

“Politics Isn’t Poker”: A Response to Andy Sernatinger on DSA and Bernie Sanders



Andy Sernatinger’s *New Politics* article “Bern After Reading: Sanders and Socialist Strategy” raises important questions to think through, whether you’re a member of Democratic Socialists of America or not. Even in the heat of the moment—and the Sanders challenge is “berning”

very hot, against all the odds, with the first primaries finally here—it’s still valuable to step back and evaluate the campaign and its impact in light of DSA’s initiatives to support Sanders.

The analysis is especially important to me because I’ve been working out my own thoughts on this. I recently wrote a (very) long article meant mainly for my comrades of the former International Socialist Organization (ISO) that retrospectively assesses our discussions about Sanders and DSA before the ISO’s dissolution.

I’ve appreciated Andy’s previous articles about DSA and quoted from one in my article. I think his most recent piece starts from where I end up. Andy disagrees with how DSA’s initiatives have taken on an “all in” character, but his article is premised on socialists being *in*. He urges socialists to support Sanders’s campaign for the presidential nomination of a party of capital by using a “class struggle approach” that will build working-class and left organization beyond the elections. I won’t repeat what I wrote, but I agree with this and think socialists need to question old assumptions and

attitudes that hinder us from embracing that approach.

I've only been a DSA member for a few months, but I share Andy's concerns about comrades not looking beyond the Sanders campaign to a struggle for socialism that will require, even if Sanders were actually elected president, mass mobilizations of the working class to achieve even a reformist agenda. Some of the talk about "only shots" and "last hopes" are rhetorical flourish, but there's obviously much more to socialism than a single election campaign, even this one, and we should make that plain now.

I attended the Chicago DSA chapter meeting where the proposal to go "all in" for Bernie that Andy singled out was discussed. I was convinced and voted yes. For one thing, the opportunity *is* historic. The unique platform of a presidential campaign as Sanders has used it only comes around every four years, and it may be a while after 2020 before there is a figure with the same stature and appeal as him.

I was also persuaded that the proposal was meant to devote resources to an independent campaign that would spread a socialist message beyond voting for Sanders. It seemed to me then, and does now, that the "all in" proposal was about more than "building a movement *for* Bernie" alone, as Andy characterized an article by CDSA member Sean Duffy.

In fairness, I think Sean was at pains in that article to explain the advantages of an independent campaign. "While we are obviously trying to win Chicago for Bernie in the March primary, and thus increase his delegate totals for the convention," they wrote, "the primary goal of our Bernie campaign is to raise class consciousness in Chicago, to grow our organization in the city, and to train up organizers and develop new leaders." I was "all in" with that.

As long as we're using gambling metaphors, maybe another poker term is worth considering: pot-committed. When you've already

bet a significant number of your chips, it doesn't make sense to fold your hand or make a weak bet to save what you have left since the odds may be worse later on. When you're pot-committed, the move is to make a strong bet, even if you aren't certain you have a hand that will beat anything else.

DSA's growth has been tied up with the mass popularity of the Sanders campaign and the other socialists who have won election to Congress and other offices. The organization already has a lot of chips in the pot. At a moment when there's a historic opportunity (not to say the last chance) to achieve even more, for the socialist movement in general and DSA in particular, it doesn't make sense to make a weak bet.

And besides, it isn't actually all or nothing, the "all in" metaphor notwithstanding. There's still a lot to win if Sanders doesn't get the nomination or become president—because politics isn't poker, and sometimes a turn of phrase is just a turn of phrase (to paraphrase another turn of phrase).

In my experience in Chicago since the "all in for Bernie" strategy was approved in early January, the chapter's activities haven't been subsumed into the Sanders campaign, nor has the organization's message narrowed to elections alone.

For example, the January meetings of North and South Sides branches each got big turnouts for publicly advertised presentations not on Sanders but on "Who Is the Working Class?" (readings by Karl Marx and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor) and "What Is Chicago DSA?" Weekly canvassing has alternated between South, West, and North Side neighborhoods, and they usually promote both Sanders and Anthony Clark, a DSA comrade running a strong, left-wing primary campaign for Congress against Democratic Party fixture Danny Davis. Each canvassing generally has a theme connected to a longstanding CDSA campaign, such as housing and rent control.

I think CDSA's efforts have not only built support for Sanders but tangibly helped to build DSA. I've canvassed with comrades who were paper members before and became active because of the Sanders campaign—and in the process started attending meetings. Plus, CDSA is tabling and canvassing in areas of the city where it doesn't necessarily have a base, expanding its profile in ways that could help future organizing.

Thus, I think election activity, even when it is the immediate priority for DSA, doesn't have to overshadow everything else and neglect building socialist and left-wing organization for future struggles.

(As an aside, last fall, the Chicago chapter went "all in" to build solidarity with the strike by Chicago teachers and school workers. A chapter that had gained further prominence and experience by helping elect six socialists to the City Council earlier in the year devoted resources and comrades' hard work to strike solidarity—explicitly emphasizing in the process that DSA's vision of winning socialism involved mass struggles of the working class.)

Again, my experience of DSA is limited to a brief period in one city. And I'm not saying there aren't times when the excitement of the moment limits comrades' focus. Then again, no one imagined that Sanders would be going into the first primaries as the frontrunner, with the "Not me, us" groundswell so far withstanding an increasingly frantic opposition from the Democratic Party establishment. To be honest, it seems unrealistic to expect comrades not to go a little overboard in those circumstances.

What's more, I think there may be more to gain for the left from being "all in" in this unusual circumstance than can be judged just yet.

The radicalization around the Sanders campaign in 2016 didn't disperse and descend into despair. By 2018, it had been

reinvigorated by local and national election successes that in turn laid the basis for a stronger Sanders campaign in 2020. Even more important was the growth of a more substantial left after 2016, with an explicitly socialist organization, DSA, at its core that has a promising and ongoing, if still developing, life beyond elections through involvement in labor and social struggles. Plus, one of the most exciting developments of the 2020 campaign is how it has cohered a broad array of left forces and figures beyond DSA around a collective identification with socialist election campaigns, making connections between activists and struggles that can be important in the years to come.

It seems like those building blocks for the left will remain if Sanders is again defeated for the presidential nomination, which is still the most likely outcome. (If Sanders manages to win the nomination, it will usher in months of chaos, instability, and upheaval that would scramble all our speculations today—but we can at least assume that it will produce enormous possibilities for the left, along with enormous challenges.)

My point is that it's too early to judge that election activity around the Sanders campaign hasn't built working-class organization—the test of that is still to come. Going “all in” to take advantage of a unique opportunity in this election could pay off in a larger, more coherent, more determined, and politically more developed left, capable of setting labor and social struggles on a higher level, with an even bigger prize at stake.