

DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS OF AMERICA

National Convention November 9-11, 2007

NPC Report to the 2007 National Convention

DSA today is operating in a political environment that changed dramatically about two years ago, at the time of the Katrina disaster. With the palpable discrediting of the extreme free market Reagan-Thatcher-Bush approach to government functioning, the general public is increasingly receptive to government activism in areas such as health care, social security, taxation and education as well as to multiple approaches to immigration, the environment, diplomacy and trade. That re-emergence of social and economic justice issues, when added to the collapse of public support for the occupation of Iraq, resulted in the takeover of Congress by the Democrats, a welcome change and a chance to roll back the gains the Right. So far, it's been a squandered opportunity. What has not changed is that the leadership of the Democratic Party seems singularly unwilling to advance a New Deal approach to politics— or what in the U.S. would be the equivalent of a social democratic agenda—even as real-world events beg for it.

In analyzing the work of the DSA for the past period, one point is worth noting: the almost complete absence of serious internal divisions within the organization. No factions formed around issues such as whether or not to support a particular presidential candidate; whether to invest in third-party efforts; which coalitions to join or cooperate with; what singular approach to take to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; whether to support the war in Iraq or even oppose the quickest of withdrawals. Better yet, no factions formed around battling strategic worldviews. Freud's "narcissism of small differences" hasn't manifested itself. Instead, just as at the 2003 Detroit convention and the 2005 Los Angeles convention, planning for this convention has been motivated by a concern for making DSA a larger and more effective organization, and one that can advance goals on which we all basically agree.

DSA is still a small organization—hideously small given the scale of what the American Left needs to accomplish—but we're not as small as we were a few years ago. One reason for our growth: the improved political climate that welcomes activist government initiatives and gives a hearing to radical politics. But we believe another reason is that the past few NPCs have operated not by passing large numbers of finely tuned resolutions (though there have been some, and should be) but by developing national programs that provide leadership and resources to our locals and members.

Starting with the 2001 Philadelphia convention, we looked for ways that the national organization and the locals could do joint work on issues of economic justice, an area that stems from our core values as socialists. Another reason is that, small as we are, these issues allow us to make good use of the strengths that we do have. Among these strengths are:

** Our members, whether in locals or at-large, constitute a modest community of activists around the country. We have several hundred activists in our locals and in YDS chapters alone. And we are capable of making a modest, but real intervention, politically and educationally in a dozen or so metropolitan areas (most significantly in Detroit, Atlanta, San Diego, and Boston, and more modestly in Columbus, Ithaca, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, New York, Chicago and,

upon occasion, Sacramento, the East Bay and elsewhere), plus a dozen campuses. We held thirteen successful fundraisers for Bernie Sanders that drew an average of 50 participants at each event.

** In addition to our activists, we have a membership of thousands who renew annually and pay their dues, helping fund our work.

** We have some standing in the academic and policy communities that think and write about these issues.

** We have ties to labor movement leaders and activists who organize around these issues. In some cases these folks are YDS or DSA alums and who now hold policy, organizing and political-action positions in their unions.

** We have a Web site that we use to promote these issues.

** We have name recognition within the wider left-liberal and progressive communities.

Based on these strengths, it makes sense to emphasize issues that have national importance, but that also are conducive to organizing at the local level. Thus, the work that the National Office and NPC does in producing literature, organizing conferences, making and solidifying contacts with unions, etc., is of practical benefit to the locals. The members and locals know that the local organizing that they are doing is part of a national DSA project, and allies know that they can draw on the talents and support of members in widespread locals.

For better or worse, these strengths do not translate into an ability to intervene seriously in national electoral politics. For the 2008 elections, almost all DSAers want the Democrats to increase their majority in Congress, and for a Democrat to be elected president. Of the Democratic candidates competing for the nomination, Hillary Clinton represents the neo-liberal, Democratic Leadership Council, hawkish wing of the Democratic Party, so it is easy to oppose her. The other candidates each have supporters and detractors. Since we do not have the ability to intervene in the process as an organization in any major way, the NPC did not think it would be useful to spend much time at this convention on the nomination question – in part because we have valued members active in the Edwards, Obama, and Kucinich campaigns, as well as activists critical of each of these campaigns. However, there may well be Congressional, State, and local races where DSA participation can make a difference. The national organization should work together with locals whenever such opportunities arise. The NPC firmly believes that the US and the world will be a better place with DSA active in a progressive coalition pressuring (and often opposing) a Democratic administration and Congress from the left, rather than engaging in defensive political battles against another four years of a reactionary, law-breaking Republican presidency.

In fact, since the 2005 Los Angeles DSA Convention, the single most successful application of this approach has been the participation in the Bernie Sanders campaign for Senate by DSA PAC. An electoral committee was formed with volunteer NPC members and others to organize a series of house parties around the country that would raise funds for the Sanders campaign. An organizing packet was produced and distributed to locals, which enabled them to organize effective house parties. The response from locals and members around the country exceeded our

expectations and once again demonstrated the capacity of DSA to function as a truly national organization. We held 13 events and raised some \$60,000 for the Sanders run. These gatherings introduced DSAers to a wide range of Sanders supporters, while raising DSA's visibility nationally and locally.

There is one other outstanding success in the past two years: the growth and development of Young Democratic Socialists (YDS). David Duhalde, the youth organizer, working with a dynamic YDS Coordinating Committee, aided the formation of new YDS chapters at a number of colleges and universities, organized the participation of YDS at the U.S. Social Forum in Atlanta last spring, and intervened in anti-war mobilizations and other events. We recommend to the incoming NPC that it place special emphasis on helping YDS grow. One painless way delegates can help is to provide David with contacts among friendly, progressive faculty, who in turn can connect YDS with progressive students. Locals should also get to know the campus left in their vicinity and let students there know about YDS.

In addition to activist projects, the NPC takes seriously its responsibility for furthering socialist education. In conjunction with YDS, we organized a Socialist retreat in June 2007 to discuss socialist theory and practice. The retreat was a great success, and in addition helped create new bonds between the generations, as many key activists in both YDS and DSA attended.

The DSA Economic Justice project has developed slowly; in part, because so little can be done under the current reactionary administration. In a sense our activity has been to prepare ourselves for January 2009 when we hope new opportunities open up under a new administration that may be more subject to pressure from its core progressive supporters. In the interim, we have devoted our energy to producing and publicizing a draft Economic Justice Agenda. We are presenting this document to the convention for discussion and further development. The document serves two purposes; first, as an educational exposition of our general approach to a different kind of economy for the U.S., but also as a guide for specific activist projects, such as health care, the right to form and join a union, climate change, etc. As with the Sanders House Party Project, the goal is to emphasize projects where the national organization can provide resources for local grass roots activism.

A number of activities around this project have already taken place. DSA organized several well-received panels at the U.S. Social Forum in Atlanta, two in conjunction with United for a Fair Economy. DVD videos of these events were made and are available for presentation. In part, it has been well-received because few mainstream political forces, certainly almost no Democratic elected officials, can coherently defend the democratic vision behind a politics of progressive taxation, inclusive immigration policy, and high-quality public provision of basic human needs. That is, as weak as social democracy may be in the United States, old-style liberalism is fading almost as quickly as members of the Greatest Generation. A Power Point presentation outlining the Economic Justice Agenda document is available on the DSA Web site, and locals in Boston, Detroit, Ithaca and San Diego have held public events related to the project.

DSA participates in anti-war activities, and is a member of United for Peace and Justice. This reflects not just our opposition to militarism but our approach to working in coalitions at the national and local level. Our membership in the Socialist International permits us a unique role in cooperating with not only representatives of center-left governments but with insurgent movements worldwide. DSA's International Commission hosted a four city Midwest tour of

Saul Escobar Toledo, International Secretary of the Mexican PRD. Since the well-deserved demise of Social Democrats U.S.A, DSA is the only U.S. representative in the S.I.

About the outgoing NPC:

*** We succeeded in operating as a collaborative leadership, with differences handled in a comradely way and our larger goals always clear. Still, we remained a small group, with insufficient representation from women and ethnic minorities.

*** *Democratic Left* was published regularly, and with high-quality content. We are currently celebrating 35 years of continuous publication of DL.

*** The quality of discussion on dsamember has been high, and differing points of view have been presented with little acrimony.

*** The Local Development Committee kept track of locals and made reports of local activity, available via Democratic Left.

*** The Personnel Committee worked to evaluate and provide helpful feedback to our hard working, dedicated staff.

*** The Budget Committee encouraged locals to hold fund raising house parties to benefit the national organization, and kept close watch on income and expenditures.

*** The Web site hosts new regular features, “News from DSA”, and “YDS Update”. The draft Economic Justice Agenda document and corresponding Power Point presentation are available in the “Tools” section of the web site.

*** The NPC endorsed the October 27, 2007 National Mobilization for Peace and Justice, just as it did earlier peace mobilizations. We have had visible contingents, tabling operations and receptions at most of the major national demonstrations.

*** The NPC issued statements on political subjects, including an Open Letter to the U.S. Social Forum, which went through an iterative process that incorporated the best thinking of the entire NPC and comrades. All are available in leaflet form as pdf files on the Web site

The outgoing NPC has functioned in a collegial atmosphere. The members have diverse politics, but we have worked well together for the benefit of DSA, which we believe is in better shape than it was two years ago. As you consider the elections for the next NPC, in addition to selecting candidates with whom you share political perspectives, we urge you to remember that the NPC is a working body, key to getting projects to happen as well as to producing literature, maintaining the Web site, communicating with locals and planning conferences. Those who serve on the next NPC need to be ready to make it a working body, and be committed to its members working together. We urge the convention to use this gathering – on which we collectively spend tens of thousands of dollars – to build a more activist DSA at both the local and national level.