

DSA Convention: Mapping a Strategy, Avoiding Dead-Ends



After reaching 25,000 members, DSA held its largest bi-annual National Convention with the hopes of creating the political clout necessary to shift the country toward a socialist vision that exceeds that of social-democratic capitalism. The four days reenergized old chapters and allowed new chapters to recognize the potential of a national organization. Overall, DSA has effectively begun resurrecting the socialist movement in the United States. All DSA members should be proud of this achievement. We should, however, be cautious in overestimating the outcomes of the convention. For behind the great rejuvenation that occurred in Chicago there were also ideological and structural currents that may limit DSA in the long run.

First, DSA has yet to claim an electoral strategy to organize against the Democratic Party *or* try to reform it. Although 25,000 members is a minute percentile to that of the country's population, at one point or another DSA will have to make a national statement over the political question: Can DSA have an effective political strategy that works on a state-by-state basis while simultaneously organizing a national organization leading us out of the Democratic Party? Can DSA flip Texas and Iowa into "blue states"? How will DSA split from the Democrats in California and New York? We did not provide an answer at the convention. Come 2020, and once Texas becomes ground game

for such national electoral work, DSA will need to answer this question. While DSA strategically uses the Democratic ballot line, DSA should also claim and desire a national future outside the Democratic Party even while attempting to reform some state Democratic Parties.

Second, while DSA approved a national single-payer campaign, the method by which we build the health care campaign has by and large been lost to localism. The decision by the convention to strike setting metrics and goals for our national campaign came out of an ill-conceived localism that may ultimately cause DSA to lose momentum. The National Office would have created a national committee specifically to create those metrics which would build a national campaign that takes into account concrete conditions in different areas across the country. Setting metrics and goals accelerates national capacity by making it rather easy for chapters to adapt goals and metrics to the concrete organizing on the ground. Metrics and goals are encouraged by national for chapters to consider without the power to enforce those objectives. They simply allow the national organization to set higher expectation and solidify the organization. DSA was structurally created as a federation, not a "democratic centralist" organization, in order to provide such national expectations while avoiding falling into a top-down structure.

The drift toward localism in DSA has come out of fear of a centralist body. This fear can be healthy, but in this case it seemed almost antithetical to building a mass organization. This localism has less to do with any anarcho-syndicalist roots, with which I identified with in my early teens, and much more to do with conservative union consciousness and liberalism today. Localism multiplies the workload of the organization whereas goals and metrics are set time and time again only to appear similar to those created in other chapters. It would have been easier to just allow the National Political Committee to set those goals and metrics and then

chapters could decide which ones they would emphasize. But now chapters now have to create their own goals and metrics and the National Office will only have the ability to create broad guidelines that get interpreted through a localist framework. Going into the long haul, DSA members need to begin to differentiate between chapter autonomy and localism or risk falling into regional conflicts instead of solidifying how the national organization consolidates our different concrete struggles.

Third, the growing emphasis on creating an organizing training strategy as proposed in Resolution 28 ironically pushes us toward the structures and politics of Saul Alinsky, an infamous anti-communist and true "democratic centralist." DSA is not like most nonprofits in that it is not staff centered but member-based. A national training strategy cannot be staff-based or we will fall into a long-term financial trap. The organizing model to take at a national level is not that of a top-down service-ism like Alinskyism, SEIU or UNITE-HERE, but that of relationship building between nearby chapters and regions which will eventually build state federations and regional councils from the bottom up. The best organizers learn through struggle, constant failure, and ultimately achieving victory, not through broad basics taught by a distant body of professional organizers.

Luckily, the kids are alright. During the Young Democratic Socialists (YDS) conference students and youth felt the necessity to build a stronger relationship to the larger DSA organization and now call themselves YDSA. They endorsed a college-for-all national campaign without falling into localism. Moreover, they elected its most diverse and radical coordinating committee yet. They recognize the potential for the Fall Campus drive to increase our membership while building a national campaign.

The best outcome of the DSA national convention was the establishment of the Democratic Socialist Labor Commission

(DSLCC) which was unanimously supported in its original language. DSA once had a Labor Commission, but over the years it failed to establish a permanent infrastructure that maintained relationships to the labor movement, established ongoing organizing with the rank-and-file, and organized our non-union membership into the labor movement. It eventually withered away. This time, however, through the DSLCC, DSA will have a chance at building regional, state and nationwide campaigns that can build strong relationships between chapters and the National Office. If effective, the Labor Commission can provide a much-needed infrastructure to push the labor movement to the left, democratize unions, and organize the unorganized.

In conclusion, DSA members need to see themselves as part of a national organization in both ideological and structural terms, and not only as part of their local or region. The national convention helped to develop a national organization, but it also revealed the areas where all DSA members need to improve. Only a national organization can develop a strong electoral strategy, support chapters in dire financial and structural need, and set higher expectations and accountability for all DSA members. DSA members should not "sideline" to their regions, let alone their locals, or they will risk not building a truly national organization.

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