

Comment on “Democratic Socialists of America: Strategy Document Draft”

Democratic Socialism or Revolutionary Anti-Authoritarian Socialism

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October 25th, 2015

Contents

The Democratic Socialist Strategy	3
The Crisis	5
Their Vision of Democratic Socialism	6
Reform or Revolution?	6

Commentary on a recent draft document on the strategy and vision of the Democratic Socialists of America, from the viewpoint of revolutionary libertarian socialism (anarchism).

Sen. Bernie Sanders, currently running in the Democratic Party primary for its presidential nomination, has identified himself as a “democratic socialist.” Even though “socialism” was once a vile insult (and still is for many), this has not prevented him from gaining a popular following. If nothing else, this has increased interest in “democratic socialism.” Meanwhile the collapse of the Soviet Union has made it possible to raise “socialism” as something other than a totalitarian horror. (Sanders says his model of “socialism” is Sweden or Denmark.)

Here is a “Strategy Document” produced by some members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The DSA, founded in the early 1980s by Michael Harrington and other radicals, proudly describes itself as the largest “democratic socialist” organization in the US. Sen. Sanders has previously addressed a DSA convention, and it currently endorses his presidential bid.

Just what the DSA means by “democratic socialist” will be seen as the statement is explored. However, this is specifically a “draft,” “a work in progress,” which its authors expect to go “through a few more rounds of edits,” before being “brought to the [DSA] convention in November 2015.” (page 1) It is not (yet?) an official DSA document. But I assume it expresses generally the views of some of the DSA members and therefore is worth evaluating. I am an anti-authoritarian (or libertarian) socialist, which is another term for an anarchist. I think it would be useful to examine this proposed “strategy” of the DSA from this perspective.

The document includes a summary of DSA’s immediate strategy to achieve at least the beginnings of democratic socialism, an analysis of what capitalism is in this period, and a vision of what democratic socialism would be.

The Democratic Socialist Strategy

“DSA’s founding political statement focused on building a socialist wing within an anti-corporate coalition of labor, feminists, and activists of color whose political program would be to the left of U.S. liberalism.” (1) Note that the coalition would be “anti-corporate” but not “anti-capitalist.” This coalition (and its “socialist wing”) would win by taking over the (existing) state (the basic framework of government). “Capitalism conquered the globe using the institutions of the state...and it is through the radical democratization of the state that socialists will overcome capitalism....The state itself becomes an arena of struggle for exploited and oppressed peoples...” (5)

The implication is that the state is neutral in conflicts between the ruling class and the working class, between the oppressor and the oppressed. These “democratic socialists” reject the idea that the state is an institution of capitalism, created by capitalism, and creating capitalism (and serving other forms of oppression which are integrated into capitalism). To them, the state has been used to conquer the world for capitalism, but somehow the very same state can now be taken over by socialists to “overcome capitalism.” The army, the police, the secret police, the prisons, the law courts, the two houses of Congress with their gerrymandering and two-senators per state, the electoral college, “the restrictive voting rights provisions,” (12) the enormous bureaucracy, the lobbyists, and the 50 state governments—all of which have been used to conquer, first North America, and then the world—these will supposedly be overcome through using the very forms of the state. It is this belief which makes the DSAers reformist (or social democrats).

The state will become “an arena of struggle,” the authors say. But the state is no more an arena of struggle than is the management of a giant corporation when top managers debate whether to grant striking workers some benefits to end the strike or whether to resist the striking union to the bitter end. And if corporate management decides to put some union officials on the board of directors, this does not change the capitalist nature of the corporation. (The one thing in which anarchists agreed with Lenin and Trotsky was that the existing state had to be overturned and replaced with alternate institutions.)

In order to achieve this drastic transformation of the state, the DSAers propose to use the Democratic Party, “particularly its progressive wing.” (13) They note that this strategy failed in the 1990s due to “...the swiftly disappearing left wing of the Democratic Party...” (2) But now they are ready to try again. Their analysis is that “The Democrats are divided between their dominant, pro-corporate national leadership and a significant anti-corporate wing, supported by its black, Latino, trade union, and white progressive base. This means that Democrats tend to be less hostile (and often friendly) to legislation in defense [of] organized labor, [women], immigrants and communities of color. They also tend to be less aggressive in their attempts to slash social services.” (13)

So the Democrats have a “pro-corporate national leadership” which is “dominant,” and an “anti-corporate wing” which is dominated. (The main job of this wing is to get out the vote for the dominant pro-corporate Democrats.) The Democrats are mostly “less hostile” and “less aggressive” in attacking labor, women, and People of Color and slashing social services—which means that they are “hostile” and “aggressive,” just not as much as the Republicans. The Republicans are the cutting edge of the corporate attack on working people and the oppressed, while the Democrats trail behind. “...Nearly all socialists view the Democratic Party, and particularly its progressive wing, as the ‘lesser evil’ of these two parties.” (13) But the lesser evil is still an evil.

This leads to a problem for an electoral strategy. The DSAers acknowledge, “when the Left poses no threat to moderate Democrats, the party leadership takes the votes of progressive constituencies for granted and presses forward with policies that serve their corporate backers.” (13) In theory, the threat of an independent liberal party might pull the “moderate Democrats” to the Left. But it is very hard in the U.S.—more so than in most capitalist democracies—to establish a left third party. There are “our particular constitutional structures and an array of restrictive state laws that make third-party national efforts extraordinarily difficult.” (12) The authors recognize this as a dilemma but offer no way out. Work inside and outside the Democrats and see what happens, they conclude.

What they do not recognize is that the Democratic Party is also not a neutral organization. It is an instrument of the ruling class. For generations now it has served to pull in progressive mass movements and then to drown them in its noxious swamp. It did this to the unions, to the Black movement, to the antiwar movement, to the women’s movement, to the environmental movement, and so on. It is an enemy of working people and all oppressed and needs to be fought, not supported.

This means that the liberal leaderships of that “progressive wing” are also our enemies, because they lead the “anti-corporate” movements into the Democratic and electoral swamp. This is especially true of the union bureaucracies, which are agents of capitalism within the organized workers’ movement. The document is for more democratic and militant unions, but says nothing about the existing union officialdom as a barrier to achieving these and other progressive goals—about the need to fight the union bureaucrats. (This does not rule out having united fronts or coalitions with union officials or other liberal leaderships over specific issues.)

The document’s authors insist on “taking part in the electoral process” even though “elections in and of themselves will not bring about major political, economic, or social reforms—let alone establish

a pathway to socialism....” (40) They are also for “direct action by mass democratic movements” (5) but these remain subordinated to legislative activities. To repeat, they believe “...it is through the radical democratization of the state that socialists will overcome capitalism.” (5)

Yet virtually all progress in U.S. politics has come about through non-electoral means. In the 30s, gains were won for workers through union organizing and militant and massive strike actions. Advances for African-Americans were won in the 50s and 60s through mass civil disobedience (law-breaking) and urban rebellions (“rioting”). The anti-war movement of the 60s included large demonstrations, civil disobedience, college strikes, draft resistance and rebellion within the military. LGBT gains were made through the Christopher Street “riot” and ACT-UP’s civil disobedience. And so on. It is not as if there is no alternative to an electoralist strategy.

The Crisis

In their analysis, the authors correctly see the 30 years of prosperity which followed the Second World War as essentially over—and not coming back. Neoliberal politics have driven back the historic gains of the Western working class. “Across the global North, wage earners’ incomes and purchasing power have stagnated, while the wealth of the superrich has soared....We can expect a deepening of the contradictions of capitalism and a return to the dramatic inequality we saw in the Gilded Age of the 19th century.” (7-8) Simultaneously, capitalism is causing “...the ever worsening disruption of the global climate....The percentage of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is rising to a level incompatible with maintaining a sustainable environment on earth.” (9) In short, “The 21st century could be very bleak indeed.” (18)

In reaction to these terrible trends there has been an increase in unrest and, at least, the potentiality of struggle. They note that “...From 1980 through 2010, the world’s working class increased by two-thirds....” (8) They note the rise of rebelliousness in the U.S. and around the world.

To step back from the DSA document, look at a New York Times article on the way money for the 2016 elections is being raised by a small group of extremely rich people (“From Only 158 Families Half the Cash for ‘16 Race”; 10/11/15). The article notes, “...The donors are also serving as a kind of financial check on demographic forces that have been nudging the electorate toward support for the Democratic Party and its economic policies. Two-thirds of Americans support higher taxes on those earning \$1 million or more a year, according to a...poll, while six in 10 favor more government intervention to reduce the gap between rich and poor....’The campaign finance system is now a countervailing force to the way the actual voters of the country are evolving and the policies they want,’ said...a political and demographic expert....” (1 & 24)

In other words, the country is polarizing. On one side is an extreme faction of the ruling class, mostly leading the rest of its class, and supported by a racist, nativist, hysterical minority of a whipped-up white middle class and working class “base.” On the other side is a multi-racial, multi-national working class, moving slowly to the left—mostly still tied to the “moderate” wing of the capitalist class, to the Democratic Party and the union bureaucracies, and favoring mild reforms to the system. Of course, the electoral system is a very poor reflector of popular political sentiment. However, there is a tide running our way, but the problem is to win the people from their faith in the capitalist system and its agencies, especially the Democratic Party and elections in general.

In this context, there is one point I am strongly in agreement with in the DSA draft document. It repeatedly declares that its members should participate in movements and coalitions “as explicit

socialists.” (38) Rather than appearing as just militant rank-and-filers, advanced liberals, or progressive activists, they should make a point about being socialists. This means doing more than dealing with specific problems of capitalism. It means raising a vision of an alternate way of organizing human society, including alternate ways of human society relating to the natural world.

Their Vision of Democratic Socialism

Much of their stated vision of socialism seems to have been influenced by anarchism or, at least, by the anti-authoritarian trends which lead to anarchism. The DSAers write about “the reorganization of work,” “workplace democracy,” “replacing the hierarchical structure of today’s corporations with management teams elected by and responsible to employees,” “worker-run cooperatives.” (23) They advocate “new forms of direct democracy,” (24) “general assemblies at the neighborhood level...citizen boards...program councils...municipal and state assemblies.... referenda.”(25) Even elected representative should be subject to immediate recall by citizens. So far, so good.

It is important to remember that they expect these libertarian-democratic changes to take place through the state—the existing state which has been reformed. Again: “It is through the radical democratization of the state that socialists will overcome capitalism.” (5) The authors refer to “the democratic socialist revolution,” (27) by which they mean a drastic change but not an actual revolution (the overturning of the capitalist class, its state, and all its institutions of oppression). They suggest “nationalizing key industries such as utilities or automobile manufacturing...” and possibly “buy[ing] out private firms.” (27) That is, the state would take over large sections of the economy, even though supposedly the workers would participate in their management. There would be a “core” sector of the economy which would be owned and planned by the government (with worker participation in management) and independent enterprises (mainly workers’ cooperatives) regulated by state agencies. DSAers disagree, they write, on how much of a market there would still be, but not on a major role for the state in the economy.

The state would be radically transformed—but not abolished. “...Under democratic socialism, security institutions such as the National Security Administration, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation would either be dramatically downsized, dismantled, or consolidated.” (25) Police would still be there, but under “citizen review boards.” I do not find such ideas to be very comforting.

Contrast this with the anarchist goal of replacing the bureaucratic-military-capitalist machinery of the modern state, which stands over the rest of society. Instead there would be a federation of workplace councils and neighborhood assemblies to coordinate society. There would be a democratic armed people (a militia) instead of the police or military. The economy would be a federation of self-managing industries, consumer cooperatives, and agricultural-industrial communes—with different regions experimenting with different ways of organizing themselves. Formerly oppressed sections of the population would have full self-determination. This is the vision of revolutionary libertarian socialism.

Reform or Revolution?

At the very end of the draft document, the authors come up with another serious problem. What if the capitalists do not allow a freely-elected democratic socialist government to take away their

wealth, their power, and their social standing? What if they resist the democratic government? In fact, they note, ‘In the 1970s through the early 1980s governments controlled by socialist or labor parties, in Sweden, Chile, and France, for example, sought to do just what we propose....Capitalists reacted quickly and viciously, usually by means of a capital strike [not investing in the economy, causing unemployment and suffering]...In other cases, capitalists allied themselves with military and foreign powers...to topple the socialist government by force.’ (48) The history of European fascism is relevant here. So are the more recent developments of the Workers Party in Brazil, the ANC in South Africa, the suppression of the “Arab Spring,” and—right now—Syriza in Greece.

Suppose the capitalist class and its supporters insist on keeping their investments, their industries, their mansions, and their banks, as well as their politicians and other lackies. Suppose they plan a military coup, or pay for fascist gangs, or use the courts or the legislatures to outlaw the socialist parties. What then?

The DSAers response is rather pathetic. “Even with solid majority support and an internal democratic culture capable socialists would still face the challenge of overcoming anti-socialist violence....There is no easy solution to this problem, but building rank-and-file support within the police and armed forces...will be essential in any socialist transition.” (49)

Yes it will be extremely important to build socialist support among the ranks of the military (mostly daughters-and-sons of the working class and lower middle class). But it will also be necessary to try to disband the professional police and the long-term “lifers” and officers among the military. It will also be necessary to arm the workers and oppressed and organize them to protect their communities and industries. It will be necessary for workers’ and neighborhood councils to prepare for massive strikes in the event of a capitalist-military-fascist offensive. It will be necessary to carry through the socialist program all the way—that is, to make a revolution. Anything else could lead to a bloodbath of the people. The failure of the DSAers to raise such a perspective is a part of their being reformist socialists.

Of course, right now we are very far from such a situation. But it is not too soon to think about it. Hard times are here and (with ups and downs) will be getting worse—as the DSAers write. Even now there has been a popular turn to the left, that is, in the direction of mass struggle and of hope for a better world. There is a revived interest in socialism, of a democratic or libertarian sort. But it must be presented in the most radical, the most anti-authoritarian, and the most revolutionary way.

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