

After Bernie, DSA Will Be Essential

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There is no doubt about it: Bernie Sanders' campaign for president has changed politics as we know it. Even more than in 2016, his 2020 race solidified issues like free college, a right to housing, Medicare for All, and a Green New Deal as not just leftist ideals, but as popular programs that the vast majority of people are willing to support. But because of Joe Biden's last minute boost, the Democratic National Committee's "anyone but Bernie" program, and the current COVID pandemic, Bernie ended his campaign.

When socialist or otherwise leftist candidates lose their elections, many console themselves with platitudes about "changing the narrative." But the left should want more than participation trophies—we need to govern, and we need to do so fast: The climate is counting on it; so are the millions who just lost their employer-sponsored health insurance because of the coronavirus. Moving the Overton window—the range of politically acceptable policies—is necessary to eventually create the kind of socialist world we deserve, but that motion has also done so much more: It has created an army of activists, volunteers, and organizers who won't back down until we win what we deserve. The big question, though, is how to actually win.

A mass democratic socialist left in the United States is essentially new. Although the Democratic Socialists of America has been around since 1982, the organization's size stayed steady at around 6,000 members nationwide until Bernie's first presidential campaign, and then exploded when Trump was elected. Since then, a handful of democratic socialists have been elected to Congress, in addition to state and city seats around the country. While it's easy to feel defeat around Bernie's campaign—after all, we lost—it's important to zoom out and have some perspective. Our movement has only been organizing in the electoral realm in earnest for five years. In those five years, we helped to elect Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, Ilhan Omar, and Rashida Tlaib (among others). We also almost got a loud and proud democratic socialist to be the Democratic nominee for president of the United States, even with immense barriers, including a media blackout. That's no small feat, and we should be proud. We punch far above our weight.

Our outlook shouldn't be too rosy, however: We lost the race for the nomination. And we should be honest about why—not just about the structural challenges, but about our own mistakes, too. But overall, our movement, and our ideas, are winning. Finally, free health care and free college, among other social programs, are a normal part of our political discourse. The question is no longer "Will it ever happen?" but "When will it happen?" Unfortunately, when we pass Medicare for All and the

like, it will be by using the Democratic Party. There has been no lack of discussion on what socialists should do electorally: bow out entirely, join or start a third party, or run socialists on the Democratic ballot line. Bowing out cedes unnecessary ground to centrists, and why would we, anyway? We're winning the war of ideas, and we're winning seats, too. That leaves running as a third party or running socialists as Democrats. But there is no current path to a viable third party. While many socialists would happily join a third party right now—and some have been calling for the creation of one for quite some time—we just don't have the numbers and power necessary to do so. While it sounds like a wonderful idea, it's just that, an idea: There is no legitimate space for one in our two-party system, and there is no plausible path to get there right now. If there were, the Green Party would be able to get more than 1 percent of the vote. And while the Working Families Party has seen some electoral success in Connecticut, New York state, and most recently, Philadelphia, these victories, while amazing, cannot yet be re-created outside of solidly blue states or cities, let alone on a national scale. But that doesn't mean we have to stop running socialists for office. We just have to run them on the Democratic Party line. To do this well, we need to strengthen both independent political organizations, like DSA, and the labor movement. In Chicago, the United Working Families Party has had some success with this. Their political organization is a coalition between two powerful local unions—the Chicago Teachers Union and SEIU Health Care—and two important community organizations—Grassroots Illinois Action and Action Now. It's independent from the Democratic Party, but the coalition recruits and trains political candidates, along with endorsing other candidates, on the Democratic Party line.

For too long, socialist organizations in the United States were relegated to the sidelines. Our groupings were small, ineffectual, and plagued with sectarianism. Although we have had important and powerful interventions—and invested heavily in different struggles—the unexpected fall of the Soviet Union disoriented much of the left and discredited the idea of socialism in the eyes of millions. The Bernie Sanders campaign reanimated our cause, and it didn't just excite socialists and left-wing Democrats—it inspired thousands and thousands of working people who had never previously been involved in politics. The Democratic Socialists of America used Bernie's candidacy to recruit heavily, and it worked. Both Bernie's run and Donald Trump's subsequent victory led to a huge boom in membership: The organization grew from around 5,000 members to nearly 25,000 by spring 2016, and now, DSA has more than 60,000 members. At DSA's 2019 convention, members passed a resolution to grow the organization to 100,000 members by 2021. To do this, DSA should prioritize getting every Bernie volunteer and donor into the organization, which will take a ton of political education and a ton of work. It's worth it: 100,000 is a huge number for a political ideology that the mainstream loves to declare as "fringe." But even at that size, we are not enough to take power or to govern. To do that, we need to keep organizing among the working class, who are suffering from the coronavirus pandemic.

We don't yet know exactly how long-lasting and how bad the effects of the coronavirus will be on the economy, but we do know that unemployment has been reported as greater than it was during the Great Depression, when it was at about 25 percent. Unions are being hit hard, as well: Their members are out of work, and so they're losing resources. Of UNITE HERE's membership, 80-90 percent have been laid off; it's difficult to imagine how and when the union will be able to bounce back. It's a really scary time for workers and their organizations, but there are some small glimmers of hope as essential and frontline workers fight for safety and respect on the job. We've seen transit workers, sanitation workers, grocery store workers, and of course, health care workers organize to demand the right to live (literally!) as they work without proper protections during a global pandemic.

And while logic might say that organizing follows job trends—so when the economy is bad, organizing is slow—we are still seeing an uptick in workers responding to the moment. DSA has just

entered into an organizing partnership with the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) union. UE is arguably the most left-wing, democratic union in the country: They worked to build a Labor Party in the United States (1996-2007), they consistently speak out against centrist Democrats, and they endorsed Bernie Sanders in the 2016 primary, which was their first primary endorsement ever. They didn't even endorse Clinton in the general election, although they urged a vote against Trump. All of this to say: They are deeply principled and committed first and foremost to organizing workers—which unfortunately is more than can be said for many larger unions. It is huge news, and great news, that they chose to unite with DSA to form the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC), a project that connects workers dealing with coronavirus-related issues to trained volunteers who can help them organize.

This partnership not only supports workers who are trying to organize, but also grants DSA legitimacy as a fighting socialist organization that has the power to make real interventions in the labor movement. This is important as we head into an unknown, unstable future: an election between one sexist, war-mongering politician and another, and potentially a labor movement without its legs. While we don't know for certain what's to come, it's likely that things will get much worse before they get better. Many laid-off workers will scramble to find new work in the only jobs that are hiring: grocery stores, delivery, and Amazon. Many grocery stores are already unionized, and many delivery drivers are still fighting the battle for proper classification as employees instead of independent contractors. While socialists should, of course, support all workers who are looking for help organizing, we should focus our limited resources on the second largest private employer in the United States: Amazon. CEO Jeff Bezos is so opposed to unions that he is using mapping technology to predict strikes, organizing, and other union activity at Whole Foods Market. We should have no illusions about the difficulty of organizing at Amazon, and yet we have no other option than to try. This fight would be much easier if Bernie Sanders were president, as he has consistently called out Bezos for being a bad employer, even introducing the "Stop BEZOS Act" ("Stop Bad Employers by Zeroing Out Subsidies Act"), which would have taxed the company in proportion to the number of employees receiving federal assistance. This move forced the company to raise its minimum wage to \$15 an hour. Whatever worker organizing we do needs to include the political education to move workers into DSA. This will take a lot of commitment, but is necessary if we want our organization to adequately reflect the working class.

Millions out of work means millions unable to pay their rent or mortgage, and without more government intervention and protection, we will see a huge rise in foreclosures and evictions. Another example of why it's necessary to continue electing democratic socialists to office is Ilhan Omar's introduction of a bill to cancel rent and mortgage payments during the pandemic. There's a lot we can learn from our past economic crises, though. During the Great Depression, socialists focused their organizing efforts not just on workers at work, but workers in their homes: tenants. DSA has already had successful tenant organizing campaigns and now has a Housing Justice Commission to lead work nationally. Many DSA chapters are endorsing their local #CancelRent campaigns, which were formed at the start of the pandemic and have since gained steam, winning eviction moratoriums all around the country. DSA has also helped fellow tenants organize tenants unions, specifically in Metro DC DSA, with their Stomp Out Slumlords campaign. These relationships and new formations will be extremely important as the right-wing increases its attacks on our right to live.

While there are many battles worth fighting right now, socialists can't do everything. DSA is growing, but we don't have enough people or strength to organize around every single issue. That's why we need to focus our limited resources on a few important tasks: organizing workers and tenants, and electing more socialists to office. Each of these priorities builds on the other. Electing socialists improves conditions for organizing. And organizing workers creates the infrastructure

necessary to make worthwhile and powerful endorsements. Although Bernie Sanders is no longer running for president, his supporters are still here, hungry for political leadership and change. We should work to funnel them into DSA, along with workers and tenants that we are organizing. Without an organization to hold all of these campaigns and people together, socialists will be just as scattered as we were prior to 2016. We need an ideological anchor to connect all of this important work. Whether it's electing socialists or organizing workers or tenants, DSA will be essential.