Still Facing Reality: A Reply to Our Critics

written by Ashley Smith, Charles Post | May 8, 2020



Our article, “Facing Reality: The Socialist Left, the Sanders Campaign and Our Future,” provoked a variety of responses. Some of our critics have pointed to factual inaccuracies. Most have challenged our assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the 2020 Sanders Presidential campaign, while others challenge us to elaborate a strategic alternative. In general, these criticisms have been offered in the same spirit as our original piece—comradely debate aimed not at scoring points but clarifying key challenges for the new socialist left in the US. We hope that this reply will be taken in the same spirit and will advance this process of political clarification.[1]

Let us start by correcting two factual inaccuracies in our article. First, we were mistaken when we claimed that Dustin Guastella had ever been an advocate of the strategy of the “dirty break”—where socialists participate in Democratic Party primary campaigns in order to garner the forces for an independent working class party in the future. We mistakenly believed that Guastella’s participation in the now defunct “Spring Caucus” of DSA indicated his agreement with this strategy, and that the eventual schism between him and others that led to the formation of the Bread and Roses caucus was restricted to how socialists relate to struggles against racial and gender oppression. We were clearly in error, because Guastella never supported the “dirty break” strategy.

The second factual error, based on what turned out to be a false internet rumor, was that Sanders had liquidated his campaign (including handing over email lists) into Biden’s. That said, Sanders has endorsed Biden and set up joint task forces with the presumptive nominee’s campaign. Despite these errors, we believe that the main thrust of our argument remains valid.

The Sanders Campaign and Building Struggle

Todd Chretien in “An Appeal for Dialectical Polemics” throws down the gauntlet to us by posing a series of stark questions:

> Did Bernie’s 2016 and 2020 campaigns build the left? Did his popularization of socialism and class politics help shift consciousness to the left? Did a socialist winning over the plurality of a whole new generation to anti-capitalist ideas and language make strikes more likely and contribute to the wildcat strike wave we see today? Yes or no?

Chretien lumps together a number of questions, not all of which are easily answered “yes or no”—they require, dare we say, a more “dialectical” response.

Contrary to Chretien’s claim that we did not recognize Sanders’ contributions to the radicalization, we noted at the start of our article that he “ran a heroic campaign” and championed “key demands

from Medicare for All to the Green New Deal." Similarly, we argued that the successful campaigns of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the "Squad" "should be celebrated, and they have dramatically helped project socialist ideas."

These electoral efforts, and Sanders in particular, gave a national political profile to waves of non-electoral organizing and struggle. Sanders' 2016 campaign built upon the struggles that emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 global capitalist crisis—the Wisconsin Uprising, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, organizing against the Obama era deportations, and the 2012 Chicago Teachers' Strike.

The 2018 elections of the Squad and Sanders' 2020 campaign gave voice to the renewed wave of struggles since Trump's ascension to the White House—#MeToo and organizing against sexual harassment on the job, the Red State teachers' revolt of 2018, the teachers' strikes in Los Angeles and Chicago, and the strikes in health care, hotels and hospitality and at General Motors.

Just as Jesse Jackson's two presidential runs in the 1980s attempted to cohere the fights against Reagan and George Bush Sr., these campaigns have given expression to extra-electoral struggles inside the Democratic Party. More radically than Jackson, they have also given a *name* to the inchoate revulsion of an entire generation of young people to forty years of neo-liberal austerity—*socialism*.

However, we do not agree with Chretien and others who downplay the contradictions of these campaigns and the trap of the Democratic Party, which has historically derailed attempts to form an independent workers' party. Moreover, we argue that Chretien and others get the dynamic between electoral politics and struggle backwards, exaggerating the role of Sanders' campaigns in driving the radicalization and lessening the role of class and social struggles. We think the comrades from the Emerge Caucus of DSA capture the dynamic more accurately:

> It was the rising tide of class struggle in the US and beyond that made the strength of Bernie's campaign possible. Instead of being the one to push the working class to motion, Bernie was a vehicle for parts of the working class to mount a complex and sometimes contradictory campaign against the ruling class.

Our key point was that it was the *limits* of this wave of class struggle and the solidity of the Democratic Party, not the coronavirus, as Chretien and others argue, that led to the defeat of Sanders at the hands of the establishment early in the 2020 Presidential race. The hard facts are that *before* the virus the Sanders' campaign was underperforming compared to 2016 and it ended as soon as the establishment united behind Biden.

For us, it is the vibrancy of extra-electoral struggle that determines the appeal of left-wing electoral activity and decisively shapes the capacity of elected representatives to deliver promised reforms. Mass struggles require larger and larger numbers of people acting together *against* the employers, landlords and the capitalist state. To succeed, broader and broader layers must be brought into confrontation with the powers that be in mass strikes, demonstrations, occupations and other forms of, often, illegal actions. To build this solidarity, working people will need to confront the ways in which capitalism "pulls them apart" along the lines of race and gender—which requires taking up the demands of the oppressed. Put simply, mass struggles are the matrix in which working people develop a radical consciousness and experience their collective power in the class war.

By contrast, an electoral campaign that limits their goal to winning office—which is the aim of *all* campaigns within the Democratic Party—merely needs to mobilize 50 percent plus one for victory in

elections. This often leads campaign organizers to distance themselves from more radical policies, which are often presented as "divisive," and from militant actions which could alienate moderate voters. That's why Dustin Guastella's call to shed "fringe parts of our platform" is not a regrettable mistake, but a Freudian slip that exposes the moderating logic of electoral runs inside the Democratic Party.

Even worse, those who participate in such campaigns and vote for their candidates can be quickly pulled into the logic of "lesser-evilism." Because they have come to believe that winning elections is the main way to exercise power, they can easily be swept up into the campaigns of (neo)liberal capitalist politicians like Biden as the lesser evil to defeat the greater evil of right-wing capitalist politicians like Trump.

Thus, instead of fostering political independence and struggle—again the key to scoring victories in society and at the ballot box—such campaigns can, as they have done historically, bring the left into the fold of a capitalist party, diverting activists from organizing resistance and into electoral campaigns for candidates they would otherwise oppose. Again, the comrades from the Emerge Caucus capture this dynamic:

> Electoral campaigns can also provide opportunities for deepening working class organization, but this does not happen automatically, with the rhythms of the campaign calendar often serving to demobilize us between election cycles. Bernie's campaign was a vehicle that brought many working class supporters into conflict with many levels of ruling class power. But now that Bernie has handed his operation over to Biden, there's a real danger that his working class supporters will stand down.

Some of our critics have challenged this assessment, claiming that it was the Sanders 2016 campaign that caused the exponential growth of DSA in late 2016 and early 2017. It is difficult to determine whether or not this was the case given the lack of public data on DSA's membership growth. However, it appears that the birth of the "new DSA" did not take place during or immediately after the end of the Sanders 2016 campaign in the early Summer of 2016. Instead, the big jump in membership came in late 2016 and early 2017—in reaction to the election of Trump and renewed social struggles like the first Women's Marches and the airport occupations against the Muslim ban.

Moreover, while we should celebrate the few thousand new members that have joined DSA in the last month, we must recognize that these numbers are small compared to the millions that voted for Sanders. Far from precipitating a big red wave into DSA in 2020, Sanders dropping out of the campaign and endorsing Biden has sowed significant demoralization and confusion among his supporters.

It's worth exploring the relationship between electoral campaigns and struggle in greater detail. Eric Blanc, in his *Red State Revolt: The Teachers' Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics,* argues that many of the key organizers of the successful teachers' strikes in West Virginia and Arizona came to identify as socialists through the 2016 Sanders campaign. While that is clearly the case, the organizing and strategic skill set they learned in that Democratic Party election campaign did little to prepare them to initiate, build and lead these struggles.

As Blanc shows, it was the extra-electoral organizing of a "militant minority" in workplaces over the past forty years by publications like *Labor Notes,* and the experience of the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and the Union Power caucus in the United

Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), that provided these young socialists with the political vision and organizing tools required to lead successful strikes in 2018.

Today, it is not clear to what extent the young militant workers at Amazon and Target, bus drivers in Madison and Detroit, nurses and other health care workers at hospitals across the US, or the mostly immigrant meat packing workers staging work actions and demonstrations for safe working places, were inspired by the Sanders 2020 campaign. Even if some were, they—like the leaders of the Red State teachers' revolt—are drawing on a very different "skill set" to build their struggles than those learned in even the most left leaning Democratic Party campaign.

Whither the "Dirty Break?"

A number of comrades insist that DSA's independent campaign in support of Sanders in 2020 avoided many of these pitfalls and educated new layers about the need for an eventual "dirty break" with the Democrats. We find neither of these arguments convincing. So far, there has only been one attempt to answer Andrew Sernatinger's claim that since last year's DSA convention, the organization essentially prioritized electoral activity, in particular Sanders' campaign, over non-electoral organizing.

Emma Caterine's "Auditing Campaigns: Bernie 2020 and the Future of DSA" in *Medium,* refers to how New York and Chicago DSA combined electoral and non-electoral organizing, without giving specific examples of the latter. She cites only four specific examples of smaller DSA chapters continuing organizing alongside election campaigns. What DSA needs is a systematic assessment of the relative weight of election campaigns and non-electoral organizing in our work in the last period, which has yet to be produced. But it seems obvious that DSA, as well as most of the left, ploughed the vast majority of its time, money and energy into the Sanders campaign over the past six to eight months.

Now while most of these forces got behind the Sanders campaign with the hope of his winning the nomination and taking over the party, some advocates of the "dirty-break" strategy did raise this strategy in public. Neal Meyer's defense of AOC's brilliant observation that she and Joe Biden should not be in the same political party implied the need for an eventual break with the Democrats. Megan Svoboda was more explicit, endorsing the "dirty break" in her interview on *The Hill.* Meagan Day and Micah Uetricht make a more substantive argument in their book, *Bigger Than Bernie: How We Go From the Sanders Campaign to Democratic Socialism*, which unfortunately appeared just as Sanders left the race.

However, there was no discussion of the *concrete steps* socialists need to take *today* to prepare for an independent party. Moreover, few to none of the actual candidates, including Sanders and AOC, actually advocated a dirty break strategy before, during or after their campaigns.

Thus, the "dirty break" remains a "distant" goal that is not linked to DSA's actual participation in Democratic primary elections. This fact is in stark contrast to the original "dirty break" that purportedly led to the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party in the 1920s. In that case, radicals running in established party primaries explicitly stated that they would not support mainstream candidates if they were defeated. Where is the commitment of DSA members and DSA-endorsed candidates *to not support centrist Democrats* under any circumstance? We believe the silence of many advocates of the "dirty break" on this key issue is not a matter of "bad faith." Instead it reflects the *objective difficulties and contradictions of this strategy*.

Once socialists enter Democratic primaries, they face enormous pressures to drop all discussion of breaking with the party in order to be perceived as "serious candidates" rather than "ideologically

driven spoilers." These pressures are particularly sharp in periods, like the one we are living through, when mass struggles have yet to produce a substantive layer of working people willing to "waste" their vote on a candidate who represents their interests but is likely to lose the election. This leaves those who contest Democratic primaries open to a drift into a new version of the "realignment strategy" by continuing the "fight" within the Democratic Party.

We believe this is a point missed by Andrew Sernatinger's sympathetic critique of our arguments in his "Wading Through Contradictions." He correctly points out that Sanders, AOC and the "Squad' were not "movement candidates—they don't arise from social movements and they aren't part of organizations that present them as our candidate in an election; they have no real accountability to anyone." Sernatinger again points out that DSA did not build a "party within a party" through the Sanders or other DSA backed Democratic primary campaigns. However, he seems to view the failure to implement a rigorous "dirty break" strategy as the result of a lack of *political will* on the part of its supporters in DSA.

We would argue that the entire strategy greatly over-estimates the degree of "permeability" of the Democrats. The representatives of working and oppressed people have always been "junior partners" in the Democratic coalition, whose demands are often incorporated rhetorically but ignored in practice, except during periods of mass struggle like the 1930s and 1960s/1970s. Today, there is even less space for the left, union officials, and the mainstream leaders of people of color, women and queer folks to advance their agenda in the Democratic Party. In fact, after the exceptional success of AOC and a handful of others, the establishment will be more prepared to head off socialist challengers on their ballot line. They will not be surprised next time, as they demonstrated in their defeat of Sanders.

Thus, it remains the case that the party bureaucracy and its capitalist backers overwhelmingly determine the outcome of elections, not voters. And rather than diminishing, their control has only grown greater even with the collapse of the old party machines. Contrary to the claims of the advocates of the dirty break, the contemporary party does not provide us a ready-made ballot line that socialists can wield for our own purposes. As Kim Moody analyzes in detail, the radical *centralization* of the Democratic Party since the early 1990s, with unelected and unaccountable fundraising committees essentially controlling the electoral apparatus, has all but closed off any possibility of the socialist left building a "party within a party."

The drift into a deeper electoral orientation with a *de facto* realignment strategy is evident with many in DSA. Even some advocates of the "dirty break" call on us to "elect working class fighters to local and state offices across the country" on Democratic Party ballot lines. Others in and around DSA are even more explicit about their goal of "reforming" the Democratic Party. David Duhalde puts forward a medium to long term strategy to transform the Democrats from "the bottom up." His version of a "new mass organization" offers political action committees (PACs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to replace the now defunct "Our Revolution" in yet another attempt to transform the Democratic party into a social-democratic or "working people's" party.

This continues the drift of much of the left into what some have labelled the "non-profit industrial complex." As working class organizations from unions to tenant organizations have declined in the face of the neo-liberal offensive, NGOs and PACS have filled the vacuum. As the comrades in the Emerge Caucus observed, "board-driven nonprofits… have donors and endless e-mail lists but little in the way of membership organization or internal democracy. These top-down organizations have further demobilized and disorganized our class, making solidarity and class power a memory more than a lived experience."

Alternatives to the Democratic Party

Peter Drucker's response to our article, "Left Politics after Sanders: Think Internationally, Historically and Dialectically" raises a very different set of criticisms. Drucker agrees with our assessment of the Democratic Party and the Sanders campaign, but points to our failure to integrate the experiences of building new left parties internationally into our alternative strategy. He is correct that we did not elaborate a strategy that effectively integrates the problem of political representation of working class and social struggles in light of the international experience. However, we do believe that integrating those experiences requires a slightly more critical balance sheet on the experiences of these parties than Drucker offers.

First, we have to acknowledge that the most successful new left parties were built upon a foundation of independent class organization that does not exist in the US. Over a century of working class struggle produced mass, independent working class parties in most of the capitalist world. These mass upsurges helped crystallize significant minorities of working people willing to "waste their vote" on parties that had little chance of short-term electoral success. It was the capitulation of social-democratic and ex-Communist parties to neo-liberalism in many parts of the world that led a segment of the old party apparatus and militants from the revolutionary left and social movements to break away and launch these new left parties.

As we are all aware, the US is almost unique in the capitalist world in not having a mass, independent, albeit reformist, workers party. This poses particular challenges for the revolutionary left in its attempts to educate for, and in the appropriate circumstances, to participate in, the organization of such a party. Just as periods of mass upsurge were the necessary precondition for the emergence of independent working class parties in the rest of the world, it was waves of strikes in the 1930s and 1940s that last made an independent workers' party a possibility in the US—one that was tragically foreclosed by the Communist Party's shift to support of the Democratic Party.

The fact that many of today's new left parties emerged in periods of low class struggle and organization has not only limited their electoral appeal, but has led many of them into impasses similar to those of the classic reformist parties from which they broke. The limited electoral successes of PSOL in Brazil, the pull of parliamentary coalitions on the Party of Communist Refoundation in Italy, and Syriza's capitulation to the EU in Greece, all point to the limits of parties that prioritize electoral activity—even parties that are independent of capital. Clearly, revolutionaries should not remain outside of these broad parties and attempt to hot-house new revolutionary "parties" with no roots in the working class.

Instead, revolutionaries should join the broad parties and participate in shaping their formal demands/program, and where it makes sense run for leadership positions. But, more importantly, our priority should be trying to transform these parties into ones that organize and contest for the leadership of workplace struggle and social movements. Only through becoming parties of struggle, that use elections to give voice to our movements and organizations, will these parties be able to stabilize a mass voter base and resist attempts to compromise with capital.

In the US, we will be supporting Howie Hawkins' candidacy through the Green Party. Whatever its limitations, a Hawkins campaign for President in 2020 will not only continue to promote radical political policies like a Green New Deal and Medicare For All, but will help *educate* radicals about the need for *organizational independence* from the Democratic Party.

However, we agree with Sernatinger that the existing third party organizations, including the Greens, will not be the basis for a mass, independent working class party in the US. But this is not primarily the result of the structure of the US electoral system—"winner-take-all" elections, no proportional representation, a strong Executive elected independently of the legislature, etc. While these factors present obstacles to a successful independent party, they are not insurmountable.

Instead, the main challenge is the low level of class struggle, which limits the appeal of electoral campaigns and prevents them, at least *for now*, from having the chance of victory. Put simply, even higher levels of class combativity have been—and remain—the necessary (but not sufficient) condition for the emergence of an independent labor or socialist party in the US.

Two other conjunctural factors limit the impact of a Hawkins Green Party campaign in 2020. First, the growing revulsion with the Trump administration and widespread belief that there is no alternative to centrist Democrats like Biden will lead most voters to prioritize Trump's removal from office. They will do so even at the cost of ignoring, excusing and even apologizing for the sexual assault charge against Biden by Tara Reade. Thus, widespread "lesser-evilism" will sharply limit the audience for a Hawkins campaign in 2020, even compared to the Nader campaigns of 2000 and 2004.

Second, the Greens themselves are sharply divided between radical anti-capitalists like Hawkins, advocates of "fusion" with the Democrats and other "progressive candidates," and campists who believe that despots like Assad in Syria are anti-imperialists. Certainly, Hawkins and his allies will be a part of forging a new socialist party, but the Green Party itself will not be the basis of its formation.

What's Next?

Today we are at the beginning of an economic and political crisis that is eerily similar to the 1930s. The COVID-19 pandemic has sharply deepened an economic downturn that had been in the making for several years and had already begun in late 2019 and early 2020. As Michael Roberts and others have argued, the end of the pandemic will not lead to a quick economic "bounce back"—entire sectors of the economy may experience massive bankruptcies, mergers and acquisitions; unemployment is likely to remain above 15 percent.

Employers will press for lower wages, longer hours, and more intense work to restore their competitive position and profitability. Contrary to the dreams of many left-liberals that the pandemic will usher in a new era of New Deal reforms, we will see bipartisan support for a renewed wave of education and social service austerity. This 1930s-style crisis will require a 1930s-style response from the socialist left—organizing working class resistance in all spheres of life, educating an emergent militant minority in socialist politics, and cohering a new workers' party to advance the fight for socialism.

The left and the working class enter this crisis severely weakened by four decades of neo-liberal offensive, a condition that we are only just starting to overcome. Almost all forms of working class organization, from unions to tenants' associations to anti-racist and feminist campaigns, have declined; they have often been replaced by staff and donor run "advocacy" groups and NGOs.

The "militant minority"—the layer of activists who keep alive the traditions and institutions of working class resistance, and can act independently of the official leadership of unions, community, anti-racist and feminist organizations—is still quite weak. However, the experience of the 2018-19 strike wave, the emergence of strikes during the current crisis and pandemic, and the growth of DSA and other socialist organizations, give us hope.

Especially encouraging is DSA collaboration with the United Electrical Workers on the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee and DSA's Restaurant Organizing Project. These are key initiatives that can help build working class resistance in the face of the pandemic and crisis. We hope that most DSA members will put their time and energy into renewed workplace organizing rather than down-ballot electoral contests on the Democratic Party ballot line.

In the face of massive and persistent unemployment, we also need to help initiate the organization of the unemployed– opposing evictions and foreclosures and demanding full unemployment benefits for all. Finally, we need to mobilize against the reemergence of the *fascist gangs,* who draw support from among the growing ranks of small businesses facing bankruptcy and poverty, and who are now demanding the "reopening of the economy."

The 1930s provides us with plenty of lessons—both positive and negative—of how to prepare for and build these movements. DSA members and other socialists will again have to grapple with the questions that confronted our political forebears then: How do we build independent and militant rank and file organizations? How do we act together with, and when necessary *against,* the official leadership of the unions and movement organizations, including those who are ostensibly more "left" and "militant"? How do we maintain our independence from elected officials and politicians who will encourage moderation when militancy and law-breaking is necessary to win? And, most importantly, how do we lay the foundation for an independent working class party and not again be sucked into the "graveyard of the social movements"—the Democratic Party.

We are encouraged by the resistance to any support for Biden and the Democratic centrists among many DSA comrades who supported Sanders. We want to join them arguing against those who peddle the "lesser-evil" nonsense that has led the left, time and again, to fold its tents, support centrists and leave the far-right as the only opposition when the centrists attack popular living standards. While we know many will not join us in supporting and voting for Howie Hawkins as the Green Party candidate for President, we believe there is space for *independent socialist campaigns* in 2020 and beyond.

We must challenge the defeatism implicit in the dirty break strategy that presupposes that elections at every level can only be contested and won on the Democratic Party ballot line. Especially on the local level where the Democrats run essentially *single party* cities and towns, socialists can and should establish their own independent ballot line. There is no reason, especially at this local level, to use a "dirty break" or "clean dirty break" strategy. If we ran our own candidates on our own ballot line, that would be far more effective in building the infrastructure for a new socialist party than getting more and more entangled in a capitalist one.

And while we should celebrate those socialists elected on the Democratic Party line, we should hold them accountable to DSA, call for them to support independent socialist campaigns, and aid that project by using their infrastructure to run for reelection on those new ballot lines. It is not hard to imagine socialists challenging and winning against Democrats in some Congressional, state legislative, mayoral and city council elections in cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco. That would indeed be a political revolution.

DSA, together with workplace and community militants, independent leftists and others should be exploring such independent campaigns that can promote our struggles and educate for the need for independent working class political organization in the US. But we should do so without electoralist illusions that winning office automatically translates into victories for reforms. Remember, we are entering a period where the capitalist class and its parties from the federal to the municipal level will be imposing vicious austerity measures against us.

In such conditions, it will take an enormous rise of class and social struggle we have yet to see to defend even past gains, let alone win new ones. Our primary efforts should therefore remain focused on building struggles and organizing a new militant minority especially in DSA and other socialist groups.

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[1] Marianela D’Aprile’s “Reality Check: We Need Class Struggle Elections” appeared in *The Call* (published by the Bread and Roses caucus in DSA) after we submitted this response to our critics to *New Politics*. However, we believe that we have anticipated and addressed her criticisms here. In this article, we also explain more fully the problems with Bread and Roses’s strategy of “class struggle elections” on the Democratic Party’s ballot line. We look forward to continuing the debate.