

India Walton: Corporate Democrats Gave Us Austerity, We Need Something Different

Via [Jacobin](#)

After becoming a full-time working mother at the age of fourteen, India Walton earned her GED. Later on, inspired by the nurses who saved her twin boys' lives in the intensive care unit when they were born prematurely, she became a rank-and-file nurse. Now Walton is running for mayor of Buffalo with the backing of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other progressive organizations like the Working Families Party.

Jacobin contributor Peter Lucas sat down with her to discuss Buffalo politics, running for office as a socialist, and what bringing a movement into office looks like.

Why are you running for mayor?

I am just so sick and tired. Now is the time to sound the alarm.

I'm a lifelong Buffalo resident: born here, raised here, educated here. I'm raising my children here. Our community is dying. Our planet is being polluted. I want my children to enjoy all the things I love about Buffalo. And if we don't act now, I don't know what the future holds for generations to come.PL

After having your first child at age fourteen, you became a working mother. What was your introduction to working and parenthood like? How did this experience shape your politics?

My introduction to working and adult life was like being pushed from a moving train. I grew up in poverty, but even then, I always saw my mother work extremely hard to make ends meet, providing me with all the things I needed. I had to overcome a lot of the challenges and disadvantages that people who come from the East Side of Buffalo – where people are poor and graduation rates are historically low – are faced with.

Having overcome that and become a registered nurse, I still faced barriers. And my story is not unique in that sense. Plenty of people work forty hours a week and still have to rely on food stamps, Medicaid, and other social programs. With rising housing costs and the price of childcare, it's impossible for the people who work the hardest to live a decent life. All the while our federal, state, and local governments subsidize corporations like Walmart and Tesla.

We are led to believe that hard work leads to success. That's just not true. The poor often work the hardest but bring home the least – working forty-plus hours with no health care or benefits. Hard work and rugged individualism won't get us where we need to be as a society. Only collective organization and solidarity will.

The current incumbent, Byron Brown, is running for reelection. Can you tell us a little bit about the mayor and what you've seen from his administration in Buffalo?

Our current mayor is a four-term incumbent who has been in office for sixteen years. A fifth term would make him mayor of Buffalo for twenty years. I'm thirty-eight years old, so that means that since the time that I've been able to vote, he has been in charge. And I can attest that my experiences – as a Buffalonian, as a mother, as a black woman, as a worker in this community – with him at the helm have not been positive.

There's this narrative about the renaissance and resurgence of Buffalo, the investment that is coming in, bringing luxury

apartments into the city. But the majority of people – the 99 percent – do not have access to these developments given our stagnant wages. Unemployment is higher, poverty rates across the board have increased, crime (especially violent crime) is present. Meanwhile, we've seen inflated police budgets and slashes to social-safety-net programs for seniors, youth, and the most vulnerable of our populations. *We are strong enough to overcome the entrenched Democratic Party that is keeping us from the progress that we all know we really need.*

The current mayor is a Democrat and a majority of registered voters are Democrat, right?

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said, "All Democrats are not created equal." We have lived through austerity budgets and a constant slashing of social services under Democrats. While we have a city that's 65 percent Democrats, many are only Democrats because they know how much more weight their vote has as a Democrat in a blue city.

Local Democrats in the party naturally finance incumbents, who in turn favor those who finance their campaigns. Unlike New York City, Buffalo does not have public campaign financing, so every dollar we raise for this campaign is just one dollar. This can make it very difficult to compete when you don't have the support of the local county Democratic machine behind you.

Our campaign is an insurgent campaign powered by people: individual donors, grassroots fundraising, door knockers, phone bankers. We are proving in real time that you don't have to be a part of the establishment to be competitive.PL

Before starting this campaign, you were a rank-and-file nurse and union activist, and then went on to become a community organizer. How have these experiences impacted the way you're running your campaign?

I don't think of myself as the center of this campaign. I'm not necessarily looking for all of the staff members and

volunteers with the most conventional experience. I'm an organizer. I'm looking for people that I can help grow and educate. Win or lose, this campaign is building an infrastructure that is going to outlive and outlast this election. Our volunteers are gaining the real-life experience that prepares them to be volunteers, staffers, and candidates for effective insurgent campaigns in the future.

Activists in the streets last summer were told that we were just making noise, that it wouldn't amount to anything. This campaign is bringing back that protest energy and turning it into lasting political power. It's not impossible. You just need the infrastructure to do it. And because a lot of my background comes out of labor organizing, I understand that there's no person who's insignificant and that you pay attention to everyone, especially those who have the least, because the people who have the least and the people who have been listened to the least are going to be the ones who will fight the most.PL

What has been the role of DSA in your campaign?

DSA members have put a lot of thought, energy, capacity, and resources into thinking about what working-class people need most. Not only in the state of New York, but all across the country. I'm very excited to grow this movement with DSA and change the narrative.



India Walton and team on the campaign trail. (India Walton / Twitter)

One of the things that our campaign has been really good at is storytelling – being able to explain to people why socialism is not this evil monster that the establishment wants you to believe it is. Parts of the pandemic relief measures have brought to light what DSA has been saying: we can have health care for all; we can forgive debt; we can cancel rent; we can prioritize the health of our communities over the profits of large developers and big corporations.

That is not a novel idea. It's common sense. And we are working together to make that the dominant narrative.

What's the Buffalo you dream of? The Buffalo that you're fighting for?

The Buffalo that I envision is one free from militarized and hostile policing, one where there's ample and truly affordable housing, where there are opportunities for collective ownership and cooperative employment, where folks are working for organizations that they have an ownership stake in. I want to live in a deeply democratic city where all voices are heard, including those who are not able to vote, whether it's because of their age or their immigration status. The leadership of this city should govern everyone who lives here.

So my dream for Buffalo is just that: a state of deep democracy and co-governance where everyone is valued and can thrive.

We've seen a nationwide Black Lives Matter movement that has rejected policing, racism, and various other forms of oppression. What's that been like in Buffalo?

In 2015 or 2016, I helped with a community policing survey, and there was an overwhelming consensus that there was a lack of trust between Buffalo police and the community. We took that information to the local newspaper and they dismissed it. We took it to the city and the city said, "No, we don't have issues like that." Then, in the four or five years following, Buffalo police killed at least five people and [assaulted a 75-year-old man](#) during a protest last summer. Nothing was done. No accountability in any of those cases.

The governor put out Executive Order 203, where municipalities and localities needed to put forth a plan for reform in order to continue receiving state aid. And the plan that came from the mayor of Buffalo was lackluster at best – in fact, the office of the attorney general put out a letter in response saying as much. There was no public comment, period, and no public hearing around it. The mayor handpicked the members of his commission, and the reforms they offered came up short.

We need independent civilian oversight, nothing less.

Do you see your campaign as connected to the socialist advances in New York City and the state legislature?

It's clear that there is a desire for more progressive and socialist candidates to run upstate and in Western New York, but there's not the infrastructure, the capacity, the financing. One of the largest challenges that we face is that we don't have the matching funds that candidates receive in New York City. The incumbent has a million-dollar war chest. He's going to outspend me. He's going to be able to purchase

ads. He's going to be able to send mailers.

A lot of upstate cities don't have as much money or as many people with disposable income. But it's a chicken-and-egg situation. We don't have a bunch of people with disposable income 'cause we don't have living-wage jobs. We don't have health care. We don't have campaign finance that allows people to have the matching funds. So working together in solidarity to overcome a lot of the challenges that pro-worker candidates are facing is what we have. But I believe that we can do it. I believe that our people are ready.

This is a national movement, and you don't need to live in Buffalo to be a supporter. There have been times that folks from Rochester have come down to Buffalo to stand in solidarity with us, and vice versa. There is a wave of progressive candidates moving across the state, across the country. I think a lot of establishment Democrats thought that places like Buffalo and Rochester would be last to see such candidates arise, but it's catching on quicker than expected.

We have to send a strong and clear message that we're not okay with the status quo anymore. We are strong enough to overcome the entrenched Democratic Party that is keeping us from the progress that we all know we really need.