

Notes on DSA Pre-Convention

March 11, 2019



We publish here an account of the discussions taking place in the Democratic Socialists of America, now the largest left organization in the United States with over 50,000 members, as it prepares for its national convention to take place in Atlanta, Georgia in August. We invite our readers to offer other views or to comment on this article. - Editors

As the Democratic Socialists of America enters the run up to its second national convention since the post-Trump membership boom, organizers are looking to play a more active role in deciding how DSA continues to develop in the future. The first DSA 2019 pre-convention regional conference provided a glimpse into the limited dynamics of the organization's ideological and infrastructural direction and DSA will need to continuously reflect on them to avoid going down a road of missed opportunities. In sum, the conference reflected the lack of political development within the larger membership, a lack of a cohesive strategy on labor and race, the birth of various political tendencies within its most developed leadership, and a danger of ignoring the larger political events occurring at the border. Yet despite all of this, DSA has indeed reached new levels of maturity, cohesion, and potential.

Preconvention: What is DSA's Theory of Change?

The first of DSA's regional pre-conventions, covering California and Hawaii, opened informally on Friday with a social hosted by one of the newest caucuses, Socialist Majority. With the success of The Call/Spring caucus's well-organized efforts to influence the organization, others have taken note and started to build their own centers of power, whether that means forming networks or taking a more concerted effort to build a decentralized organizational vision as is the case for the Libertarian Socialist caucus (LSC). In contrast to what some have described as Spring Caucus's "centralist tendency" that is interested in a more limited field of political engagement, Socialist Majority seems more devoted to the permissive, generalist DSA in which many of the post-Trump members developed their skills. Although the caucuses differ there, they largely share the same theory of change: make incremental wins, grow DSA, repeat. While this has been challenged by some factions

within DSA (see LSC's Dual Power document and the former Refoundation platform), the democratic road to socialism is still the mainstream political line that orients the majority of the organization.

Labor and Race: Where is DSA's Power?

The first day of the convention began with a panel of DSA members reflecting on the progress of previously agreed upon organizational priorities: the Democratic Socialist Labor Commission, Medicare for All, National Electoral Committee, and College for All. The panelist representing Labor spoke to DSA's recent successes in supporting worker's actions, highlighting the recent UTLA strike and ongoing unionization efforts at Anchor Brewing. In his closing remarks, he emphasized the need to *see one's own workplace as a site of struggle and "pick a fight with your boss."* Unfortunately, after his much needed intervention, there was little further elaboration of a national labor strategy and there remain large questions unanswered regarding DSA's relationship to Labor, a peculiar problem for a socialist organization. The formal relationship of DSA to unions seems to consist of labor solidarity and members understand this to be insufficient. Non-union DSA members must be more actively engaged in conversations about workplace democracy and, more importantly, be given the toolkit to launch campaigns. Without proper grounding, DSA members will not have the orientation to effect the necessary transformation. If DSA cannot develop workplace struggles into class struggles it will not give proper weight to the power that the working class possesses as an agent of revolutionary change.

The space historically filled by centralizing struggles at the point of production is currently occupied by major tendencies that revealed themselves over the course of the regional strategies breakouts and general trainings that followed the panel. The first is a policy oriented, social movement approach, favored by proponents of Social Housing, Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, and Free College for All. This electorally minded effort maintains a certain skepticism regarding self-organized workers. While workers are seen as capable advocates for their own wellbeing, this orientation believes that change lies in the hands of Congress. Creating a mass movement of various class segments to engage in policy proposals could gain leverage on the Democrats and newly elected democratic socialists, but they will not lead to an energized working-class capable of organizing for itself. They may instead further segment, gentrify, and divide the working-class. The second tendency, the clear victor for framing a housing resolution at the upcoming convention, focuses on struggles at the point of circulation, exemplified by the movement for tenant organizing and establishing tenants unions. The experience organizing in Los Angeles led to many attendees warning chapters to not engage in coalition with landowners, big and small, that largely reflect a petit-bourgeois class that constantly dilutes working class demands.

This drive to create independent institutions of democratic power can be viewed more broadly as influenced by the framework of "base-building". Of course, it must be said that while its current elaboration most frequently takes the form of this circulation struggle, the whole of base-building does uphold the importance of the fight for workplace democracy. But does an emphasis on circulation struggles reflect a general feeling of pessimism about the prospect of organized labor in the contemporary, atomized workplace?

Whether in workplace or circulation struggles, intersectionality and coalition building with POC-led groups remained an ongoing debate at the conference. The contention within DSA around issues of identity has written records and debates, but no one in DSA disagrees that it still has work to do if it is to become as racially diverse as the existing working class.

The major tendency regarding race concentrated on representation in leadership and carving out spaces within DSA for underrepresented identities. While it is certainly positive to see these kinds of developments, it is important to return to the material and think about what kind of work DSA can

do to earn trust and build power. Focusing solely on safe spaces, representation, and changing names will not avoid essentializing identities, reproducing oppression, and silencing political voices that support identity movements fighting for material demands. That said, a simplistic understanding of solidarity as a tool for immediate material gain cannot suffice. There is no universal worker with a standard set of needs. To homogenize the working class under capitalism is to limit the understanding of the ways in which the system concentrates on oppressed groups. DSA needs to further efforts to establish an understanding of identity that is capable of seeing it as a constitutive element of class struggle, not an illusion of it.

The debate around race and racism appeared most directly in the discussion on how DSA should engage against the Far Right and Immigration. A significant amount of members believed that the only way to beat the right would be by directly protesting neo-Nazis and, in certain situations, fighting them to intimidate them from pursuing stronger tactics. A second tendency engaged in a strategy to push the labor movement to support policies like Social Housing and Medicare for All that could benefit all immigrants. Both of these positions failed to take seriously rising international migration and the increasing political influence at the national level of racists in business suits. An intervention did occur after a third tendency emphasized that the U.S. labor movement (which includes immigrants) continues to push a patriotic agenda that in certain ways reinforces the need for borders and national security. The U.S. could in fact end up with a single-payer insurance system and social housing alongside a militarized border that effectively continues a two-tier segment which would only increase resentment between U.S. workers. To fight the Right, this third tendency argued, DSA will need to engage in voter enfranchisement campaign on the one hand and, on the other, engage in the Abolish ICE campaign to eliminate an entire unionized sector of DHS. In turn it will open up the political space for refugees currently at the border and migrants already in the U.S. to take a central role in changing the politics of the United States. This tendency presents the clearest line for an intertwined relation between labor and race, but was sadly missing from the larger discussions.

While there were certainly important skills and strategies discussed over the course of the conference a general feeling brought up afterwards was that some of the conversations could have gone into greater depth. If DSA members do not see themselves as capable of bringing their politics to the workplace, DSA needs to develop them to the point where they feel comfortable taking action. DSA has the potential to act as a connective tissue that allows workers to flex centers of power in concert towards collective goals but to do that DSA must be embedded at the points of struggle, wherever those may be.

The Bernie 2020 Debate: What are DSA's Principles?

At the conference, the debates reflected a lack of political development on the majority of the membership even if a general anti-capitalist sentiment continues to exist. The most important debate, but sadly a missed opportunity, came through the conversation around the almost inevitable 2020 Bernie endorsement. This could have been an opportunity to strategize a variety of political lines on the 2020 presidential elections but it turned into a rather frustrating conversation in which neither of all the four sides really seemed to talk to one another. The first tendency to denounce Bernie Sanders argued against an endorsement primarily around moral terms. Important concerns were raised about Bernie's position on a couple of topics, notably: his vote for SESTA/FOSTA which has endangered the lives of sex workers, and his Medicare for All proposal which does not meet the standards established by DSA's own Medicare for All Campaign. There is a strategic rationale arguing that supporting Bernie has the potential to strain DSA's relationships with particularly marginalized groups. Although there did exist a second framing against an endorsement because of due process, this tendency also fell into a moral argument above the political reality of where the organization currently stands to influence any presidential candidacy. Third, possibly the main

position in the organization, was the tendency that DSA must endorse Sanders because he is the only candidate who can defeat Donald Trump and the corporate Democrats while supporting the policies of the Green New Deal, Medicare for All, and Social Housing. Finally, and probably the most accurate depiction of the material conditions reflecting both the limitations of the organization and the external primary debates was a position to endorse Bernie Sanders knowing that he will not win the primary, calling on him to break with the Democratic Party when he loses, and focusing primarily on using Bernie to organize chapters to build a more political developed membership via its long term campaigns. The lack of differentiation on the four tendencies made it seem as if the debate around a Bernie 2020 was a yes or no answer. This led to the conference failing to develop strategies to use throughout 2019 and 2020.

DSA must take seriously the opportunity presented by the Bernie campaign. The potential to draw in greater unorganized masses is too important to ignore. That said, it is important that DSA understand that the campaign in and of itself is not a mass anti-capitalist movement and participation in it cannot be the end of its work. Without a greater plan of action for how DSA can engage in a productive manner, its role is that of opportunists, moving the organization right to absorb larger numbers instead of moving the people left. Further, DSA must put forward a vision that does not discount the mistrust that a section of the working class holds towards American political institutions and their figureheads. Without convictions that form the bedrock of DSA's long term goal, it is vulnerable to capitulation and limits the range of people who will respond to its message.

Both sides of the debate tacitly admit that the left holds little influence among the people. On the side for, this translates to a substitution of active organizing for the spectacle of a presidential campaign. On the side against, it's a pessimism that DSA cannot properly articulate a difference from the candidate, and any engagement would see us overrun by him. DSA cannot give up the fight before it has even begun. DSA has no choice but to organize people where they are and move them towards a socialist future.

Regional Strategies: What is DSA's Structure?

Over the lead up to the pre-convention there was some pushback on the way that the agenda had been set, with a group of members proposing their own version. That member resistance crossed over onto the floor the day of the debates with speakers questioning how the topics were chosen and why there was not a more democratic process. This is reminiscent of the popular debate around structure that has been ongoing in DSA, often talked about as focusing on strong locals vs. a strong national. It presents a slightly misleading dichotomy that necessarily frames different parts of the organization as inherently antagonistic. Part of the issue in the organization as it stands is that there is little infrastructure between the groups. Locals feel as though national is imposing their will and doesn't give a fair listen to members. If DSA is to act as a powerful force, it seems necessary to create a unified body that is capable of acting beyond localized struggles. DSA needs to move from a large network of activists into a party model organization. DSA requires a strong national presence, but the question of how it is built cannot be overlooked.

Relevant to this was the last conversation on Sunday that focused on building regional connections and on the Green New Deal. DSA's relative weakness in the rural areas and lack of support for smaller chapters was a focal point. The larger coastal cities hold a set of resources in institutional knowledge and labor power that smaller chapters cannot access. Expanding the organization means gardening and caring for the plants everywhere and luckily there does seem to be a growing trust within chapters as well as an opportunity to form relationships with DSA members across California and Hawaii via proper channels of communication.

While all attendees agreed that DSA needed to support a Green New Deal, there was no real strategy of what DSA should do in the larger climate justice movement. At a high level there is a question of whether it is even possible to influence a movement that is objectively on a route toward green capitalism as a result of the ruling classes internally at war on how to get out of the global situation created by the capitalist world-system. A comrade from Los Angeles proposed that DSA focus on immediate local work capable of scaling up to the Green New Deal should the opportunity present itself. This reminder to root DSA in the issues rather than the policies offered more fertile starting ground for its regional work.

Building effective regional networks has great potential to grow DSA's ability to make change as well as helping level the distribution of power and aid communication between locals and national. Without further access to each other, DSA cannot begin to clarify its political lines and adequately address the experiences and lessons gleaned from its organizing tactics. It's a pressing topic that the upcoming convention should debate.

Moving Forward

It is clear that two tendencies shaped the clearest political lines at the regional conference, one emphasizing base-building and the other emphasizing mass support for national policies. These two tendencies were largely reflected in the two largest chapters in California with Los Angeles emphasizing an organizing project and East Bay focused on electoral projects. The San Francisco chapter, however, presents a strong connection between both lines as seen in the Anchor Steam campaign and the passage of Measure C. DSA must figure out how to negotiate long and short term goals, how to navigate the need for expediency and that for inclusivity. Without a theory of change and a firm set of principles, the movement risks either being cast adrift, responding to whatever challenge comes its way, or isolated and irrelevant, unable to muster the power necessary for true change. Once DSA can firmly grasp its lines, we can begin to build the strategies and structures necessary to carry out its plans. We need to develop a culture that is capable of bringing decision making past a level of "winner take all" and use the power of critique to improve the work of its members.

First, a national strategy on labor that is able to expand the the field of contestation beyond the narrow idea that struggle in the workplace is strictly the purview of existing unions (without, of course, under emphasizing their usefulness) would suit DSA in the contemporary American landscape. Second, an understanding of the border as greater than the result of actions within the US and rather part of the broader world-system will provide a more useful lens of analysis and impel DSA members to build out the much needed bonds of solidarity with the international working class. To achieve these goals, the organization will need to create a regional infrastructure that is capable of shortening the distance between national and locals and ensuring that there is a development of membership and leaders.

While DSA seems to be heading in a more explicitly social democratic route, there is also a growing question of whether a democratic road to socialism can truly exist or if there will come a time when the organization will finally embrace a rupture, in all its messiness, away from the transitional reforms of capitalism. Will DSA prioritize legislative victories or engage in a long term organizing plan to restructure itself to function as a third party model, enter into communities of color, and engage in a more nuanced labor strategy? In 2017, the organization took bold steps to shake free from some of its historical constraints. How it decides to act positively with this newfound freedom is yet to be seen. Once again, the question that has dogged the movement rears its head. How will DSA answer it? It seems like the membership is still deciding these questions.