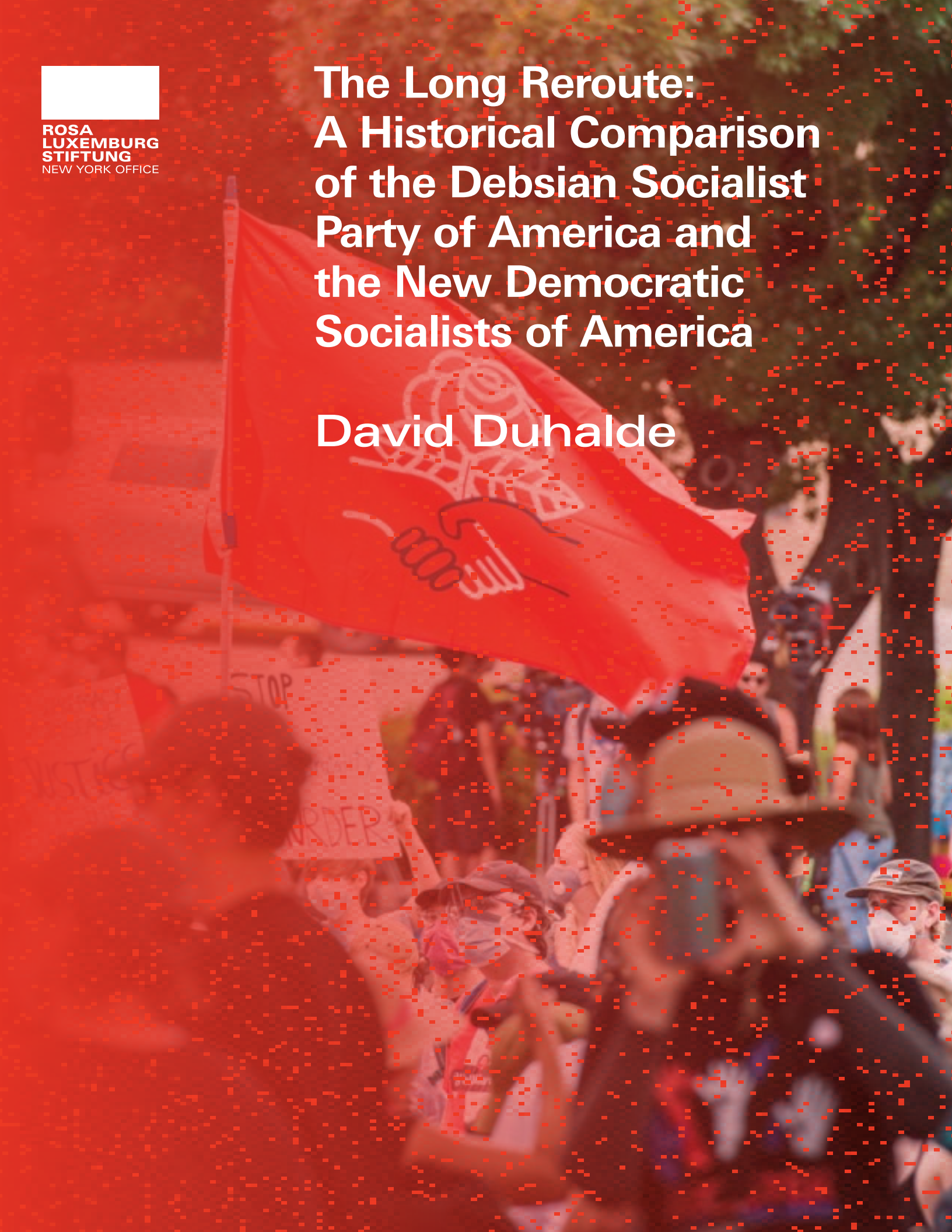


The Long Reroute: A Historical Comparison of the Debsian Socialist Party of America and the New Democratic Socialists of America

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Summary: The Long Reroute



This history is written both for those outside the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and those who are members of it, with the upcoming 2025 national convention in mind. Knowing where DSA has come from over the past decades and how its debates on labor and electoral politics have evolved — including a historical background on those same issues in the Socialist Party of America — can be an educational tool to see where the organization is going.

For those outside DSA, trying to understand the internal workings and decisions of the largest socialist group in the United States can be difficult. This historical comparative study of today's DSA and its predecessor party will help readers understand how this history of the U.S. socialist movement can explain what is going on in the contemporary DSA.

For those inside DSA, my hope is that this article will provide a better grounding in our political debates and our tradition. I wrote this just before DSA held

its fifth convention since the first Bernie Sanders presidential campaign, a campaign that transformed the fortunes of the group and turned it nearly into a household name. At the biennial convention in Chicago, delegates — including those who joined after the first wave of newcomers around 2016 and those who joined just this year — will debate, argue, and vote on resolutions and proposals to shape the organization’s positions and strategy for the near future.

Likely delegates and observers from the earlier surges of membership over the past decade may find clashes and disputes on the convention floor in Chicago eerily similar to ones of other recent gatherings. For first-time attendees, however, these conversations are completely new. The constant stream of fresh members and leadership turnovers have made preserving DSA history and institutional memory increasingly difficult.

This was not always the case. In the DSA I joined at the turn of the century, there was not only little turnover but also a deep, shared understanding of the organization’s history and origins. However, this stability and sense of self was partly a reflection of the really small, if not almost sect-like, nature of the association and its negligible influence on U.S. politics. Today’s DSA, on the other hand, is a political player across the country on various levels. Gone are the small meetings discussing our past and in their place are the large assemblies shaping our future.

The coming socialist period still will be shaped by those that came before it. For U.S. socialism, the plays are largely the same over the century — it is only the actors and scenery that shift. But relevant histories can be largely forgotten by future generations. Our lessons from the past can, at the very least, be overtaken by stories and narratives that are more dominant even in the now, even if they are less useful in understanding the present. Recovering those lessons is the big task of this article.

A Brief History of the Socialist Party and Democratic Socialists of America

Socialist Party

The Socialist Party was founded in 1901 in Indianapolis, Indiana through the unification of the Social Democratic Party and former members of the Socialist Labor Party. The then new Socialist Party, or SP, grew rapidly over the next decade to a height of nearly 120,000 members in 1912 — or almost half a million people if scaled to today’s U.S. population.

The party achieved its greatest impact in its first two decades of existence

under the leadership of figures coming out of the labor movement and engaged in electoral work. These were leaders with competing visions for the socialist movement. They included Eugene Debs, Victor Berger, Morris Hillquit, Bill Haywood, Mother Jones, and Kate O'Hare. The party elected hundreds if not thousands of members to office and its labor action fostered dynamic union federations mobilizing millions of workers into class struggle.

But the party's public and unwavering opposition to the First World War led to serious political repression that it never fully recovered from. While Debs was able to get nearly a million votes in the 1920 presidential race from prison — where he was confined by the federal government because of his speeches against militarism — the party steadily declined nationally in the 1920s. This included an unsuccessful effort in the mid-1920s to create a broader Progressive Party.

By the 1930s, the party was only able to maintain pockets of strength in particular urban areas. Its demographics in this period shifted from having a significant native-born membership and a strong presence in rural communities to being primarily urban-based with heavy concentrations of immigrant and first-generation Americans.

Norman Thomas, who succeeded Debs as the party's national spokesperson, also received nearly a million votes for president in 1932. But the New Deal period was not particularly favorable for the party. The party increasingly lost or could not recruit advanced activists who either chose instead to support Franklin Roosevelt's agenda or were more attracted to militant and effective groups such as the Communist Party — which, in particular, was a rival to the SP. Internal factionalism, including a failed takeover attempt by a Trotskyist group, weakened the party further.

Still, the party itself and its members continued to play a real role in labor and social movement activism. Socialists were instrumental in founding groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Decades later, socialists continued to play a role in civil rights struggles. SP members included prominent Black trade unionists like A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin provided the economic vision behind the 1963 March on Washington, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — who more privately embraced democratic socialism — gave his legendary "I Have a Dream" speech.

The party also dedicated energy to organizing and uplifting workers, such as tenant farmers, who major unions ignored. Socialists continued, to play a role in organized labor, especially the garment unions, but more as individuals not through the party itself.

The Socialist Party stopped running presidential candidates by the 1950s and

was one of the few historic left membership organizations not to experience any real growth during the 1960s upsurge in anti-capitalist activism. The small party increasingly saw its influence flowing from where its members were positioned, and it tried to internally influence policy in major unions and the government. However, the roles some of its leading members took in organized labor and the allies they made there were at odds with the party's long-term commitment for peace, as many U.S. unions supported the Vietnam War. In short, the party, which had survived numerous splits and government repression, saw the Vietnam War as part of a broader struggle over whether to ally with pro-war liberal and labor allies or to support pro-peace movements with other progressive forces.

Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee and New American Movement

The Socialist Party legally changed its name to Social Democrats, USA (SDUSA) in 1972 and continued to exist under that name until 2007. In 1973, Michael Harrington, one of the three co-chairs of the new group, left the ostensible party with other members in protest against SDUSA's continued support of the Vietnam War. They were soon joined by thousands to form the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC). As the core of its strategy, DSOC embraced what was called the realignment strategy to transform the Democratic Party into a more progressive party through intra-party work, primaries, and uniting labor with other social movements to push out more reactionary forces.

In 1980, DSOC played an essential role in Senator Ted Kennedy's nearly-successful primary challenge to incumbent Democratic President Jimmy Carter. Through the broad coalition known as the Democratic Agenda, DSOC continued programming that built a socialist presence in the Democratic Party and its allied organizations in labor and progressive advocacy groups in the early 1980s. However, the "Reagan revolution" and a conservative political climate curtailed a lot of the advances DSOC had made.

In 1982, to overcome these challenges, DSOC merged with the democratic-socialist and more activist-oriented New American Movement, an organization founded by former Communists and alumni of Students for a Democratic Society. The new organization took the name Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

Democratic Socialists of America

The Democratic Socialists of America has continued to build a democratic-socialist presence in the United States for the next four decades. Like many

socialist and anti-capitalist groups, its membership and influence declined during the neoliberal period. Yet DSA remained, at least on paper, the largest US-based socialist group and maintained celebrity members and public intellectuals including Cornel West and Barbara Ehrenreich. These intellectuals gave DSA some national prominence even as a small organization after Harrington's death in 1989. During the years before Bernie Sanders's first presidential run, DSA — while highly democratic and not completely uniform — had a much smaller range of beliefs around what democratic socialism meant and what programs it would engage in than it does today.

DSA changed dramatically after the first Donald Trump victory. After hovering between five to seven thousand members for years, thousands joined overnight and DSA grew to nearly 10,000 in a matter of months. By 2017, DSA numbered 25,000, and then it grew to over 90,000 members by the time of the 2020 general election. These new socialists brought in fresh ideas and expanded DSA not just quantitatively but qualitatively in terms of beliefs and the scope of activism and ideas. DSA is now a political player with members in the U.S. Congress and hundreds at the local and state levels. It can effectively pass legislation on numerous issues and is mentioned regularly by the establishments of both major parties as a threat to their agendas.¹

The Historic Roots of Our Debates

An inspiration for this piece is to assess the constant comparisons of DSA to left organizations quite dissimilar to it. To a lesser extent, contrasts are made with the Communist Party, USA, whose democratic-centralist structure and once strong party discipline are nowhere to be found in DSA. In particular, consistent analogies are made between DSA and the Students for Democratic Society (SDS), and warnings are sounded about SDS's dissolution due to factionalism.²

DSA's public fights and combative caucuses provide surface resemblance to the sectarian politics that ultimately destroyed SDS. But lived memory of that experience for especially older DSA members can make those similarities seem more important than they are, and it can lead them to overlook the big differences between DSA and SDS. First, DSA, while it is generally run by young

1 A small sample: Democrats - The centrist Third Way "The Radical DSA and the New York City Mayor's Race" and moderate Democratic Congresswoman Spanberger criticizing the use of the word "socialism" after the 2022 mid-term Congressional elections. Republicans - Often use DSA on mailers to voters to attack candidates in and outside DSA. Here [is an example of the national Republican Party](#) attacking AOC using DSA.

2 As far back as 2018, Jacobin was [publishing articles about SDS](#) such as "Half the Way with Mao Zedong" as a subtle warning to DSA about factionalism. Most recently, erstwhile DSA member and U.S. historian Maurice Isserman has been warning about alleged sectarian entryism into DSA using SDS and the Communist Party as lenses in [several recent publications](#).

people, is still a multi-generational collective and certainly not a campus-based one. Second, while DSA has, and SDS had, low barriers for membership, DSA's socialist politics ultimately encompass a much narrower tent than the defunct student group. Michael Kazin, a professor and historian of the U.S. left and former SDS member himself, finds the DSA-SDS comparison to be flawed and also not very instructive. In a discussion for this piece, he noted that the new iteration of DSA has now lasted nearly as long — despite its internal crises and all — as SDS did from its beginning to end.³

The much better historical comparison to the new DSA, as this paper will show, is the pre-Cold War Socialist Party. The distance from the Cold War is a critical commonality for the new DSA and the old SP, especially under Debs. Historian James Weinstein in his 2003 book, *The Long Detour*, made this point just about a decade after the fall of the Soviet Union. Weinstein argued that the USSR's existence and U.S. anti-communism put real limitations on what was once possible for the U.S. democratic socialist movement to do in terms of attracting members and influencing policy and politics.⁴

Absent a domestic politics dominated by the threat of Communism, the U.S. socialist movement has returned, in some ways via a long reroute, to its original structures and impact on the U.S. from a little over a century ago. This is especially notable in electoral outcomes and the organization's effects on society via movement work around labor and other issues. One way this has happened — and here Weinstein's 2003 book was ahead of its time in its calls to do just this — was for socialists to use Democratic primaries to contest elections. A dozen years after the publication of his book, Sanders did just that in the Democratic presidential primary. Many hundreds of DSA backed-candidates have followed his path.

This history will argue that while there are many debates in the socialist movement at any given time, especially inside an organization like the SP or DSA, there is usually one central dividing question that dominates all others. For the SP before the Cold War, for a time the central fight was around how to orient towards the labor movement. For the 1960s and 1970s version of the party, the existential crisis that tore it apart was the Vietnam War. In today's DSA, there is a lack of consensus on if, how, and when to build a new workers or socialist party instead of running candidates through the Democratic Party. As we will see, the fact that debates about electoral and labor strategy are still important to DSA is a notable similarity with its SP forebearer.

³ Michael Kazin. Interview with David Duhalde, June 17, 2025.

⁴ James Weinstein, *The Long Detour: The History and Future of the American Left*. Westview Press, 2003.

The Argument to Come

The paper is broken into three sections comparing the old Socialist Party and the new DSA: the first on labor, the second on electoral politics, and the third on internal politics and organizational tendencies. In the labor section, I will argue that even as the new DSA has shifted its labor organizing strategy and union-orientation from the old DSA's policies, the organization today has much more consensus around the idea of making existing unions more militant and democratic than we saw in the old Socialist Party, where debates raged about creating entirely new labor federations and organizing outside the big unions.

In the second section, I will demonstrate that while similar debates exist about the role of candidates, elections, and officeholders in the socialist movement today as those that the SP took up one hundred years ago, the differences within DSA now are much larger. DSA has yet to reach agreement on a path out of the Democratic Party, or whether one is needed at all. The Socialist Party by contrast had near unanimity on running candidates outside "the old parties," as the Democrats and Republicans were called then.

In the last section I will chronicle how the wide range of views we see in DSA today is very much in line with the U.S. socialist tradition. I contend that the old SP and new DSA are better understood as coalitions of different socialist tendencies, interest groups, and currents than as single organizations. My main contention is that understanding this type of internecine and internal fighting even in the SP over a century ago gives a much better sense of how tensions will play out going forward in the new DSA than looking at the experience of SDS. It also should allay at least some of people's fears that DSA is too hopelessly divided to succeed. As I will show, a healthy (and at times an excessive) culture of debate has been a feature of the American socialist movement since its birth.

Additionally, I do want readers to know this paper is not designed, nor claims, to be a comprehensive history of DSA and the Socialist Party. For instance, the divisions over Vietnam will not be discussed as the paper is limited to pre and post-Cold War periods. Critically, I do my best to be fair and cover as much as possible, but I am certain there will be caucuses and other internal groupings that will be left out. I apologize in advance. In the pursuit of equity, with only a few exceptions for current elected officials and the DSA national co-chairs, my focus on individuals is mainly for historic figures so as to not elevate anyone in the new DSA over others.⁵

⁵ For full disclosure, I am a member of the Socialist Majority Caucus of DSA. In this research, however, I worked and contacted members of other caucuses for their perspectives as well as independents within DSA (and also former members for their viewpoints). I strove to make this as ecumenical as possible so it can be a teaching tool for those inside and outside of DSA to understand its history and current situation.

Lastly, I want to thank those who made this possible. First, my partner Michelle Munjanattu who encouraged me to seek a venue for my desire to publish this historical comparison and her feedback. My parents Linda Wine and Alejandro Duhalde who made me a socialist and nurtured my love of history, including giving me an encyclopedia in high school that I used for this project, especially my mother's assistance. Stefan Liebich, Executive Director of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's New York Office, who got me the material backing for this, including my longtime comrade Neal Meyer's editing and advising. Socialist elders such as Mike Hirsch (posthumously), Lee Levin, and Chris Townsend, who donated books and historic documents, sometimes at their own expense, providing me with a rich research foundation. Chris Maisano for lending many books from his library to me. To historians David Marcus and Paul Buhle for their input and advice. And William Prince for final copyediting assistance. All mistakes are my own. And many others who took my questions and inquiries over the past few months. You know who you are and I will always appreciate you.

That goal may not always be achieved to its fullest potential, and I am very open to feedback to make future histories better and wider.

Socialist Trade Unionism: Then and Now

Across the globe, the labor movement and trade unionism are the primary cause and principal activity outside of elections for many socialist parties and their programs. The centrality of the “labor question” for U.S. socialists is still there today, but the focus of socialists’ workplace organizing has shifted over the last century. Today, the energy of labor activists in DSA is largely dedicated to making existing unions more democratic, militant, and responsive to their members and the needs of the working class. This work is done through both getting unorganized workers into unions and challenging more conservative union leadership with internal reform efforts.

However, at the turn of the 20th century the Socialist Party of America and other U.S.-based leftists were divided on which types of unions to form and which federations of trade unions to support. Understanding this shift from dynamic and divisive fights about which types of unions socialists should support towards an unspoken unity about changing the nature of existing unions will help explain how DSA operates in the labor movement. And critically, it will demonstrate how internal disagreements in DSA today can mask a widely-shared consensus.

The Left and Labor in the Nineteenth Century

We should begin with the formation of unions in the United States and how early socialists related to organized labor. There were several attempts since the Civil War to form a national labor federation, one of the most radical of which was the short-lived Knights of Labor. Heavy government and business-led repression against worker militancy allowed for more conservative and business-oriented unions to win out over more radical unions.⁶ The American Federation of Labor (AFL), established in 1886, and its craft unions of skilled workers, exemplified this kind of business unionism.⁷ Craft unions traditionally have been open only to workers with particular skills, not those employed at a particular workplace or sector.⁸ As a result they tend to be more exclusionary and more conservative.

6 Werner Sombart. *Why is there no Socialism in the United States?* (The McMillan Press, 1976), 22.

7 *Ibid.*

8 “Definition for Common Labor Terms”, International Brotherhood of Teamsters, accessed June 27, 2025, at <https://teamster.org/member-resources/definitions-common-labor-terms/>

The violent repression of more radical, pre-AFL national labor federations such as the Knights of Labor was a key factor shaping early socialist debates about labor strategy.⁹ Absent a stable, strong, and left-wing union federation, socialists were unable to easily determine where to put their labor organizing focus and increase their influence among advanced workers.¹⁰ Labor debates as a result centered around whether to create and support new more militant unions or to try to shift more conservative unions.

AFL vs. IWW

The high point of this debate over labor strategy occurred in the early 20th century. The Industrial Workers of World (IWW), founded in 1905, was the immediate catalyst for the fight. Those Socialists, often identified with the party's more moderate faction, generally supported the AFL and did not offer a plan to organize the unorganized. Those in the more radical wing of the party, on the other hand, were increasingly sympathetic to the IWW, which strove to organize beyond the AFL's existing craft unionist orientation.¹¹ The IWW's efforts also included pushing to open up labor unions to immigrant groups such as Jews, Chinese, and other non-western Europeans. (The existing AFL immigrant membership tended to be from older migrants including Irish and Germans.)¹²

The IWW, whose revolutionary rhetoric often overshadowed its pragmatic organizing and misguided faith in American due process, set out to organize workers in fields ignored by the AFL and its craft unions. The IWW's hostility towards the mainstream labor movement and its Socialist Party allies led even its friends to view it as an advocate of the divisive dual unionism.¹³ Dual unionism is defined as activities and/or membership on behalf of a rival union, nearly always in the same industry.¹⁴

One of those friends was Eugene Debs, who was present at the founding of the IWW. Debs' evolution from Democrat and conservative unionist to five-time Socialist presidential candidate and revolutionary worker organizer symbolized the shift of many workers in that era towards more militant stances. Debs's goal was the creation of a revolutionary federation, as he considered reforming the AFL to be "as useless as to spray a cesspool with attar of roses."¹⁵

9 Irving Howe. *Socialism and America*. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 121.

10 Ibid.

11 Mike Davis. *Prisoners of the American Dream*. (Verso, 2018). 47-48.

12 Ibid. 42

13 Irving Howe. *Socialism and America*. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 25.

14 "Definition for Common Labor Terms", International Brotherhood of Teamsters, accessed June 27, 2025, at <https://teamster.org/member-resources/definitions-common-labor-terms/>

15 Ibid. 24.

While Debs was and still, especially by the left, widely regarded as the patron saint of the U.S. labor movement, his orientation towards the IWW was not followed by all leading socialists at the time or later.¹⁶ Victor Berger, an Austrian-born prominent figure of the Sewer Socialists faction and Wisconsin Socialist Party, was one such opponent. Berger had deep roots in the mainstream labor movement including AFL unions.¹⁷ And Berger was not alone among party leaders who wished to engage the AFL over the IWW. Another socialist supporter of the AFL was Morris Hillquit, a Russian-born New York-based orthodox Marxist, who had given the Sewer Socialist their nickname as a slight.¹⁸ At times, Hillquit made overtures to Samuel Gompers who headed the AFL nearly uninterrupted from its founding to his death in 1924.¹⁹ Yet, Socialists did contend with Gompers within the AFL. In 1912, at arguably the party's height, a party member and printer named Max Hayes garnered nearly one third of the vote in an election for the AFL presidency against Gompers.²⁰

In an ideal world, the IWW-AFL debate could have been settled through merely seeing which resulted in better unions and working conditions. But the advent of the First World War foreclosed this option. Brutal government repression against the Socialist Party and the IWW — both organizations opposed the war — severely damaged both groups.

Despite attempts at uniting the left to respond to this repression, solidarity was no match for right-wing repression. The IWW's infrastructure and ability to organize was effectively crushed.

The Eclipse of the Socialist Party in the Labor Movement

The birth and rise of the Communist Party coincided, unsurprisingly, with the decline of the Socialist Party. The Socialist Party's initial enthusiasm with the Russian Revolution gradually gave way as many members' sympathies with the Soviet Union as a model for the United States waned.²¹ This led to tension inside and outside the Socialist party. In particular, it led to a combative relationship with the increasingly stronger Communists, who had split from the Socialist Party. This tension affected the SP's labor work throughout the 1920s.

¹⁶ Harry Laidler. *Socialism in the United States: A Brief History*. (League for Industrial Democracy, 1952), 21.

¹⁷ Irving Howe. *Socialism and America*. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 7.

¹⁸ Irving Howe. *Socialism and America*. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

²¹ *Ibid.* 330.

By the 1930s, Socialists found themselves usurped by Communists in many leading unions, especially those of the new Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The CIO, founded in 1935, was composed of unions seeking to do industrial organizing, including unskilled workers — the kind of organizing AFL unions had long avoided.

A More Unified Labor Strategy Today

Given their weakness and dwindling membership, those in the Socialist Party in the coming decades increasingly aimed their focus more on union leadership than the rank-and-file. When the Socialist Party split in the 1970s, its two main offshoots — Social Democrats, USA and DSOC — both prioritized recruiting labor leaders and staffers. By doing so, they hoped to shape domestic and international policy from the top down within the unions. This “grasstops” approach continued after DSOC merged with the New American Movement into DSA, and it was the new organization’s labor orientation through the mid-2000s. This led to an aversion to taking positions on internal union elections and supporting the kind of reform efforts that were much more common among more rank-and-file oriented groups such as the pro-reform union activist publication Labor Notes. By the 2000s, DSA and its youth section primarily supported campaigns to help organize new workers or draw attention to labor injustice, and did this work at the grassroots level where it could. This position officially changed at the 2019 convention when DSA delegates voted to adopt the rank-and-file strategy as the organization’s labor focus.²²²³

The rank-and-file strategy²⁴ is one that encourages socialists and allies to build relationships with already-existing working-class activists in the unions. The goal is to support workplace organizing struggles and eventually to challenge more conservative union leadership. The appeal of this strategy became more real to many labor activists by the mid-2010s when progressive and socialist rank-and-file educators won the elections to lead the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). Under new leadership, CTU won huge gains for their members and the community through multiple large and successful strikes.

While this strategy was not universally accepted when it was proposed in 2019 — many veteran DSAers were uneasy with publicly siding in internal union

22 2019 DSA National Convention Results, Accessed May 29, 2025 <https://docs.google.com/document/d/126wVQCrdpfzS1KfPr6vsVY3rKtMXhKZTH4Lq2oohDh8/edit?tab=t.0>

23 Resolution #32 Labor Strategy and the Democratic Socialist Labor Committee, Accessed May 29, 2025 <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xulx3e-qz6qpJZ50oU61Lm3NnyfEaDzUw7coBo69ZE0/edit?tab=t.0>

24 Kim Moody. The Rank-and-File Strategy: Building a Socialist Movement in the US (2000). Accessed June 12, 2025 <https://solidarity-us.org/rankandfilestrategy/>

disputes and elections — it has gained more widespread acceptance among different caucuses and factions of DSA over the last few years. And one notable fact is that the strategy’s advocates and even detractors cannot be placed easily into a single demographic. You will find rank-and-file orientation fans who are union staff members and skeptics who themselves are union members.

The interest in supporting union reform efforts has not eclipsed attention to new organizing. DSA members are also active in salting (sending pre-selected organizers to unionize companies such as Starbucks and Amazon). But these differences in emphasis should not be misread — almost all DSA members agree on the need to organize in both the existing unions and in unorganized workplaces.

Ultimately the degree to which DSA members differ on union orientation is nowhere near the order of magnitude seen in the old Socialist Party. No one, for example, is arguing for a new labor federation even if some people dislike and distrust the AFL-CIO leadership.

This unity extends into the present political crisis facing the U.S. As of this writing, DSA’s National Labor Commission (NLC) has actively supported the resistance to the federal government’s attacks on immigrants and this work has multi-faceted support. And this unity in crisis is reflected in labor debates at the upcoming DSA convention. Nearly 90 resolutions and amendments have been proposed for this year’s convention, but only ten are directly related to organized labor (if you remove proposals with electoral components).²⁵ None actually express major strategic disagreements with the strategy of the NLC. These resolutions focus on encouraging socialist union members to run for office, seek arms embargo, and organize Amazon. The upcoming convention is unlikely to change the direction of DSA’s labor work for the near or long-term.

25 Convention Compendium, 2025 DSA National Convention, Accessed May 29, 2025. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pDJ5u_JRSt4bc7TOcXJAJBnKvBcz6RZ4NDBrJnylQNO/edit?tab=t.w3ibfjqb4wyr
If you keep the labor resolutions and amendments with an electoral focus, it is 13 proposals (about one-seventh of the total proposals).

To see how I calculated the percentage of resolutions and amendments on a particular issue, please see this table of 2025 DSA convention proposals categorized by a large focus (or not) on Palestine, labor, and electoral policies. There are also three tables to show the totals by resolution and amendment on a particular issue:
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1RnvOXspSsrR12-kMizPC33gHMvrE1ZC0_xTrHeihLhc/edit?usp=sharing

Socialist Electoralism: Then and Now

The Democratic Socialists of America is not formally a political party nor has it ever been. Yet its membership at conventions in recent years has voted and confirmed the desire to establish a new socialist party. How then did it come to be that U.S.-based democratic socialists and others abandoned their formal status as an independent political party only to seek it out again decades later?

The answer to this transformation lies in the history of the Socialist Party, its splits (especially around the Vietnam War), and the rejuvenation of DSA as effectively a new organization (and de facto coalition) after 2017.

Birth of a New Independent Party

To understand today's DSA and its struggles with the party question, we can begin by looking at the socialist electoral movement even before the birth of the SP. Frustrations with the sectarianism of the existing left at the end of the 19th century led dissenting factions of the American socialist movement to propose a unified socialist party in 1900.²⁶ The next year, the Socialist Party of America was born in Indianapolis, Indiana.

The new Socialist Party grew rapidly following its birth. As one historian put it, the compounding growth and optimism of the SP in its first decade was electric:

The Socialist Party membership grew from 16,000 in 1903 to 118,000 in 1912, a seven-fold growth in nine years. The socialist vote quadrupled between 1900 and 1904 to reach 400,000, doubling again from 1904 to 1912, when it reached 900,000. If this rate of increase continued, declared some socialist prophets, it was easy to see that the Socialist Party would become [sic] in the not distant future the dominant party of the land.²⁷

However, the SP under Debs's leadership was able to achieve this incredible rate of growth in part by papering over the differences within the party. Among the many divisions that cleaved the party, two major questions relating to the value of electoral politics were especially important: 1) did electoral activism on the part of the party serve the end of doing propaganda in the lead up to a revolutionary change or was its goal public policy and the winning of gradual reforms?, and 2) was the role of Socialist legislators to serve as independent political actors or must they follow the preferences of the party and the discipline that goes with it?

²⁶ Morris Hillquit. *History of Socialism in the United States*. (Dover, 1971), 303.

²⁷ Harry Laidler. *Socialism in the United States: A Brief History*. (League for Industrial Democracy, 1952), 10.

For example, Morris Hillquit and his faction of the party's center-left believed "socialism is primarily a movement of education and propaganda."²⁸ While he garnered nearly a fifth of the vote for New York City mayor in 1917, he (and four-time presidential candidate Eugene Debs for that matter) continued to believe electoral campaigns served mostly (though not exclusively) an educational purpose to create more socialists.

Opposition to their view did not fall neatly along the supposed left-right axis of the party. The more radical IWW organizer Haywood thought of elections as serving only a practical value of getting sympathetic comrades into office — comrades who could then be counted on to support unions when they needed help.²⁹ Less surprisingly, Berger and his more moderate faction, saw the value of winning office both for educational and practical terms to demonstrate how socialists could and would govern. What Hillquit (disparagingly) called "Sewer Socialism," Berger dubbed the "Milwaukee Idea."³⁰

There were critics of this latter argument, however. Some worried, with reason, that Socialists could be victims of their own success if they won on something short of a radical agenda. Good reforms would be adopted and watered down by the other major parties. Such critics pointed to the experience of the party in Schenectady, New York in 1913, where the Socialist mayor's successful and harmonious tenure led business interests to defend the left-wing elected officials against right-wing attacks.³¹ Such alliances with business obviously offended the party's more radical supporters; how were Socialists going to lead a rupture with the ruling class if that class supported them?

Party Discipline

Even if the party remained divided on the uses of electoral politics, the party nonetheless did want its elected officials to support party positions. The party did expel and remove Socialist officeholders that broke with major planks around the major subjects of women's suffrage (for) and prohibition (against). It also brought Socialist officeholders and candidates up on internal party charges for merely accepting labor endorsements from unions not otherwise allied with the SP. In Los Angeles, the lone Socialist city councilor voted for the election of a council president who was a Democrat. The SP councilor was then forced to leave the party. In Minnesota, a state senator was expelled from

28 Morris Hillquit. *Socialism Summed Up*. (The H.K. Fly Company Publishers, 1913), 47.

29 James Weinstein. *The Decline of Socialism in America: 1912-1925*. (Vintage Books, 1967), 111.

30 One key to their success was the party's state and municipal legislators coordinating to, for example, give more local autonomy to Milwaukee to avoid the pre-emption when a state government blocks municipalities from enacting laws (Joshua Kluever. "The Golden Age of Pragmatic Socialism: Wisconsin Socialists at the State Level, 1919-37. *The Journal of the Gilded and Progressive Era*, No. 22 (2023): 204-223.)

31 James Weinstein. *The Decline of Socialism in America: 1912-1925*. (Vintage Books, 1967), 108-110.

his local, made up largely of Finnish immigrants, apparently because he won his election!³²

The Height – and Limits – of Socialist Electoral Power

In the 1912 presidential election, Eugene Debs captured six percent of the presidential vote, his highest vote share ever. (Hillquit noted at the time that if proportional representation had existed for the U.S. House of Representatives, this would have netted the party 26 congressional seats, whereas they in fact won none.³³)

But this achievement was due in part to the candidacy of former Republican Theodore Roosevelt. The former president tried to win the White House with a short-lived Progressive Party. His platform not only borrowed from the Socialists³⁴ (like his cousin Franklin Roosevelt would do two decades later), but the presence of the Progressive Party created disarray with customary partisan allegiances.³⁵ Socialists did better because the two-party duopoly was temporarily weakened. They also grew in rural areas where the political machines were feeble or non-existent.

Repression and Decline

The backlash against the Socialist Party over its anti-war stance during the First World War was a key factor in damaging and weakening the party. Due process and democratic norms were discarded when it came to Socialist officeholders (and radical unionists). In 1917, three Socialist city councilors in Cleveland, Ohio were expelled from the city council because they would not pledge support for the war.³⁶ This type of undemocratic expulsions continued after the war. In 1920, five elected New York Socialists were denied their state assembly seats without trial merely for being members of their party.³⁷

Despite these repressive efforts, the Socialist Party did continue to win office during this period. Socialists expanded their presence in state legislatures and in 1914 regained a foothold in Congress with the victory of Meyer London.³⁸

32 James Weinstein. *The Decline of Socialism in America: 1912-1925*. (Vintage Books, 1967), 112-113.

33 Morris Hillquit. *Socialism Summed Up*. (The H.K. Fly Company Publishers, 1913), 65-66.

34 James Weinstein. *The Decline of Socialism in America: 1912-1925*. (Vintage Books, 1967), XI.

35 Werner Sombart. *Why is there no Socialism in the United States?* (The McMillian Press, 1976), XXXI.

36 *Ibid.* 200.

37 Liza Featherstone. "A Century Ago, Socialists Represented New Yorkers in State Government." *Jacobin*, Accessed May 30, 2025 <https://jacobin.com/2020/07/history-socialism-new-york-dsa-state-assembly>

38 James Weinstein. *The Decline of Socialism in America: 1912-1925*. (Vintage Books, 1967), 337.

Even Socialists who lost saw their vote totals increase compared to previous years, with some defeats coming only because the two major parties united to nominate the same candidate against the left.^{39,40}

Ultimately, the bigger blow for the Socialist Party came in the form of internal conflict on the left. When those who would form the new Communist Party (at first in fact there were two Communist parties) split, the SP suffered an exodus of thousands of dues-paying Socialists. Socialist Party membership fell from 109,000 in 1919 to just 36,000 the next year. It never recovered the dynamism of its mass press nor influence in the trade unions again.⁴¹

Birth of DSA and Realignment

By the 1970s, anti-Communism including support of the Vietnam War and antagonism against the New Left dominated the party leadership, who had renamed it Social Democrats, USA. When these debates eventually came to a head, Michael Harrington — a writer and anti-poverty advocate who by the late 1960s was the most prominent socialist in the country — led the bulk of the membership, who were opposed to the war, out of the organization. These activists then formed the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC).

Today, DSOC is best remembered for its efforts to push the Democratic Party to the left. This became known as “realignment.” The goal of realignment in the case of DSOC was to create a more ideologically coherent Democratic Party, one with a social democratic platform at its core. DSOC hoped to achieve this by getting labor, civil rights, and other progressive forces to lead the Democratic Party. This strategy would involve tactics like running socialists in primaries — like DSA does today — but it also meant DSOC members getting involved in the inner workings of the Democratic Party platform and party infrastructure, work that DSA does not currently do.

Some consider realignment a failure because neoliberals came to dominate the party during and especially after the presidency of Jimmy Carter. The unsuccessful primary challenge by liberal Senator Ted Kennedy to Carter in 1980, in

39 James Weinstein. *The Decline of Socialism in America: 1912-1925*. (Vintage Books, 1967), 337.

40 This nuance of success despite attacks is helpful to understand what is occurring in DSA today as part of the backlash against the Palestinian solidarity movement. DSA officeholders including former congressional representatives Cori Bush and Jamaal Bowman have lost re-election partly based on pro-Israel forces arrayed against them. But Bowman aside, every New York State socialist elected official won re-election in 2024 and DSA even gained an additional seat in the legislature. This year’s municipal elections saw Zohran Mamdani, the DSA candidate for mayor, win an upset race for Democratic nomination for mayor. The two DSA incumbent city councilors, facing well-funded primary challengers, each won their races by at least 35 points.

41 James Weinstein. *The Decline of Socialism in America: 1912-1925*. (Vintage Books, 1967), 322-323.

which DSOC played a major role, was seen as a huge setback for the strategy. But in many ways its tactics and predictions worked or came true. For example, DSOC's outsized presence through its Democratic Agenda program at the mid-term Democratic national conventions caused conservative party leaders to limit access to party activists.⁴² The Dixiecrats did leave the party gradually and today labor backs Democrats nearly exclusively, while union endorsements were much more bipartisan even during the Ronald Reagan era. The two major parties are arguably more polarized and coherent than they have ever been since socialism became a force in this country.

The New DSA's Electoral Strategy

DSA, DSOC's successor organization, remained committed to realignment until the 2010s. A 2015 strategy document produced after a year of national discussion removed any mention of realignment in the electoral section.⁴³ By 2017, the new DSA's electoral focus — like many other progressive groups such as the Sanders-aligned Our Revolution — set their sights on contesting Democratic primaries as the main arena for struggle. This strategic focus has expanded over the last ten years. Whereas DSA had about a dozen and a half elected officials around 2016, by now nearly 150 socialists have won with a DSA national endorsement⁴⁴ — not counting the many more who did so just with chapter backing. These victories rapidly accumulated as socialist candidates won during the resistance to the first term of President Donald Trump by beating out more complacent, conservative Democrats. Arguably the most famous example of this is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who in 2018 with the backing of DSA and a handful of other groups including the Justice Democrats, defeated an incumbent congressional Democratic leader to represent a district in New York City. Her victory brought in thousands of new DSA members essentially overnight and raised the prominence of the growing group.

Running socialists in Democratic primaries is a long-standing tactic that occurred before DSA or even DSOC existed.⁴⁵ Seth Ackerman's "A Blueprint for a New Party" in *Jacobin* re-introduced this tactic as part of a wider effort to

42 Maurice Isserman. *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington*. (Public Affairs, 2000), 334-336, 346.

43 "Resistance Rising: Socialist Strategy in the Age of Political Revolution" (pages 10-11) Accessed June 1, 2025 https://www.dsausa.org/files/2016/06/Resistance_Rising.pdf

44 National Electoral Commission, DSA, "Past Endorsements" Accessed July 3, 2025 <https://electoral.dsausa.org/our-campaigns/past-endorsements/>

45 The arguably most famous example of this is when Upton Sinclair, a best-selling author and one-time Socialist Party member, was the 1934 Democratic candidate for governor of California during the New Deal. He lost on a radical program called End Poverty in California. For more, read William Prince's "Upton Sinclair's EPIC Campaign is a Roadmap for DSA": <https://www.dsausa.org/blog/upton-sinclairs-epic-campaign-is-a-roadmap-for-dsa/>

build independent socialist political power.⁴⁶ In that spirit, a majority of DSA delegates at the 2019 convention voted to officially endorse, departing from the idea of just electing more sympathetic officials and instead moving towards electoral independence from the Democrats⁴⁷ in what is known as the “dirty break” strategy.⁴⁸ One key reason given for the embrace of the dirty break was the need to eventually have an independent political party that millions of working-class people could identify with and join. Dirty break supporters argued that socialists could run in Democratic Party primaries in the short run to build up a bench of elected officials and DSA’s electoral capacity and prepare for a split from the party in the future.

What Kind of Party?

The concept of DSA becoming a party now enjoys widespread support from many caucuses, including those that otherwise vigorously debate each other on electoral strategy. But this ostensible unity covers up serious tensions and disagreements around what such a party would look like, especially its relations with elected officials. Similar to the debates of the Socialist Party a century or more ago, today’s DSA leaders also have very different and sometimes incompatible views on what the group’s electoral strategy should be.

This year’s convention resolutions provide insight into these schisms. Unlike the handful of labor-oriented submissions, over one-fifth of the 2025 resolutions center on electoral vision and values — not counting the over one dozen submitted amendments to them as well. Proposals range from disciplining Ocasio-Cortez and other socialist officeholders, to calls for speeding up the process to become an independent party, defining red lines for endorsement, and more. None of these documents enjoy the consensus found in the labor movement-oriented resolutions mentioned in the previous section. The resolutions on party-building, elected official accountability, and endorsement standards will likely be some of the most hotly-contested and watched votes at the gathering.

The history and decline of the Socialist Party as an electoral force thus will have many echoes at the 2025 DSA convention. Most obviously, unity around the mere idea of being or becoming a party does not necessarily result in consensus around how the party and its elected officials should operate, especially together. One quarter of the resolutions and amendments at the convention this year involve electoral politics - including 30 percent of the amendments!

46 Seth Ackerman. “A Blueprint for a New Party” *Jacobin*, no. 23 (2016): 101-111

47 “National Electoral Committee Report to the [2019] DSA National Convention”, DSA, Accessed on June 1, 2025 https://drive.google.com/file/d/10JONOfjqcNWoDTSrl_8XYatWRDx-pSvC/view

48 Eric Blanc. “The Ballot and Break,” *Jacobin*. Accessed June 2, 2025 <https://jacobin.com/2017/12/democratic-party-minnesota-farmer-labor-floyd-olson>

But the viability of any socialist electoral project is both in and outside of its control. The downfall of the Socialist Party as a vehicle for winning offices was impacted by strong rival left-wing parties that DSA does not have. Furthermore, the country's voters are more favorable and open to socialism than they have almost certainly ever been. But the polarization today between the Democratic and Republican parties, which did not exist when the Socialist Party operated, also makes voters more partisan and less open to new options. Democratic voters may be happy to vote for socialists within primaries, but may not want to vote for the same candidate if they ran on another line. Thus the contest for DSA becoming a new party is still occurring and very much not over.

When a Coalition Makes a Party: A Socialist Tradition

The Socialist Party, in the Debs and Thomas eras, and today's Democratic Socialists of America share the socialist tradition of intense factionalism. These two national political formations of SP and DSA were divided into formal and informal subgroups that cut across ideological, regional, generational, and ethnic lines. Both groups were in essence coalitions, not highly-unified organizations. They brought together very different anti-capitalist trends in U.S. politics under one roof.

Today, some DSA caucuses — as the organized tendencies are known — have paid staff members at times, publications, and even national gatherings. Some even have numbers of cadre and leadership sizes equivalent to DSA itself when it was at its weakness. In other words, some caucuses could have been as strong or even stronger than DSA in terms of activists and political reach in its 2000-2015 incarnation.

Critically, to understand DSA today is to grasp that these caucuses are by and large homegrown — similar to the factions of Socialist Party of old. This is true even if those internal groupings draw from groups outside DSA and other international traditions. Connecting the similarities of the two U.S. socialist organizations will help one understand how today's DSA democracy and decision-making works. That's because how these inside interest groups interact and how they affect both the programming and perceptions of DSA are critical for an appreciation of how DSA actually functions.

Factions in the Socialist DNA

Factionalism in socialist politics is not unique to the U.S. (or to the left, generally). But one unique coincidence, however, is that both the Socialist Party of America and the Democratic Socialists of America were born from two socialist groups uniting. For the former, it was members of the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) and Social Democracy of America joining to form a new party. And for the latter, it was a complete legal merger of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee and the New American Movement to establish DSA.

Those mergers sought to overcome sectarianism by combining socialist forces into a mass formation. Morris Hillquit, for example, explicitly stated he and his comrades abandoned the SLP because it “had become used to regard[ing]

membership in their party as the privilege of the chosen few, and were rather reluctant to open it to the masses.”⁴⁹

While men such as Hillquit may have quit one party, they did not cease being part of factional debates and sectarianism. Hillquit’s SLP internal grouping, which include lawyers such as himself, were derisively called the Kangaroos because they jumped around and as a reference to Kangaroo courts where verdicts against the accused are all but predetermined.⁵⁰ The Socialist Party from its founding had these divisions in its DNA. Major debates included disagreements over electoral and labor strategies, centralization vs. decentralization of the party, and how to relate to the broad U.S. and global socialist movements, among many others.

Tendencies Formalize

The internal formations took different names. Some of the most famous in the Debsian era were the moderate “yellows” (such as the grouping of party chairmen Victor Berger and Oscar Ameringer) who favored “evolutionary socialism” compared to the “reds” (including Eugene Debs and “Big” Bill Haywood) who drifted closer to “insurrectionary socialism”.⁵¹ The “yellows” favored centralizing of the party, “boring from within” the American Federation of Labor (which meant working within the AFL to reform it), and electing Socialists to govern. The “reds” leaned towards decentralization and were sympathetic to and active in the Industrial Workers of the World. Within these two broad camps additional differences were notable. Hillquit, for example, whose “centrist” orthodox Marxism on paper leaned towards the reds on labor and politics, aligned more closely with Berger and his allies, often for his own reasons.⁵²

By the era of Norman Thomas in the 1930s, new internal groupings had been formed: the Centrists, Old Guard, and Militants. The Centrists continued to persist as an important tendency and Thomas was more sympathetic to them but not formally a member. The Old Guard were the descendants of the yellows and most moderate of the three tendencies. The Militants were more aligned with radical versions of the road to socialism including a greater inclination to emulate, but not fully copy, elements of the Communist movement.⁵³ As history showed, these divisions were neither unchanging in the long term nor permanent. (For example, much of the Old Guard left in the early 1930s to form the

49 Morris Hillquit. *History of Socialism in the United States*. (Dover, 1971), 295.

50 The Debs Project. “Kangroos and the SDP Politics.” <https://debsproject.org/2018/04/21/kangaroos-and-sdp-politics-18-12/>. Accessed July 13, 2025.

51 James Green. *Grassroots Socialism*. (Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 48

52 Ira Kipnis. *The American Socialist Movement 1897–1912*. (Columbia University Press, 1952), 184.

53 Harry Fleischman. *Norman Thomas*. (W.W Norton Company Inc, 1964), 128.

Social Democratic Federation only to rejoin the Socialist Party two decades later. Fifteen years later the party divided again permanently.) The record also demonstrates that it is overly simplistic to divide a socialist collective into just “right” and “left” wings. Instead, one should view it as a spectrum along different axes of beliefs and values, such as more moderate but left-wing to more radical and revolutionary.

Beyond the Left and Right

An excellent summary of the viewpoint that mass U.S. socialist organizational structure often contains a continuum of beliefs can be found in this summary by James Weinstein of Jesse Wallace Hughan’s scholarship:

[T]he Socialist Party was “divided neither into two opposing camps nor into a number of warring factions.” This was demonstrated, she wrote, by the “unanimity with which all groups cooperate in such enterprises as the party press, a contest for free speech, or a labor conflict.” Still, she recognized “a gradual shading” from revolutionists on the left to constructivists on the right,” with groups in between whose characteristics were “seldom exact and always changing,” and “whose members indulge in mutual criticisms.”⁵⁴

A person who embodied this complex nature was Kate Richards O’Hare. O’Hare was a midwesterner like Debs and became a socialist after finding other alternatives to social change to be insufficient. O’Hare and her husband barnstormed different states and she quickly became one of the party’s leading spokespeople around the country. Her political pragmatism put her closer to Ameringer but she found herself in agreement with those favoring regional decentralization of party activities.⁵⁵ And while she didn’t self-describe herself as a feminist, her gender and upbringing near the Great Plains were used by men she might otherwise have agreed with, such as Berger and Hillquit, to push O’Hare away.⁵⁶

The inability to put O’Hare into a single factional category is reflected in today’s DSA complex nature as well.

DSA’s nationally elected leaderships tend not to be independents such as O’Hare, but representatives of distinct internal groupings called caucuses instead. The leaders, formally part of a body called the National Political Committee (NPC), are elected by delegates at biennial conventions. Current members of the NPC are nearly all in caucuses (unlike the vast majority of the membership who are un-caucused). So these leaders often vote less on their own prerogatives but after consultation with their internal formations. DSA

54 James Weinstein. *The Decline of Socialism in America: 1912-1925*. (Vintage Books, 1967), 4.

55 James Green. *Grassroots Socialism*. (Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 50.

56 Sally M. Miller. “Kate Richards O’Hare”, in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Geogarakas (Oxford University Press, 1998), 570.

does not have a parliamentary system where these different caucuses form formal governing coalitions. But you do find in DSA caucus publications discussions of “majorities” and “minorities” on the NPC. These groupings, however, are not so permanent or fixed as they seem. The combination of caucuses that form a majority on the NPC can differ as some groups may agree on an internal electoral question about accountability of politicians but then diverge on international politics. As Hughan noted about the Socialist Party, DSA too can act in unanimity and unity under the proper conditions.

Coalitional Unity: How Excitement and Opportunity Overcomes Divisions

The Debsian Socialist Party was, and DSA in the past decade has been, single political formations in a legal sense but coalitions in practice.⁵⁷ DSA’s diversity of ideas, factions, and leaders doesn’t always mean conflict dominates the discourse and life of the party or organization. In fact, the democratic practices that lead to decisions on programming can generate unity. These campaigns and orientations around current politics and opportunities can foster unity and internal cohesion thus reducing tensions and the possibilities of facturing.

Broadly speaking, the coalitional nature of each socialist formation goes beyond just the factions and caucuses built around political differences. In both the Socialist Party in the past and DSA today, national committees act independently and exert influence over direction and programming. For the SP for a period in the 1910s, about half the membership were part of the foreign language federations. These ethnic associations were especially dominant after the First World War and shaped many of the party’s decisions and orientations, including its empathy to the Russian Revolution.

A significant portion of the members would eventually leave for the nascent Communist movement.⁵⁸ In DSA, some national caucuses have held quasi-independent power such as the labor and international caucuses which could, at points, issue their own statements and still can heavily influence the national organization’s positions. These caucuses also work with partners on behalf of DSA outside the top elected leadership and staff.

In the first decade or so of the Socialist Party, the growing numbers of members, ranks of elected officials, influence in unions, inspiring cultural work, and more all combined to foster a sense of enthusiasm and avoid the threat of splits.⁵⁹ It was not until government repression and the divisions around the

57 Irving Howe. *Socialism and America*. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 32.

58 Irving Howe. *Socialism and America*. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 47-49.

59 Harry Laidler. *Socialism in the United States: A Brief History*. (League for Industrial Democracy, 1952), 10.

newly formed Soviet Union that the Socialist Party became unable to avoid ruptures. Not only did the Socialist Party lose members to the two newly formed Communist parties (that eventually merged), they also lost ground to a short-lived Labor Party. The exodus of members in both directions was not because it held the wrong socialist principles, but often (as in the case of the Labor Party split) because the factional disputes had made the Socialist Party unsuitable for political work.⁶⁰

In the new iteration of DSA, the first initial wave of unity could be found in the political moment that created the conditions of its rebirth: Bernie Sanders' two White House campaigns. Sanders' presidential candidacies raised not only the profile of democratic socialism that attracted thousands to DSA, but it also pushed issues such as Medicare for All into the mainstream. Campaigns for these reforms in turn generated excitement for DSA and its policy platform. This climate created the momentum and hope needed to keep the organization together even through often rocky bouts of very public dissent and debate. For example, DSA's endorsement of Sanders in 2020 was more complicated and much less unanimous than in his first race; but through a democratic process, the organization eventually came together and campaigned heavily for him.⁶¹

The cohesiveness of the organization has ebbed and flowed since Sanders dropped out of the primary in April 2020. DSA was united in supporting the George Floyd protests and the Black Lives Matters Uprising of the summer of 2020. The 2020 general election, however, and more importantly the subsequent Joe Biden presidency and how to approach his political agenda, were the subjects of often heated debate. While the country's most prominent democratic socialists such as Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez openly backed Biden's general election campaign and his domestic agenda in the first few years, DSA itself was much less supportive of the president and largely adrift in how to approach federal policy. The exception to this was progressive labor reform legislation (the Protecting the Right to Organize Act, aka the PRO Act), which DSA campaigned for but which died in the Senate. Other signature bills supported by DSA such as Medicare for All were effectively dead. DSA was locked out — both by its own wishes and also because it is too small to exert power at a national level — from influencing any of Biden's policies.

Iron Dome to October 7th – DSA Debates How to Support Palestine

⁶⁰ James Weinstein. *The Decline of Socialism in America: 1912-1925*. (Vintage Books, 1967), 226.

⁶¹ For a history of DSA's presidential endorsements and the democratic nature of the decisions behind them, please see my chapter "Democratic Socialists and the U.S. Presidency in the Neoliberal Era" in the anthology of the 2020 elections *Power Concedes Nothing* (2022).

Because DSA could not push or influence the Biden administration, the importance of the organization's congressional voting record took on extra significance. This was especially true of questions about Palestine and U.S. support for Israel, which would develop into some of the most dramatic faction fights in the organization's history.

Jamaal Bowman was an educator who was first elected to Congress in 2020 as a DSA member. However, DSA endorsed Bowman late into his primary campaign and his victory was largely due instead to groups such as the progressive, primary-focused Justice Democrats that had also helped elect Ocasio-Cortez. When Bowman won, he became DSA's second congressional representative in New York City in the new DSA era.⁶² He defeated a noted foreign policy hawk, Eliot Engel, in the primary and was a welcome departure from the standard U.S. posture towards the Middle East, especially towards the Israeli government. But the district contained many voters still sympathetic to Engel's views on foreign affairs whom Bowman felt he had to take into consideration.

This came to a head when Bowman voted for funding for Israel's Iron Dome, an anti-rocket missile defense program. In what became known as the Bowman Affair, DSA caucuses, leading activists, and members generally were divided over whether this vote was a violation of democratic norms and public stances since DSA had endorsed the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement that aims to cut off all military aid to Israel, among other demands. Ultimately, Bowman was not expelled from DSA as some wished⁶³ but did drop his membership quietly and was not re-endorsed in 2022. (Notably, he rejoined and had a rapprochement with the NYC DSA chapter that backed him heavily in his unsuccessful 2024 re-election bid.)

One of the major proponents of expelling Bowman was DSA's BDS Working Group. The BDS WG's campaign against Bowman and its disagreements and noncompliance with requests from the national headquarters led several months of difficult debates at the local and national levels. The working group was eventually de-chartered in a narrow NPC vote and its work reassigned to DSA's International Committee. Eventually, the BDS WG quit the organization in protest with public support of some DSA chapters.⁶⁴

This was not the last time a group publicly left DSA over debates about Israel

⁶² A few congressional representatives such as Major Owens and Jerold Nadler were members of DSOC and DSA prior to 2016. Owens was likely the last NYC DSA member in congress until Ocasio-Cortez.

⁶³ Democratic Socialists of America, "On the Question of Expelling Congressman Bowman - Democratic Socialists of America," December 2, 2021, <https://www.dsausa.org/statements/on-the-question-of-expelling-rep-bowman/>

⁶⁴ DSA Observer, "DSA Leadership Votes to De-Charter BDS Working Group", email to subscribers, March 20, 2022.

and its occupation of Palestine. After the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7th and the subsequent heavy Israeli military warfare against Palestinians living in Gaza, DSA experienced public departures of those more sympathetic to Israel and much less inclined to view political parties such as Hamas as legitimate leaders of Palestinians. One such instance was a public resignation letter from 24 long-time DSA members a month after the attack. This letter included two paragraphs about disagreements with how some in DSA approached electoral discipline over congressional votes (including Biden’s successful effort to stop a rail strike) but the remaining pages covered how they felt DSA has shown insufficient empathy for the Israeli lives lost and general criticisms over the organization’s perceived softness on authoritarian regimes.⁶⁵

Both splits from DSA — the faction of BDS WG members and the veteran DSA members more sympathetic to Zionism — demonstrate two key facts about the new DSA:

1. The factions and partners in the new DSA can change but the program such as Palestine solidarity will continue.
2. These disagreements are largely born out of internal, “homegrown” struggles over major strategic disagreements about how to approach politics. Both groupings who departed DSA were active in the organization as individual members, not as outsiders trying to influence DSA policy to foster splits. People leave when they feel they can no longer achieve their objectives through the existing democratic process.⁶⁶

Entryism – Real and Imagined

The significance of this distinction between internal disputes and so-called “outside agitators” lies in the real history in the U.S. left of smaller groups entering larger ones as a bloc. This practice is commonly called “entryism.” Left-wing historian Maurice Isserman defined entryists as:

tightly organized groups who, without sharing the beliefs of larger and more loosely organized bodies, join and proceed to either wreck or, where possible, capture them for ends at odds with the spirit and purpose of the original members.⁶⁷

The concerns about entryism in DSA are especially strong among those who remember the actions of Maoists who in the 1960s entered the Students for

65 “Out of Loyalty to Democratic Socialism: Why We are Leaving DSA.” The New Republic, November 9, 2023: <https://newrepublic.com/article/176781/open-letter-why-leaving-democratic-socialists-america>

66 At least one-seventh of the resolutions and amendments are directly related to Palestine advocacy or actions by electeds around the Palestinian independence. That does not even count some proposals that reference Zionism as a criteria for endorsement.

67 Maurice Isserman. “Why I Just Quit DSA,” The Nation, October 23, 2023 <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/quit-dsa-gaza-israel/>

Democratic Society (SDS) with the purpose to make the group more radical. Those entryist efforts in SDS succeeded in making the SDS more revolutionary in its stated program but they also quickly destroyed it in the process.

Those who fear the dangers of entryism cite the experience of the Socialist Party of America in the 1930s.

In 1936, elements of the U.S. Trotskyist movement entered the Socialist Party as a bloc. Their effort proved unsuccessful, as within two years their members withdrew or were expelled.⁶⁸ But their maneuver led to the more conservative parts of the party leaving to form the Social Democratic Federation (who in an ironic twist of fate ended up working with the Communists — who they had previously strongly opposed — in places like New York in the new American Labor Party).⁶⁹ The Socialist Party never recovered its strength and influence after this episode and continued to decline for the coming decades.

These experiences however are much more the exception than the rule for democratic socialist organizations in the U.S. To be clear, entryist campaigns against DSA have been proposed and attempted by groups such as Socialist Alternative,⁷⁰ but these attempts have not resulted in much success for the smaller body.⁷¹

What has occurred in DSA is less entryism and more an unplanned left-wing refoundation. Left-wing refoundation is the idea that a stronger left is possible through both regroupment of existing radical structures into a new formation alongside the rethinking and retooling of current left-wing strategy into an alternative orientation.⁷² Some degree of the former has occurred, although somewhat haphazardly, with hundreds of veterans of other leftist groups entering DSA in recent years.⁷³ But they did so as individuals and by-and-large those older veterans have not achieved or sought many formal posts in DSA's leadership.

Furthermore, many existing socialists have changed their politics since entering the new DSA. A prime example are the ex-members of the International Socialist Organization (ISO). The ISO was a roughly 500-1,000 member, cadre-based, democratic-centralist Trotskyist group that disbanded in 2019. Many of its

68 Kenneth Teitelbaum. "Socialist Party", in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Geogarakas (Oxford University Press, 1998), 771.

69 Harry Fleischman. Norman Thomas. (W.W Norton Company Inc, 1964), 170-171.

70 Bill Barclay, et al. "The Dangers of Factionalism in DSA," In *These Times*, March 30, 2021 <https://in-thesetimes.com/article/dsa-socialist-alternative-entryism-socialism-marxism>

71 In my research, people did claim Left Voice and International Marxist Tendency (now Revolutionary Communists International) both attempted DSA entryism, but I did not find public documents to validate.

72 Bill Fletcher Jr. Interview with David Duhalde, July 7, 2025.

73 Maurice Isserman. "Egalitarian Idealists and Authoritarian Zealots: A Cautionary Memoir," *Liberties* 5, no. 2 (2025), 188-189.

former members subsequently entered DSA but are now found across the spectrum of caucuses and projects — some now have politics that are more akin to the old DSA than the ISO. In short, there was no single trajectory for long-time socialists entering in DSA even if they came from the same outside tendency.

Homegrown Factionalism with Outside Characteristics

DSA's factionalism is homegrown. Simply put, the divisions and debates originate largely within DSA, not outside of it. For the hundreds of members who were long-time members of other organizations before joining DSA, tens of thousands more had their first experience in a political organization, much less a socialist one, in DSA. These two groups do interact with each other and many of the caucuses have external influences — both contemporary and historic. Every grouping has their own unique history.

The list below attempts to capture some of the nuance of the largest caucuses in the organization today competing for national leadership, with a special focus on their labor and electoral positions. (Please see links to learn more about the respective caucus or slate with available public information.)



[Bread & Roses](#): This caucus traces its origins to the Left Caucus founded in the early 2010s prior to DSA's explosion in membership. Bread & Roses has consistently held NPC seats since its founding — it currently holds three seats.

The caucus attracts those working in the labor movement, especially as rank-and-file union activists, and those interested in building an independent political party. For outside influences, existing and former socialist groups similar to its politics would be Solidarity and the 1970s group the International Socialists.



[Commie Caucus](#): This is a grouping of self-described communists with origins working together in California before they joined DSA, and who later launched as a collective of organizers work inside and outside of DSA. The caucus is heavily involved in rank-and-file organizing in the labor and tenant movements to address what it calls "working-class disorganization." It puts a premium on everyday fights on the job and in the neighborhood as a means to foster class formation. Caucus members put a smaller

premium on left-leadership or electoral contests within unions or movement organizations. They are less involved in DSA's electoral work relative to other caucuses, though members do participate in certain campaigns for DSA electeds.



[Emerge](#): A self-described big-tent communist caucus that began as a New York City-only grouping in 2018 and expanded nationally in 2025. The caucus has held several NPC seats in the past and currently has a co-chair of the

International Committee. Emerge prioritizes internationalist and abolitionist politics and supports class struggle elections. They seek to build a party-like organization, which they view as distinct from the question of ballot lines. They support a rank-and-file orientation in union activism, but as one piece of a broader socialist labor strategy that includes workers excluded from traditional labor formations.



[Groundwork](#): One of the newer caucuses with roots in defunct internal formations such as, but not limited to, those organizing around ecosocialism and Green New Deal advocacy. Groundwork's concerns about fascism and commitment to what it believes are more flexible electoral and labor strategies may have fit in the old DSA. But its vocal desire for DSA to be a mass membership party and its criticisms of nonprofits would not. Groundwork has four members on the NPC, and one of the national DSA co-chairs, Ashik Siddique, is a member.



[Libertarian Socialist Caucus](#): Since 2017, this caucus has advocated a libertarian socialist viewpoint in DSA including a self-described opposition to the state. The group believes that elected socialists should not exert influence over DSA, but those officeholders instead need to be accountable to the organization and use their position to build independent working-class power. LSC believes in a public socialist presence to build democratic, militant trade unionism with a special place for direct action and mutual aid in the labor movement.



[Marxist Unity Group](#): This caucus traces its historic roots in the Marxist tradition of German socialist leader Karl Kautsky. MUG advocates for positions that were central to many in the Debsian Socialist Party including the importance of running elections, but for propaganda purposes, and constitutional reform. MUG is

close to the magazine *Cosmonaut*, although it is not a caucus organ, and is ideologically influenced by the Communist Party of Great Britain. MUG has two members on the NPC.



[North Star](#): North Star was formed largely by members of DSA from the pre-2016 era. Members come from a variety of backgrounds, including the New American Movement and Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee that merged to form DSA, the Committees of Correspondence (a split from the Communist Party - CPUSA - from the fall of the Soviet Union), the CPUSA and other left-wing groups as well as newer DSA members. North Star prioritizes building a popular front against the MAGA movement.

It believes that DSA's relationship to the Democratic Party should be a tactical matter, not a philosophical principle. North Star has backed a wide range of political candidates, including Democrats and other non-socialists. Based upon its understanding of U.S. history, North Star is not interested in forming a new party. They do not have representation on the NPC.



[Red Star](#): This caucus originated in San Francisco but has become a national caucus. Self-described as Marxist-Leninist, however, it is independent of any existing Communist parties. Red Star seeks to transform DSA into a vanguard party and is critical of DSA's electoral strategy as being too close to the Democratic Party. The caucus has also criticized what it describes as "tailism" and "reformism" in DSA's labor strategy. Red Star has three members on the NPC, including national co-chair Megan Romer.



member to the NPC.



on socialist officeholders. SMC members participate in various ways and different roles in the labor movement and do not prioritize one democratic union strategy over another. In terms of outside allies, SMC is close to the cadre of Liberation Road, a post-Maoist formation.



for re-election on the Springs of Revolution slate.

[Reform & Revolution](#): This caucus was founded by a group of members who left Socialist Alternative, a Trotskyist formation, and joined DSA. These members argued for the importance of Marxists organizing in the socialist mainstream, in contrast to other Socialist Alternative cadre that wanted to stay in their organization. Reform & Revolution's labor and electoral positions fit within the tradition in which they came from, in supporting rank-and-file militancy and pushing for a plan to create a new party. They have yet to elect a

[Socialist Majority](#): This caucus began to organize for the 2019 convention and has held NPC seats since that gathering. It currently has two seats on the NPC. Caucus membership is largely, but not exclusively, from major urban cities. Its members are known for their roles in electoral politics, including as staff for socialist electeds. Therefore, SMC tends to support broader electoral strategy with less discipline

[Springs of Revolution](#): One of the newer internal formations, they have origins in the Anti-Zionist 2023 convention slate. The network has a heavy focus on international and revolutionary politics. For labor strategy, it is supporting a resolution to plan for May Day 2028 with the more left-wing elements of labor and connecting DSA with revolutionary socialists. For electoral politics, it backs a resolution to create a unified standard for candidate endorsements so all DSA backed candidates are nationally endorsed. Two NPC incumbents are running

There are more caucuses and interest groups in DSA than listed here. Some organizing happens through networks around publications such as *Tempest* and the national committees; for example, members who participate in global solidarity work often self-advocate as a bloc and brand themselves as such. In my assessment, the tensions and political differences borrowed from outside of the traditional DSA are less to do with entryism and more to do with an American tradition of anti-establishment politics and revolutionary optimism that could be found in the more radical elements of the Socialist Party, too.⁷⁴

Generational

In the United States it can be a cliché to discuss political conflicts in generational terms. And, fairly, sometimes the ruling class tries to divide generations against each other such as in reforms to pensions and other social benefits currently being received more by one age group than another. Therefore, it is correct to be wary of generational explanations, but sometimes they offer real clarification not found elsewhere.⁷⁵

To understand the generational tensions, you need to grasp the massive age shift that occurred as the new DSA was transformed. The average age of a DSA member halved after the influx of new members after the election of Donald Trump in 2016. The mean age was 67 in 2013 and dropped to 33 years old in the first major survey of members post-2016. Whereas earlier generations of DSA members could cite mentorship from older comrades, the massive number of incoming new socialists made it essentially impossible to replicate the guidance that veterans had experienced. There simply were too many novice socialists for experienced members to guide.⁷⁶ This generational divide was exacerbated by the very different lived experiences of DSA's different cohorts, especially of the thousands of millennials and zoomers who joined DSA after 2016 on the one hand and the older millennials, Generation X, and boomers who made up the organization before 2016 on the other.

Older generations that had seen government as a force for good in the Great Society programs and expansion of the welfare state were now joined overwhelmingly by younger people who only knew disappointing Democratic administrations promoting neoliberal reforms like Obamacare or time-bound social-democratic efforts like COVID relief under Joe Biden, that expired when they were still needed. These gaps in lifetime experiences resulted in people preferring different strategies even with the same information. In the Socialist

74 James Weinstein. *The Decline of Socialism in America: 1912-1925*. (Vintage Books, 1967), 208-209.

75 Irving Howe. *Socialism and America*. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 57.

76 David Duhalde. "Socialist Across Generations: We Need to Talk." *Democratic Left*, March 21, 2021. <https://www.dsausa.org/blog/socialists-across-generations-we-need-to-talk/>

Party, age cohorts could vary if they had focused on trade union activity or agrarian campaigns.⁷⁷ Across the past century, Socialists of varying age groups could find themselves in conflict because their different lived experiences made it hard to find common ground.

In a tension that rhymes with older members and allies pushing for young leaders in DSA to endorse Biden,⁷⁸ Irving Howe chronicled how the party's old guard in the 1930s failed to convince the militants of the error of their ways:

But if its words were mostly right, its melody was mostly wrong. In the chaotic atmosphere of the early thirties, the Old Guard socialists were unresponsive to whatever seemed new or unfamiliar. They had lost the taste for insurgency, something you might suppose socialists would have as their birthright. They failed to understand what it was about American life in 1933 that might drive a young person to excesses of "leftism."⁷⁹

A similar theme is demonstrated with the lack of young signers on the public resignation of two dozen DSA members in the New Republic referenced earlier. Even if the more junior members might have sympathy with some of the arguments, likely the new orientation of Israel's governments and of the Palestinian resistance leaderships in their lifetimes undoubtedly shapes how they approach the same situation with a dissimilar attitude. What eventually become factional fights often start off as differences in seeing a problem due to different generational experiences.

* * *

None of this section is to say the internal fights of DSA are harmless. They can be quite destructive. Nor is DSA guaranteed not to face a rapid decline or possible collapse in the future. What is clear is that DSA's sharp and even at times nasty democratic culture is in line with the history of multi-tendency socialist organizations in the United States.

77 James Green. *Grassroots Socialism*. (Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 24.

78 "An Open Letter to the New New Left From the Old New Left," *The Nation*, April 16, 2020

<https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/letter-new-left-biden/>

Mike Davis and I wrote two separate responses to this open letter. My comments focused on while I had sympathy for defeating Trump, and personally worked to do so, the letter had misunderstandings how the DSA endorsement process worked such as that the decision was made by the convention not DSA leadership: <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/responses-to-an-open-letter-to-the-new-new-left/>

79 Irving Howe. *Socialism and America*. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 55.

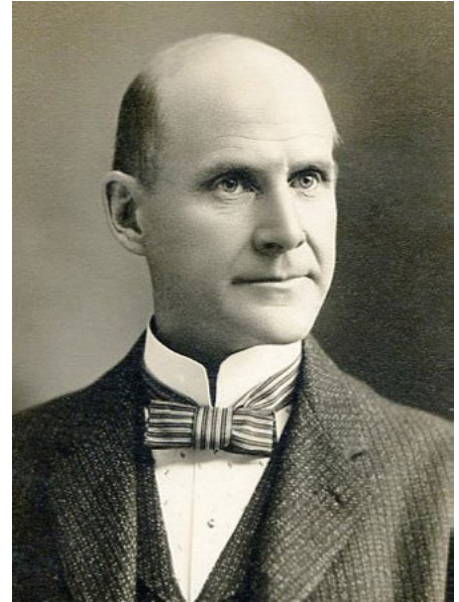
Biographies of Key U.S. Socialist Figures

In Chronological Order

Eugene Debs (1855-1926)

Born and raised in Terre Haute, Indiana in 1855, Debs, the son of French immigrants, evolved from a Democratic Party elected official and bread-and-butter trade unionist into a revolutionary worker organizer and later a five-time left-wing party presidential candidate.

Debs' labor activities began in the rail industry at a time when the relationship between railroad employees and employers was more fraternal than combative. Debs' radicalization process began during the class struggles of the 1870s, especially as the railroad industry owners turned violent. However, in spite of Debs' more militant attitudes, throughout the 1880s, Debs remained wary of strikes — even those pushed by the American Federation of Labor (AFL).



In 1893, Debs and others formed the American Rail Union (ARU) which united different crafts in the industry into one union. Shortly after its formation, the ARU's 150,000 members went on a national strike. However, the strike was put down by President Grover Cleveland from the Democratic Party, and Debs and other union leaders were jailed. While imprisoned, future comrades such as Berger sent Debs reading materials, e.g., Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* and, shortly after, Debs embraced socialism. He then quickly became a leader in the anti-capitalist movement and went on to be a founding member of the Socialist Party.

Already a leading Socialist Party figure, Debs also joined the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) at its founding in 1905 and, for the rest of his life, Debs supported industrial unionism as the means for organizing the masses — rather than the AFL's narrower vision that focused on unionizing specific crafts. Debs would eventually leave the IWW in 1908 and softened his stance on the AFL; nonetheless, he continued to advocate for working outside the two major

parties (Democrats and Republicans), first working with the Social Democratic and then with the Socialist Party. Both of these parties nominated him for president and, running as a Socialist in 1912, he captured nearly six percent of the vote – the highest percentage the Party ever achieved when competing for the White House.

After the US entered the First World War in 1917, Debs' anti-war activities landed him in prison, and he ran his final presidential campaign from jail.

While Debs was eventually pardoned by Republican President Warren Harding in 1921, he went on to serve as National Chairman of the Socialist Party until 1926. However, Debs — already sick prior to his incarceration — never fully recovered, physically or politically. Upon his release, he returned to a Socialist Party greatly weakened by government repression on the one hand and by factional disputes on the other. These factional disputes revolved around whether or not or to what degree the Socialist Party should emulate the tactics and strategies of the Russian Revolution.

While Debs never won office as a Socialist, he remains widely liked by U.S. leftists and unionists of all stripes and, in many ways, is seen as the patron saint of the Socialist Party and the US union movement.

Victor Berger (1860-1929)

Born in 1860 in a village that was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire (now Romania), Victor Berger emigrated to Wisconsin in the United States in 1878. A German speaker, he wrote for socialist and labor publications in his native language, as well as in English. Berger was elected to leadership roles in both union and radical organizations. A founding member of the Socialist Party of America, in his home state of Wisconsin, with its German-base, Berger was instrumental in turning the Wisconsin Socialists and their state party into a political machine. In 1904, they ran him as their candidate for Mayor of Milwaukee; though that campaign was unsuccessful, he was elected to Congress as a representative from Wisconsin in 1910. He also served as International Secretary of the Socialist Party from 1910 to 1912 and later as its National Chairman from 1926 to 1929.



Throughout his career, Berger led the more moderate elements of the party and often clashed with the more radical tendencies in the socialist and labor movements. However, his opposition to the First World War would ally him with the more revolutionary comrades of his party, and he also defended his party rivals as they faced oppression by the US government and capital. Despite the fact that he was historically known for his advocacy of socialism, Berger's work in the U.S. Congress focused on reforms and even, despite his own bigotry against people of color, on racial justice. While his anti-war position led to his expulsion from Congress, this was eventually reversed, and he served as a U.S. representative from the state of Wisconsin until 1928, when he was finally defeated, dying a year later in a streetcar accident. Berger's legacy is one of helping create one of the most lasting state Socialist Parties – a state party that went on to affect public policy long after Berger's death and the decline of the Socialist Party nationally.

Morris Hillquit (1869-1933)

Born Moses Millkowitz in 1869 to assimilated Jewish parents in what is now Latvia, Millkowitz moved to the United States in 1885, he changed his name to Morris Hillquit. Like numerous immigrant Russian Jews in America, Hillquit found himself employed in the garment trade and, as many of his peers did, he became active in the socialist movement — first as a member of the Socialist Labor Party (SLP), then from 1929 to 1933 as the Socialist Party's National Chairman, and finally three times as its International Secretary.



In 1893, Hillquit became a lawyer but remained active in the workers movement. His cases centered on employee and labor rights. During this time, he was very active in the SLP but increasingly found himself at odds with its leader, Daniel DeLeon, over his near full control of the party. While Hillquit successfully led a faction out of the SLP to merge with the Social Democracy of America Party (of which Debs was a member), there was factional fighting in this newly formed Socialist Party of America, as well.

Hillquit was a self-described "centrist", between the "right" represented by figures such as Berger and the "left" by people like Debs. Hillquit's factionalism, however, did not stop him from aiding in the legal defense of the IWW's

Big Bill Haywood against spurious criminal charges. Hillquit also took a leading role in the party's united front against the First World War.

In addition to being a party leader, he ran as a candidate for the Socialist Party, first for Congress in 1906 and 1908, then twice for mayor of New York City. In his 1917 mayoral campaign, he received over 20 percent of the vote, and 12 percent of the vote in the 1932 special election. A prolific writer, he wrote a great deal on socialist theory and history, which has proven invaluable to historians studying leftist social movements in the U.S.

In 1924, Hillquit was supportive of the effort of the party to back Progressive candidate Robert La Follette's White House run; he also aided Norman Thomas in his rise to replace Eugene Debs as the party's presidential standard bearer. Hillquit eventually became the party's chairman; however, as the party became increasingly divided over strategy around the New Deal, etc., he was unable to serve as a unifying force. As a result, much of his faction — dubbed "the old guard" — left the party.

Nonetheless, Hillquit's impact on the U.S. socialist movement based on his belief that Marxist principles should take priority over just trying to run electable candidates for U.S. office is still felt in the U.S. socialist movement in general and in debates within DSA today.

Kate Richards O'Hare (1876-1948)

Born in Kansas in 1876 to homesteaders who moved to Missouri, as a young woman, O'Hare first tried teaching but later found herself working as a union machinist. A progressive drawn to religion and temperance, she did social justice work through her church but eventually found such rescue work to be insufficient to overcome the existing economic order. As a result, after hearing a public lecture by Mother Jones and meeting socialists, O'Hare embraced socialism as her cause.

O'Hare and her husband spent the coming decades organizing for socialism, and she quickly rose up the ranks of the Socialist Party. Even before women could vote in many states, she was nominated for federal office. A prolific writer for party journals and sympathetic papers, she was also a member of the party's National Executive



Committee and the Women's National Committee. She was also a famed lecturer, considered second only to Eugene Debs, with whom she was close; and like Debs, she would be imprisoned for her anti-war activities. Nonetheless, some historians view her politics as closer to those of her sometimes rivals, Hillquit and Berger, than to Debs.

What distinguished O'Hare from some of the previous male party leaders mentioned above was her deep concern for agriculture and women's issues as part of the socialist program. While never a self-defined feminist and believing that true gender and racial equality could only be achieved in a classless society, O'Hare nonetheless worked for women's suffrage with non-socialist middle class allies and supported divorce and abortion rights when they were not mainstream in the party. Unfortunately like many party members of her time, O'Hare's views on race were at times very reactionary – an all too common trait found throughout all tendencies of the old Socialist Party at the time.

After the socialist movement declined, O'Hare eventually left the Socialist Party but remained supportive of its efforts, such as backing Upton Sinclair's Ending Poverty in California gubernatorial campaign. Perhaps because she herself had been unjustly incarcerated, she also dedicated much of her remaining years of activism to prisoner rights.

O'Hare's later activism exemplifies the road many former party members would take to continue progressive work, even as opportunities for more radical change grew increasingly limited.

Norman Thomas (1884-1968)

Born in 1884 to a family of clergymen in Marion, Ohio, Norman Thomas would become the "conscience of America." Thomas followed in his family footsteps and become an ordained minister. Like many other U.S. radicals, after his own ministry experience in the slums, Thomas moved from believing in a social gospel to socialism. A former Republican, he joined the Socialist Party in 1918, a party whose mission he had written against as a student at Princeton.

For most of Thomas' early years in the Socialist Party. Eugene Debs was imprisoned under the Democratic president Woodrow



Wilson and Republican president Warren G. Harding. Thomas had once been a paperboy for Harding, and Thomas lobbied Harding for Debs' early release. Thanks to these efforts, Harding commuted Debs' sentence, but Debs left prison physically weakened. He also returned politically weakened. The party was fragmented, and Debs did not have the strength to fix it because of the poor state of his health. This challenge would fall to Thomas.

Thomas, like other party members of his time, was enthusiastic in his support for Robert La Follette's 1924 presidential campaign while simultaneously backing efforts to get Socialists to form a broader Progressive Party. He ran on the Socialist Party ticket for New York governor in 1924, New York City mayor in 1925, and then for president from 1928 to 1948. While Thomas received about two percent of the vote in 1932, external political conditions such as the New Deal stole the party's remaining thunder, and he never polled as high again.

Changes in the Socialist Party under Thomas led to a concentration of socialists in cities, a phenomenon we still see today. Around the country, the votes of farmers and laborers were replaced by a heavier concentration of votes in urban areas, especially among particular ethnicities such as the Jews, Finns, and Germans. While Thomas could still count on labor's support, especially in the heavily Jewish garment unions, he tended to attract more backing from intellectuals than working-class leaders. Nonetheless, the party continued to organize in rural communities, and Thomas was a key national advocate for the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, a racially integrated union of poor tenant farmers largely in Oklahoma and Arkansas.

While the party had recovered slightly from its nadir after the First World War, Thomas had to struggle to handle the factionalism that divided the party. A failed Trotskyist entry attempt in the 1930s as well as the fact that the New Deal made it harder to hold onto and recruit new members further weakened the Party.

Thomas remained steadfast in his loyalty to the Socialist Party and to politics outside the "old parties" but also worked with President Franklin Roosevelt and the Democrats against the right-wing and demagogues like Huey Long, the de facto ruler of Louisiana who planned on challenging Roosevelt for the presidency but was assassinated in 1935.

The Socialist Party under Thomas was also strongly committed to peace and civil rights. Unlike the Communists, the Party was opposed to Japanese internment during the Second World War; Thomas also advocated for civil liberties, even for the Communists who were opposing him. Moreover, he traveled around the world, including visits to the Middle East where he lobbied heads of government such as Golda Meir of Israel and Gamal Nasser of Egypt,

encouraging them to protect the rights of the ethnic and religious minorities in their countries.

And finally, unlike many others in his party, Thomas was an early opponent of the Vietnam War early, though he passed away before contrasting positions on the conflict broke apart his socialist political home. Thomas, sometimes called the “conscience of America,” became a model for socialists in this country to remain true to principles even if they are unpopular.

A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979)

Arguably the most important and impactful Black socialist trade unionist of his time, Asa Philip Randolph was born in Florida into poverty in 1889. The son of a preacher, Randolph was an excellent student and orator, and his debate skills and commitment to civil rights were early indicators of his future impact on social causes. While a radical, he respected the vision of moderate accommodationist leaders such as Booker T. Washington, with their focus on working to improve the more immediate economic conditions of Black people through well-structured organizations.



By 1911, Randolph was exposed to leftist politics while studying at City College of New York. He was active both in supporting the labor movement throughout the northeast as well as had an eye to international advocacy for the African diaspora. By 1920, Randolph was a key figure in the Socialist Party and their candidate for New York State Comptroller, receiving 200,000 votes when few Black-Americans even held public office. By this point, U.S. Attorney General Mitchell Palmer, whose anti-Communist and proto-McCarthyite raids bear his name, dubbed Randolph “the most dangerous black [sic] in America.”

In 1925, after several years of focus on writing and editing publications such as the Messenger, Randolph took on one of the roles for which he is most famous: organizing for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. This union was made up almost exclusively of Black men who worked for the railroads. Over the decade, Randolph was able to influence New Deal legislation that made collective bargaining in this profession possible and dramatically improved the working conditions of the porters.

Randolph played a role in two historic events that shaped American history - a rally that happened and one that didn't. In 1941, just as the U.S. entered the Second World War, Randolph threatened a 100,000-person march to promote racial integration in the production of military goods. However, the demonstration never took place because President Franklin Roosevelt gave in to Randolph's demands (although the actual implementation of this policy turned out to be disappointing).

For most of his adult life, Randolph was an on-again, off-again member of the Socialist Party. In 1948, the party wanted to draft him as its presidential candidate, but he declined. When the Socialist Party of America split in the 1970s, Randolph remained in the Social Democrats, USA, the more neoconservative faction. However, Randolph was largely inactive in this new version of the organization.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's 1963 March on Washington — planned by Bayard Rustin and others — brought 250,000 people to D.C. marching for both jobs and freedom — an economic framing of the civil rights struggle largely credited to Randolph. Thus, for his commitment to promoting a vision of the interconnectedness of racial and economic liberation, to this day, Randolph remains a hero of the labor, civil rights, and socialist movements.

Michael Harrington (1928-1989)

Born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1928 to a family of middle-class Irish-Americans, Michael Harrington's early interests were more focused on religion than on worker rights. A bright student, Harrington entered Holy Cross, a Catholic college, in Worcester, Massachusetts at 16 years of age. After graduating, he enrolled in Yale Law School but left after one year. He ultimately graduated with a Masters in English from the University of Chicago. Not finding professional satisfaction in either law or literature, he moved to New York in 1949 and



joined the radical Catholic Worker movement. In their ministerial work with the city's destitute, this social justice group practiced living as the poor. Harrington left the Catholic Worker after two years seeking to work with more radical advocates of structural change. He found this in the independent Marxist formations who worked separately from the Socialist and Communist parties; however, his sect eventually merged with the Socialist Party. From that point on, Harrington was a committed socialist cadre and an advocate for

moving the socialist cause into mainstream U.S. politics.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, middle-class America was “discovering” poverty in an affluent society. Harrington’s 1962 book chronicling U.S. destitution, *The Other America*, sold four million copies and made him a household name. The book also caught the eye of President John Kennedy, who invited the young writer to be part of his anti-poverty initiatives (The War on Poverty) — later taken over by Lyndon Johnson after the assassination of his predecessor. However, as Harrington pushed for more structural reforms and deeper change, he was eventually iced-out of the War on Poverty.

Harrington served as either Socialist Party Chairman and Co-Chairman from 1968 to 1972, taking over from Norman Thomas the mantle of being the foremost socialist in America. However, by the time Harrington joined the Socialist Party, it had ceased running presidential candidates; additionally, the divisions in the party — especially around approaches to the New Left and to the Vietnam War — eventually proved irreconcilable, and Harrington found himself on the losing side of these factional disputes.

Because of these divisions, the party split. The vitriolically anti-Communist and anti-New Left faction renamed itself (and the party as) Social Democrats, USA while Harrington’s side — involved with the Anti-Vietnam War peace movement and open to a broader left coalition — formed the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), which he chaired. DSOC would champion a realignment strategy to make the Democratic Party more socially progressive and labor oriented. In 1980, this included drafting Senator Ted Kennedy, John Kennedy’s younger brother, to challenge the then incumbent Democratic president, Jimmy Carter.

DSOC later would merge with the New American Movement (NAM) to form the Democratic Socialists of America, and Harrington — alongside Barbara Ehrenreich — would co-chair this new organization. This new party was formed just as socialism as a movement was generally on the decline across the globe; nonetheless, Harrington remained active in the Socialist International and served as a bridge between world social-democratic leaders and the democratic-socialist leaders in the United States.

Harrington’s efforts to emphasize socialists running in Democratic party primaries and the importance of building a multi-issue activist organization (not just seeing itself as an electoral party) served to create the foundation for today’s DSA, which has taken its own direction with great similarities and differences to the group he helped found and run.

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