DSA Needs a Party-Building Model

Via [The Call](#)

For much of my life I was disillusioned with politics and our so-called political leaders.

I knew the racism and xenophobia of the Republicans disgusted me, but I could not call myself a Democrat. Growing up, I saw my father, a teacher unionist, almost fired for organizing in Newark Public Schools against the privatization spearheaded by then-mayor Cory Booker and Barack Obama's administration.

Bernie Sanders's campaign made me realize there was an alternative: [democratic socialism](#). His campaign did this for the thousands and thousands of DSA members who joined following his campaign. It showed us the power elections potentially have to raise class consciousness and name the class enemy. It also demonstrated more than ever the importance of [building our own party](#), since the current Democratic party proved so inhospitable to our politics in both 2016 and 2020.

Because of these experiences, I decided to get involved in electoral work. I've learned from DSA's on-the-ground electoral experience, especially from chapters like NYC-DSA and Chicago DSA. I've had the opportunity in my own chapter in North New Jersey DSA to become a leader in Joel Brooks's campaign for city council. And now, to help further this work, I'm running for DSA's National Political Committee and supporting Resolution 8: Toward a Mass Party in the United States, written by the National Electoral Committee and endorsed by DSA's Bread & Roses caucus. Resolution 8 would be a much-needed step forward as DSA adopts a more comprehensive party-building model for its electoral work.

New Local Models

Since Bernie's 2016 campaign, DSA chapters across the country have been doing the work of party-building by raising workers' expectations and bringing them into struggle. They have also developed members' organizing skills and chapters' infrastructure.

This is perhaps most evident in NYC-DSA and Chicago DSA. In 2020, the NYC-DSA's "DSA for the Many" slate swept six socialists into the state legislature, and in the most recent city council elections they elected two socialists to office. In Chicago, DSA elected a slate of socialists to city council in 2019.

In NYC, the electoral working group does not make paper endorsements, but activist endorsements where the chapter bottom-lines the entire campaign — from field to finance and communications. This has allowed them to build up structures within their chapter that can outlast an election cycle. Further, this endorsement model has also allowed them to actively shape the candidates and campaigns that they run and to maintain closer ties to candidates once they are elected.

Today NYC DSA continues to organize with our electeds through initiatives like Tax the Rich and the Green New Deal for Public Schools campaigns. In these projects, DSA electeds are participating and using their offices to bring constituents into the campaigns and project the demands of the campaigns into the halls of power.

DSA activists in NYC and Chicago are running class-struggle elections that don't just elect the right person to deliver reforms from above, but that organize and empower the working class as well.

Building Our Power in North New Jersey

The work of building class struggle campaigns is uneven across

the country. For years in North NJ DSA, my home chapter, we followed the kind of paper endorsement model that most nonprofits and even some chapters in DSA engage in. Usually, a candidate would come to the chapter for support and we would rubber stamp them with a paper endorsement and sometimes send our members out to volunteer for that candidate's campaign. The problem with this model was that we did not build leadership or structures within the chapter — the field, communications, data, research, fundraising, and compliance groups were all housed within a campaign that would disband once it ended. Also, because we were not playing a significant role in directing the campaign, we could not shape the direction of the campaign or the candidates.

In order to replicate the New York City model, the North NJ electoral working group began meeting regularly with leads in the Brooklyn Electoral Working Group to learn from them. We began a rigorous research phase, mapping out districts where there was high DSA membership density, a reasonable win number, and a weak incumbent. We then began a candidate recruitment process, focusing on recruiting from those strategic districts we identified.

This process was hard. There were several great candidates who came to us for an endorsement. While previously, under our paper endorsement model, we would have endorsed all of them, we knew that our new activist endorsement model meant we only really had the capacity to endorse one.

We decided to go with [Joel Brooks](). Joel has been an active member of DSA for five years now and a labor and socialist organizer for even longer. Many of us in our chapter have known and come to trust Joel over the last few years for his work in our DSA for Bernie campaign, the electoral working group, DSA's Hudson County Branch, immigrant justice advocacy, and more. He was also in a diverse, working class district with a weak incumbent and where housing costs have been rapidly increasing — the kind of district DSA chapters have

had a great deal of success.

We are still several months away from election day, but so far we have managed to develop skills, infrastructure and leadership that will outlast one election cycle and build up our capacity to undertake new elections and even non-electoral campaigns. We are speaking to thousands of working-class residents about DSA and our movement in Jersey City as well as publicly identifying the class enemy — the real estate moguls and corporations not paying their taxes while the streets remain cratered with potholes and schools remain woefully underfunded. We are working alongside our comrades in the housing working group to organize issue based canvasses that also have the potential to bring constituents into organizing beyond the election.

Toward a Mass Party in the United States

Isupport [Resolution #8 "Toward a Mass Party in the United States"](#) because it gives DSA the resources and mandate to empower more chapters to undertake electoral campaigns like ours and like those in NYC and Chicago. It would help chapters run and elect DSA organizers across the country who can use their campaigns and offices to politicize and organize the working class. At the chapter level, it develops a program to help chapters build electoral working groups or committees. And at the national level, it further develops the National Electoral Committee (NEC) fundraising and organizing capacity to support local working groups. Plus, it builds out a coordinated volunteer program to harness the power of DSA members in chapters who aren't running electoral campaigns to help make the difference in critical DSA electoral races all over the country.

In particular, national staff is crucial to carrying out this work. Electoral work has been woefully understaffed in DSA. The NEC needs electoral-specific staff to both help build national infrastructure and support chapters to develop the

kind of electoral infrastructure needed to run socialists for office at all levels of government across the country. Resolution #8 commits DSA to hiring two new full-time staff to help advance the work of the NEC.

For all these reasons, Resolution #8 deserves the support of delegates to DSA's 2021 National Convention. If elected to the National Political Committee, it would be one of my top priorities to see that Resolution 8 is fully implemented.

But my commitment to Resolution #8 goes beyond its critically important short-term implications for DSA. What's great about the resolution is that it also commits DSA to the hard but necessary work of building a mass party in the United States.

As the resolution states: "socialists need a political party to organize the working class in order to contest elections, to act as a vehicle to organize the millions of working people who are not yet socialists, to win democratic socialism, and to function as a political pole for democratic socialism."

Such a party of the working class would radically upend American politics. It would give workers a vehicle for entering Congress, state legislatures, city councils, and executive offices to directly shape the policymaking process in the interest of the working class. It would spread the message of socialism through propaganda and organize workers directly in their neighborhoods and in their workplaces. As [others have argued](#), we got a foretaste of what such a party would be like in Bernie Sanders's 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns.

Today, DSA acts as a kind of proto-party, carrying out many of the tasks of a party but still lacking the national scale, recognition, and substantial base of a real party. It's our job to deepen this work — constantly struggling to raise people's support for the socialist cause, their class consciousness, and their own capacity to fight and win. As we

advance this work and link up with unions transformed by the rank-and-file strategy and other social movements, we'll move closer to the day when we can really say that we are part of a mass party.

Resolution 8 leaves the long-term questions of how such a party might emerge in the United States open-ended. Comrades from different caucuses may disagree on these questions. I am a supporter of the dirty-break perspective, that eventually socialist and workers will need to [formally break](#) with the Democratic Party and launch a party of our own with its [own identity and ballot line](#).

Regardless of how comrades think about the question of breaking with the Democratic Party however, we should all be able to get behind Resolution 8 as it's written as an important step forward for our electoral work. Building on the experiences in New York City and Chicago as well as in up-and-coming chapters like my own in North New Jersey, we can build a real proto-party that puts us on the path to challenging the capitalist class and building real working-class power.