

Radicals for our Time: The DSA Vision

By Jared Abbott

Thanks to Bernie Sanders's presidential campaign and Donald Trump's election as president, DSA's membership has nearly tripled over the past year. Sanders brought the "S" word out of the closet, and Trump sent thousands of people in search of an effective organization both to fight the right and to push forward with Sanders's political revolution.



Whether you are a new member or have been with us for years, you know that DSA is a "big tent" organization. DSAers agree broadly on basic values and strategy, but there is no "party line." If you put 15 DSAers in a room, you'll find those who want us to **become** a political party and those who want to **take over** the Democratic Party, with many shades in between. You'll find those who aren't interested in electoral politics and prefer movement building and those who are ready to run for office as open socialists. We want to bring all democratic socialists together in common struggle rather than divide them up into separate and less effective organizations. The diversity of political perspectives in DSA is a strength that we celebrate, not a weakness we tolerate.

Whatever your perspective, we can say that almost all DSAers share a broad vision about DSA's political orientation and strategy. The following is a short introduction to that vision:

Socialism as Radical Democracy

Socialists believe that capitalism is fundamentally at odds with democracy. For this reason, anticapitalism lies at the heart of our politics. This crucial perspective is missing from liberal and progressive analyses, and we put it front and center in our work. Yet socialism is a much broader project of liberation. Socialism means the full democratization of all areas of our lives. Whether in the workplace, school, family, politics, neighborhood, or anywhere else, all people should have a voice in decisions that affect their lives. This means that ending racial, gender, sexual, and other forms of oppression that keep people from freely determining the course of their own lives is also at the core of the socialist project.

However, we need to remember that capitalism interacts with each of these oppressions in complex ways that structure how different groups are affected by

economic exploitation. So, for instance, African American working-class women face a distinct (and more intense) form of economic exploitation compared to white working-class women. At the same time, because the vast majority of people face the short end of the capitalist stick on a daily basis, class solidarity around our shared experience of economic exploitation can build bridges to unite working people against capitalism and all other forms of oppression. But this solidarity can only be built if socialists are on the front lines fighting against racial, gender and sexual, and other inequalities.

Our radical democratic socialist perspective is critical because it helps us connect the dots between what might seem to be separate issues in the organizing we do. For example, how does anti-charter-school activism relate to the fight to raise the minimum wage to \$15? Progressives just say that those are two good things we should care about because they help ordinary people. We say that both are examples of organized working-class resistance. Both struggles chip away at capitalism and build toward democratic socialism by shifting the balance of power away from economic elites and toward poor and working people.

Transformative Strategy

In addition to connecting the dots, we keep our eyes on the big picture. Our end goal is to achieve a democratic socialist society, but we obviously can't get there overnight. So we fight for ambitious, achievable reforms like Medicare for All or free tuition to public colleges and universities. These reforms are "transformative," because they move us in the direction of democratic socialism. Again, they do this by shifting the balance of power in our country away from economic elites and toward poor and working people, rather than simply reinforcing the power and logic of capitalism. Here is an example: both the health care exchanges created by the Affordable Care Act and Medicare for All provide health insurance for the uninsured. However, the exchanges leave power in the hands of private insurance companies while Medicare for All takes power away from those companies and puts it in the hands of a public agency that is accountable to the public. These reforms are also transformative because they open up new possibilities for what might be politically achievable in the future and increase the leverage working people have to make those possibilities a reality.

DSA on the Ground

Because we believe struggles across the full range of social movements are intricately connected, we are active in work from immigrants' rights and reproductive justice to labor solidarity and anti-police brutality. We work in struggles that defend the rights of the most vulnerable people in society (undocumented immigrants, Muslims, women), at the same time that we fight to

expand the rights of working people and strengthen our power against capital (Fight for 15, paid sick leave, paid parental leave). We prioritize doing this work in coalition with working-class and poor-people's organizations, particularly those rooted in communities of color.

Social-movement work alone, however, is not enough. Achieving real power means having power over decision-makers. This means getting people elected to public office who will be accountable to poor and working people. We seek to elect progressive and, where possible, explicitly democratic socialist candidates to all levels of government. However, we focus on local and state level races where a group such as DSA—which has limited financial resources but significant people power—can make a real impact. Whether in Democratic primaries (the most likely option for state and national-level races in the short-to-medium term), nonpartisan races, or with independent/Green Party/or other socialist candidates, we put our organizational support behind candidates who will be accountable to a democratic socialist agenda. Over time, we seek to dramatically expand independent socialist electoral capacity (regardless of the ballot line a candidate runs on) to pull local, state (and eventually national) politics to the left.

Educational Activity

Throughout U.S. history, the word “socialism” has been used by capitalists to denigrate anything that would increase the power of working people. Socialists were murdered and imprisoned. In the 1930s, Franklin D. Roosevelt took some parts of the Socialist Party platform and folded them into the New Deal, thus bringing many who had voted Socialist into the Democratic Party. In addition, before the fall of the Soviet Union, socialism was often confused in the public mind with totalitarian communist systems. Fortunately, over the years socialism has lost many of its negative connotations. Even before the Sanders campaign, as income inequality reached levels unknown since the Gilded Age, public opinion (particularly among folks under 40) was shifting. Sanders brought the word into the open and created a huge opportunity for socialists to challenge conventional views about U.S. society.

Individualism, consumerism, self-reliance, and other related concepts are deeply engrained in U.S. collective identity. They run so deep in our self-understanding that most people take them for granted as “natural” features of our culture and society. Socialism, on the other hand, involves solidarity, community, being responsible to and for each other. So, to persuade people that socialism is worth thinking about, we have a lot of work to do.

The difference today is that in this post-Occupy and post-Sanders campaign world we have receptive audiences in communities across the country. Through

conversations, discussion groups, public forums, and other venues, we must expose the “common sense” ideas of capitalism, racism, and sexism as defenses of inequality and oppression. Challenging people’s basic assumptions about the causes and possible solutions of political and economic problems is at the core of what we do. This is truly counter-cultural education, and it is through this work that we expand the horizons of political possibility. As we expand the political possibilities, we open up new, more radical arenas of struggle.

Our recent rapid growth shows that there is a real hunger for a different perspective. Without a deep and wide pool of members who are engaged and active in our campaigns and educational activities, we can’t win. We believe in constantly and deliberately reaching beyond “the usual suspects” who think like us or belong to our “group” to bring people from all walks of life into our organization. We will have to go outside our comfort zone to have conversations at information tables, when we knock on doors, and when we host friend-raising house parties.

The current situation has motivated thousands to democratic socialism and millions to an activism and coalition building not seen in decades. DSA is proud to be part of that resurgence.

Jared Abbott is a member of DSA’s National Political Committee and an active member of Boston DSA and the Harvard Graduate Students Union (UAW).

DSA local groups work with other community organizations in self-defense and solidarity actions. You can find your local DSA group at dsausa.org/chapters.

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Democratic Socialists of America