

# Socialism Reignited in America

By Moritz Wichmann

## Socialism in the US Then and Now

At some point over the last couple of years the rose emojis could not be ignored any longer—they were ubiquitous. The emoji has become a de facto calling card for members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) who use the symbol to highlight their involvement in the group. At least on Twitter, this has created high visibility for democratic socialism. Whether it is the future of the Democratic Party, health policy, street protests, or strikes being debated, DSA members join the discussion and push the conversations leftward with biting critiques.<sup>1</sup> But offline too, democratic socialism is rising and is on the verge of ushering in a new progressive era in the US.

DSA today has almost as many members as the US's largest left organizations had at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1916, the Socialist Party of America (SPA) had 86,000 members. Its chairman, Eugene V. Debs received 900,000 votes in the 1918 Presidential Election. The SPA had two Congresspersons, dozens of State Representatives, and more than 100 Mayors.<sup>2</sup>

The DSA was founded in 1982 as a merger between Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) and the New American Movement (NAM). The 6,000 members were led by Michael Harrington. When Harrington died in 1989, DSA which had been largely a social democratic organization throughout the eighties, failed to grow beyond its circle of founders and remained pushed to the fringe for nearly two decades.<sup>3</sup>

Just as the last era of socialism in the US coincided with record social inequity and concentration of power in the hands of a few oligarchs, we again live in a similar era expect Amazon has replaced Standard Oil. For the millennial generation, and the even younger "Generation Z" who came of age during the financial crisis and its aftermath, economic precarity is the defining feature of this neoliberal age.<sup>4</sup>

This changed in 2016 with a renewed attention in democratic socialism sparked by Bernie Sanders campaign for the Democratic nomination for President. Quickly interest and growth in DSA began and hope arose.

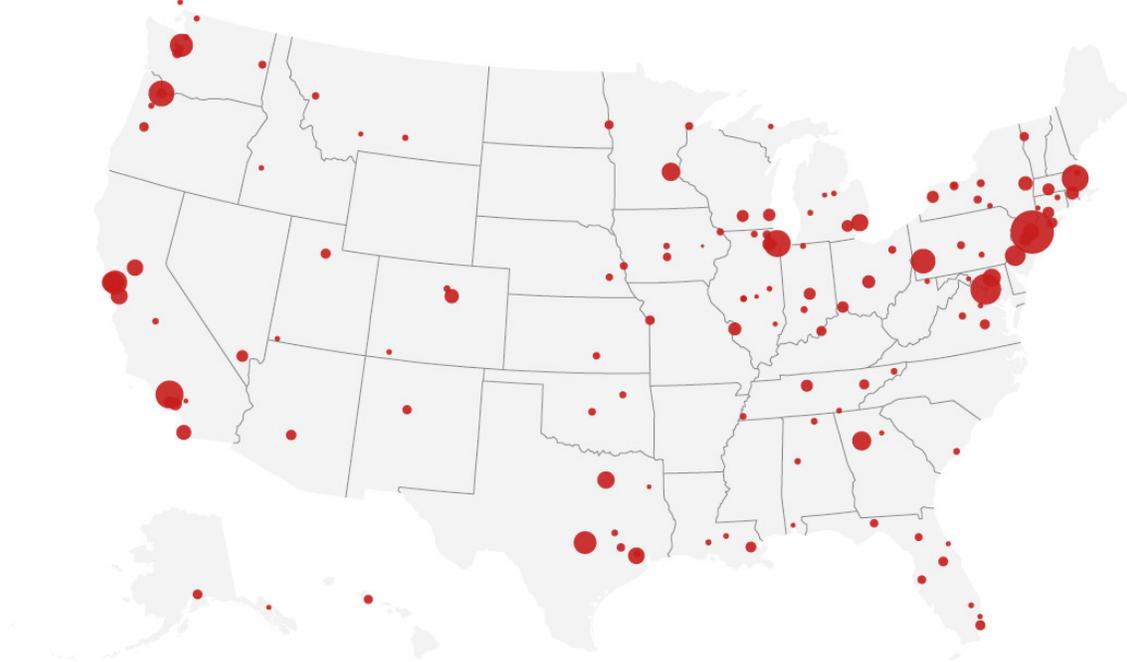
## The "Post-Bernie" Membership Surge

DSA does not publish monthly membership data but being visible in mobilizations after Trump's election along with successful electoral campaigns like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's to Congress seem to be important drivers of membership growth. At the time of Trump's inauguration in January 2017, the organization had already doubled membership to 15,000 dues-paying members and by the fall of the same year membership had doubled again to 30,000. By mid-July 2018, DSA had 45,000 members with 1,152 new members joining the organization the day after Ocasio-Cortez won her primary.<sup>5</sup> At time of this publication, membership stands at over 56,000 members.<sup>6</sup>

DSA is coordinated by an elected sixteen-member National Political Committee overseeing the more than 200 independent chapters across the US.<sup>7</sup> The biggest chapters are in progressive cities like San Francisco, Chicago, and New York City where the chapter has over 5,000 members and has been “transforming the political landscape.”<sup>8</sup> But DSA chapters can be found all over the country, north, south, east, and west in rural, suburban and urban areas alike. DSA operates on a budget of 4 million dollars.<sup>9</sup> A large portion of that money is spent on the organization’s eighteen full-time employees. Because of the small budget, local chapters independently raise funds for local campaigns, events, and the political work they do to supplant the sparse funds they receive from the national organization.

### **Sozialist\*innen im ganzen Land**

Ortsgruppen der Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in den USA



Stand: 26. Juli 2019 - Daten sind unvollständig, weil nicht alle Ortsgruppen Mitgliederzahlen angegeben haben bzw. sich diese verändern.  
Grafik: moritz wichmann/neues deutschland Quelle: DSA/dsaatlas.org Erstellt mit Datawrapper

In 2013, the average age of DSA members was 68 years. By now the “old guard” has become a minority as the organization has grown drastically younger with a current average age of 33 years.<sup>10</sup> An important aspect of this has been the growth of the Young Democratic Socialist of America (YDSA) which has grown from only a dozen chapters three years ago to 80.<sup>11</sup>

### **Political Strategy: A Tactical and Pragmatic Relationship to the Democratic Party**

The present day DSA comes out of two uniquely tried and diametrically opposite American ventures: first an attempt to push the Democratic Party leftward, and second to create an alternative Left Party in the United States. Contrary to previous generations though, today’s “Socialists” are more pragmatic

in working with the Democratic Party. Since the party has slowly shifted left in the last couple years it makes being the “left flank” of the party and participating on its ballot line easier.<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact that a number of DSA members entertain the idea of a “dirty break” from the Democrats and forming an independent party, even proponents of the idea see the current relation of political forces makes it an unwise move at this time.

The equivalent to the pragmatic and tactical cooperation with the Democratic Party seems to be a pragmatic understanding of socialism.<sup>13</sup> Socialism to many is an insistence to “democratize all areas of life, including the economy.”<sup>14</sup> For many in the younger generation of DSA, socialism seems to be about transformative projects like Medicare for All. Being pragmatic and socialist in that sense means to concretely think out radical social democratic projects and move them forward. When talking to activists a sincere focus towards small steps is apparent.

DSA’s growth is a product of organizing. DSA largely does local political work and emphasizes “showing up.”<sup>15</sup> This is DSA’s strength. This means directly talking to people, campaigning and canvassing at the door steps, be it for DSA candidates or a national campaign like that for Medicare for All, or specific local campaigns like one in Dallas around paid-sick leave.<sup>16</sup>

To broaden its base, the organization is following a dual strategy of engaging in electoral politics and in social movements. It is an activist organization with a pragmatic-tactical relation to electoral politics. Even though successful campaigns like those of Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and New York State Senator Julia Salazar get lots of media attention, a big part of DSA’s work happens outside of elections.<sup>17</sup> The organization has become a catch all attracting both community organizers and activists from different social movements. This has proven successful with the election of six new DSA members to the Chicago City Council. Because their power in the Council is limited due to representing only ten percent of the council, the DSA representatives focus mostly on agenda-setting bringing topics into public discourse while cooperating with progressive Democrats for their goals.<sup>18</sup> This is a new type of politician, an “organizer-politician.”

## **Today’s Fringe, Tomorrow’s Center? Electoral Politics and Movement Work**

Even before the 2016 surge in membership DSA had some electoral victories,<sup>19</sup> but recently they have come “in bunches.”<sup>20</sup> In addition to the twenty previous DSA members holding public office fifteen DSA members were elected in 2017 ranging from school board, to city council seats, to Lee Carter ousting the Republican Majority Whip in Virginia’s House of Delegates.<sup>21</sup> In 2018, 32 DSA candidates won office. Among them were Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez from New York and Rashida Tlaib from Detroit, who each got elected to the US House of Representatives.<sup>22</sup> Despite 30 other losses, DSA’s National Political Committee celebrated the 2018 midterm election results as a “rebirth of the socialist movement.”<sup>23</sup>

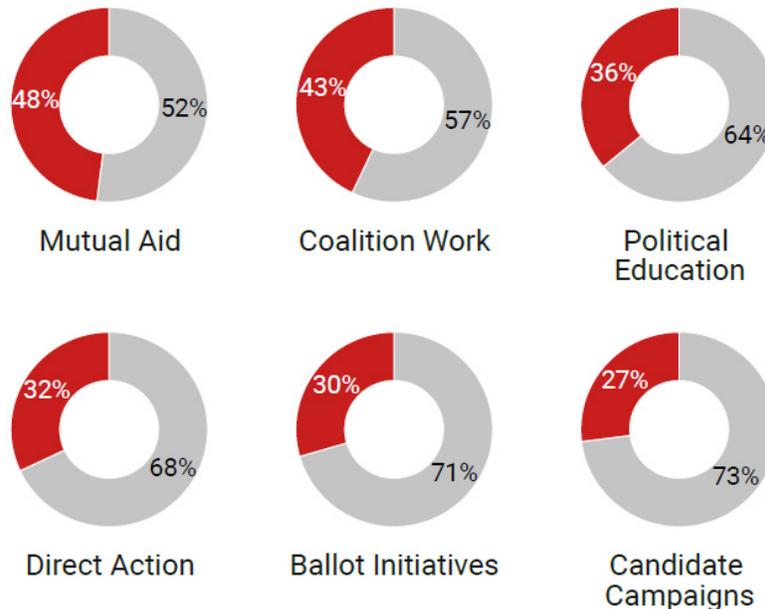
Even in the “off-year” of 2019 where there are not many elections taking place in the US, DSA candidates still triumphed. In Chicago six DSA candidates got elected to city council, and nationally nine DSA endorsed candidates have won so far. More primaries and elections with DSA endorsed candidates will take place in August and the following months.<sup>24</sup> Today there are 94 DSA politicians across the country. The profile of the districts of DSA officeholders point to demographically similar places where DSA can be expected to make electoral gains in the future: relatively liberal and urban places.

But, DSA candidates can also be successful in other parts of the country, ones that are neglected by the Democratic Party. Geographically it is possible that DSA will find electoral success in some parts of the rustbelt and around the Great Lakes.<sup>25</sup> They could make inroads in urban parts of the diversifying South that currently attracts educated and politically liberal young urban transplants due to economic opportunities,<sup>26</sup> and they might even be successful in parts of the more rural West that once hosted a left wing “prairie populism.”<sup>27</sup>

DSA can turn out decisive votes through canvassing in local level elections where only a few hundred votes make a difference. That is why an endorsement by the organization, which comes with the canvassing operation and support has gained a certain political weight in some parts of the country. Recently, DSA candidate Tiffany Caban ran in a hotly contested Queens District Attorney race that came down to a recount and was decided by under 100 votes.<sup>28</sup> In the recount, Caban lost by mere 55 votes.<sup>29</sup> The bitterly fought race shows how DSA has become a political counterweight to an established “political machine” in an area.<sup>30</sup> In doing so DSA is part of a wave of progressive activism in the Democratic Party that more or less successfully moves it to the left.<sup>31</sup>

## DSA chapters engage in a various political tactics

Percentage of DSA chapters who engage in a tactic (red) or do not (grey)



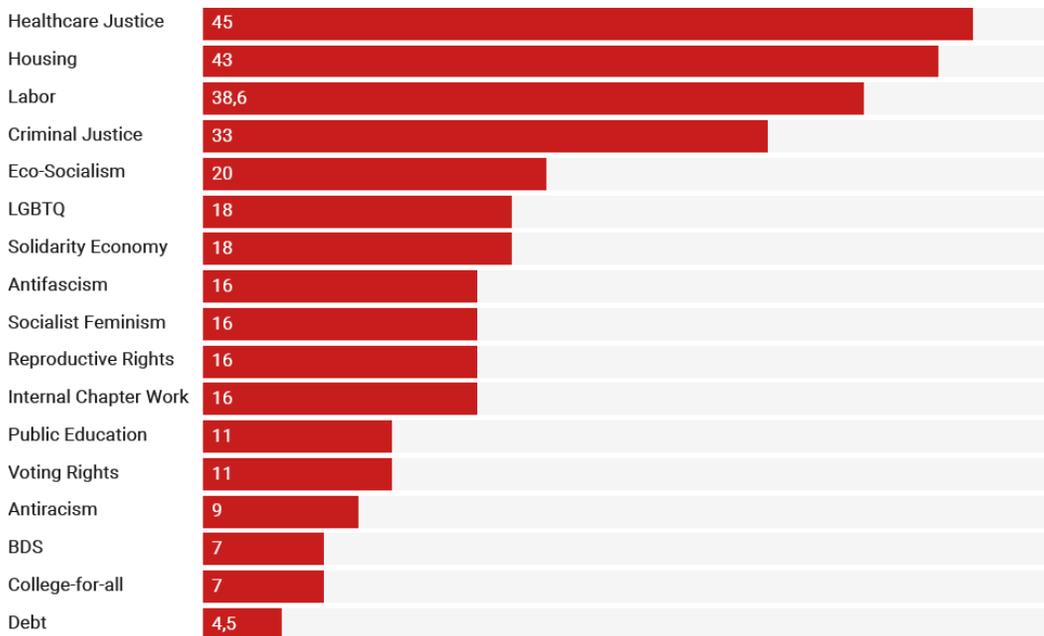
44 of 261 DSA chapters surveyed in the winter of 2018, including YDSA

Grafik: Moritz Wichmann Quelle: What We Re Building Survey Erstellt mit Datawrapper

According to a DSA-wide survey of 44 chapters from *Build*, 45 percent of the chapters work on health-care justice, with the DSA campaign for Medicare For All prominently featured in this. 34 percent of all the surveyed chapters work on advancing the proposal for universal public single-payer health-care. Equally important: 43 percent of chapters work on housing more generally. 38.5 percent of local groups are working on “labor” for instance supporting strikes and a third of all chapters (33 percent) are advocating for criminal justice reform.<sup>32</sup> With regards to political tactics, the survey paints a mixed picture of an organization where lots of local groups work on projects of “mutual aid” (48 percent) and are engaged in local coalition-work with other organizations or political forces (43 percent). More than a third of DSA chapters run projects of political education (36 percent) and an almost equal number of DSA chapters (32 percent) are involved in direct action campaigns. But above all, one focus looms large: A majority of local groups are working in electoral politics in one way or another (57 percent). As part of that 29.5 percent participate in campaigns for ballot initiatives and a bit more than a quarter (27 percent) support candidates in local elections.<sup>33</sup>

## Most DSA Chapters work on Healthcare, Housing and Labor

Issues DSA chapters work on in percent



44 of 261 DSA chapters surveyed in the winter of 2018, including YDSA

Grafik: Moritz Wichmann Quelle: What We Re Building Survey/Build DSA Erstellt mit Datawrapper

## Caucuses: Horizontalism and Central Leadership

Currently, DSA has several independent caucuses and wings with “several dozen to a few hundred members” each. The majority of DSA members unaffiliated with any specific caucus.<sup>34</sup> The caucuses differ in their ideology and approach to political work. The only formally recognized caucus is the Afro-

socialist and Socialists of Color Caucus which advocates on behalf of people of color in the organization.<sup>35</sup> There are several other caucuses with their own websites, publications, and teams of members who whip votes at the conventions for resolutions proposed by caucus members or for the caucuses candidates to the National Political Committee. Some see caucuses as a normal development in a growing organization,<sup>36</sup> but other voices downplay apparent increasing factionalism. The biggest caucuses are:

- ⇒ Bread and Roses: Marxist, rather small but relatively well organized caucus, close to Jacobin magazine. Members of the caucus advocate for a more coherently organized democratic but centrally led organization, that connects union activism and electoral work and denounces “horizontalist practices.”
- ⇒ Build: A rather “apolitical” loose network that distrusts the central leadership and rather opposes it generally in favor of practical local work and base-building and hence advocates for decentralization.
- ⇒ Socialist Majority & Collective Power Network: Consisting mostly of leading chapter activists and those from national workgroups, who want to improve the internal organization of DSA, to be attractive to more people in regard to political work and who want to work towards greater diversity among DSA members.
- ⇒ Libertarian Socialists: Anarchists and autonomous Marxists who reject the current work at the national level and “centralized forms of governance and decision-making” more generally, for instance through the National Political committee which they want to abolish in favor of individual local “group responsibility.”<sup>37</sup>

## **The 2019 convention: Organizational consolidation and thematic broadening**

The general priorities of the DSA are deliberated and decided upon every two years at its convention. There is a sense of internal pride about the strenuous but democratic character of DSA and its more or less deliberative conventions.<sup>38</sup> In 2017, at the last convention in Chicago, 750 delegates argued on behalf of 25,000 members on the future of DSA.<sup>39</sup> They decided on resolutions that would have had Michael Harrington “spinning in his grave” by how far they moved the organization left.<sup>40</sup> These included supporting the BDS movement and splitting from the Socialist International because according to DSA lots of its member parties (like the German Social Democrats<sup>41</sup>) had become enablers of neoliberalism and “enforcers of austerity.”<sup>42</sup> In 2017, the DSA chose these priorities: Medicare for All, strengthening the working-class movement, and the election of socialists.<sup>43</sup>

The 2019 convention had 1056 delegates debate on behalf of the 56,000 members.<sup>44</sup> 85 resolutions and 33 Constitutional Amendments were proposed with each proposal needing to have the support of at least 50 dues-paying members in good standing to make the agenda. That half of the resolution were either about organizational matters (28) or financial questions (8) shows that this year`s convention stood for organizational consolidation.<sup>45</sup>

Consolidation comes as a reaction to problems and questions that arose over the past two years of the National Political Committee. It is also about adopting new rules for an organization that has had “growing pains” and about creating new structures or changing rules to do justice to an organization that has evolved from a “circle of book clubs to a mass organization.”<sup>46</sup>

As part of the emphasis to develop the organization a resolution to create a “growth commission” was adopted. It has the ambitious but not impossible goal of achieving further growth of membership to 100,000 members by January 2021. The growth goal includes the explicit aim to win over black and brown people, queer and women workers, and more members of the working class in general.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Regionalization Conflict and Concessions to Identity Politics**

Part of the organizational consolidation is also an initiative to change membership in the organization from the dominating yearly dues to monthly ones, thereby achieving a steadier stream of income for the organization. As part of the initiative, smaller chapters will receive a larger share of dues than before. It is a cautious change. Other more ambitious resolutions in that regard were voted down. Proponents argued they would strengthen local work and the autonomy of chapters, while opponents saw them as preventing national pooling of resources for forceful national campaigns. Thus, resolutions for dues-sharing and re-allocation of 30 percent or 50 percent of dues to local chapters failed. The same happened to resolutions that aimed for a more regional organization in the form of regional assemblies or councils. It means that for now the more “horizontalist” caucuses around Build and the Libertarian caucus were not able to get a majority for some of their goals.<sup>48</sup> How this part of the organization will react to these developments and how the proposal of a referendum process will be treated will show how much of a “big tent” organization DSA will be in the future and how open it truly is to grassroots democracy.

Successful resolutions that passed included to work for “open borders” and for the decriminalization of sex-work. Additionally, a new priority of the political work that is both about organizational culture and outward-facing campaign is childcare. In the future, DSA wants to provide childcare at chapter meetings, “preferably also by men” to enable parents’ participation and to politically fight for free public childcare and paid paternal leave.<sup>49</sup>

### **Old and new priorities and practical politics**

Some of the resolutions adopted at the 2019 convention merely formalize existing work or dedicate additional resources to locally existing but previously not nationally declared priorities. That is the case for housing. To further the work, the national organization is now tasked to develop training material for a priority that many chapters were already working on. A national committee was tasked to help local chapters organize tenants in tenant unions and to advocate for rent control laws. With that, the idea of housing as a human right is meant to be advanced nationwide.

DSA now also officially supports the engagement for an Ecosocialist Green New Deal with an organizer that is to be hired for a national campaign coordinating the work of chapters. The same approach is adopted to the already existing focus on reforming the criminal justice system which will now have a national working group. The national organization is tasked to support chapters engaging in District Attorney elections. Additionally, a nationwide campaign to end cash bail, a practice that disproportionately affects poor people and people of color, was also adopted.

On the labor end, the promotion of a militant working-class movement and the activism of DSA-members in unions is a continuation of previous work with additional resources. In addition to the continued support of strikes, DSA wants to try to organize previously unorganized workers and voted to

adopt the rank-and-file strategy. Following the narrowly adopted resolution about the rank-and-file strategy, DSA members will work to promote more activist unions and work for political radicalization of workers not only during strikes but beyond.<sup>50</sup>

Rather new for DSA is the creation of a national antifascist working group. According to the authors of the resolution, the organization so far has “punched below its weight” in antifascist politics.<sup>51</sup> The new group is tasked with providing chapters with means to organize against neo-Nazi activists and to defend their political work. Outwardly-facing, the working group is meant to be a point of contact with other antifascist groups in the country. It is meant to use the “political weight of the most powerful leftist organization in the USA”, to further acceptance of and “carry antifascism into mainstream.”<sup>52</sup>

With regards to elections, the work of the existing National Electoral Committee was affirmed at the 2019 convention. It will continue to support chapters to build a “pipeline” of future candidates for higher office locally. In addition to the decision from March 2019 to endorse Bernie Sanders the convention voted on a resolution to not officially support any other Democratic candidate for President should Sanders lose the primary. That being said individual chapters or activists are not bound to that decision and will be encouraged to vote against Trump, just as the organization did in the 2016 “Dump Trump” campaign.<sup>53</sup> A resolution to build an independent campaign for Bernie Sanders from the left, to “go all in” also failed. Both decisions are in line with a focus on local campaigns and they mean that DSA’s involvement in the presidential race will be somewhat limited. However, in addition to its endorsement of Bernie Sanders, DSA wants to pressure the Sanders campaign to develop a more coherent and left foreign policy platform. As an activist organization, DSA largely cedes the politics of “money-raising” to other organizations as it focuses on the work of its membership. Thus a resolution to create a DSA Political Action Committee (PAC) and raise \$500,000 also failed.

DSA affirmed that it does not see a contradiction between electoral and movement work but rather, that the two are symbiotic with the former as a means to further the latter. To this point, they affirmed that they want politicians who act as organizers, who use their office to promote social movement and working-class politics. A resolution to bind national endorsements of candidates to these two principles carried. The resolution signals a slight shift to the left as it mandates endorsed candidates to openly identify as socialists but in addition contains language about the possibility of a “dirty break” which could mean a future possible break from the Democratic Party to form an independent party.<sup>54</sup> Another resolution about a “litmus test” for candidates containing fourteen policy positions candidates must support to get a DSA national endorsement, however, was voted down meaning DSA reserves some flexibility when it comes to supporting candidates on the national level.<sup>55</sup>

Before the 2019 convention there was the fear of possibly having too many priorities.<sup>56</sup> However, the rejection of a politically uncontroversial amendment to the Ecosocialist Green New Deal resolution which would have declared DSA’s support for the global climate strike planned by Fridays-For-Future activists on September 20 shows the continued commitment to following through on decision and to do “serious” politics.<sup>57</sup> The amendment was beaten down not because it wasn’t supported, but due to realist concerns. A delegate argued against it before the vote was taken and the amendment was voted down because in the short time until September 20, DSA would not be able to provide more than symbolical support.

In addition to the continued support for the three priorities chosen at the 2017 Convention: Medicare for All, Labor, and electing socialists, DSA wants to engage in “serious politics” on a Ecosocialist Green New Deal, housing, childcare, and criminal justice reform. It seems DSA is mirroring the most important fields of action of the US left more generally.<sup>58</sup> It is possible that an organization that is now double the size compared to two years ago can do politics on a doubled set of priorities. However, at the same time, it might be possible that DSA, currently a hybrid between an activist organization and mass organization, will behave or become more like other mass organizations. This could look like a union with a large membership where many members are not regularly active until they are activated for important moments like a strike. Signs pointing to this were echoed by voices from NYC-DSA comparing their 5,000 paper members “to the estimated 750 regularly active members” they have. On the other hand, the thematic broadening of DSA and the ambitious growth goal of 100,000 members point to the “unrealized potential” of DSA in a country where a poll shows that amongst registered voters about ten percent of Democrats see themselves as democratic socialists already could be way higher than 1000 thousand and could be in the millions. Only time will tell. For now, the DSA will continue to organize.

## References

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