

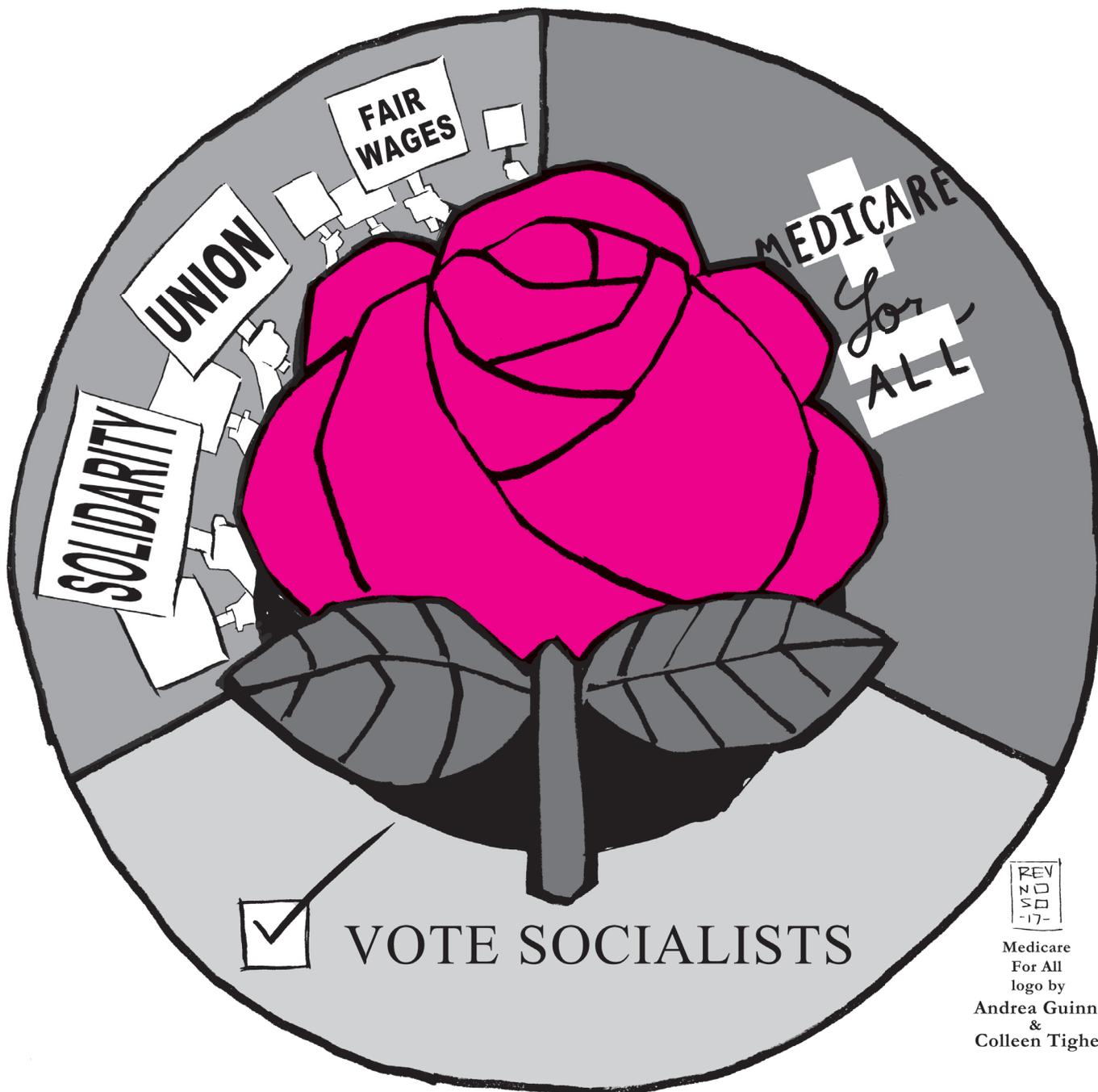
# DEMOCRATIC LEFT

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**From the National Director**

# Let's Seize the Moment

By Maria Svart

I'm sitting on a panel on Medicare for All (M4A) at the Women's Convention in Detroit in October. And I'm realizing again how critical DSA's work is in this moment. There are 4,000 women at this conference. Probably a few hundred of them identify as socialists.



I connect M4A to the larger crisis of care caused by neoliberal capitalism. For example, women provide unpaid care in the home because we lack public programs such as universal child care and healthcare as well as living wages. And women are largely the ones providing low-paid healthcare in the racially stratified labor market, exploited by private insurance, hospital, home care, and nursing home corporations. I say to the women in the room that we need to build independent political power from the ground up if we are to have any hope of moving from these crushing individual burdens to collective liberation.

During this conversation and in others, I bring our socialist values and ideas to the convention's liberal audience, and I am reminded of my own journey from being a twenty-something mainstream feminist who yearned for more to finding a class analysis and becoming a socialist feminist in Democratic Socialists of America.

Our recognition of the complexities of class, race, and gender in the United States is one thing that drew me to DSA. Our strategic approach to politics—respecting local conditions and, critically, recognizing the need to build grassroots power in order to win—is another.

November 7, Election Day, proved that organizing works. Movements are tested in unpredictable ways, such as after a police shooting or disaster cap-

italism, as well as predictable ones, such as in the election cycle. With allies like Our Revolution and the shoe leather and cell phones of our members, we supported DSAers running as Democrats, Greens, and independents, depending on political context. We helped elect 16 of them to local office in places from Montana to Tennessee, including unseating the Republican whip of the Virginia House.

I believe our ability to hold this degree of nuance is critical to our success. I have never been satisfied with the idea of simply being ideologically correct. I want to win. And winning on a mass scale in politics, workplaces, and communities, will require building a much larger socialist organization than what we have now. It must be an organization that welcomes a wide range of new people rather than shuts them out. It must be one that is politically independent but that fights alongside mass movements.

What does it mean to build such an organization? For one thing, it means learning to openly disagree in a comradely way. In our toxic culture, it's not hard to get angry with each other. The difficult question is whether we make conflict constructive or destructive. When I was a union organizer, I saw that members had a choice between standing together against their boss and across their differences or losing the union. We face that same choice now.

DSA members come from diverse backgrounds and life experiences, and you can never truly walk in another person's shoes. In fact, not one of us has all the answers. But within our range of politics, we all recognize the centrality of contesting for state power, of practicing democracy as a means and viewing it as an end, and of using the transformative nature of collective action to build multiracial working-class power.

We may not all think the same, but we turn out to be mostly on the same page when it comes to priorities for action. A spring 2017 membership survey foreshadowed the same three top priorities chosen in August by our convention delegates: 47% listed health care, 27% electoral work, and 25% labor solidarity. This degree of agreement doesn't exclude differences that naturally arise—how can they not?—but it keeps us from becoming paralyzed. We have a world to win.

That's why I've chosen to devote my life to working-class organization, first in the labor movement

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Cover art by Frank Reynoso

# DSA Convention Adopts National Political Priorities

By Joseph M. Schwartz

At the Democratic Socialists of America's bi-annual convention in August, some 800 delegates representing more than a hundred active chapters set three national priorities: the fight for Medicare for All (M4A); the revival of a strong labor presence both within and without DSA; and the election of open socialists to office. In the run-up to the crucial 2018 congressional and state legislative elections, DSA hopes to challenge the Democratic Party's failure to offer a coherent economic justice program as alternative to the reactionary Trump regime.

The political and organizational priorities are not meant to be a laundry list of every struggle in which our chapters engage. They represent campaigns in which national staff and leadership can focus our limited national resources and change the political equation from a zero-sum game. Even in presidential elections, the majority of working class voters of all races do not vote; but as Bernie Sanders's presidential primary campaign demonstrated, working-class voters of all races can be mobilized around an agenda that would make healthcare, higher education, and a living wage basic social rights. These programs would be funded by progressive taxation and major cuts in military spending.

## Medicare for All

The convention decided that a national Medicare for All campaign could turn the tide against Republican attacks on the Affordable Care Act (ACA), Medicaid, and Medicare. Some 50% of the country is covered by Medicaid and Medicare. But we can only provide high-quality health coverage for all if the government takes over the private healthcare insurance industry completely. Most advanced democracies have some form of universal health care (not just insurance, but publicly funded coverage). However, in the United States this is a profoundly radical (or "non-reformist") program in that it both institutionalizes a new social right and "decommod-

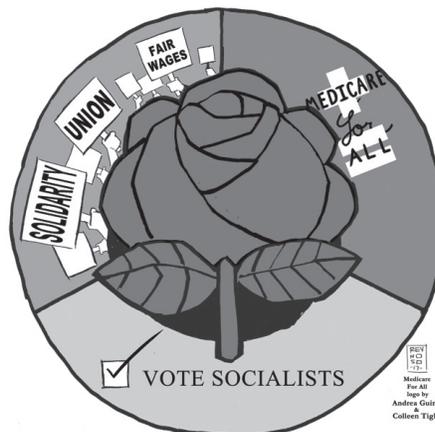
ifies" (takes out of the private sector) health insurance.

The private healthcare sector is politically and psychologically entrenched in the U.S. psyche. If we are to achieve a national single-payer program, we must transform U.S. politics. Thus, DSA groups around the country are canvassing in favor of the basic principles of single-payer in order to change how the public sees health care. DSA chapters are petitioning in favor of the five basic principles that constitute a robust M4A plan: a comprehensive single program; comprehensive coverage (including mental health coverage, the full range of reproductive health services, drugs, dental, and vision care); free service at the point of service, funded by progressive forms of taxation; universal coverage (for all U.S. residents); and a jobs program for those in the private insurance industry affected by the transition.

Thus, DSA chapters will push House and Senate members to sign on to John Conyers's single-payer bill (HR 676) or Bernie Sanders's one (S 1804) and to turn these paper endorsements into strong advocacy for the bills. Already, sixteen senators have signed on to the Sanders bill and more than 120 House members to the Conyers bill. Some of these signers are moderate Democrats who fear primary challenges from the left. This will happen only if a mass social movement pressures Democrats to do the right thing for opportunistic reasons—because doing so becomes central to their chances for being re-elected or winning a primary.

Strengthening the Labor Movement

The convention also recognized that a major cause of the weakening of left forces in U.S. politics over the past forty years is the destruction of the labor movement. Even mainstream liberal economists admit that de-unionization has been a major cause of the stagnation of working-class living standards. Union density has declined from 22 percent of the workforce in 1980 to a paltry 11 percent today



Frank Reynoso

(only 6.5 percent in the private sector). DSAers are active as rank-and-filers, elected officials, and staffers in numerous unions. The convention endorsed reviving a strong Democratic Socialist Labor Commission (DSLCL) that would promote labor working groups in every chapter and enable DSAers to coordinate their work in various economic sectors. In addition, the Labor Commission could help DSAers gain jobs in workplaces that are being targeted for union organizing drives. DSA has many younger members working in the critical tech and logistics industry, as well as teaching and healthcare, all areas of potential growth for a revived labor movement.

### **Electing Socialists**

Ultimately, the space for organizing and the chances for single-payer will be crucially influenced by who governs. Thus, the third part of the DSA National Priorities resolution focuses upon increasing the strength of socialists and the broad left within electoral politics. DSA does not see electoral politics as an arena separate from social movement work. Without Occupy, Fight for \$15, and #Black Lives Matter, there would not have been a Sanders campaign or pressure on the campaign to expand its racial justice agenda. But Sanders also demonstrated how running as an explicit socialist opens space for issues long considered off the political agenda (such as publicly financed free higher education and a financial transaction tax). DSA will concentrate its scarce national electoral resources on supporting chapters that are campaigning for open socialists who are running as Greens, independents, or in partisan Democratic primaries. Already such a strategy in an off-year election has contributed to DSA now having 34 members elected to office, some at the non-partisan local level, but also several as open socialists in state legislatures (such as Mike Sylvester (D-ME), Mike Connolly (D-MA), and Lee Carter (D-VA)). Although the national DSA will only devote its scarce resources to supporting openly socialist candidates, the resolution recognizes that building a more multiracial post-Sanders electoral force inside and outside of the Democratic Party will be crucial to the fate of the left in the 2018 and 2020 elections.

As Lorraine Minnite and long-time DSAer Frances Fox Piven argue in "Why the Democrats and Movements Need Each Other" (*In These Times*, October 17, 2017), if social movements grow among constituencies that traditionally vote Democratic, then some Democratic politicians will respond by moving to the left. DSA understands that electing a Democratic Congress and president won't guarantee radical reform (see the Obama administration).

But it also understands that it would improve the chances of democratic socialist movements to win progressive reforms. It's no accident that single-payer is on the state agenda in two of the "bluest" states—California and New York.

### **Coalition-building**

Why build a socialist presence within a broader left? Any reform that will redistribute power and wealth from corporate America to the working class will be militantly opposed by capital. As the movement for single-payer strengthens, we will witness more overt red-baiting of the program (after all, the ACA was and still is subject to such attacks). The Sanders campaign demonstrates how legitimizing the term "socialism" expands political possibilities. As DSA's legitimacy grows, we'll both be able to elect open socialists at the local and state level and to increase our weight within progressive coalitions fighting for meaningful reforms. Ultimately those reforms, even if won, will be weakened by pressure from those who control investment—corporate elites. Thus short-term struggles, such as M4A, which aim to socialize a part of the corporate economy, illustrate the possibilities of a more robust economic democracy. Opponents who worry that single-payer might be the slippery slope toward socialism could be right, if we continue to build a more vibrant political presence for DSA at both the grassroots and national levels. Our five-fold growth over the past two years makes such a reality possible, but only if we choose our battles with care and marshal our scarce national and chapter resources intelligently. ❖

*Joseph M. Schwartz is a member of DSA's National Political Committee and a professor of political science at Temple University. He is the author of The Permanence of the Political and The Future of Democratic Equality.*

### **DSA MAKES GAINS ON ELECTION DAY**

Sixteen DSAers won state and local offices in the November elections. DSA was represented in 25 elections across 13 states. Four of those running had national endorsements from the DSA, and of those, Tristan Rader won his race for City Council of Lakewood, Cuyahoga County (Ohio), and JT Scott is now Ward 2 Alderman in Somerville, Massachusetts. Many others were supported by local DSA chapters. We are very proud of DSA member Lee Carter, who defeated Virginia Republican House Majority Whip Jackson Miller despite vicious last-minute red-baiting. Find out more on the DSA website.