Fighting for the Soul of Socialism

written by Amelia Dornbush, Luke Elliott-Negri, Sam Lewis | February 7, 2018

After a huge bump in membership thanks to Bernie Sanders, and an even bigger one thanks to Donald Trump, the DSA continues to grow. Since its national convention in August, membership has increased from 25,000 to 30,000. We have known since 2011 that millennials have a more positive association with the word "socialism" than the word "capitalism";[1] Sanders gave this demographic shift from the cold war era a political expression, and DSA has given it an organizational expression. Now thousands on the left are scrambling to answer the question, "What do we do with this newfound energy?"

There is relatively little disagreement that the Movement for Black Lives, the labor movement, feminist movements, and other popular struggles are key to building power. And other than a handful on the very far left, most of us agree that elections matter a great deal. But for some, there is a line in the sand when it comes to *how* the left should approach electoral work. In a recent piece [see "The Two Souls of Democratic Socialism" in this issue], Kim Moody applauds DSA's efforts to "jettison [the left's] old baggage," but proceeds to trot out one of the biggest suitcases: "The specter of the past that haunts DSA … remains the Democratic Party."

Moody represents a tradition on the left that says any engagement with the Democratic Party—and, importantly for our argument, any attempt to use its ballot line—represents a treachery so great that it must be vigorously condemned. We argue that this tradition is deeply flawed and anti-materialist in essence. Instead we put forward a concrete plan for building left power that actually jettisons the U.S. left's long-standing baggage with respect to electoral politics. There are two souls of socialism: one that studies the actual, material terrain unwaveringly and makes a plan to build power, the other that leans on ideologies constructed in past eras to make plans in this one. We see ourselves firmly in the former camp.

What Makes the United States Different?

Under some electoral systems, social movements simply form a party and snag seats in parliament just a few years after their founding, like the Indignados building Podemos in Spain.[2] The United States does not have one of those systems. *The United States is the only industrialized country on the planethttp://books.wwnorton.com/books/978-0-393-32254-5/to combine single-round presidential voting and down-ballot plurality voting*.[3] Any serious, materialist analysis of what is electorally possible in the United States simply must take this system and its implications into account.

The effects of plurality (or first-past-the-post) voting are well known. If it is possible to win a race with less than a majority, and there is not a "runoff," then challenger parties are likely to "spoil" races since they typically draw votes from their ideologically closest opponent. As almost anyone who is serious would admit, Sanders running in the general election as an independent or third-party candidate would have, at best, made Trump's victory far more decisive.

The high salience and high stakes of presidential elections magnify the problem, drawing many more voters to the polls every four years than in off-cycle elections and impacting all down-ballot federal races and many state and local races as well. The stakes of the presidential election intensely cement party identity and voting behavior.

These two features combined put nearly all third-party challenges at the federal level somewhere between pointless and disastrous. The left has faced the Democratic Party dilemma since the nineteenth century, but the question became especially acute in the 1930s, as Franklin Delano Roosevelt pivoted left and the labor movement became the anchor for national-level Democratic Party politics. Forty years later, with deunionization and deregulation beginning to grip the labor movement and the Democratic Party, a third-party approach gained renewed appeal for some. But these efforts have largely failed, reducing many of our good ideas and capacities to the margins. Clearly, we need a flexible new approach that moves beyond past practice and ideological dogma.

The Democratic "Party"

An analysis of the unique electoral system in the United States also requires a careful consideration of the unique structure of the parties themselves. As Moody notes, the Democratic Party is not a membership organization in the sense that European political parties are. Power and influence are wielded through a set of formal and informal mechanisms, increasingly the control of fundraising networks. With party registration rules set by state laws, the Democrats do not control their membership rolls. With party primaries and caucuses managed by state boards of elections, Democrats have surprisingly little power over who runs on their ballot line. Most importantly, whether one looks at the federal, state, or local level, Democrats don't have a binding platform and could not enforce one if they did.

It is incumbent upon us to delineate the Democratic Party's ballot line from its structural apparatus, which we should typically oppose and which has minimal accountability. In fact, running on the ballot line as a left-wing challenger puts a candidate more directly in conflict with the apparatus of the party machine than do most third-party candidacies and poses a more serious threat; this we can clearly see in the mobilization against the Sanders campaign as juxtaposed with the Jill Stein campaign. The ballot line is a tool at our disposal, and we would be foolish to ignore it.

As materialists, we should strive to build power for socialism in the most effective way possible given the circumstances we find ourselves in. This means having a sober assessment of the different tactics we have tried with varying degrees of success in the United States.

Finding Ways In

There are a host of local and state projects that suggest how the left generally and DSA specifically might build independent political power. Moody affirmatively cites the work of the Vermont Progressive Party as an example of how to proceed, and we agree that this is a case worth studying! But he fails to note that outside of Burlington, where Bernie Sanders himself cleared the way for independent politics with his 1981 mayoral victory, nearly all elected Vermont Progressives have used a fusion strategy,[4] beating Democrats in their own primary while maintaining an independent caucus in the state Legislature.

Moody also mentions the Richmond Progressive Alliance, but, as with the VPP, he doesn't go into much detail. If he did, he might mention that the RPA operates in nonpartisan races,[5] much like Socialist Alternative in Seattle. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with this, but as we look at actually existing left-electoral projects, it becomes clear that successful third-party challenges in partisan races are exceedingly rare and that we need a more nuanced account of the Democratic ballot line than Moody offers.

There are of course many other examples that Moody ignores or dismisses because they work against his approach: New Haven Rising, based in the labor movement, elected a City Council majority of rank and file union activists and is taking on the financial behemoth that is Yale

University.[6] In Jackson, Mississippi, Cooperation Jackson have revived radical politics in the Deep South with a platform centered on local investment in worker cooperatives.[7] The Working Families Party continues its national expansion, backed by labor and community coalitions, and has been winning elections in primaries and in some instances on its independent ballot line.[8] DSA member and Black Lives Matter activist khalid kamau was one of the first socialists to win an election in post-Trump-victory America,[9] followed by a stream of local democratic-socialist election victories this past November.[10] All of these organizations and candidates *used* the Democratic ballot line—imperfectly, no doubt, but with some notable success—to build independent politics.

A Path Forward

Given these past successes, we propose the following as a strategically grounded approach to building electoral power in the United States:

No corporate funding. The DSA or any left formation should make rejection of corporate funding fundamental to their campaigns. Moody fails to explain how a candidate who doesn't take the Democratic Party's money can be disciplined by them and also fails to acknowledge that his proposed strategy of running in general elections against Democrats is vastly more resource intensive.

A tactical approach to ballot lines. It can be energizing and inspiring to work for a candidate capable of waging a serious race without using the Democratic Party line. Sanders' career and the VPP effort in Burlington is testament to this. Variations in U.S. electoral law also offer many opportunities in non-partisan, fusion, and even some multimember districts. But in many cases, grabbing the Democratic Party line is the difference between winning and losing, the difference between building working-class power and a doomed campaign that must justify its existence in terms of its educational potential. In these cases, we must take the line and do what we please with it.

Independent, accountable organizing. When running socialist candidates, whether with a "D" next to their name or not, it is important that they are accountable to an independent, democratic organization. In Brooklyn this year, DSA endorsed two candidates for City Council, one in a Democratic Primary[11] and one as a Green/Socialist candidate in the general election.[12] In both cases, DSA members ran our own canvasses, trained hundreds of our own volunteers, maintained control of our own data about conversations, and developed our own messaging. In both cases, we made demands on our candidates to include DSA members in strategic planning and decision-making, to be public about their socialist politics, and to refuse all donations from the real estate industry. Maintaining our independence in practice can help us build our base, strengthen our organization, and win electoral victories without being junior partners to any candidate, campaign, or party organization.

Get 50 percent plus one. All serious politics, electoral or otherwise, are fundamentally majoritarian affairs. In proportional representation systems, the far left can feel good about themselves because they can snag a few seats and maintain "independence." But of course most parliaments require a majority even to form a government, let alone to legislate, and so the majoritarian effort unfolds among elected officials. If the left generally and DSA specifically are interested in really vying for power, we need a *majority*—a majority in each battle we fight, but also *a majority of the whole society*. We are dead set on this goal—winning majorities to socialist politics—and have no interest in letting baggage, however big, get in the way. If we can build a socialist majority without the Democratic ballot line, great. With the Democratic ballot line, great too. Hell, we'll use the Republican ballot line if we can get ahold of it.

Arguments that claim on principle that we should never run as Democrats fail to recognize the

fundamental difference between being a Democratic apparatchik and using a ballot line. The rigidity of the two-party system has long been a thorn in the side of efforts to build real power for the socialist left. But the structure of the American party system also provides moments of opportunity. Exploiting the ability to run candidates on a line when the party elite have little recourse to oppose them is one such opportunity. Rather than opposing it on anti-materialist theoretical grounds, we should see this as another potential tool to build the movement we so desperately need.

Footnotes

1. Pew, "Little Change in Public's Response to 'Capitalism,' 'Socialism'," 12/28/2011.
2. César Rendueles and Jorge Sola, "Podemos and the Paradigm Shift," *Jacobin*, 4/13/15.
3. S. M. Lipset and G. Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*, Norton: 2001.
4. Luke Elliott-Negri, "Lessons From Vermont," *Jacobin,* 8/2/16.
5. Robert J. S. Ross, "From Refinery Town to Progressive City," *Dissent,* April 6, 2017.
6. Jennifer Klein, "New Haven Rising," *Dissent*, Winter 2015.
7. Bill Quigley, "Blueprint for The Most Radical City on the Planet," Huffington Post, 10/18/2017.
8. Sam Lewis and Luke Elliott-Negri, "If the Left Wants to Win Elections, It Should Heed the Lessons of This Progressive Third Party," *In These Times*, 9/27/17.
9. Daniel Marans, "Sanders-Backing Socialist Wins Big In Georgia City Council Race," Huffington Post, 4/19/17.
10. "15 DSA Members Elected!, 2017 election," 11/9/17.
11. Aviva Stahl, "Khader El-Yateem Could Be the First Socialist Palestinian Pastor on the City Council," *Village Voice*, 9/5/17.
12. Frank Guan, "Could a Democratic Socialist Actually Win a Spot on City Council?" *NY Magazine*, 11/5/17.