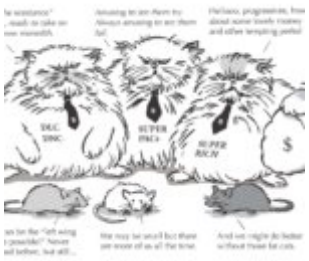
The Left and the Democratic Party

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What can socialists today learn from the experience of the left in the past as it grappled with the issue of electoral politics? Over the last 50 years, American leftists have in general adopted two alternative strategies for dealing with the question of electoral politics. On the one hand, some attempted to build a movement to reform or even to take over the Democratic Party, while others chose instead to work toward an independent political party to the left of the Democrats. Each of these strategic approaches has encountered tremendous difficulties in making headway in the American political system. Today, with Donald J. Trump as president, with the Republicans controlling Congress and most state governments, and after Bernie Sanders' remarkable campaign for president and the astonishing growth of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), debate over political strategies is more intense than it has been for decades. So we turn here to look at the first of these strategic approaches, the attempt to reform the Democratic Party, to influence it, or simply to use its ballot line.

The idea that the left should work to reform the Democratic Party in order to defend democratic rights and the standard of living and social benefits of the working class, as well as to prepare the ground for a struggle for socialism, actually has a long history that goes back to the 1930s. The Communist Party (CP), which had been founded in 1919 and been illegal and underground until 1921, finally emerged in the mid-1920s with a legal organization prepared to engage in political campaigns. Communist candidates in the 1920s received only a tiny number of votes in those elections.[1] In 1922 and 1923, the CP attempted to take over the Farmer-Labor Party movement, but ended up driving out other labor groups.[2] With the stock market crash of 1929, followed by the beginning of the Great Depression, Communist strategy began to change.

The Communists ran William Z. Foster, one of the country's leading labor union strategists and organizers, as their candidate for the presidency of the United States (his third campaign) in 1932. Foster strongly opposed Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt that year and also opposed the first New Deal; following the ostensibly revolutionary line of the Communist International at that moment, American Communists warned that FDR could become a fascist.[3] Their slogan was, "Fight for Socialism, or the Blue Eagle [symbol of the New Deal's National Recovery Act] Will Wear a Brown Shirt." But after Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party took power in Germany in 1933, virtually unopposed because of the disastrously sectarian stance of the German Communist Party as well as the passivity of the German Social Democrats, Joseph Stalin, who had become the leader of the Soviet Union, changed the Communist International's line. In 1935, the Communist International adopted the Popular Front strategy, arguing that the Communists should form a bloc with all other anti-fascist parties, including capitalist parties, to oppose fascism and to pressure their governments to strengthen their military forces and form alliances with the Soviet Union.

The Communist Party of America had some difficulty for a few years attempting to figure out what this new Popular Front policy meant for the United States, where neither a parliamentary system

nor political coalitions existed, and where two capitalist parties, Republicans and Democrats, dominated. In the mid-1930s, the Communists once again worked with other leftists in an attempt to form a Farmer-Labor Party, but in 1936 they also ran Earl Browder as a Communist candidate for president and unofficially and tentatively began to support the Democratic Party.[4] When a group of Socialist Party (SP) members broke away and created the American Labor Party to support Roosevelt, many Communists in New York State voted for Roosevelt on the ALP line.

Led by Browder, the Communists decided by 1937 that Roosevelt's New Deal coalition was the "specific form of the Popular Front in the United States."[5] The Communists argued that their role in the Democratic Party was to strengthen the New Deal wing of the party against more conservative Democrats and to push for a foreign policy of "collective security" against the Axis powers. Then, when Stalin signed the Nonaggression Pact with Hitler in 1939, collective security was abandoned, and Roosevelt was suddenly denounced as a warmonger. After Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June of 1941, however, the Communists, principally to support the USSR, became fervent supporters not only of Roosevelt and the Democratic Party but also of the U.S. government and its war effort. Support for the war led the Communists to work to suppress workers' strikes and to oppose black civil rights protests or demands that might weaken support for the U.S. government, disrupt war production, or undermine the fight against the Axis powers.[6]

The Communists' commitment to the Democrats in the late 1930s also made them opponents of building any party to the left. As Browder explained to the CP's tenth convention, held in 1938, the Democratic Front was not fighting for a socialist program, but,

> If we cannot have socialism now, and obviously we can't until the people change their minds, then in our opinion, while the present capitalist system exists, it is a thousand times better to have a liberal and progressive New Deal, with our democratic rights, than to have a new Hoover, who would inevitably take our country onto the black and sorrowful road of fascism and war.[7]

This argument, calling for support for the Democratic Party as the lesser evil, together with the view that the Republican Party was ultimately the party of war and fascism, has been the CP's fundamental position from the 1930s until today. And even when, in the 1930s and again in the 1970s, the Communists ran their own candidates for president and vice president, the party and its members often actually worked in the Democratic Party and supported its candidates. From the view that the Democrats were the lesser evil flowed the Communists' opposition to the creation of a labor party or any other left party. In the later 1930s, the Communists opposed "launching artificial third parties, which can only split the people's ranks."[8]

The CP ran no candidate in 1944, unwilling to challenge Roosevelt even symbolically while he led the United States, which was allied with the Soviet Union during World War II. When, as the war was ending, Roosevelt died and the more conservative Harry Truman succeeded him, Congress began to turn to the right and the Cold War began. The Communists suddenly rediscovered independent political action. Particularly motivated by the change in the U.S. government's hostility toward the Soviet Union, the Communists supported the presidential bid of Henry Wallace, Roosevelt's Secretary of Agriculture. Communists played a very large role in the new Progressive Party created to be the vehicle of Wallace's campaign, which had a platform calling for national health insurance, an expanded social welfare system, nationalization of the energy industry, and, most important for the CP, a friendly posture toward the Soviet Union. The Communists became the principal organizers of Wallace's campaign, though many of the party's union leaders refused to go along, arguing that it would lead to greater division in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). In the end, Wallace won only 1,156,000 votes out of about 49 million votes cast, a demoralizing defeat for him and the CP.[9]

The Wallace campaign, however, represented an aberration; the Communists soon returned to support for the Democratic Party. The Communists' consistent if sometimes critical support for the Democratic Party and its presidential and congressional candidates through all of the vicissitudes of the Democrats' history meant that, even if it preferred progressives, it usually ended up in the general election backing the Democrats' regular capitalist candidates, virtually all of whom were defenders of American militarism and imperialism abroad and of exploitation and racism at home.

The political efficacy of the Communists' strategy, beyond the occasional election here or there of a more progressive congressional representative, mayor, or city councilperson—such as Vito Marcantonio[10]—is extremely difficult to measure, but certainly it has not been significant. During the Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s, the period of the McCarthyite persecution of the Communists—as well as of the Soviet Union's crushing of the Hungarian Revolution and Nikita Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's crimes at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—the party, reduced in size and influence, had virtually no political impact. From 1968 to 1984 the CP once again ran its own presidential candidates, though as before the party simultaneously continued to support Democrats. Their support for Democrats had no impact on the rightward movement of the Democratic Party from the 1940s to today. Yet, the CP continues to have a strategy of working within the Democratic Party with the goal of pushing it to the left and strengthening the progressive forces within it.[11]

The Socialist Party and Independent Politics

Let's turn further back now to look at the experience of the Socialist Party of America. The SP actually had a long history of independent political action dating back to its early years. As the party's most popular leader and perennial presidential candidate, Eugene V. Debs, said himself, "It is for me to say to the thinking workingman that he has no choice between these two capitalist parties, that they are both pledged to the same system and that whether the one or the other succeeds, he will still remain the wage-working slave he is today."[12]

Debs was the SP's presidential candidate in every election from 1900 to 1924. In 1912 he received over 900,000 votes, 6 percent of the total, a record never equaled again by himself or any other leftist candidate in a U.S. presidential election. Presbyterian minister and SP leader Norman Thomas picked up the mantel in 1928, but received only 267,000 votes that year. After the stock market crash and the Great Depression, in 1932 voters turned against Republican Herbert Hoover and elected Franklin D. Roosevelt by an overwhelming 22.8 to 15.7 million votes. Thomas's vote total in that election reached 884,000, nearly as large as Debs' vote in 1912, but with a much larger population and many more voters, it represented a far smaller percentage than Debs had achieved.

The SP declined throughout the 1930s, principally as a result of the attraction of Roosevelt and the New Deal, but to a lesser extent because of the loss of part of the organization—all of the California Socialist Party—to the Trotskyists who had entered the party and ran away with a significant piece of it.[13] The SP's "Old Guard" split away, and its most prominent labor leaders, Sidney Hillman and David Dubinsky, and labor attorney Louis Walman created the American Labor Party in 1936. Their plan was to make support for Roosevelt palatable to socialists who didn't want to vote for him on the "bourgeois" Democratic Party line.[14] That year of Roosevelt's greatest victory, Thomas received only 188,000 votes. As Thomas's biographer writes, "The Socialist Party lay in ruins."[15]

During the rest of the Norman Thomas era, the SP became ever smaller and weaker. Thomas's vote declined to only 98,560 in 1940. Thomas did worse in 1944 and a little better in 1948 with about 160,000 votes, but by the mid-twentieth century, the SP seemed unlikely to break out of its marginal position. After the outbreak of the Cold War, Darlington Hoopes stood as the party's candidate in

1952 but received only 20,000 votes, and the SP put forth no presidential candidate in the period from 1956 through the 1960s. With the SP out of the picture, the old Socialist Labor Party and the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party ran candidates, but their candidates received a miniscule number of votes.

The Realignment Strategy

What then, after such a debacle, should be socialists' political strategy? In 1958 Max Shachtman and a group of his comrades from the Independent Socialist League (ISL) entered the SP bringing with them a new political strategy.16 Shachtman, a former Trotskyist and leader of the ISL, soon became one of the dominant figures in the SP and offered the party a way out of the political doldrums in which it had been stalled for more than twenty years. His theory was that the SP could play a key role in transforming the Democratic Party into a progressive force for social change.

In the postwar period, Shachtman, a former revolutionary socialist, had begun to rethink his politics. He came to believe, for example, that the Labour Party government in Britain "had demonstrated the *possibility* of expropriating the bourgeoisie by parliamentary means."[17] He had begun moving toward the Democratic Party in the late 1940s and early 1950s.[18] By 1961, Shachtman for the first time actually advocated that Socialists support a Democratic Party candidate, and soon he was suggesting that his followers work in the Democratic Party reform clubs, a message he carried into the civil rights movement as well just a few years later.[19]

Shachtman now developed a broad political strategy, which came to be called "realignment." His realignment strategy was based on the idea that the SP could be the catalyst of an alliance between the labor unions and the civil rights movement within the Democratic Party. As part of that strategy, Bayard Rustin, a member of Shachtman's organization, worked with Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. to organize the March on Washington, which was supported by Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers and the progressive labor leaders and their unions. In the mid-1960s, Shachtman's strategy seemed to have legs.

Shachtman and his followers actively pursued this strategy while also modifying it. Initially oriented toward the progressive, formerly CIO unions, by the late 1960s he and his followers became supporters of the conservative union leader George Meany, head of the AFL-CIO, as well as of the more moderate wing of the black movement led by Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph. Most important, Shachtman and his group, breaking with the socialist tradition of opposition to imperialism, became supporters of the U.S. war in Vietnam.[20] They did so not only because of their belief that Stalinist Communism (in the Soviet Union, China, and other Communist states) was a system more reactionary than capitalism, but also because of their affinity with the Johnson administration and the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. In the 1972 presidential election, this view led Shachtman to first support candidate Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson, a hawk. Then when Jackson was eliminated in the primaries, Shachtman rejected George McGovern's anti-war campaign and backed the liberal Hubert Humphrey, who had the endorsement of the AFL-CIO.

Michael Harrington, a protégé of Shachtman and a supporter of his Democratic Party realignment strategy, had long been disturbed by his mentor's rightward drift and finally broke with Shachtman in 1972 over the Vietnam War, calling for a negotiated peace—but not, like the anti-war movement, for immediate withdrawal. Harrington and his supporters opted to back the liberal anti-war candidate George McGovern for president. The split between Shachtman and Harrington effectively destroyed what remained of the old SP, and Harrington went off to form a new organization in 1973, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, which later merged with the New American Movement to create DSA in 1982.[21]

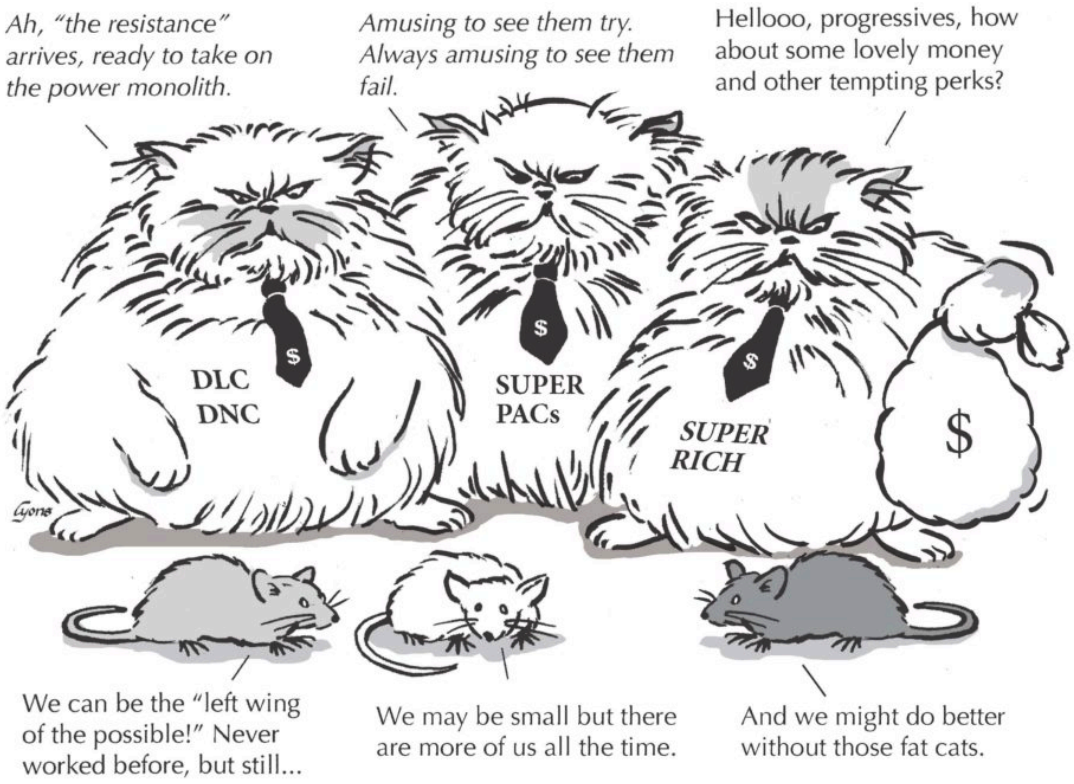
Harrington, however, continued to believe leftists should be, as he often said, "the left wing of the possible," which meant in practice the left wing of the Democratic Party. Harrington had become close to Democratic Party leaders in the 1960s as a result of his journalism. His book about poverty in the United States, *The Other America* (1962) was an enormous success and gave him personal entrée to the highest echelons of the Democratic Party. He came to work with President Lyndon B. Johnson's aides Sargent Shriver and Frank Mankiewicz and had opportunities to meet with Cabinet members. As Harrington wrote, "It was all very heady and exciting to be arguing with Cabinet officers and indirectly presenting memos to the president."[22] All of this led him to turn right. "By 1960 I had begun to understand how wrong I had been to accept the simple, revolutionary scenario of the young Marx. The change began when I first made real contact with workers and blacks and realized, among other things, that the Reutherites were the genuine, and utterly sincere and militant, left wing of American society."[23]

In his book *Socialism*, published in 1970, Harrington argued that under the impact of the labor upheaval of the 1930s, Franklin Roosevelt's Democratic Party had been transformed into a social democratic party. Subsequently, during the postwar period, Harrington argued, the unions had built "a political apparatus which is a party in everything but name. … Then in the elections of 1968, special circumstances revealed the extent to which the unionists had become a political party in their own right." And, he added, "As a result the unions were the decisive element in the Humphrey campaign in a way that had not been true in the Kennedy and Johnson races of 1960 and 1964."[24] Harrington recruited to his new group, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, not only many United Auto Workers officials, but also other labor leaders such as Jerry Wurf, head of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees, and William Winpisinger, top official of the International Association of Machinists.

Harrington's central political realignment strategy remained fundamentally that of Shachtman, but now with a new twist: Socialists could be the catalyst that would fuse not only labor and the black civil rights movement, but also anti-war liberals, and could make the Democratic Party a labor party capable of bringing socialism—by which Harrington now meant social democracy—to America. Economic and political developments, however, did not go as Harrington had foreseen.

The Democratic Party: Crisis and Reaction

The Democratic Party that emerged from the New Deal era of the 1930s and existed until the early 1960s was, as it had always been, firmly under corporate domination. But it also included a congeries of interest groups: wealthy capitalists, professional politicians, leaders of the corrupt big-city machines, southern white racists, labor union officials, and northern black leaders. The decisions about the party's candidates and its platform were made in the famous "smoke-filled rooms," where a handful of white men struggled to advance their groups' interests. Though some states held party caucuses and a few others held primary elections—in the South they were "white primaries" that excluded black voters—nevertheless, the choices of candidates and rulings on policy were made by a handful of power brokers and generally confirmed at the national convention by delegates who were professional politicians and loyalists.



The enormous social upheaval of the 1960s—the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement, together with the ghetto rebellions that burned cities across the country as well as the emergence of the women's movement—began to challenge the Democratic Party leadership as well as the old structures and policies. Before 1972, though blacks represented 12 percent of the U.S. population, they had only about 2 percent of delegates at the Democratic Party's National Conventions. In Mississippi, where black people were routinely denied the right to vote, civil rights activists organized a rival state party convention in 1964, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). They elected delegates and sent 64 representatives, led by black activist Fannie Lou Hamer, to the Democratic Party National Convention. The Democratic Party Convention, however, refused to seat the MFDP delegates, so liberal Senator Hubert Humphrey and party leader Walter Mondale arranged a "compromise" to seat two MFDP delegates alongside the all-white regular delegation. The MFDP refused the insulting offer. This enormously increased the pressure on the Democratic Party. Lyndon Johnson's support for the civil rights acts of the mid-1960s drove many southern whites out of the Democratic Party and attracted the newly enfranchised southern black voters. They wanted a voice and vote in party decisions. And blacks were not the only ones demanding greater representation; so too did the party's anti-war activists and the newly organized feminists, as well as increasingly active young people.

In 1968, after incumbent Lyndon Johnson—facing tremendous opposition because of the Vietnam War—had withdrawn from the race, Hubert Humphrey won the Democratic Party's nomination, defeating peace candidate Eugene McCarthy despite the fact that Humphrey had not won a single primary in his own name. His victory at the convention took place as Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley's police department beat and arrested left-wing protestors outside in what a U.S. government report called a "police riot."[25] The scandal of Humphrey's nomination led the Democratic National Committee to create a special commission—the McGovern-Fraser Commission—to rewrite the rules of the party. The commission's new party rules did three principal things. First, they reduced the

role of state party officials as delegates to no more than 10 percent and restricted the number of political office holders. Second, they relaxed the rules for choosing delegates, eliminating literacy tests and residency requirements used particularly in the South to exclude black voters. Third, they established criteria for affirmative action to insure the inclusion of racial minorities, of women, and of young people proportional to the population. These rules were accompanied by an expansion of the political primary system to more states, 40 out of 50 (the others using party caucuses).[26] These rules had a dramatic effect on the 1972 Democratic Party Convention, which was effectively taken over by the party's left wing—with disastrous results for both the party and the party's left.

In 1972, at the peak of the anti-war movement, the liberals—using the new rules—succeeded in winning a majority of the delegates to the Democratic Party National Convention and chose the liberal, anti-war South Dakota Senator George McGovern as the party's candidate. Faced with the insurgent rebellion, the party leadership, which remained deeply committed to the war in Vietnam and largely opposed to a greater role for blacks, rebelled. The Solid South's politicians and white voters accelerated their exit from the party, migrating en masse over the following years into the Republican Party. The big-city machines abandoned McGovern, who had betrayed them by throwing Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley out of the convention and replacing him with a delegation led by the black leader Reverend Jesse Jackson. Under the leadership of George Meany, the AFL-CIO for the first time in its history did not endorse the Democratic Party candidate, taking an official position of neutrality in the contest between McGovern and Nixon—while Meany, who refused to meet with McGovern, went golfing with President Nixon and his Cabinet,[27] thus making his preference clear.

The Black Political Convention of 1972 also failed to endorse McGovern. Utterly abandoned by the Democratic Party—with the exception of California and Washington, DC—McGovern went down to defeat, winning only 37.5 percent of the vote to Richard Nixon's 60.7 percent, while the Electoral College vote was an astounding 520 for Nixon and 17 for McGovern, the 17 being the votes from the state of Massachusetts and the District of Columbia. The lesson of 1972 was clear: If the Democratic Party's left wing succeeds in taking control of the convention, the party organization and the unions will walk away, preferring to see a Republican victory than to yield control to a left-wing insurgency. Harrington's realignment strategy had been given a practical test and had failed.

The result of the disastrous 1972 election was that in less than a year the Democratic Party repealed some of the McGovern-Fraser reforms and went on, over the next several years, to reinforce the power of the party's central leadership. In 1981 the report of the Hunt Commission, chaired by North Carolina Governor James Hunt, led the Democratic Party to create the so-called "superdelegates," and so by 1982, the party leadership was firmly back in control. The superdelegates were described in 2016 as "the embodiment of the institutional Democratic Party—everyone from former presidents, congressional leaders, and big-money fundraisers to mayors, labor leaders, and longtime local party functionaries. Nearly six-in-ten are men, close to two-thirds are white, and their average age (as best we could tell) is around 60."[28] The superdelegates, who were pledged to no particular candidate, made up almost 15 percent of the Democratic Party National Convention that year; there were 4,765 delegates of whom 714 were superdelegates. Democratic Party reform had been crushed. Was reform still possible at all?

Things had not developed as Harrington had projected. His plan did call for driving out the southern racists, but it did not work out as expected. Following Johnson's signing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, most of the Solid South's white voters gradually left the Democratic Party, which in some areas became a party of the black minority. Almost the entire region became Republican. At the same time, the Democratic and Republican parties both turned to television advertising, diminishing if not eliminating the significance of the big-city machines. As for the radicals and liberal activists,

by 1975 the anti-war movement and the civil rights movement were both practically dead, and those forces largely evaporated.

The labor movement, on which Harrington put the entire weight of his strategy, had begun to come under attack in the late 1960s, a process that continued relentlessly and mercilessly into the 1980s and beyond. By the late 1970s, employers were closing plants and moving production to the South or overseas, demanding contract concessions, opening new non-union workplaces, and wherever possible eliminating unions altogether. The unions' leaders, including those aligned with DSA, provided no vision, no strategy, and most important, no action to defend the working class.

The premises of realignment strategy had completely disappeared. Nevertheless, DSA continued to pursue its orientation to the Democratic Party, though without any real strategy or clear goals. Harrington's biographer writes that in 1976, "Harrington was prepared to support virtually any candidate the Democrats nominated that year, except for [the Southern racist George] Wallace." Harrington would work to influence the platform.29 During the period from the 1980s to the 2000s, DSA's position on American elections differed little from that of the Communist Party. It worked to support liberals in the primaries, but then backed virtually any Democrat against the Republicans while the entire Democratic Party slid to the right.

The Inside-outside Strategy

The Maoists developed another strategy, or at least a variant of an old one. When in the early 1960s the Soviet Union and China fell out, Mao accusing Nikita Khrushchev and his successors of having followed the "capitalist road," the world Communist movement also divided. The pro-Soviet Communist parties split, as the Maoist factions went off to found their own communist parties that flourished between 1960 and about 1980. Initially extremely sectarian and ultra-left, some Maoists became interested in electoral politics by the 1980s. As descendants of Stalinist Communism, even if some were critical of that experience, the Maoist groups—and there were many—tended, once they became interested in electoral politics, to pursue the old pro-Soviet Communist Party's Popular Front approach of working in the Democratic Party.

The campaign of the black Representative Harold Washington for the mayoralty of Chicago in 1982-1983 was a turning point for the Maoists. Washington—a longtime member of the Chicago machine, never a civil rights activist, an opponent of abortion rights, and not even a liberal—was running as a Democrat against both the Republicans and the racist Democratic Party political machine of which he had been a part.30 The Maoists rallied to his campaign as a struggle against racism, which it absolutely was, providing operatives and foot soldiers. After his hard-fought victory, Washington chose some of the Maoists to serve in the new city government.

So, with the Washington experience under their belt, in 1984 when Jesse Jackson ran for the presidential nomination in the Democratic Party on a progressive platform, the Maoist organizations quickly moved to support him. This was the old Communist Popular Front, but with a difference. Some of the Maoists also worked to build Jackson's campaign organization, the Rainbow Coalition, as an independent organization or social movement.31 Jackson put forward a very progressive platform, and he and the Rainbow Coalition appeared at the sites of struggles against racism and at labor union picket lines around the country. That year he won 3.2 million votes, 18 percent of the total, carried two states, and sent 358 delegates to the convention—a quite significant showing, though some on the left viewed Jackson as a protest politician whose authority derived not from the black working class, but from recognition by the business and political elites.[32] Jackson and his supporters went on that year to back the Democratic candidates in the general election.

Jackson ran again in the 1988 primary campaign involving five candidates, which was won by

Michael Dukakis with ten million votes (42 percent), while Jackson came in second with nearly seven million votes (29.4 percent). Jackson's supporters on the left hoped that with such a spectacular showing he would run as an independent candidate, but he went to the Democratic Party Convention and made his famous speech, the heart of which was this passage:

> Common ground. That's the challenge of our party tonight—left wing, right wing.
>
> Progress will not come through boundless liberalism nor static conservatism, but at the critical mass of mutual survival. It takes two wings to fly. Whether you're a hawk or a dove, you're just a bird living in the same environment, in the same world.[33]

Jackson had made it absolutely clear in this abject capitulation to the party's establishment that he wanted his followers to remain in the Democratic Party, to back its candidate—the neoliberal Dukakis. A part of the left, among them many Maoists, had kept the Rainbow Coalition alive from 1984 to 1988, but when Jackson returned to the Democratic Party, the Rainbow disappeared, and shortly afterwards so too did most of the Maoist parties. Now much smaller, Maoist groups continued into the 2000s to support Democratic Party candidates while also building independent social movements outside the party, but without any general strategy for changing the Democratic Party itself.

In the 1984 Democratic primaries, DSA declined to support Walter Mondale and also failed to support Jesse Jackson, though many DSA members worked on the Jackson campaign. Only after Mondale won the nomination did DSA endorse him. In 1988, DSA endorsed and worked hard for Jackson in the primaries. The two Jackson campaigns briefly revived the old hopes of realignment among some DSA members, though by the 1990s the left's influence had declined dramatically and the neoliberal Bill Clinton's star was rising. At present, no left group appears to believe, or at least no group takes an official or public position, that it or some coalition it might lead could take over the Democratic Party.

In practice, by the 1990s, there was little difference between the strategies of Communists, Maoists, and DSA. All backed Democratic Party progressive candidates in the primaries and called for voting for the Democrat against the Republican in the general election. Those with better connections in the labor, black, or women's organizations attempted to influence the platform, for what that was worth. Most worked to build social movements outside of the party, though when Election Day arrived, they often attempted to turn those movements out to vote for Democrats. Yet, while most of the small American left was working to push the Democrats to the left, the party now led by Clinton's Democratic Leadership Council continued to move, apparently inexorably, to the right. Interestingly, in 2000 the DSA membership was torn between Democrat Al Gore and Green Party candidate Ralph Nader and consequently failed to endorse anyone.

Socialist Candidates in the Democratic Party

The Bernie Sanders Democratic presidential campaign of 2016 suddenly offered another possible model for the left. Sanders ran as a self-declared "democratic socialist" candidate in the Democratic Party. His campaign had an enormous impact on the country and especially on the broad left, leading thousands to join DSA. Furious at the Democratic Party for its treatment of Sanders, frightened by Trump, and inspired by the Sanders campaign, some DSA activists now propose to run openly socialist candidates within the Democratic Party with the goal of building from these experiences a future independent socialist party. So far, DSA has endorsed only a few such candidates, so this strategy remains untested. And other DSA members have remained committed to the old strategy of supporting progressive Democrats.

What Are the Chances of Changing the Democratic Party?

Some still believe the Democratic Party can be reformed, but socialist Kim Moody argues that "the Democratic Party appears even more impregnable" than it did in the past. It is ever more centralized, and, as he writes,

> The party has become a well-funded, professionalized, multi-tiered hierarchy capable of intervening in elections at just about every level. It selects candidates, provides funding, furnishes endorsements, offers media relations, and supplies computer and digital campaign and get-out-the-vote services. In Congress and most state legislatures, its leaders impose a high level of party discipline, such that for the last two decades 90 percent of floor votes in both houses have been along strict party lines.[34]

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Democratic Party's precinct work was done by armies of labor union and community volunteers who staffed phone banks and went door-to-door campaigning and then getting out the vote. Today things are quite different. By the 1960s, radio and television ad campaigns had begun in many areas to carry the burden of campaigning. Today, "paid consultants, mass mailings, pollsters, computer experts, media gurus, and services from profit-making outfits specializing in campaign wizardry have replaced the old clubhouse (or reform club), union, or county foot soldiers."[35]

With the growth of economic inequality, Democratic Party donors, flush with hundreds of millions of dollars, exert enormous influence on the three major committees that disperse their money: the Democratic Party National Committee, the Democratic Congressional Campaign, and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. Large corporations such as Microsoft, Pritzker, Time Warner, and Blackstone Group, and wealthy individual donors, contribute far more money to these committees than do the labor unions. Crowdfunding, managed by groups such as ActBlue, is supposed to have democratized political fundraising. But it becomes another source of money from business and the wealthy because of the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision, which allows corporations, labor unions, and individuals to give as much money as they wish to Super PACs, which can advocate for or against candidates. As Moody writes, "All of this adds up to a party that, even more than in the past, is both highly undemocratic and structurally tied to the business PACs and wealthy donors that fund their committees and preferred candidates."[36]

As Moody suggests, few challenges to incumbent Democrats are successful: "Since World War II, only between 1 and 2 percent of congressional incumbents have lost a primary challenge, with the rate of incumbency hovering above 90 percent." Bernie Sanders' campaign confirmed the Democratic Party leadership's commitment to the organization and opposition to challenges from the left. Moody points out that of 712 superdelegate votes, Sanders won only 44 and a half, just over 1 percent. Of the 232 Democrats in both houses of Congress, only ten endorsed Sanders, and the Congressional Progressive Caucus, with 75 members, gave Sanders only one endorsement. Finally, "of the 3,170 Democratic Party state legislators, Sanders won the endorsement of just 91, less than 3 percent."[37]

The Problem of the Democrats' Influence on the Left

Beyond the issues raised by Moody about the virtual impossibility of having an impact on the Democratic Party, there is the question of the Democratic Party's influence on those leftists who attempt to work in it. Given the Democratic Party's organization, its fundraising capacity, its size, and its influence, it would be naïve to think that one could work in that party without being seriously affected by it. After all, when one enters an organization, one becomes subject to its rules, to one

degree or another accepts its program, forms relationships with its leaders and members, becomes involved in its activities, and may become dependent upon its organizational and financial resources.

Consider the Democratic Party principle that all primary candidates are expected to endorse and work for the winner of the primary, who becomes the candidate in the general election. A progressive Democratic candidate opposing a regular Democrat with the usual problems—neoliberal politics, belief in austerity, support for militarism and imperialism—must now endorse and work for that same person. Of course, one can on principle refuse to do so, but that will certainly make that person an enemy of the party, which will in the future be on guard and take revenge. The party platform, almost surely full of fine phrases about equal opportunity and a better life for all, also often contains commitments to balanced budgets, a strong military, and defending America's interests abroad. What does one do?

Take the case of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a DSA member whose victory in a Democratic Party congressional primary in New York in June 2018 stunned the country and thrilled DSA members. Just a few weeks later, she came out for all Democrats, which included Andrew Cuomo and all Democrats. The New York City DSA leadership criticized Ocasio-Cortez for her endorsement of Cuomo and other Democrats, writing, "We reject the illusion that the Democratic Party is, or will become, an institution serving the interests of the U.S. working class."38 Nevertheless, the candidate that DSA had endorsed turned to support a devious and conservative Democratic Party governor.

Leftists thus sometimes find themselves backing candidates whose principles and programs they oppose, providing a left cover for the candidate while discrediting themselves.

There is another problem as well. As leftists in the Democratic Party form relationships, they will be exposed to the blandishments and perquisites of power, the easy availability of money, equipment, cars, and other resources, as well as further access to even more influential people with more to offer. The temptations are many, and while not all succumb, the Democratic Party can exert a powerful negative force on left groups and individuals.

Today the Democratic Party liberals are doing everything they can to keep the Resistance from becoming an independent movement. The Democratic Alliance, a foundation made up of liberal donors that wishes to move the Democratic Party to the left, is giving millions of dollars to groups such as Indivisible, which now has a staff of 40 and 6,000 volunteers. Billionaire George Soros is giving large donations to progressive groups such as the Center for Community Change, Color of Change, and Local Progress. The clear if unstated goal is to keep Resistance activists voting for liberal Democrats, rather than setting out in an independent direction.[39]

We have more than a hundred years of socialist electoral experience in the United States, and some 80 years of leftists attempting to influence or reform the Democratic Party. The history suggests that there is little if any chance of ever doing so. The history of the nineteenth century suggests that only a genuine national crisis, accompanied by a massive national movement—in that period a movement for the abolition of slavery—can lead to a realignment of the political parties. And the experience of the twentieth century suggests that only in periods of tremendous mass upheaval do we see even the beginnings of independent political action, a subject that we will turn to in a future article.

Notes

1. The Communists ran William Z. Foster and Benjamin Gitlow for president and vice president in

1924 and again in 1928; out of about 30 million votes cast in 1924, the Communists received 36,396, and in 1928 with about 36.5 million votes cast, the Communist candidates received 48,770 votes. (See the *Encyclopedia Britannica* accounts of the elections available online.)
2. Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Period* (Random House, 1986 [1960]), 29-51.
3. In 1932, Foster won about 100,000 votes out of approximately 38 million votes cast. (See the *Encyclopedia Britannica* online for accounts of the elections with votes cast for each candidate.)
4. Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1957), 332. In the 1936 election, Browder won just over 80,000 votes out of 63 million votes cast.
5. Cited in Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 115.
6. Charlie Post, "The Popular Front: Rethinking CPUSA History," *Against the Current*, July-August, 1996.
7. Cited in Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (Basic Books, 1984), 210.
8. Cited in Howe and Coser, 332.
9. Howe and Coser, 470-78; James Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 232-35. The Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party candidate Farrell Dobbs got only 13,613 votes that same year.
10. Alan Schaffer, *Vito Marcantonio: Radical in Congress* (Syracuse University Press, 1966), 52. Earl Browder first insisted that the Communists back Marcantonio.
11. John Bachtell, "A radical third party? I agree!" *People's World*, January 22, 2015. Despite the title, Bachtel, Chair of the Communist Party USA since 2014, argues for working politically through the Democratic Party.
12. Eugene V. Debs, "Outlook for Socialism in the United States," *International Socialist Review,*September, 1900.
13. David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party: A History* (The Macmillan Company, 1955), 253-54.
14. Robert J. Fitrakis, *The Idea of Democratic Socialism in America and the Decline of the Socialist Party* (Garland, 1993), 185.
15. S.A. Swanberg, *Norman Thomas: The Last Idealist* (Charles Scriber's Sons, 1976), 206.
16. Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist's Odyssey Through the "American Century"* (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 1994), 262, 271-77.
17. Max Shachtman, "Aspects of the British Labor Government," *New International* (17, January-February 1951), 12; *Labor Action,* July 23, 1951, cited in Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (Basic Books, 1987), 56.
18. Drucker, 242-43.
19. Drucker, 270-71.
20. Drucker, 288-89.
21. Maurice Isserman, *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington* (Public Affairs, 2000), 256-302.
22. Michael Harrington, *Fragments of the Century* (E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1973), 175.
23. Harrington, *Fragments*, 178-79.
24. Michael Harrington, *Socialism* (Bantam Books, 1973), 306, 324-25.
25. The Walker Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, summary here.
26. Judith A. Center, "1972 Democratic Convention Reforms and Party Democracy," *Political Science Quarterly* (Vol. 89, No. 2, June 1974), 325-350.
27. Bruce Miroff, *The Liberal's Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2009), 184-89.

28. Drew Desilver, “Who Are the Democratic Superdelegates?” Pew Research Center.
29. Isserman, *The Other American,* 330.
30. Florence Hamlish Levinsohn, *Harold Washington: A Political Biography* (Chicago Review Press, 1983), *passim.* Hamlish Levisohn makes it clear that Washington was not only not a radical, he was not even very liberal. Gary Rivlin, *Fire on the Prairie: Chicago’s Harold Washington and the Politics of Race* (Henry Holt and Company, 1992), *passim.*
31. Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (Verso, 2002), 275-78.
32. Adolph L. Reed Jr., *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 123-26.
33. Jesse Jackson, Democratic Party National Convention Address, 1988.
34. Kim Moody, “From Realignment to Reinforcement,” *Jacobin*, January 26, 2017.
35. Moody.
36. Moody.
37. Moody.
38. “NYC-DSA Statement on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s Endorsement of Andrew Cuomo and ‘All Democratic Nominees,’” www.socialists.nyc/statements/ocasio-cuomo/.
39. Kenneth P. Vogel, “The ‘Resistance,’ Raising Big Money, Upends Liberal Politics,” *New York Times*, Oct. 7, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/10/07/us/politics/democrats-resistance-fundraising.html.