Why I Voted Against Endorsing Cynthia Nixon

written by Dan La Botz | July 30, 2018

The leadership of the New York City chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) voted this past weekend by a two-thirds majority to endorse Cynthia Nixon in the Democratic Primary race for New York State governor. The decision reflected similar majorities for Nixon among the total membership of the New York City branches. An accompanying motion also passed that linked DSA's work on the Nixon campaign to the Julia Salazar campaign in the Democratic Primary for State Senate and tied it to our organization's support for the New York State Health Act and the a city campaign create for expanded rent stabilization.

Since the majority of my fellow New York City socialists voted to endorse Nixon, I feel obligated as a member of the City Leadership Committee (CLC) to explain to our members why I cast my vote against, as did eleven other members of the 34-member body, while one person abstained.

I will try in this brief statement to make clear first what seemed to me to be the principle reasons given to support or reject the endorsement and why i took the position that i did. Let me begin, however, by stating that some at the meeting argued that since the majority of our members had voted to endorse Nixon, that we were all obligated to vote to endorse her. I disagreed because as I stated at the meeting, I was elected in my Central Brooklyn branch by members who know that, while generally supportive of our electoral work over the past three years, I am dubious about the "Progressive" Democrats and about strategies that tend to suggest that we can have significant influence in the Democratic Party or on its candidates. I felt that I had to represent those who voted for me on that basis.

Readers should be clear that this debate in DSA was not an argument about whether or not Nixon was better than Cuomo. I think that virtually no one in DSA supports Cuomo in the primary and nearly all agree that Nixon would be a better choice. The question was: Do we as DSA want to give her our endorsement? And you should also be aware that voting against endorsement would not have stopped any of our members from working for her as individuals or from voting for her in the primary. The endorsement question was solely about whether or not our socialist organization, its time, energy, resources, and its reputation should be inked to her campaign and, if she were to win,

to her future administration. The question of endorsement became critical after Nixon proclaimed her self a “democratic socialist,” or at least a supporter of DSA’s health and housing campaigns and of “democratic socialist values.” The CLC vote took place after a straw poll of the members and a series of debates and votes in branch meetings where half of six NYC branches voted to endorse and half voted against, but a total of approximately two-thirds of the members voted for.

The Major Arguments Pro and Con

Many of the DSA members arguments pro and con on the Nixon nomination have been posted online (and can be found here, and here, and here), but let me state what I thought were the principal arguments made by both those in the CLC meeting and in branch meetings who spoke for endorsing Nixon:

- We should endorse Nixon because we want to defeat Cuomo.
- We should support Nixon because she is a progressive candidate who has declared herself to be a democratic socialist.
- We should endorse Nixon because she shares our positions on the Health Act and on rent stabilization.
- We should support Nixon because our allies with whom we work in coalitions support her and our failure to do so would distance us from them.
- We should support Nixon because this is an historic opportunity to continue to build the progressive movement and the socialist current within it, including to recruit to DSA.
- We should support Nixon because it will build our organization’s political and social movement capacity.
- We should support Nixon because it will build class power, since we will be organizing among working class people around issues like health and housing.
- We should endorse her because then we will have more leverage over her and we can work with her to improve her political program.

I would say that among those for endorsing Nixon, there was greater political unity around those points, while those who opposed the Nixon endorsement did so for a variety of reasons that did not form a coherent political view. The principle arguments of those voting against endorsement, each of which has to be taken independently, were:

- We should oppose electoral politics in principle or opposition to electoral politics at least at this moment.
- We should not work in the Democratic Party because it is a capitalist party.
- We should not endorse Nixon because we do not want a rich woman and famous actress to be the face of DSA.
- We should not endorse her because we do not have the capacity to carry out another political campaign in addition to Julia Salazar’s.
- We should not endorse Nixon just because some of our allies such as Make the Road support her, since they are NGOs and have different politics and motives.
- We should not support Nixon because she opportunistically announced her “democratic socialist values” only after Alexandria Ocasio Cortez’s victory over Joe Crowley.
- We should not endorse Nixon because--unlike Ocasio Cortez and Salazar—she is not a member of the Democratic Socialists of America.
- We should not endorse Nixon because since she is not a member, we will not be able to hold her accountable to our organization.
- We should not endorse her because our failure to endorse will not affect either her campaign (which is very likely to lose in any case) nor our organization.
- We should not endorse her because for many of the reasons given above, it devalues our

endorsement and discredits our claim to be socialists.

Why I Cast My "No" Vote

I do not agree with those few DSA members—some self-described anarchists or others who might be called "movementists"—who oppose any electoral work altogether and simply want to work in the labor social movements. I believe that labor and social movements as well as political action will be necessary to build a socialist movement and ultimately to overthrow capitalism. Nor do I think that all work in the Democratic Party should be eschewed at all times. While I am in general an opponent of the Democratic Party as a capitalist party, I think that it can be useful to run socialist candidates in some Democratic primaries or general elections. After all, if we are to create a working class party we will have to do so by eventually splitting and replacing he Democratic Party.

What we should avoid is becoming simply another progressive group on the left edge of the Democratic Party dreaming that we could somehow have great influence on it or even reform it. I think that is absolutely impossible to reform or capture the the Democratic Party given the control of the party's organization and finances by the capitalist class and given its historic and deep ties to the banks, corporations, military leadership, and major media. I believe that we need our own working class party, though how to get there from here is not clear. In the meantime, I think it is correct to consider and debate these endorsements of progressives and socialists running in the Democratic Party, as long as we are clear about our long-term goal of contributing to the ruin and replacement of the Democrats by a working people's party.

I felt at the CLC meeting that the strongest argument in favoring of endorsing Nixon was that we would then be able to continue the momentum that began with the Bernie Sanders 2016 campaign for president as well as the Ocasio Cortez campaign victory. I think, however, that that opportunity always has to be weighed against the tendency toward the transformation of DSA into simply another progressive organization on the left of the Democratic Party. We don't simply want to be used to by candidates to advance their political careers by rounding up and corralling leftwing voters for them. After all, once Ocasio Cortez had our endorsement, she more or less quickly cut ties to us—one finds no reference to DSA on her Twitter or Facebook sites, for example, though the Justice Democrats are there—and she has gone off to campaign with the Working Families Party (WFP), with Bernie Sanders, and with some Progressive Democratic Party candidates. Our organization—with 45,000 members large by left standards remains small in comparison to other political organizations—and has so far exerted virtually no gravitational pull on Ocasio Cortez who now orbits around other bodies.

I think we would have even less influence over Cynthia Nixon. While Nixon came from a lower middle class family, a single mother living in rent stabilized housing, she eventually became a successful actress, and that made her wealthy. Good for her. The problem is that as a wealthy, successful actress she became connected to some influential people in politics. Nixon, remember, was, as she explained in an interview, a supporter of Barack Obama and of Hillary Clinton, the two neoliberal Democrats against whom many of the DSA members rebelled when they backed Sanders. Nixon was also a Bill de Blasio supporter in the mayoral race in 2013, and after winning de Blasio appointed her to various city government advisory positions. DSA, however, has been quite critical of de Blasio on housing and police issues. Given Nixon's past, it is not surprising that some of de Blasio's campaign staff are now working on her campaign. These are the important political forces in Nixon's life, not DSA, which is unlikely to exert any influence over her. Clearly once she has our endorsement, we have no leverage over her. We have, I think, little or no chance of every holding her accountable to anything.

I find the argument that endorsing Nixon would somehow help DSA to organize working class power

to be the most specious. Everyone tries to organize workers. Trump is trying to organize white workers to support him through his attacks on Mexicans, Muslims, and the Chinese. Sanders worked to organize workers by advocating Medicare for All, free college, and a living wage. Cuomo is trying to organize black and women workers to vote for him by offering to protect their political interests; and public employee union endorsements indicate that so far he is winning on that one. Nixon so far hasn't shown much interest or ability to organize workers, but perhaps she will do better. We too on the socialist left want to organize workers, but we want to organize them as an independent movement with its own interests—not those of the Republican and Democratic Party politicians—and within that independent movement to argue for socialism. If we become dragged into the mainstream of the Democratic Party, they will collect the votes of the workers we organize.

Like Bernie Sanders and Ocasio Cortez, Nixon apparently thinks of democratic socialism as something like Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, though, of course democratic socialism goes far beyond that, aiming to see the working class take control of the banks and corporations and to transform our political institutions. Nixon's casual acceptance of the label "democratic socialist" followed by her clarification that she supports our health care and housing campaigns and holds our "democratic socialist values" suggests that she hasn't really thought about it much. As someone brought up at the CLC meeting, she has not joined DSA, nor do I think she is likely to do so.

The DSA labor branch made an amendment to the campaign plan, suggesting that DSA meet with Nixon to help her develop a labor platform. Interesting that we were about to vote on endorsing a candidate who didn't have a labor platform and whose remarks on labor have been ill informed and sometimes anti-union. At the CLC meeting I agreed that the DSA Labor Branch leadership should arrange a meeting with Nixon and layout a program such as Julia Salazar has adopted. I made a motion that our endorsement be contingent upon Nixon accepting our labor platform, but that motion received only eight votes. I wish that DSA's NYC labor branch and all of those in the CLC had taken this up sooner. We as socialists see organized labor as central to both resisting the right and to building a movement for socialism. While workers have many interests, including housing, health care, and police reform, specifically labor union and workplace interests should be among the most important issues for us and for the candidates we support. We should expect our candidates to have the strongest pro-worker and pro-union positions.

Some argued that we had to endorse Nixon or we would offend and alienate our allies in the social movements, some of whom are working for her campaign. I think that our relationships with our allies, with both leaders and rank-and-filers, have been based on our actual commitment to the issues on which we fight together. We have showed up to fight along side our allies on housing, health, police reform, the environment, workers' rights, immigrants' rights, women's rights' and LBGT issues, and we will continue to do so in the future, whoever our organization endorses. The Democratic primary will be over shortly, and when it is both our social movement allies and we in DSA will still be together in the demonstration, in the streets, and lobbying in the statehouse on the issues, including with those unions that supported Cuomo.

I felt that the discussion among the 34 members of our NYC leadership was one of the best political debates in which I have been involved. People argued hard for their points of view, but they treated each other respectfully. What I regret most about the CLC meetings outcome was that the plan that was adopted—I was one of two who abstained—linked the Salazar and Nixon campaigns. So we have now linked our genuine socialist candidate to a progressive who comes out of the Obama, Hillary Clinton, and de Blasio camp. I will continue to vote as someone who understands the need to work with Democratic Party progressives and with our labor and community allies, but who believes that we must defend the political independence and integrity or our socialist identity. Unfortunately, I think the CLC vote jeopardizes those, but that should lead us to fight even harder to preserve them. At the same time, those of us in DSA who put more emphasis on independent politics need to create

a stronger political pole around which to rally DSA’s members.