DSA 2019 Convention Breakdown

written by Andrew Sernatinger | July 6, 2019

The 2019 Convention for Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) is fast approaching, and there is a lot to sort out. The Convention will debate and vote on the approved resolutions and constitution/bylaw changes and elect a new sixteen (16) person leadership body, the National Political Committee (NPC). Resolutions will commit DSA to political positions, organizational changes and/or specific projects or courses of action. All of these will have to take into consideration the organization's budget, staff and member capacity.

On June 24th, the approved eighty-five (85) resolutions and thirty-three (33) constitution/bylaw changes were released publicly for consideration and potential amendments. With that many proposals, the number of documents alone is overwhelming and it can be difficult to grasp what is being debated, especially as resolutions don't explicitly name out an author's affiliation to any group in DSA. In what follows, I'll analyze what's been proposed, the players involved and what it tells us about the state of DSA.

For purposes of disclosure, I'm not a member of any caucus within DSA. I was briefly associated with Socialist Majority, and I wrote an early draft of its fundraising plank. I independently wrote a resolution that commits DSA to a "Bernie or Bust" perspective on the 2020 election. Below I'll try to be objective, though I'm not impartial.

Background: Nuts and Bolts of the National Organization

The document from the Resolutions & Amendment Committee gives some useful background for understanding the state of the organization. For nearly 60,000 members, DSA National runs on a meager budget of roughly $4.4 million, 75% of which comes from dues. Most of the money the National spends is on staffing costs, and for 2019 DSA is intentionally running a deficit of about $350,000 (spending reserves), largely to subsidize convention.

For staffing, the Resolutions & Amendments Committee notes:

This spring we finally felt we could afford to expand staff, so we began hiring. Our staffing now stands at 16 full time and 1 part time, with 5 more positions projected and in the hiring process. Once that hiring is complete we will have 23 full time and 1 part time staff – still small for an

organization of our size, but almost double what we were a year ago. For comparison, during the 2017 national convention we had a staff of 7 full time and 1 part time workers.

Most of the staff are assigned to running the organization's office, membership information, finances, website and the like. Just four staff are dedicated "Field Organizers", supporting 175 locals as well as each being attached to a national priority. DSA staff have a union, represented through the Newsguild-Communications Workers of America (CWA).

The Players: Caucuses and "Not-Caucus" Caucuses

The presence of organized factions isn't new to this convention, but they play an important role in the politics of DSA. Caucuses count members in the dozens or low hundreds, so the vast majority of DSA members are not affiliated to any grouping, however a plurality of proposals and candidates are affiliated to an organized group.

There's nothing innately wrong about caucusing with like-minded comrades, and as DSA has ballooned in size the effectiveness of any individual to influence the organization has diminished. In order to influence the Convention process (which is the point), members are basically required to caucus. To avoid being flooded with resolutions, the Convention Committee instituted a rule that proposed resolutions would need at least fifty (50) members in good standing to sign onto them for it to be considered at convention. Fifty isn't overly burdensome, but it does encourage members to self-organize to ensure 1) their proposals make it to convention and 2) they can count on support when the vote is taken.

For the NPC, name recognition makes a large difference with so many members. No one knows everyone, so running as a caucus slate rounds out the chances that you and your people get elected. While it gives the appearance of greater unity, it's likely that formations will change or disband following convention when they've met their immediate purpose.

Existing caucuses going into convention are (in no particular order):

- Bread & Roses (B&R): Formerly "Spring", an explicitly Marxist caucus descended from last Convention's "Momentum" slate. B&R probably has the most articulated idea of what they want DSA to be, which is a group that can create a mass workers' party largely through a combination of labor organizing and socialist electoralism. They tend to see the National organization's purpose as creating a united and coherent organization. "We oppose horizontalist practices that distort democracy into a series of endless meetings, replace accountable leadership with the tyranny of structurelessness, and drain decisions of consequences. We must make decisions about priorities and then commit to carrying them out."
- Build: The original "not-caucus" caucus. Descended from Praxis, the other big slate in 2017. Somewhat apolitical in their outlook, they publish a zine about what chapters are doing on the ground and have a vision of "base-building" that is much more local. "We believe that most of the national organization's troubles are the direct result of escalating factionalism, personal attacks, and a zero-sum approach to internal political differences." They generally favor decentralization/dispersement and distrust the national organization to accomplish tasks.
- Socialist Majority Caucus (SMC): Comprised largely of chapter leaders, national working group leaders and former DSA staff, they largely want to stay the course but improve upon old structures that haven't worked particularly well with the growth of the organization. They also house some members of the smaller "North Star" caucus of old guard DSA. "We believe DSA should be a national organization governed democratically and openly from the bottom up."
- Collective Power Network (CPN): Another formation that says it isn't a caucus but

accomplishes basically the same goal. CPN similarly comprises some former DSA staffers, with supporters based largely in DC and New Orleans. CPN argues that DSA is limited in its appeal until it addresses organizational challenges. They have a federated vision for DSA, a stratified form of organization between local, regional and national. "The broad goal of building a mass organization of workers fighting for a democratic socialist society is seriously undermined by our current membership composition and lack of diversity."

- Libertarian Socialist Caucus (LSC): Anarchists, council communists and autonomist Marxists. Argues for abolishing the National Political Committee and shifting dues from National to locals. "…the Libertarian Socialist Caucus is suspicious of centralized forms of governance and decision making…Instead, we wish to promote the ability of individuals and communities to set their own priorities, both inside and outside the DSA. Governing authority is illegitimate in itself and can only be justified if it is delegated by and subordinated to a democratic assembly."

Where I can I've tried to associate proposals with a caucus that developed them. At present, the convention committee only notes the immediate authors, which can make it difficult to decipher which factions are involved in a given proposal. Only CPN explicitly attached their formation to their resolutions in the description; some caucuses have promoted associated resolutions online. In keeping with LSC's structure, they haven't really put things out collectively but have visible caucus members who have put forth proposals – I've chosen to attach them to LSC even though they aren't formally endorsed. I've researched as best I could, but readers should be aware of the potential for error in associating proposals with a faction in my analysis below.

Resolutions at a Glance

As stated above, there are eighty-five (85) resolutions for consideration; just under half (40) are associated with an organized caucus within DSA. If we passed every single resolution as they are, they would cost $7,053,287.64 and require and require 28 additional full-time staff[1]. I've sorted resolutions into categories according to what they're addressing. The breakdown is as follows:

Type	Number of Resolutions
Organizational	28
Electoral	11
Financial	8
Labor	7
Anti-Racism	6
International	5
Gender	4
Ecosocialism	4
Political	3
Immigration	3
Housing	3
Prisons	2
Fascism	1

Based off the number of resolutions alone, we get a sense of what our priorities are in 2019. A third of the resolutions are concerned with the internal organization of DSA; if you fold in anything having

to do with how money is raised or distributed, that figures approaches nearly a half of all resolutions. (The “Political” category regards two resolutions about making a platform and one on changing our name, which are also about how we operate but are somewhat distinct.)

Thirteen resolutions call for committing to an issue as national priority, which touch on six common subjects: labor, immigration, climate/ecosocialism, elections, prisons, and housing. The 2019 Convention does not set a limit on the number of priorities DSA will have, which is different from 2017 where only three were chosen (Elections, Labor and Medicare for All). That could become a problem in 2019 if the Convention over-commits; if everything is a priority, then nothing is a priority.

Overview of Resolutions by Topic

Without oversimplifying, topics can be either be viewed as mutually compatible, where the thrust of the resolutions are largely the same with differences in details, or competing, which have major differences that cannot be reconciled. Overall, there seems to be more agreement on perspectives and less agreement on organization. I’ll focus on the two continuing priorities (labor and elections) and then the organizational prescriptions.

The remaining nine topics are fairly equally distributed and collectively make up less than a third of the total resolutions. There are some very interesting individual resolutions, but it’s hard to evaluate their significance with much confidence when there are only a handful of resolutions regarding gender, race, immigration, ecosocialism, etc. At best, one could say that there isn’t a consensus about what the new third leg of the priorities stool should be. There is a curious absence of Medicare for All (M4A) in the resolutions, considering it was a core priority in 2017. I suspect that the difficulty in making concrete progress on M4A has been disheartening, but there isn’t an issue that looks like it has the common interest to be a replacement priority.

Labor

Approximately seven resolutions were submitted with perspectives on labor, which boils down to proposals by B&R (#32 “Labor Strategy and the DSLC”), CPN (#3 “Towards a Clear, Multifaceted Strategy for Labor”), and Build (#66 “Prioritizing Labor”, #67 “Organizing the Unorganized”, #68 “New Operation Dixie”).

Where they all agree is that they seem to be evaluating the Democratic Socialist Labor Commission (DSLC) as a success, and one that needs to be expanded upon. They all call for an additional staff person assigned fully to labor in DSA: national coordination of the DSLC, an expansion of support for local chapters’ labor work, and encouragement for DSA members to take up labor organizing as a priority.

Build’s “New Operation Dixie” is absurd. The AFL-CIO’s original Operation Dixie was an enormous undertaking to organize the US South during the heyday of industrial unionism and was beaten back in the 1940s. To think that just half of one DSA staff’s time could effectively encourage and oversee such a venture is ridiculous.

The most significant difference between labor proposals is on the guiding philosophy behind the labor work. Bread and Roses explicitly favors “The Rank and File Strategy” (RFS), a perspective articulated by socialist labor activist Kim Moody and most closely associated with the work of *Labor Notes*; CPN, Build and Socialist Majority (as expressed on their website) do not.

For the uninitiated, RFS places emphasis on organizing as worker-activists (whether in unions or not), building reform movements inside unions that call for more militancy and democracy, and views “shop floor” activism as paramount. RFS is not against working as union staff, but rather

believes that union staff are part of a complex labor bureaucracy that does not have the same opportunities for engaging workers as agents of change. For example, when the CORE group in Chicago Teachers Union won control of their union, inspired by the RFS, staff were important to the administration of the union and its new militant character, but were ancillary to the activity of teachers themselves.

The emphasis on the RFS coming from B&R will be a sticking point at the Convention, as the organization has historically favored working with "progressive union officials." The ensuing conversation will have implications for DSA's vision for socialism and our sense of how to get there.

Elections

Resolutions involving electoral politics can be subdivided as follows: prioritizing elections, 2020 election-related, and endorsement criteria. Given the role elections have played in bringing people into DSA, it's no surprise that there are multiple resolutions reaffirming DSA's commitment to running socialist candidates, again with perspectives by B&R (#31 "Class Struggle Elections"), SMC (#82 "DSA National Election Priority") and an old guard-type resolution (#13 "Defeating Trumpism and Electing Democratic Socialists and Progressives").

#13 "Defeating Trumpism" effectively argues for an 'Anyone But Trump' perspective, hoping to push the Democrats to the left, but supporting them against the Right regardless. SMC's #82 "National Election Priority" articulates the center position of being involved in electoral activity, prioritizing coalition work, having left aspirations but leaving it up to chapters to decide what minimum program is acceptable. #31 "Class Struggle Elections" (B&R) stakes out a left pole for electoral politics, putting forward a perspective of running as open socialists, using the office to build movements, and trying to build a "party within a party" to prepare along the lines of a "dirty break" – a strategy for building a new political party in the U.S. by operating in the Democratic Party and eventually taking gathered forces and 'breaking them off' to form the new party.

Apart from electoral strategy, #48 "Candidate Litmus Test" sets up a questionnaire that candidates must affirm completely for them to get a DSA endorsement, which is by far the most restrictive, but in its attachment to specific bills in Congress, I suspect it'll have too many limitations to pass. #52 "Not One Penny" sets a pledge that candidates for U.S. Congress must vote against militarism and all foreign military operations; I don't know the viability of this considering how the military is woven into nearly all federal budgets. No resolutions explicitly call for a break with the Democratic Party.

Two resolutions are aimed at DSA's orientation to Sanders. My own #15 is essentially a "Bernie or Bust" resolution, which accepts the decision DSA has already made in endorsing Sanders but rejects any other candidate should he lose. #39 "Petition Bernie Sanders for a People's Foreign Policy Platform" might be called the "No Tankies" resolution, aiming for DSA to try and push Sanders to have better international policies – importantly this contains language for solidarity with Palestine and Venezuela.

In sum: Elections? Yes. How should DSA do them? Within the Democratic Party. The minimums are going to have to be negotiated.

Financial

Whatever decisions are made regarding DSA's finances are going to affect every other resolution, since it'll have an impact on staffing levels and available resources. There are a surprisingly large number of resolutions concerning how DSA's money is spent. DSA dues are cheap: an annual

membership is only $65 (a little less than $6 a month). Compare that to other socialist organizations where the dues are between $20-$50 a month. The 2017 Convention voted in favor of a dues sharing policy, where 20% of dues collected would be given to locals. The particulars of this policy were left up to the NPC, who decided that the 20% should apply only to monthly dues for chapters with organizational accounts. This created an incentive for locals to build local infrastructure and sign up their members on recurring monthly dues. Dues sharing is pretty unusual and fairly progressive for an organization of this type; normally members pay directly to the national, and any funds a local has is what it can independently raise.

Of the eight resolutions concerning finances, half of them want to increase the share of dues going to the locals. On the lower end, Build's proposal (#83) earmarks 8% of all income for resources directed at locals to the tune of $380,000; the infamous "Pass the Hat" $100/month flat stipend to every chapter is being presented as a constitutional amendment, but is estimated to siphon $215,000 from the National. LSC has four proposals (fully half of the financial resolutions) that a) increase the dues share to locals to 50% of ALL dues (#37), thereby cutting the national budget by roughly $2 million; b) allow the locals to handle memberships and dues rather than the national (#22), c) discourage large donations, dropping our income by about $500,000 (#16) and d) increasing the convention subsidy to delegates (#29). Less money in, more money out.

SMC's fundraising proposal "Grassroots Fundraising and Small Chapter Growth" (#55) essentially calls for an extension of the program DSA currently uses. *Grassroots Fundraising* calls for a plan for a national dues drive to encourage members to switch from annual to monthly dues, which provides more security for the National's income (since they don't have to worry about lapsing memberships) while also increasing the volume of dues shared with locals. The policy doubles the share for the first 50 members in a chapter (which is a greater benefit for smaller chapters) and looks to reduce the financial transaction costs, so we don't lose money to credit card companies. This aims to grow the pie rather than cut it differently.

Organizational

So far, I've only looked at resolutions, but as we approach organizational proposals the difference between a resolution and a bylaw change is a legalistic distinction, so I'll consider both as they pertain to DSA's Organizational Structure. To avoid tediousness, I'll highlight trends and reserve commentary for interesting or outrageous proposals only.

There are twenty-eight (28) resolutions aimed at DSA's internal functioning, and an additional thirty-three (33) constitution/bylaw changes, for a total of sixty-one (61) proposals. LSC leads these, having submitted approximately one quarter of all proposed organizational changes, followed by a handful each for Build and CPN; neither B&R nor SMC submitted any bylaw revisions. LSC is ideologically motivated against representative leadership, so most of their proposals have to do with either shrinking DSA National (and abolishing the NPC outright) or putting the national bodies under intense scrutiny – some of their proposals for transparency are reasonable enough, but that's more a case of a stopped clock being right twice a day.

While there are a few miscellaneous proposals, most of what's being put forward concerns the NPC, Conduct/Grievances, YDSA, Member Trainings, and Organizational Structure. They're not so much an a la carte menu of nice ideas as they are responses to some prominent issues DSA has had in the last three years. A few examples:

- There are several resolutions barring police from membership in DSA, and some resolutions establishing a recall procedure by the membership. They follow the Danny Fetonte scandal, where an elected member of the NPC didn't disclose that he worked as an organizer for police

unions. The incoming 2017 NPC immediately had to deal with the problem and didn't think they could remove him on those grounds alone. Members were upset and found that they didn't have the right to recall NPC members.

- Resolutions about direct voting, town halls, transparency and the like largely grow out of this year's advisory referendum on whether DSA should endorse Bernie Sanders for President. LSC and the Afrosocialist Caucus made public their objections to the process. Some called it a fait accompli, and others noted the fact that the vote itself wasn't binding on the organization.
- The tasks voted on at the last Convention haven't all been accomplished by the NPC. Praxis and Momentum offered competing visions of the organization in 2017, and the term started off with distrust that leaked into the Twitter-verse. Praxis became the NPC minority and then had their own internal issues between caucus leaders which led to dissolution. The messiness of the whole situation has led to general skepticism about how the NPC functions, particularly with gossip about faction fighting. As a result, one third of all organizational resolutions are about the NPC. These resolutions follow accusations of strategic caucus voting and NPC dysfunction, calling for proportional or regional representation and new standards or conflict resolution mechanisms for the NPC. Especially given the volume of LSC's organizational resolutions, there are some partisans that skew the sense of the conversation with overcorrections.
- Caucuses are getting more attention as they become more prominent. DSA's mechanisms are still largely designed for a network of book clubs rather than a sizable activist organization. Where staff and NPC members have been involved with caucuses, some have cried foul that they're using organizational resources to support their faction.
- The growth of chapters has outpaced National's ability to support them, especially with staff attention. This seems especially true for YDSA, where resolutions call for dedicated full-time staff to support the youth organization; according to the Convention Committee report, a hire is in the works. Some resolutions see this as an infrastructure problem, hence calls for more intermediary bodies between local chapters and the NPC; for creating more standard trainings and materials to guide members; and for a change in how locals are chartered to speed up chapter recognition.

Conclusions: What Kind of DSA?

I made the argument earlier this year that despite the presence of caucuses in the organization there is broad agreement on DSA's core politics, and the contention is largely about how the organization functions. After reading through these resolutions, I stick by that claim. Differences in the political resolutions appear to be more of degree rather than kind. Elections and labor have multiple proponents affirming that they should be a priority and given dedicated staff to expand the program. There's a growing sense of support for anti-racism, ecosocialism, gender justice and the immigration crisis as central to the work of DSA. The problem is going to be deciding a political strategy where DSA can feasibly put its energy and avoid devolving into moralistic virtue signaling.

The bigger issue for the Convention is what will happen to the national organization? With half of the proposals being about organization, it is sure to be a slog for delegates. Ultimately, what's being put forward amounts to a "to be or not to be?" question. Either gut the National and act as a network of locals under the DSA brand or figure out how significant the issues with the structure are and adjust accordingly. There are actual stakes involved for the socialist project in the United States, and while DSA has benefited from the looseness of the "big tent", it looks like the convention is going to have to draw a line on what is ultimately incompatible in DSA.

[1] Figures come from estimated costs attached to each resolution. Staffing number is where "Hours"

= .1; “1/4 time” = .25, “1/2 time” = .5, and full time = 1.