

DSA: Social Democracy or Revolutionary Socialism?

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“The first great step of importance for every country newly entering into the movement is always the organization of the workers as an independent political party, no matter how, so long as it is a distinct workers' party.... The masses must have time and opportunity to develop and they can only have the opportunity when they have their own movement--no matter in what form so long as it is only their own movement--in which they are driven further by their own mistakes and learn wisdom by hurting themselves. “

So wrote Frederick Engels about the US working class in 1886. That step – the organization of the US working class as its own political party – has yet to be accomplished. But today, when both the main political parties of the US capitalist class are in crisis, there is an opening like never before since the 1930s. For socialists, one of the first steps in taking advantage of this opportunity would be to run independent, working class representatives for local office. These would be candidates who explicitly link the local issues with the necessity of building a mass working class political party.

With its extremely rapid growth, Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) can play a vital role in helping the creation of such a party. It can put the creation of such a party on the agenda, raise the issue in the minds of millions of workers. It also has the resources to run successful independent, working class representatives for local office and start to bring these local campaigns together into one national, working class movement, independent of and opposed to the two main capitalist parties.

Liberalism

For too long, radical social movements have been sacrificed on the altar of the Democratic Party in the name of being “practical”. Once lured into the party’s sphere of influence, these groups forfeit their independence and become subordinate to the agenda of the Democratic Party itself. In practice, this means dancing to the tune of, or never going beyond the program of the “progressive” wing of the Democrats. That is why it is impossible to preserve the political and organizational independence of working class movements while supporting Democratic Party candidates.

Taking such a step is impossible as long as we support *any* Democratic Party candidates. How, after all, can we explain the class nature of the Democrats, the role of their “progressive” wing as bait for the trap, the necessity of the working class to build its own party, while at the same time we support some Democrats? Everything in the tumultuous last 12 months proves it cannot be done.

The Significance of a Mass Working Class Party

First of all, we should be clear on what the working class is: This is the class that depends on selling its labor-power for a wage. This also includes those who are fraudulently classified as “independent contractors” such as Uber and Lyft drivers. It is not only the traditional blue collar workers like construction or factory workers, but also baristas, secretaries and clerical workers, teachers, grocery clerks and even incarcerated workers. We are all bound together by our common interests as a *class* – in other words our relationship to the “means of production”. What is necessary, as Engels explained, is for the class to be united through its own political party.

Presently, the union leadership and the non-profits confine themselves to “pressuring the Democrats”. In reality this means allowing this capitalist-controlled party to set the political agenda. It means being unable to clearly point to the class nature of politics.

The building of a mass working class party would be a huge *first* step forward. It would start to place all issues on a class basis. It would start to clarify that the solutions rest on the working class. It would also open the door to revolutionary socialists starting to gain a real base in the working class.

This last point must not be forgotten, exactly because while the creation of such a party would be a huge first step, it would be only that – a *first* step.

Liberals think workers don't need their own political party and can rely on the capitalist Democratic Party. The social democrats at least go beyond that and understand that workers do need their own party. However, what sort of party do they think is required?

“Mixed” Economy?

The social democrats generally advocate a “mixed” economy, with some elements of nationalization (such as public utilities, railroads, etc.) along side a robust, for-profit capitalist economy. The problem is that the essence of a socialist economy is democratic state planning, and it's impossible to plan an economy where huge sectors are controlled by the anarchic, for-profit market. The social democrats point to countries like Sweden as a model, but they forget that the Swedish Social Democrats have been cutting back on their social programs since 2008, and in Germany the main cuts against the social programs have been carried out by the Social Democrats too. This has been the case throughout Europe. Just like in the US, these societies have growing far right, chauvinist and racist movements exactly as a result of the confusion that social democracy has created there. In other words, these “socialist” countries are not socialist; they are neither run by workers nor outside the crisis of capitalism.

History of Social Democracy

Social democracy originated as the movement of revolutionary Marxism. However, it then degenerated and became an attempt to balance between the socialist traditions of the working class and the needs and interests of the capitalist class. At times of crisis, that balancing act was impossible and the social democratic leaders came down decisively on the side of the capitalist class.

This is what happened in the years leading up to WW I, when the different imperialist powers could only settle their rivalries through war. Throughout Europe, almost all the social democratic leaders supported their own capitalist class in that imperialist slaughter.

Following WW I and the Russian Revolution, capitalism was in another crisis and revolution was on the agenda, especially in Germany. There, it was the social democratic leadership who saved the day for capitalism, including their orchestrating the murder of Rosa Luxembourg and Karl Liebknecht.

They supported their own capitalists' imperialist ventures in Asia and Africa.

In the economic upswing following WW II, the social democrats did produce some major reforms for the working class throughout Europe. This is what present-day supporters of social democracy point to, but now, under the economic crisis of capitalism, in most European countries it is the social democrats who are trying to preserve the profits of “their” capitalists by leading the way in cutting social benefits.

Syriza

Greece is a perfect example of the failure of social democracy. For years the Greek Socialist Party carried out cut after cut of essential services for working class people. In response, the Greek working class rose up, threw the Socialist Party out of office and voted in a radical left alternative in 2015 – Syriza. This was a milestone not only for the Greek working class but for the workers' struggle against cuts and austerity world wide. Led by Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, Syriza struggled to reverse these cuts. *But exactly because of their limited strategy and program, they were unable to accomplish this and ended up carrying out the exact same attacks on the Greek working class that they'd been elected to reverse!*

Chile 1973

Nor can capitalism be legislated out of existence or can socialism be accomplished through the capitalist state. Take, for instance, the example of Chile's Salvador Allende, who came to power in the early 1970s in that country: That was exactly what Allende tried to do – build socialism in Chile through the capitalist state. He ended up so antagonizing the Chilean capitalist class that – along with the CIA – they organized

a military coup, assassinated him and tens of thousands of others. The Pinochet dictatorship that ruled Chile for years afterwards was one of the most brutal in Latin America's history of brutal dictatorships.

A US Workers Government

And how about in the US?

Even if a president were elected from a mass working class political party, she or he would be frustrated at every turn. Since only one third of the Senators are elected at any one cycle, the Senate would probably remain firmly under capitalist control. Even if it weren't, the capitalists could count on the judicial system to stymie a socialist president and congress.

Then there is the rest of the state apparatus – the heads of the bureaucracies, the military brass and the police. All of these form the real base of the state – the *capitalist* state in this case. In a situation of real crisis, they would be used to topple a socialist-led government in the US, just like they have in many other countries, throughout history .

But that is not the end of the story.

Committees of Struggle: A Rival to the Capitalist State

A president from a mass working class party in the US would only come into office in a time of tremendous turmoil, a time when tens of millions of workers and working class youth were in activity. It would be a time when, as Engels put it, workers would be driven further by their own mistakes. While they almost certainly would be involved in capitalist elections, workers would not simply leave matters there; they would be organizing and fighting in the streets, work places, working class communities and schools. They would be building their own organs, their own committees, to carry their struggles forward.

Among other things, these would be self-defense committees. But they would also probably involve themselves with such things as organizing classes in colleges and universities, maybe controlling prices and the flow of goods, etc. In other words, they would start to rival the capitalist state.

This happened in every radical working class uprising, from that in Chile in the 1970s to the revolution against the Shah of Iran in 1978-9 to the early days of the revolution in Syria in 2011. There were even elements of this in the Seattle general strike of 1919. In that instance, the general strike committee not only ran the strike that shut down Seattle, it determined which goods (such as basic food and medicine) were allowed to be brought into the city.

In this way, a rival to the institutions of the capitalist state would start to develop. The question would start to pose itself: Which shall rule – the working class committees of struggle or the capitalist state?

Revolutionary Socialists

The working class would be driven further down the road towards putting its own committees of struggle into full power in society, which means bringing down the capitalist state. But once again, history shows that they would have limited time in which to draw that conclusion and act on it. That's why it's important to have a revolutionary socialist wing of a new mass working class party – to learn along with the working class but also to help make this unconscious learning process conscious, thereby speeding it up.

Conclusion

To sum up: A mass working class party would be the independent organizing center for the struggles of the working class, of by and for itself. It would be the gathering point, coordinating body and learning center of the class struggle. This does not mean subordinating issues like racism, sexism, LGBTQ rights or the environment to the class struggle but, rather, clarifying that it is the role of the working class to resolve them through their own organization. While participating in capitalist elections is far from the only role a mass working class party would play, ultimately the party will have to either run its own candidates or it will get swept up into and become subordinate to the Democratic Party or possibly another capitalist party.

Karl Marx said that the emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working classes themselves. This can only be done by relying on our own forces and overthrowing both the political and

economic system of capitalism, root and branch.

Further reading

The Gene Debs Caucus of EBDSA also suggests some further reading:

“Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder” by Lenin.

Some on the left conclude that because it's not possible to simply “vote in” socialism that therefore the working class movement should not participate in elections. This is not a new idea, and Lenin in his famous little book decisively argues against it. It's one thing, he said, for revolutionaries to reject capitalist elections; it's something entirely different for millions of workers to do so.

“Social Democracy or Capitalist Realities?”

This short article gives a little more history and analysis of social democracy and its shortcomings, not to mention outright betrayals. See it online at: <https://oaklandsocialist.com/2017/07/19/social-democracy-or-capitalist-realities/>

“What is Revolution?”

This pamphlet develops further the question of how, under what circumstances is a socialist revolution possible and how, through what process, can the capitalist state be overthrown. Read it online at: <https://oaklandsocialist.com/2015/02/07/what-is-revolution/>

“Socialism, Utopian and Scientific”, by Frederick Engels. This is an introduction to the method and ideas of scientific socialism as postulated by Marx and Engels.

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