



# DSA's 2011 convention: Building socialism, forming comradeship, resisting corporate domination

By Michael Hirsch

The hotel housing the convention was contemporary Americana, a blue glass multi-story pile. As architecture and location, the area was capitalism regnant, situated in a right-to-starve state where unions are under the gun and socialism is a word used to scare the horses. No one was scared this time, as Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) held its 2011 biennial convention and marked its tasks and perspectives at a time when resistance, emboldened by the Arab spring, the Wisconsin mass demonstrations and the Occupy Wall Street movement's confidence that "we are the 99%" is on the rise.

Inside the capacious convention hall, under a scarlet banner proclaiming "Obama is No Socialist, But We Are," over 100 delegates and observers, including a far-right blogger from the misnamed Accuracy in Media, planned their fightback for the New Year. Delegates savored the impact of the Wisconsin protests that built massive resistance to the state governor's union busting, the huge outpouring of opposition to Big Oil's environmentally calamitous effort to import Canadian tar sands crude, and the full-bore effort of Ohio unions in defeating a draconian anti-labor law by an almost two-to-one margin in a high-

turnout contest just days before the convention. And then there was Occupy Wall Street's exemplary populist effort to speak for a disenfranchised majority, fan the proverbial flames of discontent and turn class war from a slur by the right into a description of a compelling left politics.

If one thing crystallized the convention consensus, it was naming and targeting criminal mismanagement by the nation's financial institutions, the laggard government response to the economic crisis, and resistance in the streets, on the job and ideologically to free-market fundamentalism and the plutocrats who benefit from it.

Had the convention thought to adopt a theme song, a fitting one would have been Chumbawamba's refrain "I get knocked down, but I get up again, you're never gonna keep me down." But this was no tub-thumping exercise.



Washington, DC.

Delegates from some 22 states came not just to celebrate victories, but to work on planning the next ones.

And work they did, in plenary sessions, workshops and widely advertised and well-attended public sessions.

First things first. Delegates entertained a resolution blasting the state of Virginia for its 1993 legislation making it just one of five states denying public employees collective bargaining rights. The organization chose a northern Virginia site only after assurances from the hotel workers' union that holding the convention there breached no boycott or compromised any organizing efforts, and comrades warmly talked union with hotel staff.

The convention held several educational workshops, including training in the DSA economic literacy project. Now known as the 'GET UP' Project – Grassroots Economics Training for Understanding and Power," it is an "each one teach one" out-of-the-box radical economics weekend training program aimed at enabling every DSA member to speak knowledgeably about the origins of and solutions to the economic crisis. The convention also formulated plans to implement its priorities resolution (see sidebar, page 4).

Delegates also passed two other resolutions. The first offered direction on how DSA should support the Occupy Wall Street movement. Delegates approved continuing to embrace the movement, as DSA members have done without hesitation nationwide, while suggesting in the spirit of solidarity a series of political demands that could

give the movement a coherent political orientation. These included a public jobs program; bank nationalization; Medicare for all; the forgiveness of student debt; an end to foreclosures; substantial investment in clean energy; a progressive income and corporate tax structure; a tax on all speculative financial transactions; and the immediate enactment of worker-friendly labor law reform legislation.

The second resolution made explicit DSA's longstanding support for the gay liberation movement and its battle for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) rights. The resolution called for federal legalization of same-sex marriages; enactment of antidiscrimination laws in housing, jobs, education, and health care, including measures prohibiting religious beliefs from being a basis for justifying bias; repealing state sodomy laws and anti-lesbian and gay restrictions, including rights to parenting and recognition; and welcoming the formation of a DSA gay rights commission.

Public events with high-profile speakers included a Friday evening forum at the magnificent St. Stephen and the Incarnation Episcopal Church, operated by a multiracial social activist congregation in Washington's Columbia Heights section. The evening featured greetings from Metropolitan D.C. Central Labor Council President and longtime DSA supporter Joslyn Williams, who said he welcomed the audience to "America's last colony," adding that "the principles of Occupy America are the principles this organization espouses...America is just now catching up to the Democratic Socialists of America."

## Democratic Left

(ISSN 1643207) is published quarterly at 75 Maiden Lane, Suite 505, New York, NY 10038. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY (Publication No. 701-960). Subscriptions: \$10 regular; \$15 institutional. Postmaster: Send address changes to 75 Maiden Lane, Suite 505, New York, NY 10038. Democratic Left is published by the Democratic Socialists of America, 75 Maiden Lane, Suite 505, New York, NY 10038. (212) 727-8610. Signed articles express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of the organization.

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*Democratic Socialists of America share a vision of a humane international social order based on equitable distribution of resources, meaningful work, a healthy environment, sustainable growth, gender and racial equality, and non-oppressive relationships. Equality, solidarity, and democracy can only be achieved through international political and social cooperation aimed at ensuring that economic institutions benefit all people. We are dedicated to building truly international social movements – of unionists, environmentalists, feminists, and people of color – which together can elevate global justice over brutalizing global competition.*

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Service Employees International Union Secretary-Treasurer Eliseo Medina, a DSA Honorary Chair, told listeners “We don’t have a wealth problem; we have a problem with how wealth is distributed.”

Sarita Gupta, executive director of Jobs with Justice, spoke about “the need to be audacious, to make aspirational and transformative demands, and put forward an alternative view,” while John Nichols of *The Nation* observed that “when Mississippi votes for women’s rights, something good is happening in America.” Speaking as a seventh generation Wisconsinite, he said “if the Egyptians can get rid of Mubarak, we can get rid of [Gov.] Walker,” and said that he was sure socialism was now on the American agenda.

Saturday’s dinner featured remarks by *Washington Post* columnist and DSA Vice-Chair Harold Meyerson, who gave a synthetic and well-received talk on the inherent tension between democracy and capitalism – this while competing with roaring bhangra music from a Sweet 16 party in the adjoining ballroom. The conference dinner also honored outgoing National Director Frank Llewellyn, longtime DSA labor activist Skip Roberts, former National Director Jack Clark, and incoming National Director Maria Svart.

Workshops, which consumed the bulk of meeting time, centered on the DSA GET UP Project to fight the austerity agenda when it rears its ugly head again in the spring. Others dealt with resistance to attacks on public sector workers; countering voter suppression and the right wing’s manipulation of racism; tips on tabling and public recruiting; building strong locals; engaging in coalitions

while maintaining one’s socialist identity; planning campaigns; working with traditional and new media, and implementing the YDS Affordable and Accessible Higher Education Campaign.

Elected to serve on the National Political Committee – the leadership body described as “the engine room of the organization” – were Theresa Alt (Ithaca, NY), Stuart Elliott (Wichita, KS), Paul Garver (Boston, MA), Virginia Franco (San Diego, CA), David Green (Detroit, MI), Barbara Joye (Atlanta, GA), Frank Llewellyn (New York, NY), Dan Michniewicz (Pinckney, MI), Simone Morgen (Columbus, OH), Joseph Schwartz (Philadelphia, PA), and Peg Strobel (Chicago, IL), plus the two YDS co-chairs, Sean Monahan (Philadelphia, PA) and Jackie Sewell (Lawrence, KS).

After concluding inspirational remarks by veteran labor organizer Jose La Luz about how we must fight for an economy that “serves the needy, not the greedy,” the convention closed with arms linked and fists raised in singing the 140-year-old socialist anthem, *The Internationale*. Its words “We want no condescending saviors to rule us from their judgment hall; we workers ask not for their favor, let each consult for all,” made for a fitting convention close, anticipating as they did Occupy Wall Street’s trust in democracy. “A better world’s in birth.” ❖

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## **2011 Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) National Convention Priorities Resolution**

*Summary below – full 10-page resolution at [www.dsausa.org](http://www.dsausa.org)*

### **I. DSA’s Activist Agenda: Building Movements for Economic Justice**

DSA will participate in social movements and protest activities that demand jobs for all and the expansion of public funding of basic human needs through the restoration of progressive income and corporate taxation, and ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and cuts to unnecessary military hardware spending. DSA will deep-

en its already significant presence around the nation within the Occupy Wall Street movement, as we welcome it as a major form of resistance to corporate power and the neoliberal\* political class that accommodates it.

Every DSA local and YDS chapter will decide which struggles to join depending upon their

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*\* Neoliberalism is a worldview that favors the private sector over government and a policy agenda that supports privatization, deregulation, tax cuts, and union-busting.*

groups' capacity, existing activist commitments, and their analysis of local political conditions and opportunities. In general, DSA locals should work in one or more of the following priority areas:

- a. Grassroots opposition to any long-term "budget compromise" that fails to sustain vital social programs;
- b. Coalitions fighting for full employment and a massive public jobs program;
- c. Movements fighting to prevent further disastrous cutbacks in state and local budgets, particularly to public higher education; and
- d. Movements fighting corporate America's attack on the labor movement and the rights of working people, both at home and abroad, and the role the destruction of labor rights has played in causing the current global economic crisis.

## **II. Public Educational Initiatives for Economic Justice**

- a. The NPC has developed an ambitious "GET UP Project: Grassroots Economics Training for Understanding and Power" that aims to "train the trainers" (grassroots activists, including DSAers) to critique neoliberal ideology and put forth a progressive, socialist-feminist alternative economic policy.
- b. The 50th Anniversary of *The Other America* Project. The convention also endorses the NPC's efforts to create a significant educational and political project around the 50th Anniversary of The Other America and Michael Harrington's role in initiating the War on Poverty.
- c. DSA locals will continue to advocate and engage in educational work in regard to the structural problems of a capitalist economy and the potential for a full transition to a democratic socialist economy.

## **III. Electoral Work in 2012 and Beyond**

DSA locals do more social movement work and educational activities than concerted electoral work. But where they engage in electoral action, they mostly work to elect progressive Democrats (and sometimes independents) who come out of and represent grassroots struggles for social justice. We also recognize that it is crucial to work to re-elect the most progressive voices in Congress. Thus, in our PAC activity we will work to aid the re-election efforts of Senator Bernard Sanders (I-VT) and Congressman John Conyers (D-MI).

## **IV. Building Organizational Capacity One Brick at a Time**

- a. The DSA national office, NPC, and local activists will prioritize strengthening existing DSA locals and YDS chapters and building new ones.
- b. To expand our organizing capacity and achieve such growth, the DSA NPC will strengthen its Local Development and Program Committees (and recruit non-NPC members to their ranks) as well as the various DSA commissions.
- c. DSA and YDS will make a concerted effort to promote the movement of YDS activists into existing DSA locals or YDS graduates starting new DSA locals.
- d. DSA and YDS will organize DSA and YDS contingents at key national and regional gatherings of progressives.
- e. The NPC and national staff will organize a DSA Membership Drive to conclude at the 2013 national convention.
- f. DSA and YDS will act to develop their on-line capabilities, including by updating the DSA website and improving the use of social networking.
- g. Finally, this convention recognizes the need to integrate fundraising and budgeting into every level of DSA's work, including DSA locals and YDS chapters.