

Socialists Should Fight the Corporate Democratic Party, Not Manage It

Via [The Call](#)

Last month a slate of progressive candidates won leadership of the Nevada Democratic Party with the support of Las Vegas DSA. The Democratic establishment retaliated immediately. The state party's entire staff tendered their resignations to DSA member and new party chair Judith Whitmer, and [drained nearly half a million dollars](#) from the organization.

It is certainly exciting to see socialists beat the establishment, and the Left has celebrated the news. This new position of party leadership could present DSA activists in the Silver State with exciting organizing opportunities.

However, the strategy of socialists taking over state Democratic Party organizations has severe limitations, since these organizations don't have much real power. Meanwhile, it forces progressive activists to become Democrats' "loyal opposition" and undermines DSA's independence from the corporate overlords we should be fighting against.

Instead of trying to make the Democratic Party brand more progressive, socialists should build our own independent working-class organizations and political identities. That means we shouldn't hesitate to wage an open struggle against the Democratic Party leadership and the corporations that support them. By building a fighting and democratic labor movement alongside an openly socialist and confrontational political movement, DSA can help lay the groundwork for a new mass party of and for the working class.

The Limits

Nevada is not the first state party that progressive activists or “Berniecrats” have attempted to take over. Recent experience in California shows that while activists can win nominal control of state parties, real power is wielded by donors and the corporate Democrats who are loyal to them.

Since 2017, activists have steered the California Democratic Party to endorse progressive policies like Medicare for All and expanded rent control. But when these popular ideas came up for a vote in the Democratic-dominated [state legislature](#) or as ballot proposals, the actors that actually hold power in and around the Democratic Party – elected officials, big donors, and the mainstream media – ignored the official party endorsements and blocked these reforms.

For example, in 2018 Berniecrats succeeded in winning a 90-10 vote within the California Democratic Party to [endorse Prop 10](#), a progressive rent-control initiative with major support from housing groups, unions, and DSA. But this had little effect on how the real Democratic Party power players acted. Blackstone and other major real estate interests [spent \\$77 million](#) in misleading advertising against the measure. Prominent Democratic Party candidates like Buffy Wicks for state assembly and Gavin Newsom for governor campaigned against it. The liberal [SF Chronicle called](#) for a “no” vote. Despite the fact that Californians [support stronger rent control](#) in general, Prop 10 was defeated. Meanwhile leading Democrats Wicks and Newsom won their elections, suffering no serious consequences for opposing the official party-endorsed Prop 10.

When it comes to winning ambitious progressive demands like rent control or Medicare for All, the state party apparatus is inconsequential compared to informal power held elsewhere. Donors, politicians, and corporate media outlets have far more sway over both voter preferences and policy outcomes than the

official party organization. This is in part because few people pay much attention to the official party organization, since it's an obscure part of our political system compared to the politicians themselves. Instead politicians and voters identify with a loose party "brand" that is easy for each candidate to use as they see fit.

Because it costs so much money to run for office, politicians themselves are mostly beholden to their big donors, donors who also have the power (through the media and independent campaign spending) to directly shape public opinion to support their profit-seeking interests. And while the relatively powerless official party apparatus might be permeable to small-d democratic influence, Blackstone is not.

Should Nevada DSA members try to use their new Democratic Party apparatus to wage an anti-corporate struggle against Republicans and establishment Democrats alike, it's unlikely they will accomplish much more than they would have if they had just run candidates for elected office directly. Socialists are doing the latter successfully from California to New York.

The actual powerlessness of these state party organizations is not a secret. One Nevada politico [pointed](#) to the example of the Nevada GOP experience. In 2012 when the official party apparatus was taken over by activists, the GOP establishment simply launched a new independent organization to build the GOP in Nevada, endorsed by "national and local leaders, [and with] its own headquarters and infrastructure." The result is that the official GOP apparatus has been mostly irrelevant since. This seems to be the plan that [establishment Democrats](#) have in Nevada.

The Costs

Not only does the Nevada Dems strategy have limits, it comes with significant costs. The most important cost is the pressure on insurgent activists within the Democratic Party to

act as a “loyal opposition” – with emphasis on the loyal. This pressure seems to be working already.

In an [interview with The Las Vegas Sun](#), Judith Whitmer describes the vision for the party under her progressive leadership: “We’re all parts of the same party and we’re all trying to achieve the same goal, which is to elect Democrats.” Whitmer laments in an [interview in The Intercept](#) that pro-corporate Democratic Senator Catherine Cortez Masto opposed the progressive challengers despite Whitmer’s “great conversations with her prior to this race.” Still, Whitmer promises to be loyal: “I reassured [Masto] that we weren’t going to primary her and we were planning on going all-in on making sure she got reelected.” So [fundraising efforts from Bernie Sanders, AOC, and Cori Bush](#) for the Nevada Dems – interventions that have excited a lot of leftists – will be funneling at least some of progressive donors’ money to pro-corporate Democrats.

Taking control of these state parties is thus a trap for socialists. If DSA members leading a state Democratic Party use the Left’s limited resources to support corporate Democrats, we’re hardly different from the apparatus that existed before. If we don’t, it’s possible it will cost the Democrats seats to the GOP, making the left responsible for undermining the organization it just took over.

Even without formal responsibility for the apparatus, socialists working in the Democratic Party orbit face enormous pressure to be loyal to the party and its leadership. This is most clear with Sanders and AOC. At times they directly criticize individual Democrats or the Democratic Party “establishment,” but Sanders has [claimed](#) that Biden might be the “most progressive president since FDR.” The [most recent kerfuffle](#) between AOC and the party establishment ironically involved her shoring up [“party unity”](#) by donating money to *support* centrist Democrats.

Sanders, AOC, and other progressives committed to “realigning” the Democrats talk of [“bringing the party home”](#) to its purportedly progressive roots as the party of FDR and Lyndon Johnson – in other words a pro-capitalist party of Jim Crow and the Vietnam War that was forced by [massive social movements](#) in the 1930s and 1960s to concede welfare, labor, and civil rights legislation.

Nevertheless the Democratic Party is still lightyears away from New Deal-era reformism, let alone the progressive agenda of AOC and Sanders. For example, Biden [appears](#) to have made vaccine aid to Mexico contingent on a promise to help [block Central American immigrants](#). Last week, the Biden administration [announced](#) that it would allow continued construction on the Dakota Access Pipeline. And Seth Ackerman [writes](#) that the “closest historical parallel” for Biden’s supposedly [“revolutionary”](#) stimulus package is not the New Deal, but the Trump-McConnell-Pelosi CARES Act of 2020.

The enormous pressure from the liberal and pro-capitalist center to [support “lesser evil” politics](#) has always been a trap for our movement. Today it undermines the massive progress AOC, Sanders, and DSA have made toward building a new current of working-class politics. By dissolving ourselves as a loyal opposition into an admittedly “evil” coalition, we tie socialists to capitalist and imperialist policies we vehemently oppose.

Putting the Conflict Back In Class Conflict

The Democratic Party today is the party of neoliberalism, drone bombings and the Saudi war in Yemen, real estate and fracking, Silicon Valley surveillance and exploitative gig work, deportations and mass incarceration, Blackstone and Amazon. Yet Democratic Party leaders will always force progressives to choose: are you loyal Democrats who may sometimes complain, or are you wreckers who have no legitimate place in the Party? The reality is that there is a *fundamental*

and irreconcilable conflict between the working class who socialists champion and the capitalists who exert dominant influence within the Democratic Party. That's why socialists should proudly renounce loyalty to the Democratic Party and decline to manage it. Yes, many working-class voters support the Democratic Party; our job is to win them to the understanding that Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi are, at the end of the day, their enemies. (Many if not most working-class people [don't even vote in most elections](#), because they don't see the point in picking between two parties that will do little to nothing for them.)

Nevada progressives [say](#) they hope to change internal party rules to stop Democratic Party legislators from putting their "thumb on the scale" in Democratic primaries and using the "powerful brand" of the party to shore up the establishment's left flank. But instead of trying to incorporate pro-worker policies into that brand, socialists should be building an [alternative brand](#) of socialist and [working-class politics](#). We should strive to make it clear that the two brands are incompatible. We want to bring workers into a fight with the capitalist interests who control the party, and in that process build the base for independent politics and ultimately an independent party of and for the working class.

Bernie Sanders's two presidential campaigns gave us a [glimpse of what a working-class political movement](#) could look like: for once it felt like the left had a national political vehicle to unite us in the struggle against the billionaire class. And this was possible only because no billionaires supported his campaign; instead Sanders "welcomed their hatred." Sanders's campaigns also inspired new movement activity, from the teacher strike wave to student and climate activism. And by highlighting the [inherent class struggle](#) between the interests of the working class and those of the capitalists and their politicians in both parties, Sanders's campaigns raised class consciousness: more working

class people learned to identify with their class; they learned that the rich are rich *because* the poor are poor; and they [learned](#) that “real change never comes from the top on down, it always come from the bottom on up.”

However, Sanders’s campaigns were top-down and fleeting, and with their demise the energy and organization of those campaigns quickly dissipated or was even co-opted into supporting the campaigns’ opponents, like Biden. Workers need a permanent, democratic, and national political vehicle in order to sustain and deepen the fight for socialism.

But for the time being the Democratic Party’s coalition includes both Blackstone and people who get evicted by Blackstone, the labor movement and union-busters, socialists and Joe Biden. This arrangement can’t last forever. Either socialists accommodate themselves as a loyal opposition and our movements continue to tail liberal, pro-capitalist leadership, or we help build a working-class political alternative.

While socialists have good reason to run in Democratic primaries in many races for now, this tactic is a near-term necessity, not a long-term virtue. Socialists can use elections in the meantime both to fight for progressive policies and to build support for politics independent of the capitalist Democratic establishment.

In New York and Chicago, socialist slates have started to build an independent and oppositional socialist brand. In Seattle, socialist and independent Kshama Sawant has won repeated and hard-fought victories as an open antagonist of the Democratic Party. In Richmond, California the Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA), including former Green Party mayor and current independent city councilor Gayle McLaughlin, has built a proto-party at the city level. In 2020 [RPA won](#) back its city council majority against the combined forces of real estate, big oil, and the Democratic Party establishment. DSA

members should follow these models rather than trying to reform a capitalist party.