DSA’s Growing Pains

written by Andrew Sernatinger | February 28, 2019

Barely five years ago, if you asked someone where a new U.S. socialist movement might appear, I would wager that nearly no one would have said with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Before 2016, DSA’s profile was largely that of a paper organization—a kind of socialist AARP that made it an unlikely candidate for a revitalized left. And yet, DSA is now an organization of over 55,000 members.

As Dan La Botz has pointed out, the influx of so many new young socialists effectively founded a new organization at the DSA 2017 Convention. The convention tacked left in resolutions to endorse Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel and to leave the Socialist International, though it was less decisive in its selection of leadership: the three slates (Praxis, Momentum and DSA’s “old guard”) each won a third of the seats of the National Political Committee, signaling that no one tendency or vision clearly dominated the organization.

For the next two years, DSA continued to grow through high profile campaigns and events: following the convention DSA members saw Heather Heyer murdered protesting white supremacists in Charlottesville; Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) beat Joe Crowley in the Democratic primary for Congress; a video of members in Washington, DC confronting Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen over Trump’s family separation policy went viral. DSA’s activity continued to boost recruitment with new chapters popping up faster than the national organization could support them.

This new DSA has had two years of collective experience in activism and building socialist organization. 2019 will be the first convention since the “Bernie Boom” and now that the honeymoon is over the organization is trying to sort itself out. Several caucuses have formed in advance of the convention, giving the appearance of major differences in DSA. The conversations about the national organization are both vague and very specific, sometimes referencing internal politics or assuming knowledge of events that many members aren’t tuned into, so I think it might be helpful to assess the state of the organization and try to “suss out” what issues are facing DSA in 2019.

Why DSA?

Before getting into the current state of things, I think we ought to try and understand how why it is that DSA has shot up in the last three years. Mostly people have pointed to the larger

conditions—increasing wealth and income inequality, disappointment with Obama, the role of the Sanders campaign and outrage over Trump—but that didn't make DSA's growth a "done deal." There are plenty of socialist groups in the U.S., so why DSA and not another organization? I think that has as much to do with what DSA isn't as what it is.

DSA is not a cadre organization. It doesn't have an official theory, it doesn't ask you to go through any kind of membershipping process or commit to meetings and events in order to be involved. Those attracted to DSA are generally turned off by the "newspaper-selling left" and find DSA to be a more comfortable fit for "doing socialism." The minimal dues make DSA a "best buy in socialism," where you can become a member for the very low price of $60 a year. The barriers to entry are minimal, which makes it easy for anyone to "test out the waters." For those not interested in being active members, they're still in the orbit of the group and become a ready-made audience for DSA's work and ideas. To some the structure might appear to be a weakness, but DSA won the hardest part of the battle: getting people in.

Just as important is DSA's approach to the Democratic Party. The Democrats have always been a dividing line among leftists in the U.S.; either you're for supporting at least the most left-wing Democrats or you reject them all outright. In practical terms the question defines how you're going to go about doing your political/electoral work. The DSA of old clearly fell on the "support left Democrats" side while many socialist groups (ISO, Socialist Alternative, Socialist Party USA, Solidarity) clearly reject supporting any Democrats. It seems obvious, but DSA was one of the few socialist groups not to reject supporting Sanders' run for president as a Democrat. While new members are seemingly more critical of all Democrats than DSA has been traditionally, the willingness to use the Democratic Party ballot line to run socialist candidates has become one of the major draws to DSA.

Lastly, DSA has fresh blood—something that is very attractive to people looking to go "where the action is." *Jacobin* magazine deserves some credit for this—it started in 2011 and quickly pivoted into trying to create a publication that looked attractive and had "personality," which made it stand out. *Jacobin*'s boom preceded DSA's, and the connection between *Jacobin* and DSA helped build DSA's "brand." With so many new members joining, the growth became its own advertisement to join DSA. Most of the 50,000 people who have joined since 2016 are very new to activist politics, but the movement into DSA carried with it a layer of socialists with previous experience, either as movement organizers or former partisans of other socialist organizations.

Many DSAs

Coming back to the present, all the activity around DSA has a kind of "organized chaos" about it. With so many new members flooding in, DSA National has been seriously tested on how it can support all the affiliated chapters that have sprung up. With only about a dozen staff for 55,000 members, new chapters are dependent on the experience of their local membership for guidance in their activism and organization. As a result, there's a major unevenness in people's experiences in DSA based off where they are.

Broadly speaking, there are three kinds of chapters: large (over 900 members), medium (200-800) and small (less than 200). The large chapters (New York, L.A., Chicago, DC) have more capacity to work on issues as a coherent organization, their cities have more opportunities for activism (labor struggles, electoral campaigns, canvassing and the like) and they're large enough to act as a force that can impact their local conditions.

Smaller chapters or organizing committees don't have many people with experience and so they scramble for ideas on what to do, often oscillating between pie-in-the-sky maximalist demands and

very immediate things that they think they can achieve. Mid-size chapters are somewhere in between, often limited in what they can do with membership and in cities with less immediate opportunity for activism. This is just a snapshot, but it's worthwhile to realize that chapters are having different experiences that lend themselves to different understandings of what's going on in DSA. Smaller chapters might be trying to figure out what they should be doing while larger ones more often debate how they should prioritize the work they have in front of them. What they have in common, organizationally, is that everyone joined DSA because they wanted to *do something*, and evaluations about the organization are going to be how much a person thinks what they're doing is important and effective.

Politically, the larger chapters, New York City in particular, clearly lead DSA with their activity. The approach large chapters take is generally adopted by the rest of the organization. For example, DSA is not opposed to third party politics and the idea of an alternative to the two parties is pretty commonly desired among members. But the tactic of running socialists in Democratic primaries has become the center position because of the prestige of AOC, Julia Salazar and even (controversially) Cynthia Nixon. The activity is primarily what's setting the terms of the debate. To stake out new positions, you have to be able to show that your approach can produce tangible success.

A twist in all this is the outsized role the Internet plays in the life of DSA. A good faith reading would say that the internal infrastructure of DSA hasn't kept up with the pace of growth—channels for discussion and debate were minimal inside the organization until recently, so they ended up spilling out onto Twitter and Facebook. Because many members' experience with DSA is limited to what is happening locally, if you want to be involved with the national organization you tend to do that through an online connection, and the people most active online largely determine how issues are presented in DSA. This can quickly turn sour when sharp "takes" are posted online without any context. Anyone who's spent time on the Internet can tell you that online arguments never turn out well.

Political Agreement, Organizational Issues

What's remarkable is that for all the variance within DSA, there's actually general agreement on the organization's policy and strategic approach. The three priorities set at the 2017 Convention (elections, labor and Medicare for All) are not really in contention, and no caucus is suggesting a radically different course of action. What is mostly being debated is how the organization operates.

Start with DSA's relationship to Bernie Sanders. Endorsement of Sanders for President in 2019 is practically a given. At the end of January, Maria Svart communicated that the National Political Committee (NPC) and National Electoral Committee (NEC) have put together a plan to prepare the organization to campaign for a Sanders Presidential run. The response by members hasn't been to object to the presumption of an endorsement (Bernie brought them in, after all), but more about how an endorsement would be made. The problem being raised is essentially about the character of democracy—how will DSA as a national organization make decisions with the most participation possible? On the other side, how can we be most effective and avoid being bogged down in process?

More generally, DSA's electoral perspective seems to be that socialists should be running candidates on the Democratic Party ticket…at least for right now. I don't know that it's been articulated as a theory, but the orientation is based off a shared perspective that 1) elections matter 2) the U.S. electoral system penalizes third parties and 3) neoliberal Democrats won't represent the working class and oppressed. I'm not saying that this is the end-all be-all within DSA, but it represents the center, default perspective. There are the beginnings of some debate about long-term goals: are socialists aiming for "realignment" of the Democrats, a "dirty break" to form a new party, a clean break, a "clean, dirty break", or…is it even worth asking right now? Unity is maintained around a

course of action, agreeing on current tasks while kicking the political party can down the road.

An article that appeared in the *New Republic* raises a couple of other issues within DSA. Miguel Salazar's piece, "Do American Socialists Have a Race Problem?" recounts events in DSA chapters in Philadelphia and Oakland. The article itself reads as a hit piece on the Momentum slate/Spring Caucus, to which Spring responded, but it highlights questions about the kinds of activity members participate in and how to grapple with the composition of the membership. Whether the events depicted in Salazar's article are completely accurate doesn't really matter if it reflects a perception that DSA could turn into an organization that tells you what you can and cannot do. We see this fear being expressed in the Columbia Falls Statement and in the Socialist Majority Caucus's principles, which both talk about a "bottom up" approach to DSA's work as opposed to a "top down" model that might confine chapters to campaigns or projects worked out in the DSA National Office.

That brings us to the last question: DSA's race, class and gender composition. A friend of mine told me recently that she spoke with a professor she'd studied with. He said, "It's great that you joined DSA. Now they just need to expand beyond downwardly mobile white people." At a glance DSA is predominately white, college-educated and male and the organization seems to be aware of this as a problem for building a broad-based socialist organization. *The Call* frames the issue quite well:

"There's no quick fix to the burning question of how to root DSA in working-class communities of color. DSA began as a mostly white organization and has grown through a process of self-selection since 2016, which tends to reinforce this dynamic since people often join through their personal networks. Regardless of what specific issues chapters focus their energies on, they remain overwhelmingly white. And no voluntary organization is immune to the fact that American society in general is still highly segregated along racial lines. But that doesn't mean there isn't more that everyone in DSA can do."

This isn't unique to DSA and it is probably the most complicated issue facing the organization. How DSA chooses to diversify the organization is the question.

That said, the conceptual relationship of race, class and gender is under contention. Perspectives range on a spectrum from "universalism" (advocating reforms that benefit the entire working class, which would especially benefit communities of color—this is the Adolph Reed Jr. position) to those that place a greater emphasis on the need to address the specific experiences of people of color as part of racialized capitalism. It's not necessarily an either/or binary, but there isn't a consensus on which approach DSA should take.

Conclusion: The Goose that Laid the Golden Egg

If the 2017 Convention was full of excitement about so many people coming together, the theme of 2019's Convention is about keeping the organization together and making strides forward. There's anxiety about how fragile DSA is and worry that taking the organization in the wrong direction could destroy it. No one wants to kill the goose that laid the golden egg.

The desire to see DSA realize its potential as a political force in the United States is a large part of what's driving the formation of caucuses—members are assessing what they think is or isn't working in DSA and trying to propose solutions with others who are coming to similar conclusions. To the extent that this is bringing conversations out and into the open, caucusing plays a positive role for DSA's internal democracy. As a democratic organization, debating and trying to convince others of your opinion is part of working through a collective process and it shouldn't be something we're immediately suspicious of—multi-tendency doesn't mean no-tendency. The problem with DSA's caucuses seems to be that there's some subtext to caucus statements; their members aren't just

coming out and saying what they're thinking. A caucus *responds* to a situation that it disagrees with, otherwise it wouldn't exist.

I've tried to describe DSA as I understand it to clarify what's gotten the group to this point. In terms of problems, DSA's are fairly good ones to have. Mostly there is agreement about political orientation, and where there isn't DSA seems capable of withstanding it. The more fraught questions are about DSA's internal structure and differences on how we should accomplish our common objectives. To a large extent DSA is "building the plane in mid-air," and we have to recognize where we are in that process. As long as we affirm the value of DSA for building a socialist movement and advancing class-struggle politics, we should be able to keep this thing going.