

# **What Kind of Party?**

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# What Kind of Party?

At the 2025 National Convention of the Democratic Socialists of America, delegates debated and passed R07: Principles of Party Building by a roughly 55%-45% vote. In the wake of convention, the resolution has not received much attention, but I believe it to be one of the most significant steps forward in DSA's strategic thinking in the post-Bernie era. At its core, the resolution put forward MUG's vision for party-building, and why we see DSA as the mass socialist party that can cohere the working class into a vehicle for transforming our society.

## A Brief History

America boasts a vibrant history of working-class parties, but following the 1919 split of the Socialist Party, the socialist movement in America fractured catastrophically into a constellation of left-wing sects. One could spend a whole lifetime inconclusively investigating the many branches and splits. These small groups are politically ineffective because of their size, but also because of a rigid system of internal control. At worst, they are prone to splits and purges, and collapse into chauvinistic politics like the Zionism of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). At best, they fail to offer any path forward for socialists in America, hawking their niche of socialism on the street corner like any other vendor.

Even with the Communist Party's rise to a mass political organization in the 1930s, the bi-partisan embrace of anti-communism after WWII battered the Left into submission, first by the McCarthyist purges of the late 1940s and 1950s, and second by the demoralization and demobilization of groups like Students for a Democratic Society. While the New Communist Movement of the 70s and 80s was an attempt to revive the party-building tradition of the Left, it did little more than accelerate the proliferation of micro-sects, which squabbled amongst each other and splintered over increasingly diverging opinions on international issues.

Those groups on the Left who survived moderated, and turned to liquidate their socialist politics into the Democratic Party. DSA itself, founded by the merger of Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (a split from the rump Socialist Party of America) and New American Movement (a successor to the collapsing SDS), took this road. It was primarily focused on bourgeois electoral action for much of its existence, supporting establishment Democrats like Obama prior to the membership surges during

Bernie Sanders' 2016 campaign. The dominant trend was best summed up by DSA founder Michael Harrington's maxim that "the left wing of realism is found today in the Democratic Party." This strategy which we now call "realignment", of limiting the scope and horizon of socialist organizing to electoral action within the Democratic Party, has been just as disastrous as the sect form for socialism in the US.

The mid to late 20th century was not immune to genuine mass politics, organized through the Civil Rights Movement, the New Left, the movement against the War in Vietnam, and the Black Liberation movement. Organizations of the Left did grow and attempt to take advantage of these movements, but their disunity effectively prevented them from elevating the socialist Left to a mass scale, especially after the split in the SDS. Today, one recognizes the successors of this era in groups like the Revolutionary Communist Party, Freedom Road Socialist Organization, and the Progressive Labor Party, none of which have more than a handful of members, and all of which have fallen victim to either left sectarianism, dead-end Democratic Party entryism, or both.

These two paths constitute the fate of practically all leftist or socialist groups in the US since the 1960s. Today, as DSA nears 100,000 members, it appears to have shaken off the dusty politics of the 20th century, and we may assume that we have escaped the blind alley of the past. But while our size and youth give us many advantages, we must be careful not to repeat the mistakes of our forerunners. DSA is already grappling with the edges of the problem. As we debate ballot lines, ideological red-lines for membership, and how to approach coalition work as the center-of-gravity within a fractured left, we constantly raise the question: what kind of party do we aim to build?

DSA already has the structures necessary to serve as a democratic, revolutionary socialist party which can lead the working class to power. But to do so we require a roadmap of the path ahead. Principles for Party Building aims to provide that roadmap; with clear guidelines on how internal party democracy should function, how to contest elections in order to grow socialist numbers and power regardless of ballot line, what to do with elected office when we win, and the crucial recognition that our struggle for an egalitarian socialist society must be international.

## **Party Democracy and Programmatic Unity**

A genuine socialist party is a mass association of the working class. It is a party which represents broad sections of the movement and necessarily

includes a diversity of strategies on how to wage the struggle for a new society. While the shallow unity of the sect-form provides a tempting but hollow model for ideological hegemony, no organization can be truly representative of the working class unless it allows for freedom of thought, association, information, and discussion within the party's full scope of organizing activities.

The first four points in Principles of Party Building lay out reflections on the nature of DSA's multi-tendency "big-tent," defining how to maintain a healthy and open internal culture without glossing over important differences in theory or strategy.

*The fundamental purpose of a socialist party is to be a mass association of the working class formed for collective political action. The party will be united around a democratically created program that outlines goals that, enacted together, will allow the working class to rule and end capitalism. The foundation of party democracy is freedom of information, association, and discussion. Members must be able to critique the party's program and organize to change it, as long as they are willing to accept fighting for it as the democratically-determined expression of DSA's goals. The internal governing principles of the party must guarantee all members equal right of participation in the democratic process, regular conventions of membership as the highest decision-making body, open leadership elections at conventions, local party organizations run by membership, and the free organization of factions. Guaranteeing members equal right of participation in the democratic process requires that participation be reserved for individual members. Groups may choose to affiliate with DSA on the basis of acceptance of our program, but may not be given voting rights as an organization.*

Any party or proto-party organization is defined by its method of achieving political unity. One method put forward by the DSA right demands that political debate be sidelined, so as to not interfere with the appearance of unity, or "doing the work." Another equally wrong approach looks for unity in the "golden mean" among the varying opinions of party members.

We assert that the path to unity can only flow through a process of democratic collaboration, deliberation, and decision-making at every level of the organization, but in particular at the national level. Every party needs a program, or a clear statement of tasks and principles which embodies the spirit of the movement. The process for its adoption must be democratic, and move through a national party congress like DSA's National Convention. This nation-wide democratic process creates the basis for programmatic unity, where members are willing to fight for the program even if they don't agree with every line.

Even under a common program, the freedom to organize factions will play a critical part in the internal life of the party. We cannot expect 100% agreement on every tenet of a party program. What we should expect, however, is a recognition that a democratic program represents the will of the membership, and that members should work to carry it out even as they have the right to voice disagreement and organize to change it.

Despite shallow arguments against “factionalism” and genuine weaknesses in our internal process of disagreement, DSA’s evolving caucus system can only be seen as a net positive for the political development of the socialist movement. Looking to our past, resulting from the Bolshevik’s ban on internal party factions by their 10th party congress in 1921 and the micro-sects which shallowly imitate its mandate, we find that limiting internal debate produces only crushing bureaucracy and a self-suppressed and depoliticized membership. It stands to reason that internal party formations produce the skills in methods of persuasion necessary to win the broader working class over to our political goals.

Democracy doesn’t just mean the ability to vote, but the ability of the governed to govern. It is not just a means to an end, but is woven into the fabric of our beliefs about what a socialist society can and should be. If we are sincere about a society where the people truly rule, then there can be no illusion that the party that prefigures that society must be democratic.

## **Electoral Strategy**

America’s undemocratic first-past-the-post electoral system definitionally favors the two dominant parties in our country’s political life. The limitations imposed by this system have by and large pushed democratic socialists to run on the Democratic Party ballot line over third-party experiments. This debate over the nature of the ballot line and our relationship to the Democrats, which predates most existing caucuses, runs the gambit from attempts to “realign” the Democratic Party as an internal faction, to the “clean break,” which argues that we should immediately break from the Democrats to run third-party or independent. But this debate produces an unnecessary binary that foregrounds tactics over strategy.

Points 5-7 of Principles of Party Building are recommendations to continue growing DSA’s electoral work, taking into account the successes and failures of the past 10 years, and attempting to think through the party question without falling into the ballot line trap.

*Because of an undemocratic and uneven electoral system designed to maintain*

*capitalist rule, DSA fights on unfavorable terrain and is pulled between the necessity of independent political action and using the ballot line of the Democratic Party. DSA's approach is the party surrogate, acting as a party but without a dedicated ballot line. While DSA must move away from use of the Democratic Party ballot line and primaries, a ballot line is not the primary goal or indication of political independence. What matters most is bringing our independent organization and program to races whether on a Democratic, independent, or third-party ballot line. When considering whether to create a ballot line of our own, losing control of our candidates to an open state-run process is a non-negotiable red line. Our ability to take independent political action is essential to preserve above all other considerations.*

Running for office is one of the main tactics socialists use to build the working-class party, this is true even in undemocratic political systems like our own. Lenin famously recognized this when he championed the use of the Russian Duma as a prime venue for agitation around socialist politics and building proletarian class-consciousness in 1906-7. He fiercely argued against and even threatened to split the unity of the Bolshevik faction over attempts to boycott the elections or recall socialist elected officials from office.

Our firm commitment to running socialist candidates for office forces us to accept the realities that this commitment implies. A patchwork of uneven and prohibitive state election laws means that we need to keep our options open to run on whatever ballot line presents the best opportunity to bring our politics to a mass audience.

But a willingness to tactically use the Democratic ballot line must not be mistaken for a strategic orientation towards Democratic Party entryism/realignment, which must be avoided at all costs. Democratic Party voters that are amenable to socialism can be won to DSA. But we should seek to bring those individuals into OUR movement, rather than subsuming our political stances and democratic decisions into their decrepit machine. Even without our own ballot line, our candidates must be under the discipline of DSA's democracy, both at the chapter and national level. Regardless of whether a DSA candidate is running on the Democratic, Independent, or any other ballot line, they should commit to running on the issues laid out by a democratically-decided program.

Our state-form is hostile to genuine democracy. That is a feature, not a bug. Both capitalist parties will do anything to stop coordinated leftist political action, if they can help it. There is no cozying up to a ruling class that is hellbent on the marginalization and destruction of our movement. It is for this reason that socialists cannot place trust in the capitalist state to fairly

and impartially regulate DSA or any socialist party. We, the members of DSA, are the ones who must decide who our party runs for office, and relinquishing regulation of that power to the state is a poisoned chalice.

## **The Strategy of Patience**

Once socialists are in office, some among us look to the actions of individual legislators on the basis of “purity,” or agreeability to specific moral commitments. But the actions of any actor in government are less dependent on individual heroics (or lack thereof), and more to do with the pressures applied by the body in which they serve. To win a small fraction of the legislature is an impressive feat, but it becomes irrelevant if our representatives cannot work in concert to amplify each other’s power and efforts. To overcome the weakness of the political minority, the right wing of our movement has historically chosen to enter into a coalition with bourgeois parties and assume some of the responsibility for governing while the party has not yet won over a majority of the working class.

In opposition to this tendency, Point 8 of Principles of Party Building reads:

*DSA orients itself in opposition to all ruling class political forces. DSA’s project is to unite workers to win the battle for democracy and bring about socialism, not to seek a governing coalition with a perceived lesser evil under the current undemocratic political system*

Socialists rarely reap the rewards of center-left coalition governments, and are often saddled with the blowback when liberal intransigence against working-class demands produces lackluster governance. At worst, this leaves the socialist movement and working class open to brutal oppression, like the reactionary military coup against Salvador Allende’s government in Chile in 1973, where the center-left Christian Democrats who were initially part of Allende’s coalition sided with General Pinochet and the military junta.

The alternative path forward for DSA and its electeds is a patient strategy of opposition. Our electeds should act as tribunes of the people which indict the existing system, and refuse to seek coalition government or govern via backroom negotiations with the capitalist parties. While we can and must struggle for ameliorative reforms, socialists cannot forego the primary goal, which is to convince the class of the necessity of socialism. The history makes it overwhelmingly clear that even modest reforms will be rolled back if socialists cannot raise the consciousness of the working class in order to confront our despotic government.

As DSA continues to grow, the contradiction between the party of government and the party of opposition will increasingly come to the forefront. In New York City, DSA elected Zohran Mamdani has already made impressive strides in forcing Governor Hochul's hand in implementing a limited section of his platform for universal child care. But Zohran has also made compromises with elements of the capitalist class in order to legitimize his "good government" project. His decision to keep on Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch is a reflection of the weakness of this approach, and NYC-DSA will have to decide on which side of the barricades it stands when a cop murder provokes another mass movement against the police. The threat of the independence of elected officials to the party project was further asserted by Zohran's moves behind the scenes to crown liberal former Comptroller Brad Lander over DSA-endorsed elected Alexa Avilez as the left challenger in New York's 10th Congressional District.

The desire to govern in order to improve the condition of the working class is a natural impulse. But as Marx aptly stated in his reflection on the Paris Commune, "...the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes." It is critical that we center the work of building the working-class majority necessary to not only elect reformers, but to smash the capitalist state and begin the process of building a new, democratic socialist society. As long as the US state remains anti-democratic, and as long as the state uses their monopoly on violence to deny genuine working-class participation, our duty is to patiently organize and educate the class to fight against it.

## **Workers Demand the World**

So far, our discussion of the political action of our party has not transcended the national scope. But the working class, like the capitalist class, is international. Our strengths and weaknesses are the common heritage of a global majority of the exploited and oppressed, and the strategy for our liberation can only run through taking power at an international scale.

Points 9 & 10 of Principles of Party Building declare:

*A socialist party in the United States must be a part of the global political movement of the working class. It is guided by the international interests of the class, not narrow national interests. The socialist movement is strengthened by putting forward common perspectives and engaging in common action internationally. DSA will continue to build ties with socialist parties around the world with the goal of forming a new International.*

Socialist internationalism is fundamentally counterposed to loyalty to the existing state, a division which has run through the socialist movement since the beginning. This division was responsible for the split in international socialism during WWI, after pro-war majorities in the German Social Democratic Party (SDP) and other European socialist parties voted for war credits. The anti-war opposition, made up of dissenters from the atrocious pro-war stance, split off to form their own parties, permanently dividing the socialist movement.

A socialist party must definitionally prioritize the interests of the international working class above the particular interests of its own nation-state. This means building DSA into a vehicle capable of gutting and undermining the US imperial police state from within. Concretely, this commits us against any kind of national or sectoral chauvinism that pits different elements of the working class against each other via tariffs, trade-wars, immigration controls, or any other measures. Some “progressive” Congress members like Rep. Ro Khanna of California have attempted to rally those who want to help workers into a program of “Economic Nationalism,” with strong state controls and tariffs on trade to rebuild a degraded manufacturing base. But Khanna’s plans disregard the concerns of other workers on the North American continent and beyond who will be further exploited to make up for the capitalists’ rate of falling profit in America. These short-sighted technocratic fixes are not only morally wrong but strategically backwards.

The US is the most violent nation in the history of the world. It goes without saying that socialists should oppose any military action undertaken by our government. Despite the phony rhetoric about “spreading democracy”, US imperialism has devastated every country it has touched, even when our actions removed foreign leaders who we as socialists would morally and politically oppose. The duty of any socialist is revolutionary defeatism, organizing towards the defeat of our own government during reactionary war. This has real implications for our organizing as the decrepit US empire enters a violent but prolonged death spiral.

DSA has made real strides in this regard, with our 2024 Workers Deserve More Program calling for closure of all overseas military bases, an end to US economic warfare via sanctions, and universal freedom of movement. However, DSA is still a long way away from promoting genuine common political action across national boundaries towards a new International, or decisively sidelining the state loyalist tendencies in our movement. We must ensure that at every possible juncture, DSA tribunes in elected office, the labor movement, media, and all spheres of society force public

confrontation over the imperial police state by refusing to support military, police, national security, and intelligence budgets.

## **Declaration Isn't Enough**

DSA's 2023 National Convention also committed itself to party-building via the resolution "Act Like a Party." But merely resolving to build towards a break with the Democrats did not in itself provide the necessary steps to overcome the junior-partner adherents and Democratic-dead-enders who remain committed to DSA's identity as a faction within a larger progressive ecosystem. Nor did it convince the disparate and disunited movementist left, which largely remained aloof to the party question, to join DSA. Some comrades may feel 2025's "Principles of Party Building" resolution is similarly disconnected from DSA's practical activity. If we wish to complete DSA's transformation into a mass party that can serve as a political home and rallying banner for America's growing socialist movement, we must put these principles into action in every facet of our work.

Internal party democracy must be protected, cultivated, and expanded. Electoral work must continue to grow, embracing a diversity of tactics to punch through the cobwebs of bureaucratic election law. Our campaigns must adhere to DSA's program, and our electeds must submit themselves to member democracy and discipline as guiding beacons. While we make every attempt to strengthen the working class, we must never compromise on principles or subordinate ourselves to elements of the bourgeoisie and its monopoly on state power. Lastly, as the US socialist movement struggles from within to decapitate the beast, we must continue to develop and strengthen ties with comrades around the world who are engaged in the same struggle.

As Marxists we don't have the luxury to think in the short term. Our government is constitutionally incapable of the kind of class governance that we need to transform society to meet the needs of humankind. Though it may take decades, we need to build a party that can measure its membership in the millions rather than thousands, and win over a majority of the working class to our beliefs. There are no shortcuts, and only through continued organizing along the partyist lines described above can we build something strong enough to weather the coming storms and come out swinging on the other side.