

WHAT  
WE  
STAND  
FOR

reform &  
revolution

A Marxist Caucus of the Democratic Socialists of America

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# Introduction

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Despite being a relatively small force, DSA has begun to have an impact on US politics. We have elected dozens of democratic socialists to local, state, and federal office. We played an important part in Bernie's 2016 campaign and can play a much bigger role in the 2020 campaign. DSA members have been at the center of the teachers' strike wave. Local chapters have organized or participated in hundreds of campaigns for affordable housing, healthcare, immigrant rights, and many other issues. Out of all this, we have succeeded in bringing together the largest socialist organization in the US in 70 years. We can be proud of the inclusive, democratic, member-run character of our organization.

However, we are starting to rebuild the socialist movement after decades of retreat that resulted in a historic low-point of socialist and class consciousness. This presents DSA with a challenge if it is to develop into a force that could be a viable tool for the working class to challenge the power of the ruling elite.

We have formed our caucus to promote what we understand to be a Marxist approach to the struggle to end exploitation, oppression, and the destruction of our environment. We are committed to helping DSA develop into a mass socialist party rooted in struggles and organizations of the working class and oppressed communities. We aim to build support for our ideas on the basis of democratic discussion among DSA members, while working together with different trends to build a multi-tendency, big tent DSA.

As a newly formed caucus of DSA we produced this initial statement of what we stand for in time for the 2019 DSA National Convention. It is still a draft that our caucus will be improving further. We see this as an open process in which we invite all interested DSA activists to contribute, whether they agree or want to help us by raising their disagreements. If you support these points of unity, please contact us through [ReformAndRevolution.org](http://ReformAndRevolution.org) or at [info@ReformAndRevolution.org](mailto:info@ReformAndRevolution.org) to start a conversation about joining our caucus.

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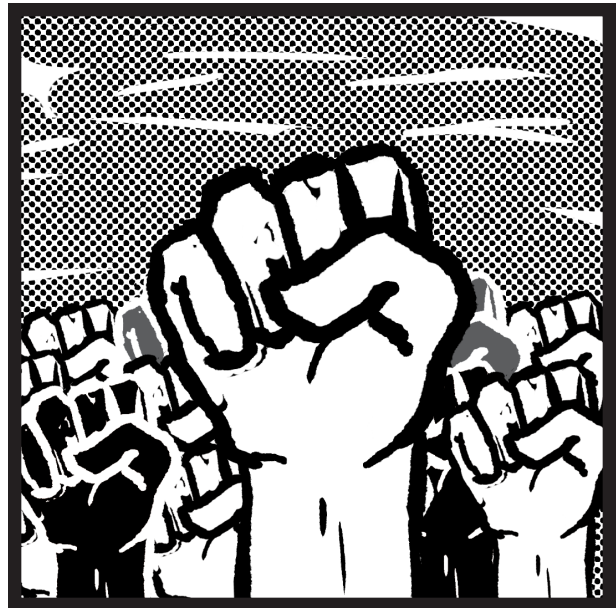
# For a Socialist Transformation of Society

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Global capitalism is mired in a deep crisis marked by a growing chasm of inequality between nations, and between the capitalist plutocrats and everyone else. Capitalism today means never-ending war, millions fleeing poverty, persecution, and catastrophic climate disaster.

Here in the US, the crisis of capitalism has fueled a deep polarization of society. On the right, there is the dangerous rise of Trump, a reactionary demagogue who is mobilizing discontent against immigrants, people of color, women, LGBTQ+ people, and other scapegoats. On the left, self-described democratic socialists Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) have both sparked and reflected a resurgence of socialist ideas.

The Great Recession seriously discredited the dominant ideology of neo-liberalism and its worship of the “free market” as the cure to all social problems. This impact was all the greater, given that the crash in 2008 was the culmination of a four-decade-long capitalist offensive



which had been overseen by the political establishment of both major parties.

The main public representatives of the new socialist movement, Bernie Sanders and AOC, portray socialism as a major expansion of social welfare while cur-tailing the power of big business through programs like Medicare for All, tuition-free higher education, the cancellation of student debt, a Green New Deal, a \$15 minimum wage, taxing the rich, breaking up the big banks, strengthening unions, ending mass incarceration, and opposing racism, sexism, and heterosexism.

The widespread support for these demands and their association with socialism are big steps forward. Working people will need to fight for each of these reforms as fiercely as the billionaire class will fight against them. Already, the opposition to Sanders’ platform is showing how hard the ruling elites and their rep-



representatives will fight against even modest reforms. This helps people draw more far-reaching conclusions about who is on their side, who is against them, and the type of change that is necessary.

As Marxists, we believe there is a deep conflict between these demands and the logic of capitalism. It will be impossible to fully implement these bold reforms in a lasting way while still leaving capitalism in place as the underlying system. This contradiction has led to very different strategies within the left.

The historically dominant strategy of the left is what Marxists call “reformism.” A reformist strategy attempts to fit the needs of workers and oppressed groups within the framework of capitalism. More left-wing strands of reformism have also argued that a socialist society can be gradually established using the existing state apparatus of capitalist society.

In our view, Bernie Sanders and AOC are advocating a reformist position by arguing against the unrestrained neo-liberal version of capitalism of the past 40 years rather than capitalism per se. They are not arguing to transcend capitalism and replace it with a new social order, but rather to return to a version of the welfare state “Keynesian” capitalism which was the norm for a temporary period, from the 1940s till the 1960s.

We do not agree that capitalism can be reformed to fundamentally meet the needs of working people and all those it

has oppressed. While we will fight along with Bernie and others for the progressive reforms they are calling for, our caucus stands in the revolutionary socialist tradition of Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Vladimir Lenin, and Leon Trotsky.

We believe establishing a socialist society requires a fundamental change—a rupture with capitalist society. A democratic socialist transformation of society would guarantee the reforms Bernie Sanders is fighting for on the basis of establishing a new social order which is compatible with, rather than in conflict with, these basic rights. It would include taking the large corporations into democratic public ownership to end the private ownership of strategic sections of our economy. Instead of the blind anarchy of the market, socialism would be based on the democratic planning of our collective resources in order to satisfy the needs of society in an ecologically sustainable fashion. Socialism would mean a qualitative expansion of democracy where all aspects of society—including our workplaces, neighborhoods and schools—are democratically run by popular assemblies and workers councils that are elected and subject to recall.

The fundamental aim of socialism, as we see it, is not just to ameliorate the exploitation of the capitalist system and all the social oppressions that come with it. Socialism represents a much more profound aspiration: a decisive break from class society and its culture of domination, hierarchy, and oppression. It would

create the material conditions for a fundamentally different human society based on solidarity, equity and cooperation that would allow a flourishing of freedom, dignity and creativity. Or in the words of the *Communist Manifesto*, a classless society would be “an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”<sup>1</sup>

We believe that the regimes in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China, and other countries were Stalinist, not socialist.<sup>2</sup> While these regimes had overthrown the capitalist class in their countries and established a distorted version of a planned economy, they were brutal dictatorships run by a privileged bureaucracy. These bureaucratic dictatorships were shaped by the poverty of their countries, their narrow national framework, and the hostile pressures of global capitalism. Their failure demonstrates that socialism requires a vibrant democracy and the overthrow of capitalism in the advanced capitalist countries that dominate the world economy.

In DSA there is a wide variety of views on what socialism means. One of the strengths of DSA as a broad big tent organization is that it allows activists with different views to fight together against exploitation and oppression, while discussing and debating in solidarity the best way forward and learning together from these struggles. While working constructively with comrades from all shades of opinion to build DSA, our caucus will argue a Marxist case for funda-

mental socialist change.

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## Reform & Revolution

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A central question DSA activists are grappling with is about the relationship between fighting for reforms and fundamentally changing the whole social system. The name of our caucus is taken in honor of the answer that Rosa Luxemburg gave to this question:

*Can the Social-Democracy [the term commonly used for the Marxist movement at that time] be against reforms? Can we contrapose the social revolution, the transformation of the existing order, our final goal, to social reforms? Certainly not. The daily struggle for reforms, for the amelioration of the condition of the workers within the framework of the existing social order, and for democratic institutions, offers to the Social-Democracy the only means of engaging in the proletarian class war and working in the direction of the final goal—the conquest of political power and the suppression of wage labor. Between social reforms and revolution there exists for the Social Democracy an*

*indissoluble tie. The struggle for reforms is its means; the social revolution, its aim.*<sup>3</sup>

As Rosa Luxemburg explained, the fight for reforms is often the terrain on which radicalization takes place. These struggles are the means for the working class and other oppressed groups to get more organized, raise their consciousness, and test their strength. People learn through the experience of fighting for reforms, big and small, who is on our side and who stands in our way. These struggles help reveal the reality of the state's legal structures, which are biased in favor of the ruling class and the status quo. These battles, even when victorious and significant, also help uncover the limits of simply tweaking the system.

In our view, DSA should fully participate in, and where possible lead, campaigns for reforms, while at the same time linking them to the need for a socialist transformation of society. While being some of the most determined fighters for every possible improvement under capitalism, Marxists explain that these reforms are won through mass struggle against the resistance of the ruling class and are fundamentally incompatible with capitalism in the long run. Reforms conceded by the ruling class due to mass pressure can be undermined and overturned at a later stage if capitalism remains intact.

For example, following World War II, the capitalist class in Western Europe made enormous concessions under the pressure of a huge revolutionary wave

at home and the threat of an alternative economic system in the form of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China. In this situation, workers and their mass parties were able to win universal healthcare, free higher education and a major extension of democratic rights. Yet, over the past 40 years, we have seen a systematic counter-offensive by the capitalist class to claw back those gains through deregulation, privatization, the breaking of unions, and generally by driving down living conditions for working people.

Another example of the instability of reforms won under capitalism is the steady erosion of abortion rights in the US. The powerful women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was able to compel a Republican-dominated Supreme Court to legalize abortion in 1973. This was a major step forward, but the underlying social structure of capitalism with its patriarchal and racist relations remained fundamentally intact. This has meant that abortion rights have been constantly under attack ever since. To fully secure these rights on a stable basis requires a fundamentally different social order, socialism, which no longer is shaped by class exploitation, patriarchy, and racism.

Additionally, the fight for reforms often shows how even the most significant reforms are not enough to provide working people what they need. When the legal right to abortion was won in 1973, it did not give women the complete re-

productive healthcare we needed. Abortion remained inaccessible and expensive, especially for women of color and poor women. This experience has helped clarify why socialist feminists argued that making the right to abortion a reality for all women requires that it be available for free as part of a socialized healthcare system.

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## Take the Top 500 Corporations into Democratic Public Ownership

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Capitalism's unrelenting concentration of wealth has now reached such proportions that giant corporations are now wealthier than whole countries. Wal-Mart takes in more revenue than the governments of Australia, Mexico or Russia, for example.<sup>4</sup> In the US the 500 largest corporations, such as Wal-Mart, Exxon Mobil, Apple, and Amazon, dominate the economy.

In response, some on the left believe that the best path to socialism is to create islands of socialism in our communities, workplaces, and organizing spaces. One popular idea is workers' cooperatives. This is one way to start the struggle

against capitalist rule at the workplace. However, as long as cooperatives produce for the capitalist market, they will be operating in a fundamentally hostile environment which will force them to put pressure on their workforce, damage the environment, and meet the terms of capitalist banks. Under capitalist society, worker co-ops can be partially protected if a broader political movement is able to mobilize enough pressure to force the capitalist state to support and fund cooperatives.

However, co-ops do not fundamentally challenge the power of the banks and the big corporations, which is what is necessary. This can only be done by taking the largest 500 corporations that dominate the US economy into democratic public ownership. In this way, we



would have the power to rationally plan out how to use this great wealth and productive capacity in service of the dem-



ocratically-agreed needs of society. On this new socialist basis, many smaller and medium-sized enterprises could be run as worker or consumer owned co-ops

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## The Revolutionary Potential of the Working Class

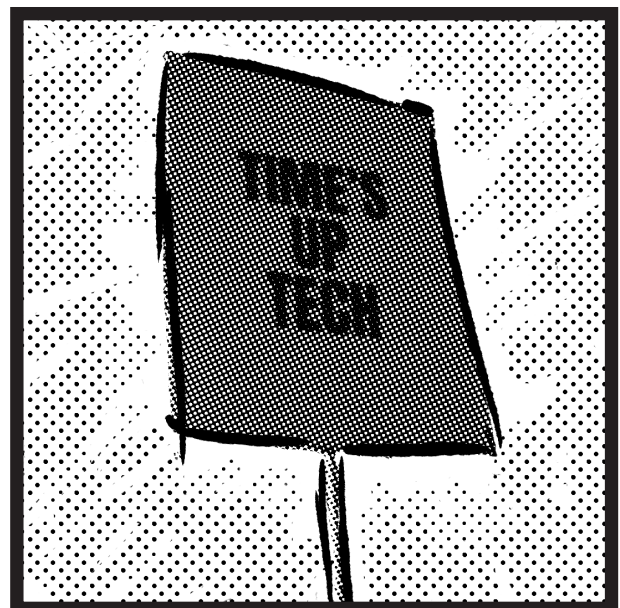
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One of the fundamental contributions that Marx made to the socialist movement was identifying the working class as the critical social force with the self interest and power to overthrow capitalism and create a new, classless society. This transformed the idea of socialism from a moral aspiration into a political program that articulates the objective interests of the working class.

Marx identified the working class as the key agent to carry out the socialist revolution, not due to a romantic idealization of workers, but due to the deep roots of their exploitation and collective nature as a class. The development of capitalism inevitably leads to the creation of a working class which, since Marx's time, has grown as a proportion of society in the US and globally. Due to its role in production, the working class has the po-

tential power to bring the economy to a halt and take over running it to meet its own needs.

Today, however, the potential power and role of the working class as a distinct and independent social force is not readily apparent. While the recent growth in working-class action, such as the wave of teachers strikes, is extremely promising, it is starting from a historically very low



level. Over the past 40 years in the US (and generally internationally) there has been a collapse of strikes, a decimation of the labor movement, an ebbing of class struggle and, therefore, a falling back of class and socialist consciousness. The lack of a socialist working-class mass force has made it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

Against this background, the growing discontent within US society has large-

ly taken the form of left populism and multi-class protests. Populism frames the divide in society as between “the people and the powerful,” or the 99% and the 1%. This gives voice to popular anger at big business, but blurs the distinction between the working class and those situated in between the working-class majority and the super-wealthy capitalist class, the so-called middle class. A left populist program opposes big business through measures such as breaking up the giant banks and regulating big corporations, but does not oppose the capitalist system as a whole. While left populism is a step forward in the US political context, given the previous prevalence of neo-liberalism, populism is in reality a radical middle-class program cloaked in the language of representing all “the people.”

On the basis of the experience of mass movements and major events in society, and the educational role a layer of socialist organizers can play, we believe this consciousness will develop into a more socialist and class-based understanding.

Given the low level of class consciousness in the US today, there is a lot of misunderstanding of what is meant by the “working class.” It is commonly misdefined on the basis of income, education, social status or type of work. As Marxists, we understand class as arising from the social relations of production.

The working class, the majority of the US population, is compelled to sell its labor for a wage to survive. This includes

teachers, nurses, baristas, tech workers, service workers, construction workers, manufacturing workers, public sector workers, workers at non-profits, etc. It includes both low-paid workers and high-paid workers (who are paid well as a result of having built strong unions or due to their skills being in high demand for a time). The working class includes blue and white collar workers, manual and intellectual labor, unskilled and skilled labor.

As a broader social class, the working class also includes the family and dependents of wage-earners, such as children, retired workers, and stay-at-home parents in working-class families who work to raise the next generation of workers or to care for the elderly.

Contrary to stereotypes, the US working class has always been highly diverse, but never more than today. Women are now part of the paid workforce more than ever before. The working class is disproportionately made up of people of color. New immigrants to this country have always been some of the fiercest fighters for working-class interests and have often brought more developed socialist ideas and organizing strategies to this country.

Although using the gendered language of his time, Karl Marx described how workers undermine their own class interests when they compete against each other: “the more [a worker] works, the more he competes against his fellow workmen, the more he compels them to

compete against him, and to offer themselves on the same wretched conditions as he does; so that, in the last analysis, he competes against himself as a member of the working class.”<sup>5</sup>

However, the nature of the working class ultimately requires it to act collectively, as a class, to secure its interests. Under the impact of major events, workers come to realize that they only have power through solidarity and organization. This collective struggle is the material basis for a mass socialist consciousness.

By its very nature the working class can only emancipate itself by abolishing the private ownership of the means of production and ending class society. Workers are compelled to struggle together, and ultimately their fights point to the need to take over their companies and collectively own and run them.

This stands in contrast to the character of other social classes. Small business owners may work long hours and barely scrape by, but their class ambition is to grow their own private business. Historically, peasant revolutions have been driven by the hunger of landless peasants for their own private plots of land. However the working class cannot—as a collective class—aspire to become private business owners or work as isolated individuals. Workers’ role in production is collective. They cannot break up their workplaces into individual small businesses for each of them to own, but they do have the power to take over their companies and

run them together.

Other sections of society face oppression, sometimes worse, than parts of the working class. However, unlike the working class, these other oppressed groups are fundamentally divided on a class basis between a capitalist elite and the majority, which is made up of working and poor people.

This can be seen in the experience of the many struggles against colonialism and for national independence. Marxists fully support these movements, and have a proud record of opposing colonialism and imperialism. However, we recognize that there is an irreconcilable class divide within an oppressed colonial people between the local capitalists on one side, and the workers and small farmers on the other side. The capitalists seek to win national independence so that they are free to be the rulers of “their” country and exploit “their own” workers. The workers and poor people see national independence as a step toward freedom and a better life. Marxists, therefore, fight for the working class and not the capitalists, to lead struggles for independence and link it to using the resources of the country for the common benefit of all.

The main obstacles to the working class realizing its power are (1) disorganization and (2) the influence of the ideas of the ruling class. Under normal conditions of capitalist rule, the majority of the working class does not take mass collective action and is under the ideological

domination of its rulers. But the history of capitalism demonstrates that at critical turning points there are explosions of mass struggle, mass organization and leaps forward in consciousness.

Understanding the centrality of the working class is at the core of the revolutionary socialist tradition. It was on this basis that Marx argued for the revolutionary idea that socialism is the self-emancipation of the working class. Our caucus firmly bases ourselves on this profoundly democratic idea. Without an understanding of socialism as the self-emancipation of the working class, left-wing movements often end up looking for top-down ways of changing society. One example is how social democratic reformism has looked to the state to change society from the top down with the role of the mass of the working class largely relegated to being passive voters.

The great American socialist, Eugene Debs, stressed the self-emancipation of the working class when he said “too long have the workers of the world waited for some Moses to lead them out of bondage. He has not come; he never will come. I would not lead you out if I could; for if you could be led out, you could be led back again. I would have you make up your minds that there is nothing you cannot do for yourselves.”<sup>6</sup> Here Debs was echoing Marx, who argued that the working class could only become fit to rule by emancipating itself through mass, collective struggle for revolutionary change.

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## Working-Class Unity and Fighting Racism

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Racism is one of the main tools the capitalist class has to try to maintain their rule over the vast majority of the population. As Keeanga-Yahmatta Taylor explains:

*All workers under capitalism are oppressed, but some workers face further oppression because of additional discrimination like racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-immigrant ideas, religious oppression, etc. Thus, in the United States, white workers are oppressed, but not to the same degree as non-white workers...*

*The biggest beneficiary in the disparity in wages [are the] employers and bosses. That employers are able to use racism to justify paying Black workers less brings the wages of all workers down--the employers enjoy the difference.*

*This is not to deny that white workers receive some advantages in U.S. society because they are white in a racist society. If they did not get some advantage--and with it, the illusion that the system works for them--then racism would not be effective in dividing Black and white work-*



ers...

*[This] creates what Frederick Engels was the first to call “false consciousness.” False consciousness is simply ruling-class ideology that is used to explain away or cover up material reality. The point is that white workers, to the extent that they accept white supremacy, contribute to capitalism’s ability to exploit them more effectively. The purely “psychological” advantage obscures the very real material deficit that racist oppression helps reinforce.<sup>7</sup>*

People of color have a long history of resisting racism and inequality. From the struggle to abolish slavery, to the establishment of industrial unions, to the civil rights movement, to the immigrant



rights movement today, people of color have often been at the forefront of struggle in the US.

The US socialist movement also has a proud history of fighting racism. For example, the Communist Party and the Trotskyists played important roles in forming multi-racial industrial unions and campaigning against lynchings. Socialists also played a central role in the civil rights movement. However, the socialist movement has also suffered from a tendency—from Eugene Debs to Bernie Sanders—to reduce all social issues to class issues. This “class reductionism” attempts to reduce the struggle of people of color to a common struggle of all workers without recognizing the need for a proactive struggle against racism specifically. This has led some labor and socialist leaders to attempt to postpone the struggle against racism supposedly until a later time, often claiming it is divisive.

This approach has failed to unite the working class. On the one hand, it acted as a barrier to fully involving people of color in the socialist and labor movements. On the other hand, some of the best fighters against racism failed to build a bridge to the wider working class.

In the view of our caucus, DSA needs to boldly fight against racism as an integral part of the working-class movement against capitalism. We do not agree with delaying the demands for justice for people of color until some time in the future or “uniting” the working class on the basis of ignoring racism (or any other form of oppression). We stand for bringing workers of all ethnicities and nationalities together to fight for improvements

for people of color here and now.

At the same time, we cannot be satisfied with a few reforms to capitalist society because racism and all forms of oppression can only be eradicated through the creation of a new egalitarian society, one where there is no longer a ruling class with an interest in constantly fostering divisions within the working class.

The idea that the working class is capable of uniting oppressed groups to overthrow capitalism and build a new socialist society was significantly weakened by the collapse of Stalinism in 1989–91. This was a historic turning point that set back the workers' movement and the credibility of socialism. In this context, the ideas of postmodernism and identity politics became highly influential in movements against oppression.

Marxists start with an analysis of society as a whole that sees oppressions as not just overlapping but rather based on the needs of a common system—capitalism. Marxism argues that ending capitalism and establishing a socialist society must be based on the power of the organized multiracial working class.

In contrast, identity politics often views the interests of identity groups as flowing from groups' unique experiences that may have overlapping/intersecting oppressions with other oppressed groups. However, the crucial connections between oppressed groups and a unifying working-class struggle against capitalism

are often ignored and sometimes even opposed.

We support people fighting oppression, regardless of disagreements we may have with the political ideas leading a particular struggle. We recognize that, despite our criticisms of the prevailing politics in many struggles against oppression in recent decades, LGBTQ+, feminist, and anti-racist movements have succeeded in bringing about significant improvements in social attitudes and democratic rights.

While actively helping to build these movements, Marxists should also advocate a distinctly socialist and working-class approach to fighting oppression, rather than echoing the prevailing ideas of identity politics. This includes putting forward a Marxist analysis of oppression, a socialist strategy for building the movement, and a program that connects struggles of oppressed groups to the overall interests of the working class. DSA should strive to bring together the experience, knowledge, and inspiration of the different struggles and offer its views on how to best wage a joint fight-back against oppression and capitalism.

The theories of some strands of identity politics lead activists to refrain from building unity with sections of workers they view as “privileged.” In contrast, we believe it is essential to unite the multi-racial working class to have the power to defeat racism and the underlying system of capitalism that breeds it. This does not mean ignoring or glossing over racism and

other backward ideas within the working class, which would only be a false unity. Uniting the multi-racial working class against the ruling class requires fighting against racism and other backward ideas within the working class. In addition, it also requires that such struggles be linked to positive appeals to the shared interests of all workers.

Identity politics often views systems of oppression as stemming from ideologies and behaviors, and often deemphasizes the material structures of society that we believe are the root source of oppression. As a result, some activists influenced by identity politics engage in a “call-out culture” that looks to shame ordinary people in an attempt to get them to change their behavior. Such an approach too often leads to a hyper-individualized atmosphere which unnecessarily exacerbates divisions within left organizations and movements, and can have a demobilizing impact.

Fighting oppressive ideas within the working class (racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc.) includes confronting it in our own working-class and socialist organizations. We should also take all the necessary steps we can to empower people from the most oppressed sections of society to raise their voices and develop their potential as leaders. However, since we are all part of, and grew up in, this sick capitalist society, it is not possible unfortunately for DSA to be an island completely free of sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression. We must commit

our organization to an approach of continual self-education and mutual assistance, constantly working to build both the understanding and commitment to challenge and overcome the harmful impacts of oppression. This cannot be done with an individualized view of the problem. Rather, it needs to be done collectively based on political clarity, clear boundaries, solidarity, and with an outward-looking focus on changing the structures of society through mass movements and political action.

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## Socialist Feminism

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As long as class societies exist, the ruling class needs to divide the vast majority of people in order to maintain its rule. The oldest division has been based on gender, the origins of which are rooted in the rise of class society and private property rights. The capitalist elite inherited patriarchy from previous forms of class society and, while reshaping it in some ways, used the oppression of women to their advantage. Despite heroic fights against gender oppression, women, gender non-conforming and LGBTQ+ people still experience lower wages, fewer career opportunities,

discrimination, sexual harassment and violence throughout society.



Outside of the field of economic production, women disproportionately bear the burden of what Marxists call “social reproduction.” Raising children, housework, and taking care of the sick and the elderly all fall disproportionately to women. Additionally women disproportionately make up the workforce of “caring” industries—from nursing to childcare to education. The ruling class benefits enormously from much of this socially necessary work being done for free within the nuclear family, and from low wages and poor conditions in woman-dominated caring industries. In contrast, as socialist feminists we demand high quality public childcare, elderly care, paid family leave, affordable high quality restaurants, etc. as social goods organized and provided for by society as a whole.

The feminist movement has achieved tremendous progress. However, the fundamental culture of oppression, controlling women and their bodies, sexual violence, and harassment remain built into the fabric of capitalist society. The oppression of LGBTQ+ people is interwoven with these patriarchal relations, which demand rigid gender and sexual norms.

Socialist feminists are committed to the full liberation of women and LGBTQ+ people by ending all aspects of their oppression – economic, social, legal, and cultural. Unlike liberal feminists, socialist feminists emphasize that there can be no end to the oppression of women, especially working women and women of color, without ending capitalism.

All organizations of the left and the workers’ movement need to educate their members to oppose sexism in all its forms within our own ranks. Only on the basis of fighting the oppression of women, LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming people can we unite the working class in a successful struggle against capitalist society.



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## Elections and Electoralism

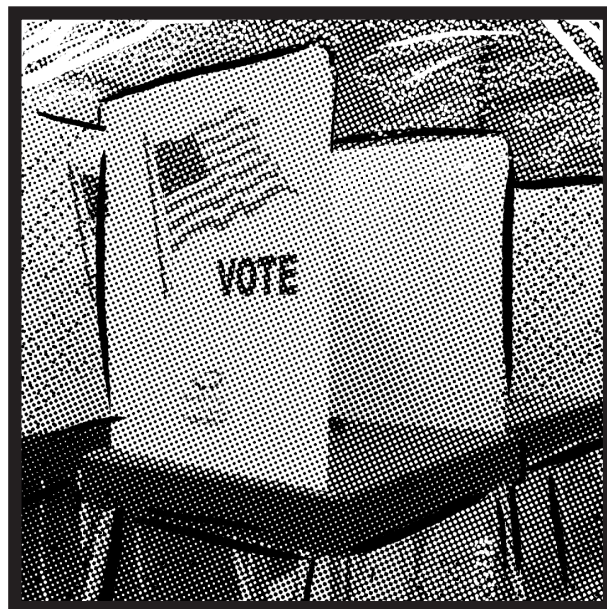
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Engaging in elections and running DSA members for elected office is an important tactic that, if applied in a principled way, can be used to popularize key demands, raise consciousness, spread support for socialism, recruit to DSA as well as help build social movements from below. Socialists elected to political office should use their position to promote protests, organizing and strikes and use their platform to skillfully expose the nature of the capitalist system and state.

However, as revolutionary socialists, we do not agree with an “electoralist” strategy that views winning elections and governmental votes as the central way to change society. The strategy of the socialist movement, including those we elect to political office, needs to be centered on building up the self-organization, power, consciousness and preparedness to struggle of the working class and all those oppressed by capitalism.

Historical experience has shown that when socialists and working-class parties are elected to political office, they come under enormous opportunist and

reformist pressures. Rather than serving the needs of the socialist movement, they can end up subordinating the socialist movement to maintaining their electoral positions, or promoting illusions that capitalism can be fundamentally challenged through gaining a legislative majority. A historic example of this is when the parliamentary representatives of the German Social Democratic Party and other Social Democratic parties voted to fund World War I.



Due to this experience, some argue not to take part in elections at all. In our view, this is a sectarian mistake. While there can be certain situations in which boycotting elections can assist the socialist movement, elections at the present time in the US are one of the main expressions of political debate and struggle. The electoral field is not the easiest terrain for working people. But for the socialist movement to walk away from

the electoral field would do nothing but allow the ruling class to have uncontested control over the political debates that so many workers follow. We would be isolating ourselves and missing important opportunities to win working-class people over to socialist ideas, as Bernie, AOC and we in DSA have shown can be done.

Instead of avoiding these opportunist challenges by isolating ourselves, we believe we need to build a strong Marxist left wing of the workers' movement that is conscious of these pressures. It is necessary to develop within workers' organizations the consciousness and culture to hold workers' public representatives accountable to the needs of the movement.

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## The Capitalist Character of the Democratic Party

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The Democratic Party is a capitalist party, fundamentally hostile to the interests of working people. For working people to articulate a program based on their interests and to take state power to reorganize society, workers must have their own political party which is 100% ac-

countable to them.

We do not agree with the idea that a political party can represent both corporations and workers at the same time, as the Democratic Party currently claims. Again and again this results in the Democratic Party putting the needs of big



business first, while the needs of workers, women, people of color, LGBTQ+ people and the environment are a distant second.

While there is widespread opposition within DSA to the pro-capitalist establishment of the Democratic Party, so far DSA has in practice largely followed behind the strategy of Bernie Sanders and others who are working to reform the Democratic Party. We are committed to building support within DSA for a strategy that recognizes the capitalist character of the Democratic Party and works

toward forming an independent mass working-class party.

However, we do not agree with the sterile approach of some on the radical left who argue against voting for left-wing candidates running as Democrats such as Bernie Sanders and AOC. There is currently a historic upsurge in support for socialism being expressed by candidates mainly running on the Democratic Party ballot line. This is a real contradiction. It is a highly unstable situation that cannot last. It will need to be resolved either by the new left forces forming their own party or by this new left energy being co-opted by the establishment of the Democratic Party.

DSA has correctly connected with the actual left wing of the working class which is rallying behind these candidates who are mostly running as Democrats. In our view, socialists should actively fight to elect them without hiding our own politics or criticisms of them, strengthening opposition to the capitalist forces that dominate the Democratic Party, and building the socialist movement out of it. DSA should help the Berniecrat wing fight the capitalist wing and build up support for the idea of establishing of a mass working class party.

Our caucus has argued for DSA to work as an independent socialist force in Bernie's campaign in the Democratic primaries to draw together the left wing of his campaign and build an independent, democratic, membership organization

out of it. We have argued for DSA's campaign for Bernie to champion the idea that the:

*Millions of Sanders volunteers should come together in their own organization with democratic membership structures ... We should campaign for Bernie to form such an organization, or call on Our Revolution to develop real membership and democratic structures so it could play such a role. If Sanders and Our Revolution are unwilling to take this step, we will be able to offer DSA as an organization for all those activists who agree that there needs to be a democratic membership organization of the left...*

*What is this, if not the de facto beginning of a new political party independent from big business? It is true that it would be built on the terrain of fighting within the Democratic Party—a party of US capitalism. But that is where the fight is unfolding and where millions of workers and young people are gathering and looking for a political alternative to corporate politics.<sup>8</sup>*

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## Toward a Mass Socialist Party

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DSA can play a critical role in making sure that out of the battle to elect Bernie the socialist movement emerges strengthened and that the idea of independent working-class politics is popularized among Sanders' left-wing base. We believe that with this approach DSA can double or triple in size into an organization of 100,000 or 150,000 members and deepen its roots in the multi-racial working-class. This would represent a qualitative change in the size and weight of DSA that would represent, in substance, the beginnings of a mass socialist party (although it could remain for a time in the form of a more ambiguous, non-party organization).

A socialist party should not only run candidates in elections, but also be a party of mass struggle. It should challenge the political course of conservative or moderate leaders in the labor movement and other social movements, actively helping to build social movements from below.

Just like DSA, it would need to have a multi-tendency, big tent character that is fully democratic. Such a formation

would allow the new socialist movement to have a common framework to work together, share lessons of different struggles and test out different ideas.

This would represent an enormous step forward for the socialist movement in the US, but it would need to develop qualitatively in its political program and base in the working class to become the party needed to successfully overthrow capitalism.

We believe that the international experience of the socialist movement has shown that a mass working-class party with a revolutionary program—a revolutionary party—is needed for the working-class to take power and reorganize society successfully along democratic socialist lines.<sup>9</sup> However, a genuine revolutionary party cannot be simply proclaimed by a small group; it must be rooted in the working class and develop out of its struggles. It has to earn the political support and confidence of wide layers of workers by demonstrating the effectiveness of its revolutionary politics in mass action. Our caucus rejects any pretension that we are such a party, nor do we believe any organization in the US today can claim to represent anything close to this.

There is no need for another self-proclaimed revolutionary organization claiming to be “Leninist” that wants to impose its doctrine from the margins of the movement onto the working class. But there is indeed a need to develop ourselves and many more people into



Marxist activists with roots in workers' struggles and a historical understanding of the socialist movement. We need Marxist activists humble enough to learn from the working class, and audacious enough to present revolutionary ideas in open, democratic discussions in living social movements. This is the kind of cadre we want collectively to help develop. This is what we believe Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky were committed to in their own time.

The revolutionary left in the US and internationally is in a state of crisis and flux as the need for open debate on the new questions posed by this period comes into conflict with the undemocratic culture and regimes which are all too common within its organizations. Revolutionary socialists from different traditions have an enormous amount to contribute to rebuilding the workers' movement and the revolutionary left. We think the best place for them to do that is as part of DSA, while openly arguing for a Marxist program.

We believe it is important that Marxists in DSA are organized within DSA to consciously discuss how to best build DSA, spread revolutionary ideas and, where possible, offer leadership for the movement. As part of this process, our caucus seeks to contribute to building a strong Marxist wing of DSA. The coming period of capitalist crisis will open up big opportunities to rebuild a strong movements of workers and the oppressed, along with revolutionary forces that can

play a decisive role in ending capitalism and imperialism once and for all.

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## Labor

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While labor faced a huge decline over the last decades in the US, it still has enormous potential power. This power can be used to fight back at a single company or industry, as well as in a generalized fashion through independent working class politics. The inspiring wave of teachers' strikes has gave a glimpse of this power and the impact that such struggles can have in the future.

However, to realize this power will require a new leadership of the labor movement. In an era of intensified capitalist exploitation, the majority of union leaders continue to cling to an outmoded political strategy—business unionism, class collaboration, and insider political deals—that has been a significant factor in the decline of organized labor. Large sections of the union leadership lead a privileged existence, paying themselves significantly more than the members they represent, and separated from rank-and-file control through heavily bureaucra-

tized and undemocratic union structures.

Socialists have a vital role in rebuilding the labor movement, challenging the bankrupt strategy of the majority of union leaders and organizing the tens of millions of unorganized workers. This starts with rebuilding a vibrant rank and file layer of union activists committed to waging a serious fightback against the bosses and for union democracy. DSA has already started to play such a role, most significantly in the strike wave of teachers that began in West Virginia in 2018. It is critical we continue and deepen this work, and build support for DSA among union members.

In rebuilding the labor movement, in our view, some of the key elements socialists need to fight for include:

- Rank and file unionism: The self-organization of our class is decisive. Workers themselves need to run and own their organizations. This includes active membership involvement in negotiations with elected bargaining teams and lively rank-and-file structures that keep members informed and allow for full debate.
- Democracy: All union officials need to be elected and subject to recall at any time by their members. No elected union official should earn more than a skilled workers wage.
- Class struggle unionism: Labor will

only be able to mobilize the full power of its members and the wider working class on the basis of waging a determined struggle for demands that can make a decisive difference in workers' lives. To win bold demands will require a strategy of mass mobilization, strong strikes that actually cripple economic activity and fighting tactics necessary to win, even if they violate the bosses' laws. This is the opposite of the prevailing idea of limiting demands to what is believed to be "affordable" for business and conducting our struggles within the framework of the existing laws.

- Independent working class politics: Moderate labor leaders continually subordinate unions to the needs of the Democratic Party in the name of lesser evilism. Instead, labor's resources need to be invested in building working class movements and genuine political representation, supporting independent and socialist candidates wherever possible and viable.

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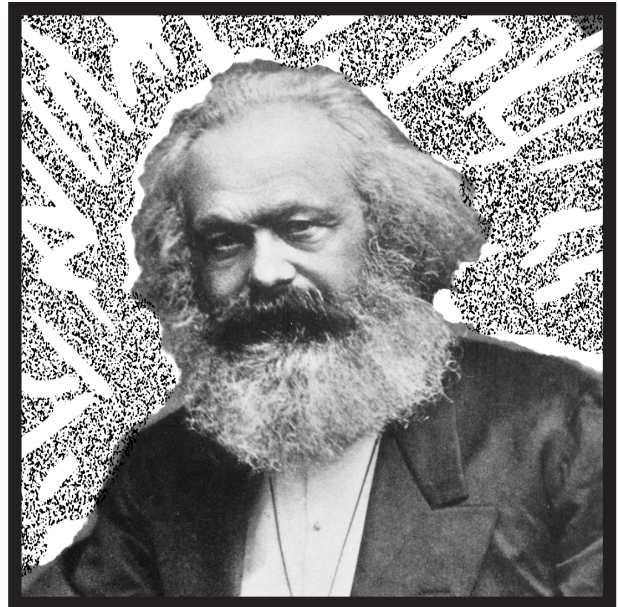
# Marxism and the State

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The election of dozens of socialists to local, state and federal offices, and the possibility that Bernie Sanders could be elected president, poses important questions for DSA regarding our analysis of the state and how to relate to it. Standing in the revolutionary socialist tradition, we agree with Lenin's classic explanation of the Marxist theory of the state in *The State and Revolution*.<sup>10</sup>

The reformist social democratic tradition generally views the existing state as a neutral instrument that can be used by any political party in government to carry out its program. In contrast, we view the state as fundamentally an instrument of the ruling class, regardless of which party is elected into office. To take power and reorganize society along democratic socialist lines, the working class needs to break up the existing capitalist state apparatus, especially its repressive forces. A socialist society would represent an enormous expansion of democracy based on the development of an entirely different kind of government based on elected and recallable councils of workers, students and the oppressed.

We oppose the ultra-left tactical conclusions that some take from this Marxist understanding of the state. This includes opposition to running candidates for political office, turning away from fighting for every possible democratic reform of the existing state, or an adventurist "insurrectionary" strategy by isolated small groups.



Socialists will only come to power in the US on the basis of having the support of the majority of society. The core of this support needs to be a democratically organized mass movement of the working class. We stand for utilizing every democratic opening that exists and constantly struggling to expand these democratic rights further, including democratizing the existing state apparatus as far as possible.

With the development of a mass working class party, socialists should campaign for

the formation of a workers government with a socialist program, by electing a workers party candidate for President and a majority in Congress. However, historical experience shows that the ruling class will not just accept the democratic decisions of the majority of people that conflict with their core interests. They will use every tool at their disposal to sabotage a socialist government, including their control over the economy, the mass media, the courts, the state bureaucracy, and the military if needed. History shows that a “pacifist approach,” such as the strategy attempted in Chile in 1973, has never been sufficient to push back the violent counter-offensive by the capitalist class determined to hold onto power by any means necessary.

That is why we believe a socialist government cannot rely on legal/constitutional protections or democratic norms. Instead, it would need to take decisive measures to end the undemocratic power of the capitalist class. Rather than relying on governmental structures to carry this out, the decisive task would be to organize a mass struggle of workers and poor people from below. Such a movement would need to elect its own councils of workers, students and the oppressed to democratically discuss and decide on its strategy and policies and radically expand the democratic running of society.

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## Internationalism

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Capitalism is a global system which has created an international working class which has common interests. For example, the workers in the US and Mexico have more in common with each other than they do with the capitalists in their own countries. Socialism is international, or it is nothing.

As socialists, internationalists, and anti-imperialists, we oppose all forms of national oppression. This includes the right of oppressed nations to self-determination, up to and including the right to secede and form an independent nation-state. For us—as it was for Lenin—this is not a tool to divide people, but to unite the working class on the only possible basis—a voluntary unity to fight oppressors of all kinds.

As socialists within the dominant imperialist power in the world, DSA has a special responsibility to act in solidarity with workers and poor people internationally and to oppose all forms of imperialism.<sup>11</sup> US socialists should firmly oppose US wars and military interventions as well as pro-corporate trade deals.



We should build support and provide aid to the struggles of workers and the poor who are standing up to US corporations and the US military.

We call for a full withdrawal of US troops and other imperialist forces from Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the closing of US military bases around the world. We support the right of the people of Puerto Rico and all other US colonial territories to decide their own fate. This includes their right to decide if they want to leave the US to form their own independent nation-state or choose to remain within the US with the rights of statehood. Either way, the people of Puerto Rico and other US colonial territories must have full rights to live and work in the US.

One hundred years after Lenin developed his ideas on national liberation, finding a solution to national conflicts is even more complicated.<sup>12</sup> The poisonous legacy of imperialism and the economic impasse of capitalism have created a nightmare situation in parts of the world where bitter ethnic and/or religious conflicts have arisen between communities living closely together that have conflicting democratic rights.

In such complex situations, it is vital that socialists argue for a program that opposes the persecution of all oppressed groups as part of a struggle to unite the working class to overthrow capitalism. For example, the sectarian civil wars in Iraq and Syria have created deep fears and tensions in many different communities.

We stand for a struggle of the working masses of each of the different ethnic and religious groups in Iraq and Syria against sectarian violence and the rotting system of capitalism and imperialism.

A Marxist understanding of internationalism is more than solidarity. Since capitalism is a global system where major international events impact all countries,



US socialists in particular must broaden our horizons and prioritize learning from the victories and defeats of the class struggle worldwide. Despite the lower level of class struggle in this country, the rapid growth of the socialist movement here provides valuable lessons we can share with activists internationally.

We support DSA collaborating with socialist parties and organizations around the world and participating in international discussions. Through this process, we stand for the development of an in-

ternational organization of socialists that is able to base itself on the key lessons of these different parties and develop a revolutionary socialist strategy.

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## For a Political, Campaigning and Effective DSA

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DSA has grown rapidly since 2015, and is increasingly having an impact on US politics. However, the rise of the right and the threat of climate catastrophe, in particular, demand that we urgently build a more effective political organization. We need to develop into an organization with more political cohesion and more effective campaigns that grows into a small, mass party of hundreds of thousands with deeper roots in the multi-racial working class.

Some key steps that we think will help strengthen DSA and move it in this direction are:

- Put Politics at the Center of our Work

We believe too much time within DSA is devoted to organizational questions, and not enough on the

political questions that make up the bedrock of our work. The growth of DSA in 2015 and 2016 was primarily a result of a political decision to endorse and actively campaign to elect Bernie. To develop and grow, our most important tasks are developing the best possible political understanding of the world, identifying the biggest political opportunities for socialists, and working out the necessary strategy and tactics to have the maximum impact.

A more political culture within DSA will help DSA be a more productive and engaging space for members to spend their limited time. Too often political differences are fought out in a proxy manner through organizational disputes. It is far more efficient and democratic if these political differences can be debated directly and transparently.

More political discussion, education, and debate will also facilitate bringing political conversations, as much as possible, out from behind closed doors (whether they take place in local or national leadership bodies or small working groups) and into accessible, open spaces for DSA members to broadly engage in.

We believe it is a significant shortcoming that the 2019 DSA Convention will not be debating a political platform of what DSA stands for (a process which had been agreed to

during the 2017 National Convention). A common platform would play a crucial role in bringing more unity to DSA, establishing a basis for political education of new members, and a political program to hold elected DSA members accountable to. New members will be much more likely to remain active if they can gain a political education from DSA, engage in interesting discussions about pressing political issues rather than organizational details, and see a role for themselves in meaningful campaigns.

Developing a platform through an extensive discussion in all chapters and in regional and national conferences will help bring more clarity within DSA about the different political ideologies that exist, and help narrow some of these differences through a constructive debate that should be educational for all DSA members and political trends.

The process of developing a platform for DSA will also likely identify some disagreements that will not be resolved at this stage. These inevitable differences should be dealt with in a democratic and responsible manner where they are openly aired, and every effort is made to find principled compromises which allow DSA to move forward as a big tent organization that can return to these disagreements at a later stage on the basis of new experiences. At-

tempting to sweep these differences under the carpet will not make them go away; it will only lead to greater tensions and divisions within DSA.



- Democracy, Not Horizontalism

For DSA to become a more effective organization where its members have the maximum ability to democratically determine its course, we believe it will need to grow beyond the present form of organizing that is often very loose and “horizontal.”

Horizontalist methods often create an atmosphere which unintentionally creates obstacles to the full participation of members due to endless meetings, decisions not being implemented, and a structurelessness that most will not have the time to navigate. Instead, we advocate for

transparent and accountable structures, with democratically elected leadership bodies (who are subject to recall elections). These leadership bodies need to be empowered to ensure that democratic decisions are carried out.

The strong horizontalist tendency in DSA often results in members working on campaigns in small groups in isolation from comrades doing similar work in other chapters, which does not allow us to utilize our full strength.

However, a more unified organization cannot come from top-down directives. It requires an organized and vibrant democratic discussion throughout DSA that arrives at clear decisions and priorities, and elects a leadership with the mandate to carry it out.

DSA members need the space to have bottom-up, democratic debates to discuss out the best political ideas, strategies, and tactics for our work. As a big tent organization, all tendencies and caucuses must be allowed to contribute to discussions, openly organize, and promote their ideas. It is important we continue to have the room in DSA for different trends to be able to test out their different ideas in practice through campaigns and initiatives, rather than a stifling monolithic approach.

Our caucus is committed to helping build a democratic, lively culture within DSA, with mutual respect and solidarity with others. In order to build a strong, big tent organization that is able to act in a unified manner when necessary, it is important that the DSA leadership elected by conventions include representatives from the main trends, tendencies, and caucuses. An effective leadership will need to consider various viewpoints and strive to achieve a consensus, or a majority position, that can provide an effective lead to DSA, while fully respecting the rights of members who disagree to argue their case and work to convince the organization of their position.

- Hold DSA Public Officials Accountable

DSA has made great progress electing dozens of members to political office. As we elect more DSA members it will become increasingly important to have a culture where they are held democratically accountable to the membership, rather than drifting away from the policies they were elected on.

It is important to begin developing our approach of what we expect from these elected members and how DSA can have democratic input into their work. The development of a common platform will greatly



assist in allowing DSA to hold political representatives democratically accountable to agreed policies.

There are real pressures of careerism and toward the separation between elected officials and the working-class membership of the organization. To help check this, DSA should insist that all its members elected to political office take home no more than the average wage of a skilled worker in their area. The remainder of their salary should be donated to building the socialist movement and other progressive struggles.

# End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848). Retrieved from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is it Going?* (1936). Retrieved from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/revbet/>

<sup>3</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution* (1900). Retrieved from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/intro.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Joe Myers, “How do the world’s biggest companies compare to the biggest economies?” October 19, 2016, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/10/corporations-not-countries-dominate-the-list-of-the-world-s-biggest-economic-entities/>

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital* (1847). Retrieved from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/wage-labour/ch09.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Eugene V. Debs, *Industrial Unionism* (1905). Retrieved from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1905/industrial.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “Race, Class and Marxism” (January 4, 2011). Retrieved from <https://socialistworker.org/2011/01/04/race-class-and-marxism>

<sup>8</sup> Reform & Revolution caucus statement, “The Biggest Opportunity for Socialists in Decades” (April 12, 2019). Retrieved from <https://reformandrevolution.org/articles/a-contribution-to-the-dsa-debate-on-sanders-campaign/>

<sup>9</sup> Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (New York: Humanity Books, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Vladimir Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (1917), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/>

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Lenin, Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism (1916), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/>

<sup>12</sup> Peter Hadden, Chapter 13 (“International Situation”) and Chapter 14 (“Finding a Solution”) in Troubled Times: The National Question in Ireland (1995), <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/hadden/1995/natq/>

## **Contact Us!**

If you agree with our ideas, please contact us to start a conversation about joining our caucus and/or working together. Feedback is also very welcome.

[www.ReformAndRevolution.org](http://www.ReformAndRevolution.org)

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[Facebook.com/dsaRandR/](https://Facebook.com/dsaRandR/)

Reform & Revolution is a website and magazine published by a new caucus in Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) who are active in unions and social movements. Our Reform & Revolution caucus stands in the revolutionary socialist tradition, and we are committed to ending economic inequality, racism, sexism, and all forms of oppression.

Reform & Revolution views the capitalist system – with its nonstop global competition for profits and power – as the main driver behind inequality, oppression, and the climate crisis. Capitalism is fundamentally undemocratic because the real levers of power are in the hands of billionaires who, at the end of the day, control the economy, the mass media, the government, and all branches of the state, including the army, courts, and the police.

We stand for bringing the corporations that dominate the economy into democratic public ownership and replacing the anarchy of the market with democratic economic planning in order to meet the needs of people and the planet. We advocate a socialist democracy where our whole society, including our workplaces, neighborhoods, and schools, is democratically run by popular assemblies.

The resurgence of socialist ideas and the explosive growth of DSA represent the biggest opportunity in decades to build a mass socialist movement in the United States, the epicenter of global capitalism. We stand for building DSA into a broad mass socialist party rooted in the

struggles and organizations of the working class and the oppressed. Reform & Revolution also seeks to contribute to the construction of an organized Marxist current within DSA which is committed to international socialism.

One of the central questions activists are grappling with is the relationship between fighting for reforms and the need to fundamentally change the whole social system. Our name is taken in honor of the answer that Rosa Luxemburg gave to this question: “Between social reforms and revolution there exists for [the Marxist movement] an inseparable connection. The struggle for reforms is its means; the social revolution, its aim.”

We hope Reform & Revolution can provide a valuable forum for lively debate on the program and strategy that social movements need to achieve their goals, drawing on lessons from past struggles. We strive to contribute to a critical and living Marxism that analyzes new developments in society and engages in the ideological debates facing the Left in the 21st century. We welcome contributions from all who share these commitments.

If you want to resist Trump and the whole billionaire class, if you want to fight all forms of oppression, join DSA at [dsausa.org](http://dsausa.org)! If you also want to find out more about joining Reform & Revolution and building a Marxist wing of the socialist movement, please visit:

**[ReformAndRevolution.org](http://ReformAndRevolution.org)**