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USA

“It Really Comes Down to Empowering the Working Class”

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On the heels of democratic socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s unexpected victory against a ten-term incumbent in the recent Bronx and Queens Democratic primary, House minority leader Nancy Pelosi swore that socialism is not ascendant. [1] It was kind of like a realtor informing you that the house isn’t haunted; the only reason to bring it up is because there have been sightings, the stairs creak at night.

This September, New York voters will have a chance to nominate another member of Democratic Socialists of America for political office. In Brooklyn, twenty-seven-year-old Julia Salazar is running for New York State Senate on a platform of single-payer health care, housing as a human right, protecting public schools from privatization, expanding collective bargaining rights, and ending mass incarceration and deportations. [2]

Jacobin’s Meagan Day sat down with Salazar to talk about the failures of the Democratic Party establishment, the difference between socialists and progressives, and how democratic socialist candidates can stay accountable to the working class once they win office.

MD : How did you become a socialist?

JS : My family immigrated to the US from Colombia when I was a baby, and my mom ended up raising my brother and me as a single mom, without a college degree and from a working-class background. My family wasn’t at all politically active, but my mom really had a chip on her shoulder and developed pretty conservative reactionary politics, so that was what I was exposed to growing up.

I started working when I was fourteen in a grocery store, and worked through high school in the service industry, and became increasingly aware of this cognitive dissonance I had between the political worldview that I was exposed to and my own self-interest. As someone who survived on social benefits, these things appeared increasingly at odds with each other.

I went to college at Columbia and I worked as a domestic worker, taking care of kids, cleaning people’s apartments. [3] It was through a combination of the political education I received at college paired with my own development of class consciousness that eventually I came to identify as a socialist.

MD :When did you get involved in activism?

JS :My earliest experience was organizing my own building. I lived in a building in Harlem that was owned and run by an abusive and neglectful management company that wouldn’t adequately heat the building in the winter, failed to make urgent repairs that were necessary to make tenants’ apartments livable. I was twenty-one with no legal training, and I went on the city’s website and determined we could legally withhold our rent. So I talked to my roommates and my neighbors and we organized a rent strike. [4]

We withheld our rent for three months. Finally, the management company took us to housing court. I showed up at housing court with a thick manila folder documenting conditions in the building. And we actually won concessions from the landlord. But of course, the management company did not invite me to renew my lease, and it was not a rent-stabilized unit, so they raised the rent and forced us out. To me, however, that experience exemplified and drove home the need for systemic change.

MD :How do you define democratic socialism?

JS :Broadly speaking, what it means to be a democratic socialist is to have a vision of a world where everyone is taken care of. We're fighting for a society in which people are valued over profit, in which everyone has access to the things they need not just for basic survival but to thrive. [1." id="nh5">5] In my campaign this translates to specific shorter-term policy positions including universal single-payer healthcare, expanding the rent stabilization system statewide and enacting universal rent control, ending cash bail and policies aimed at eliminating mass incarceration, and so on.

MD: What distinguishes a democratic socialist from a progressive?

JS: A democratic socialist recognizes the capitalist system as being inherently oppressive, and is actively working to dismantle it and to empower the working class and the marginalized in our society. Socialists recognize that under capitalism, rich people are able “ through private control of industry and of what should be public goods “ to accumulate wealth by exploiting the working class and the underclass. Functionally, this perpetuates and exacerbates inequality.

A progressive will stop short at proposing reforms that help people but don't necessarily transform the system. For example a progressive might advocate for forcing landlords to do necessary repairs on buildings. But unless you advocate for universal rent control and frankly, eventually, the abolition of private property “ though that's not my campaign platform because it's not very realistic “ what you're actually doing is just kicking the can down the road.

What it means to be a democratic socialist legislator is to push for changes that will have positive material effects in people's lives, but which also bring us closer to a truly socialist economic system.

MD: It sounds to me like you're saying a progressive and a democratic socialist may overlap on some key policy proposals, but for a democratic socialist the goal is empowering the working class to win further fights against capitalism, whereas for progressives it's often more palliative.

JS: Yes, it's like harm reduction “ that's how I would describe it.

MD: What have been the primary failures of the Democratic Party establishment to date, and whose interests does the party serve at present?

JS: Take the commentary we've seen in the last week, since Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez beat Joe Crowley in the Democratic primary in her congressional district in New York. [6] The dominant centrist liberal wing of the Democratic Party is completely out of touch with what the majority of registered Democrats “ which is to say, working-class people “ actually want, and the policies that actually resonate with them. I think what we're seeing is that the constituents of the Democratic Party have a much bigger political imagination than the party establishment, whether at the federal level or in local machine politics.

So the main problem is a lack of political imagination, approaching every dispute from a position of compromise instead of from a position of readiness to fight for the working class and marginalized.

MD: What do you think the prospects are for socialists in transforming the Democratic Party into a fighting force for working-class people? Can it be realigned, or is it merely a tool at present for building independent socialist politics?

JS: I definitely think the latter. My feeling is that Democratic Party realignment is at best a laudable secondary goal, not a primary goal. Ultimately, the two-party system de facto disenfranchises people, and I can't see the Democratic Party ultimately being a vessel for the democratic socialist revolution, so it would be silly and shortsighted for democratic socialists to put a lot of effort and resources into that project.

MD: But then on the other side, you have people saying socialists should only run outside the Democratic Party. What's your answer to them?

JS: They should tell that to the over 150,000 people in my district, who are living in fear every day of being displaced from their homes, and who are registered Democrats in a state with closed primaries. It's unquestionably strategic here in New York — though not everywhere, I should add — to run as a Democrat if you want to seize power as a leftist. To mobilize people around socialist politics you have to engage Democratic voters, and you can't do that in any meaningful way without running on the Democratic Party line in my district.

I recently supported DSA (Democratic Socialists of America) member Jabari Brisport, who ran as a Green Party candidate. His district is different from mine. I think it would be great if we could all avoid the Democratic Party line, and I think it's still an important question for people running under different circumstances, but if I were to try to do that in this district, I highly doubt people would notice much less vote for a third-party candidate in the general election.

MD: Is the goal of a socialist campaign primarily to win office and to legislate, or is it to build a movement and spread a message? If it's the latter, how do electoral politics achieve that goal uniquely?

JS: The goal is to build a movement. Otherwise, long term, we are just reformists. And part of building that movement is demonstrating our power, demonstrating to other people we want to bring into the movement that the movement is growing and viable. We also need to send a message that in order to build this movement, we must radically defy the systemic efforts to alienate and isolate us from each other. Communicating that is one of the most important components of a campaign like mine.

Additionally, it's important to actually successfully elect candidates who can enter the legislature and fight for policies that will actually transform the lives of working-class people. Election is a short-term goal, while the long-term goal is to build a movement, but the two are not mutually exclusive. The way people respond to these races — for example, in the case of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the way people have responded to a democratic socialist working-class Latina being elected in the Bronx to the federal government — can have a huge impact on the movement, on a national scale.

Democratic socialist electoral campaigns energize people to become involved in the socialist movement in the US. And while I think Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is to the left of Bernie Sanders, and I am to the left of Bernie, there's no doubt that his campaign generated an incredible amount of interest in socialism. When I canvass and mention democratic socialism, people primarily identify it with Bernie, because he popularized the concept through his electoral campaign.

MD : What is the nature of your involvement in DSA, and how integral is DSA to your campaign?

JS: DSA is absolutely integral to my campaign, particularly our field operations. I've been actively involved in NYC-DSA for almost two years. I'm on the organizing committee of our chapter's Socialist Feminist Working Group, I used to manage the chapter-wide calendar and do a lot of administrative work, and I've been involved in multiple branch campaigns.

It was largely DSA members — one of whom is now my deputy campaign manager — who persuaded me to run. DSA’s national electoral strategy has informed our own campaign strategy, and DSA members have been volunteering for the campaign since we launched in April. So DSA has played a critical role in this campaign from its inception.

MD: What do you make of the teacher strike wave? Is this a new dawn of labor militancy, and if so what accounts for it? And what’s the role of organized labor in fighting for a socialist world?

JS: The strike is the most powerful tool that organized workers have against the boss. So to see workers striking in huge numbers, and in “right-to-work” states pre-Janus, is deeply inspiring. [7] The socialist movement needs to be led by the working class, so when we see workers coming together in solidarity across the country to strike, it’s meaningful for the socialist movement. Furthermore, labor issues are related to all other issues facing the working class, like health care, and it was awesome to see that highlighted during the teacher strikes.

A true socialist movement is only going to become reality via the working class taking power, and wielding the power we currently have. In New York State, public sector workers don’t have the right to strike because of the Taylor Law. [8] Part of my platform, which I’ve spoken to people in the labor movement about throughout my campaign, is that we need to amend the Taylor Law to allow public sector workers to strike, especially now. In a post-Janus world, the strike is going to be the most powerful tool that workers have. [9]

MD: Returning to what we touched on previously, it strikes me that a good example of the distinction between a progressive candidate and a democratic socialist candidate might be that a progressive wouldn’t necessarily push super hard for amending the Taylor Law, because progressives to some extent believe that elected officials can take care of things — for instance, they can deliver change to workers by raising the minimum wage. A socialist doesn’t just want to pass legislation on behalf of the working class, but to clear obstacles to the working class’s militant self-organization.

JS: That’s right. It really comes down to a core interest in empowering the working class. And that’s going to mean so much more than favorable reforms. There’s no question that we have to expand and comprehensively fund the social safety net, but if we do that without altering the more basic structures that disempower people and keep them in wage slavery, we’re never going to see long-term social change.

MD We know the party machine is strong in Albany. Meanwhile, capitalists everywhere exert power over the political process, directly through campaign funding operations and indirectly through the threat of capital strikes and disinvestment. [10] So if you’re to win, what pressures and obstacles do you expect to face as an elected official in pursuing a democratic socialist program, and what are some strategies for meeting those challenges without compromising on socialist principles?

JS: Working within the New York State legislature, I anticipate it will be difficult when there are different interests always trying to compromise a legislator’s integrity. We saw in New York a group of so-called progressives in the state senate recently who, as soon as they got into power, entered into a power-sharing agreement with the Republican Party. I’m not really interested, as you can imagine, in the fact that they betrayed the Democratic Party, but they betrayed the working class. They did that by not just agreeing to caucus with Republicans, but by giving up the power that had been invested in and entrusted to them by the electoral process. I don’t think they did it because they’re all secret Republicans, they did it because they negotiated a deal that would be advantageous for them, that would result in more funding for their districts in the budget process and ultimately better career prospects. This compromise would ultimately be in their own interests.

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I think there's always going to be private interests competing for a legislator's favor and exerting various pressures, and the best way to remain accountable to the working class — that is, the kind of people who would elect a socialist in the first place — is to remain materially beholden to those people, for example by not taking corporate money. The importance of running a grassroots campaign isn't just on principle, but in practice it means that if you were elected on a campaign funded entirely by the movement, then you're more likely to stay accountable to the movement.

MD: Here in California, Gayle McLaughlin ran a democratic socialist campaign for lieutenant governor. She didn't win, but one of her ideas — in addition to being only financially beholden to working-class people — was to form a “shadow cabinet” for herself of dedicated movement leftists to help advise her on decisions and keep her in check. Elected officials have establishment voices in their ear all the time; her goal with this idea was to counterbalance that by explicitly lending an ear to people who would invariably provide a different analysis. What do you think about that?

JS: That makes a lot of sense. A democratic socialist legislator always has to be driven, first and foremost, by class politics and a materialist analysis. To that end it's important to surround yourself with people from the very start who are committed to that vision.

For example, in my campaign, we're not hiring any consultants. It's not that a consultant is bad on principle, but my socialist staff and I are deeply wary of bringing people in who are going to tell us to compromise our fundamental values as socialists. That same standard needs to be maintained in creating a staff as an elected. People don't necessarily need to be dues-paying members of DSA, but you have to make sure that the people who are advising you are not entrenched in the system that's oppressing us.

Source [Jacobin](#).

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[1] *Jacobin* "[Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Transformational Vision](#)", CBS "[Nancy Pelosi says socialism is not ascendant in Democratic Party](#)".

[2] Julia Salazar "Organize for Change"<https://salazarforsenate.com/>.

[3] *Jacobin* "[When the Excluded Organize an interview with Premilla Nadasen](#)".

[4] *Jacobin* "[No Rent for Rats](#)".

[5] *Jacobin* ["Will Socialism Be Boring?"] > <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/07/russian-revolution-art-vonnegut-equality>].

[6] *Jacobin* "[Will Socialism Be Boring?](#)".

[7] *Jacobin* "[Labor's Choice After Janus](#)".

[8] New York State "[New York State Public Employees' Fair Employment Act — The Taylor Law](#)".

[9] *Jacobin* [“There Is No Illegal Strike. Just an Unsuccessful One”](#)

[10] *Jacobin* [“When Capitalists Go on Strike”](#).