

DSA Convention 2019—Overcoming Divisions—Votes to Maintain Strong National Organization, Takes up Ambitious Organizing Agenda

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Some 1,056 delegates to the Democratic Socialists of America convention, representing some 55,000 DSA members, met in Atlanta over the weekend and voted to adopt a series of resolutions that will continue to build a strong national organization capable of carrying out ambitious campaigns in labor and community organizing as well as electoral politics. The central division in the convention, largely driven by rival caucuses and fought out over a number of resolutions, was between those who wanted a stronger central organization capable of organizing strategic national campaigns and those who wanted a more decentralized organization that would encourage local organizing initiatives.

Beyond those debates, the delegates adopted significant political positions, such as a motion stating that in the event that if Bernie Sanders loses the Democratic Party nomination, DSA will not support any other Democrat in the 2020 national election. And they passed a measure requiring nationally endorsed candidates to run as open socialists. The assembly also adopted a radical position in support of open borders, came out in support of an ecosocialist priority and the Green New Deal, and carried a resolution opposing U.S. imperialism. And by a very narrow majority the convention voted to support anti-fascist work. The convention reasserted the centrality of union work, adopting several resolutions on labor organizing. On-going efforts, such as work on the Bernie Sanders primary campaign and the fight for Medicare for All, were implicitly endorsed by the convention.

The convention elected DSA's new leadership, a 16-member National Political Committee (NPC) made up of individuals from various caucuses or independents who more or less proportionally reflected the convention divide, with about ten members committed to the more centralized organization and half a dozen leaning toward the decentralization position. The previous NPC, riven by factionalism, failed to work together harmoniously or very efficiently, and the challenge for this leadership will be to find a way to implement the convention decisions and to face new challenges collectively and effectively. Overall, despite debate that was sometimes heated, all of the delegates left the convention committed to building a larger, stronger, and more active DSA.

The Nature of the Convention

The previous convention held in 2017 had only 700 delegates expressing the will of 25,000 members. This 2019 convention was made up of 1,056 delegates from every state, many cities, and suburban and rural areas throughout the country. Unfortunately in numerous DSA chapters, many members did not vote in the delegate elections, reflecting a larger problem that, as members stated in convention remarks, in many locales only perhaps ten or twenty percent of the members are active.

The convention delegates were mostly young (a great many between 25 and 35), much more white than people of color, but with an important role played by women and LGBTQ comrades throughout. For many delegates, some of whom had only been members for a year or two, this was their first national convention. A visiting Latin American comrade observed, "In truth, this seems more like a youth congress than a national political organization." Yet it is also true that this was a more mature convention than the last, reflecting that in the last two years DSA has done an enormous amount of work in political campaigns, labor union strikes, the fight for immigrant justice, housing issues, and other areas.

The general organization of the convention unfortunately made it difficult to hold extended political discussion and to debate such important issues as the American political scene, DSA's relationship to the Democratic Party, U.S. foreign policy, or the question of oppressed groups in the United States. The convention was not organized around major political issues but rather around a series of short summary reports, resolutions, and constitutional amendments. At the same time, certainly scores and perhaps hundreds of members rose to speak on these items in what was a highly participatory convention.

Originally more than 125 such items were presented which were reduced through a series of pre-convention delegate votes (with a low level of participation) to a short consent agenda and about 30 remaining items to be taken up over the convention's more or less 16 hours in working sessions. The political convention novices spent a great deal of time in procedural motions and "questions of personal privilege" that frequently frustrated the body. And on a few occasions resolutions on complex questions were bundled together and dealt with in haste. Nevertheless, by and large the convention rules worked, the delegates behaved respectfully toward each other, and the convention accomplished its business. Several international observers commented on being impressed with the democratic character of the convention and by the attention given to making all members feel comfortable and able to participate.

Several caucuses organized around political platforms—Build, Bread and Roses, Socialist Majority, Collective Power Network, the Libertarian Socialist Caucus, Reform and Revolution and others—drove much of the debate and whipped vote on crucial issues. Build and the Libertarian Socialist Caucus tended to lead the decentralizers, while Socialist Majority and Bread and Roses led the centralizing forces. The upstart Collective Power Network that appeared shortly before the convention tended to muddy the waters with some centralizing and some decentralizing proposals. Many members not in caucuses, however, wavered in their views, voting one way on one motion and another on the next. No caucus or alliance of caucuses dominated the convention.

The Great Divide and the Political Significance of the Convention

The great divide in the convention between the centralizing and the decentralizing forces could be characterized as a difference between those who want a democratic socialist party-type organization based on indirect representation by conventions and national committees and those who want something more like a of regional and local activists groups based on participatory democracy. In a series of votes on questions of political education, organizer training, dues and the national budget, as well as other organizational issues the centralizers tended to win about 55 percent of the vote, while the decentralizers got about 45 percent. Yet it would be a mistake to draw the lines too deeply

to suggest that it was socialists versus anarchists, because that would certainly be wrong. People on both sides of the divide appreciate having a national group and those on both sides want a vigorous democratic would lay claim to participatory democracy as part of that agenda.

The convention was devoid of any references to Marxist theory and there were few references to socialist history, and as already mentioned, the organizing structure of the convention made deep political discussion and debate on the convention floor virtually impossible. While the International Committee of DSA arranged for international guests from left parties and social movements in a variety of countries—among them Brazil, Japan, and Venezuela—who spoke in a few special sessions, foreign policy remains one of DSA's weakest areas. A hasty bundling of several motions on international questions including Palestine, Cuba, and anti-colonialism—while motivated by the delegates strong desire to express their anti-imperialism—led to a short and inadequate discussion and the adoption of a problematic document. All of this reflects the insufficiency and unevenness of political education over the last few years, which a resolution on political education passed by the convention, should help to remedy.

What the Convention Says about DSA's Politics

While the convention issued no general analytical document or manifesto, our organization's politics can be inferred from the conventions resolutions and the discussion around them.

First, DSA remains a democratic socialist organization committed to bringing to power a socialist government, socializing the means of production, creating an egalitarian and democratic society. To do so, DSA continues to see its role as building a socialist presence through campaigns in the Democratic Party combined with the construction of a stronger labor movement and more powerful social movements (as expressed in the class-struggle election resolution that passed). Different than the Socialist Party of America in its heyday at the turn of the last century or the Communist Party in the 1920s, or elements of the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s, DSA does not in general talk in terms of either a workers' party, a workers' government, or the need for socialist revolution, nor do any of its caucuses—though many individual members would describe themselves as revolutionary socialists. The adoption of the Bernie or bust resolution represents an important statement, as does the requirement (in Resolution 31) reinforcing previously adopted positions that all nationally endorsed candidates run as open socialists.

Second, DSA placed an enormous amount of emphasis at the convention on the discussion of labor. While far from it now, DSA clearly wants to be a working class organization. The invitation to Sara Nelson, International President of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO, to speak at the convention emphasized that commitment. The Bread and Roses caucus has been (under various names) the principal advocate of the rank-and-file strategy, largely influenced by the International Socialists (IS) and Solidarity from the 1970s to the 2010s. B&R caucus adopting that strategic outlook and looking to the examples of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) in Chicago, as well as Labor Notes, worked to get DSA members into union jobs, to work in rank-and-file movements, and to transform the labor movement. The newly created Collective Power Network, a rival caucus that also emphasizes labor offered a broader, decentralizing proposal, putting less emphasis on the rank-and-file approach. Members of the San Francisco DSA put forward a resolution that passed the convention calling for DSA to work directly with labor unions to organize, as the SF DSA chapter did with the International Longshore and Warehouse Workers (ILWU) at Anchor beer. In the end, a series of labor proposals, somewhat contradictory in their emphases were adopted, but nevertheless continuing the emphasis on the need for militant grassroots unionism. What has often been missing in all versions of the union debate is a clear analysis of the labor bureaucracy as a social caste within the unions—balancing between the corporations and the workers—with its own ideology and the power and perquisites of

office.

Third, DSA once again adopted resolutions expressing its desire and its plans to work with communities of color, such as the resolutions adopted in the omnibus consent agenda on immigrant and refugee rights, support for open borders, and orienting to Latinx communities, as well as other resolutions on community organizing and housing. Taken together with early decisions, such as the creation of the Afrosocialists and Socialists of Color Caucus, all of this is very good. Still, turning this corner will be very difficult, especially establishing relationships with Black working class people through their unions and communities and winning them to socialism. The long history of American racism, including in the Democratic Party, in the labor unions, and sometimes in the left, presents formidable obstacles, as does the fact that up largely out of white, college-educated people trained for work in high skilled jobs and professions. What DSA must also do is find organized, political Black and Latino organizations and find a way to work with their leaderships and members, that is the historic path to an integrated left party, though this is not at this time part of the strategy.

Finally, foreign policy, that is, international questions and the issue of imperialism, remains one of DSA's weakest areas. Once again, there are no doubt historic reasons for this. The old DSA of the 1980s worked closely with the Democratic Party and aligned itself internationally with the Socialist International, inevitably placing it on the Western side of the Cold War divide. The new DSA arose in the effervescence of the Bernie campaign of 2016 with its emphasis on domestic issues and Bernie's own weaknesses on foreign policy questions. While the terms "internationalism" and "anti-imperialism" appear in DSA resolutions and discussions, the group and its members have not actually done much thinking about these issues. The DSA International Committee has begun to develop positions on these questions, and needs to continue to develop an internationalist and democratic foreign policy.

Overall, the Convention 2019 demonstrates that while DSA has firmly established itself as the most important organization of the American left in decades, it is also true that it has not yet consolidated itself, certainly not in the working class or communities of color. Nor has DSA developed a full-fledged Marxist analysis and strategy to deal with American politics, much less international question. And that is not surprising, given that it is such a new, youthful group and still a relatively small socialist organization (55,000 in a nation of 327 million). Still, for leftists in America, DSA remains the place to be and to fight for revolutionary socialist ideas.