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# DEMOCRATIC LEFT

THE MAGAZINE OF THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS OF AMERICA



## DEMOCRATIC LEFT

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Democratic Socialists of America promotes a humane international social order based on equitable distribution of resources, meaningful work, a healthy environment, sustainable growth, gender and racial equality, and non-oppressive relationships. We are dedicated to building truly international social movements—of unions, environmentalists, feminists, and people of color—which together can elevate global justice over brutalizing global competition.



## KEEP ORGANIZING!

BY MARIA SVART

**W**e live in dangerous times. Joe Biden won the election, but the results were far, far too close, and he's still deporting people, dropping bombs and hiding behind procedure. Meanwhile, Donald Trump's fascist base and its puppet masters have captured much of the Republican Party, as demonstrated by a study last fall showing that the GOP now shares key authoritarian characteristics with Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party and Viktor Orban's Fidesz. Republicans are already advancing over 100 bills in 28 states to erode voting rights and introducing bills in dozens of states to criminalize protest.

Not just Republicans, but also neoliberals in the Democratic Party are forcing schools and restaurants to open before vaccines are distributed, and the 500,000 COVID deaths are joined by untold suffering as millions remain unemployed. The crisis in capitalism is killing us, and the political crisis threatens to finish the job.

What is a socialist to do?

### Organize!

When New York City locked down a year ago, the national office sent headquarters staff home for what we thought would be a few weeks. Chapters ended in-person events. Members risked their lives every day at work or struggled at home with kids or cramped conditions and bills piling up.

But you kept organizing. It's what socialists do.

Fighting for workplace PPE and hazard pay, expanding or building mutual aid networks in response to COVID or weather disasters, pivoting electoral and legislative work from canvassing to phone banking, taking to the streets for an end to racist police violence and for public energy production, and holding chapter education and democratic decision-making events over Zoom: These are but a few of the ways DSA members are still building the mass movement we need to win. Just looking back at our collective work this past year is mind-boggling.

Organizing is how we helped beat back the white supremacy threat in the last few months. It's how we'll consolidate left gains and strengthen solidarity across our differences as we take on the capitalist class. And it's how we'll build multiracial working-class power for the long term, as when Black and brown essential workers won historic raises and learned solidarity through the Hunts Point strike in January.

The legendary leader of the Chicago Teachers Union, Karen Lewis, may she rest in power, always said to ask yourself this when considering a course of action: "Does it unite us? Does it build power? Does it make us stronger?"

That's why we are going all-in this spring to fight for the pro-union Protecting the Right to Organize Act (see story on p. 3). Reach out to your local chapter now. It is never too late to take that first step! 🌱

# A GREEN NEW DEAL MEANS A LABOR NEW DEAL

BY CHRIS LOMBARDI

ILLUSTRATION BY DEVON MANNEY

**What does an "all hands" moment for DSA look like? Perhaps this one, to judge from recent communications across the organization pointing to the first major campaign of 2021. The following material, drawn from DSA's website, tells a story that is as exciting as it is historic.**

**T**he new Biden administration is making big commitments around the climate crisis, but the working class needs more than a restoration of the Obama-era status quo and massive handouts to corporations for "green" capitalism. We need a Green New Deal that massively expands the public sector and guarantees good green jobs for all workers.

A first step is ensuring that Biden's campaign promises to support labor become reality.

The PRO Act, which passed the House last year but stalled in the Senate, would be the most significant pro-union labor law rewrite since the 1935 Wagner Act. It would almost certainly lead to a major revival of unionization and working-class power.

The PRO (Protecting the Right to Organize) Act has several key provisions. The bill would impose financial penalties on businesses that violate workers' rights, remove prohibitions on solidarity strikes, and ban captive-audience meetings in contested union elections. Perhaps most significantly, it would put a federal ban on so-called right-to-work laws and push back against gig-economy exploitation by tightening standards around independent contractor classification. It's a good bill. DSA supports it, and during the campaign, Joe Biden said he did, too.



In March 2009, then-Vice President Biden gave a surprisingly decent speech to the AFL-CIO's annual conference in support of the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA). EFCA was one of Barack Obama's key campaign promises. By allowing unions to form via "Card Check," instead of forcing secret NLRB elections, the bill would have made it much easier for workers to organize. "This is all going to be difficult," Biden said, "and one of the most difficult things will be to re-institute that basic bargain" between business and labor: that higher productivity means higher wages. "And I think the way to do that is the Employee Free Choice Act." But like so much of the Obama administration's promises, it evaporated in the face of massive opposition by the forces of capital.

Does the PRO Act have a better shot than the EFCA did? We learned our lesson from the EFCA debacle. Democrats such as Biden aren't going to make better labor laws a priority unless we push them, and now is our chance to up the pressure.

That's why the Democratic Socialist Labor Commission and DSA's Green New Deal Campaign are launching a push for the First 100 Days of the new administration to pass the PRO Act, which would strengthen unions and the power of the working class to organize on the job, helping to build labor power as strong as it needs to be in the months and years ahead to win a just transition to a green economy for all communities. The original New Deal was won through militant labor organizing. Rebuilding this capacity is crucial to DSA's work for a radical Green New Deal.

Passage of the PRO Act will be a game-changer. And DSA is no longer on the sidelines. 🌱

**CHRIS LOMBARDI** is online editor of *Democratic Left*, and author of *I Ain't Marching Anymore: Dissenters, Deserters & Objectors to America's Wars*. For more information about the campaign, check out [dsausa.org](http://dsausa.org).





## CATCHING UP WITH AOC

Bronx Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, best known as AOC, is DSA's foremost "superstar." With over 12 million Twitter followers, her picture on the December cover of *Vanity Fair*, and mass cultural appeal to teens and the not-yet-political, she continues to use her celebrity to build support for a democratic socialist agenda. We spoke by Zoom on January 26. —DON MCINTOSH

### What was your path to joining DSA?

I grew up very working class. Both my parents grew up in extreme poverty. What initially drew me to DSA was the fact that they showed up everywhere that I showed up. I started as a community organizer before I even knew about DSA, and I was advocating for educational equity. A friend invited me to a DSA meeting in the Bronx/Upper Manhattan Branch. This was around the time DSA was picketing to call attention to warehouse workers. They brought undocumented

warehouse workers to the meeting and translated their testimony. And on top of that, the chapter provided free childcare to anyone who wanted to show up. And at the end of that meeting, I was like, 'Okay, this is real.' Then [DSA member] Jabari Brisport ran for City Council. It felt like something fundamentally different to me. Ironically enough, I was one of those folks that felt we're not going to get any substantive change through electoral politics. I felt that way because I grew up around Bronx

machine politics, where there was a lot of cynical use of identity under the guise of lobbyist-driven policies. Also, in New York City, there has historically been tension between DSA and organizing collectives of color. But it really felt like a moment where we were coming together. And I felt like it was something worth being part of.

**DSA's priorities are your priorities, Green New Deal and Medicare For All in particular. There's no getting around the fact that those are going to require an act of Congress. What's the most strategic thing that DSA members and chapters could be doing right now to bring that about?**

I think sometimes people fall into this trap of wishful thinking about a poll question, thinking that support is solid, that it's unsusceptible to the propaganda of corporate lobbyists and the health insurance industry. The first thing we need is honesty

about the work ahead of us. The oil and gas lobbies have gone in so hard to try to give the Green New Deal a bad name, and even after total hammering by the Republican Party, it still doesn't poll that poorly. Once we send organizers or have other forms of messaging and explain what the Green New Deal is, support skyrockets. So I think we need to engage in the work of organizing. There is critical electoral work to be done as well. The strategy of supporting candidates—when that is calculated, focused, precise, when we aren't casting our net too wide beyond the capacities of any given local organization—is extremely effective. I've seen the impact of it from the inside—how even incumbent members of Congress will totally reinvent themselves in a far more progressive direction, because they know their communities are watching.

**Some on the Left have looked at Biden's record and his differences with the Bernie wing of the party, and they conclude that no progress is going to come out of the Biden administration. What's your view?**

Well, I think it's a really privileged critique. We have to focus on solidarity with one another, developing good faith critique. Bad faith critique can destroy everything we have built. We do not have the time or the luxury to entertain bad faith actors in our movement. What is the message that you are sending to your Black and brown and undocumented members of your community when you say nothing has changed? Perhaps not enough has changed. But just the other night, we in collective struggle were able to stop the deportations of critical members of our community. And that would not have happened

in a Trump administration. We can make the argument that not enough is changing fast enough. These are not nitpicking questions of semantics. The language that we use communicates "who is included." When you say "nothing has changed," you are calling the people who are now protected from deportation "no one." And we cannot allow for that in our movement. That's not a movement that I want to be a part of. We're so susceptible to cynicism. And cynicism continues to threaten to tear down everything that we have spent so much time building up. We're allowed to win too, by the way.

**Millions of people are excited about you being in Congress and rooting for your success. But at the same time, no other figure has been targeted by the Fox News crowd quite like you have. Why do you think that they worked to make you such a bogeyman for the right wing?**

I think they've done it because they know that we are a threat, particularly because I'm a movement candidate. If I was just some kind of one-off singular candidate, I do not believe that we would be attracting the energy and attacks. Organized capital has correctly identified that my candidacy is not an individual venture, but representative of an actual working-class movement. There is a rush to define me to the country before I have the opportunity to define myself. I believe that what was attempted was, "We're going to make an example out of her for everyone else." It was also trying to convince Democrats that this is too dangerous, and that this is a liability. And it didn't work. We expanded our presence with the election of Jamaal Bowman and Cori Bush. This is not going away.

**One of the exciting things about your early days in Congress was your willingness to break from convention, like when you blew the lid on the freshman orientation that was crawling with corporate lobbyists or appeared at the Sunrise Movement sit-in in Nancy Pelosi's office. Has your strategy shifted from those days?**

I don't think so. I believe we're getting more sophisticated. I think about all of our tactics as different tools in a toolbox. When I first started, I had a hammer. And when you have a hammer, everything's a nail, as they say. But then you learn about other methods, you get a wrench, you get a screwdriver. You add the tools of electoralism, supporting other members to join. You have the tools of sunlight. There's one moment I'll never forget. We were going through the appropriations process, I believe in 2019 or so, and there are these massive multi-thousand-page packages. And I remember finding this really bizarre appropriation for fossil fuel facilities, like a multi-billion-dollar giveaway. We were like, "Where did this come from? Did someone slip this in?" We were gonna propose an amendment to take it out, so we raised the question about this. And because no one wanted to fess up and actually own that they were the one who put that in, it was withdrawn without actually making it a floor fight. There are so many of these wins, that aren't necessarily public fights every time. Some of that work is quiet, but it is just as significant as some of the public fighting and organizing.

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# SOCIALISTS ACROSS GENERATIONS: *We Need To Talk*

BY DAVID DUHALDE

I joined DSA at age 19 (full disclosure: I'm 36 now) because of Eugene Debs's alleged quip that "an unorganized socialist is a contradiction in terms." I felt it as a moral obligation, not a strategic decision. The organization was down to about 5,000 members and had no visible national presence.

As a member, and then a staffer of Young Democratic Socialists (now YDSA) in the final years of George W. Bush's second term, I found it demoralizing to attempt to recruit students to an organization that seemed to have no one under 40 in its off-campus chapters. How could one not consider leaving to join a larger organization? Luckily, some of us did stay to maintain a structure that would welcome a flood of new comrades energized by Bernie Sanders's first presidential campaign and Donald Trump's election. Overnight, it seemed, I and my small cohort went from being the "future generation" of our socialist project to being in the almost-oldtimer category.

This new energy has given DSA a capacity and influence we had not experienced in decades. From having our Political Action Committee contributions returned by candidates afraid of being labeled as socialists, we have become an organization whose endorsements are sought. From providing a handful of people to show up at picket lines, DSA now mentors and trains rank-and-file leaders, shaping the future of democratic unionism.

The U.S. Left went through a similar demographic transition more than 50 years ago, and it did not end well with regard to intergenerational work. (See various histories of Students for a Democratic Society and the New Left.)

From what might be called "the ashes of the old," our organization was founded by a 1982 merger of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) and the New American Movement (NAM). Both formations were youth-dominated and changed the way socialists mobilized in this country.

DSOC broke with the strategy of building an independent party, seeking to build instead a nexus between labor, social movements, and the left wing of the Democratic Party. Younger activists came to DSOC in the early 1970s, as the former Socialist Party split into three different groups. DSOC helped elect socialists on the Democratic Party line, introduced young people to the socialist tradition in the labor movement, and drove international solidarity with the South African democracy movement and the Latin American Left.

Youth was even more central for the New American Movement, which emerged in the 1970s from the shattered Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). NAM was made up primarily of graduates—literally and figuratively—from the New Left. They pushed for campus chapters that included faculty and workers, rather than narrow "student" groups. Baby Boomer NAM members were some of the earliest fighters for a socialist feminism that challenged male dominance in the organization. This task is certainly incomplete, but their efforts are a lasting legacy and important foundation for addressing institutionalized racism, sexism, and heteronormativity in socialist spaces.

Recently, as part of a study for the DSA Fund, I spoke with former members of the youth wing of DSA. In the hundreds of interviews and surveys of 1970s and 1980s DSOC and DSA youth section members, as well as NAM activists, I was struck by how often they cited mentorship as one of their fondest memories of that time. Old Left and New Left learned from the mistakes made by SDS. There was a real desire to avoid these mistakes and build a collective space for collaboration and learning. One alumnus recalled speaking with *Dissent* magazine co-founder Irving Howe as an equal, not so many years after receiving Howe's *World of Our Fathers* as a bar mitzvah gift.

But after the 1990s, as DSA members grew older, membership stalled, and by 2013 the average age of members was 67. Veteran members at the time were so happy to have younger members in the organization that students and youth had multiple mentors to choose from. Mentorship



provided a constant source of historical information, organizing experience, and personal wisdom. After Donald Trump's election, the average age of DSA members dropped to 33. Longtime members today lack the capacity to nurture and guide newcomers, who now vastly outnumber the older cadre.

Absent such collaboration, DSA runs the risk of repeating past mistakes. It's not hard to find executive committees of DSA chapters with no one who is over 35 or who was a member before 2016. Our National Political Committee has almost no one on it from the DSA that existed before Bernie Sanders's 2016 run. Without a generational balance in leadership, within but not limited to the NPC, institutional memory cannot be shared. Such concentrations of age are inadvisable—whether within the *old* DSA when it was just old or the new DSA, which is the opposite.

People with different entry points into socialism should have the opportunity to meet, discuss, and learn from one another. For instance, some chapters have started running tech workshops for members. During the pandemic, online study groups have allowed people to meet virtually when they might never have traveled to another town for an in-person event. But we need more planned exchanges among comrades who are not age peers.

One of the most successful programs in my time as YDSA organizer was our biennial summer intergenerational leadership retreat. YDSA and DSA leaders came together to read historical socialist texts, share stories, and break bread. Many of the YDSA leaders who came stayed on to build DSA. These conferences showed them that a

**Gay Pride parade in Chicago circa 1992**

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAY HUGHES

lifetime commitment to socialism was a real option. The older members learned about new styles of organizing. DSA conventions featured panels with socialists from each decade talking about their commitments.

Sharing knowledge and experience is a two-way street. Our newer members can learn from those who play the long game, and the older ones can both remember their own youthful enthusiasms and mistakes and stretch themselves to learn about organizing in the 21st century. DSA will be stronger for it. 🌹

**DAVID DUHALDE** is vice-chair of the DSA Fund and serves on the Steering Committee of DSA's International Committee. For a deeper dive into the history of youth in DSA, watch his video presentation of this material on the *Jacobin* magazine YouTube station at [youtu.be/Sdcz7KnIz6s](https://youtu.be/Sdcz7KnIz6s)



# QUESTION THE DATA:

## Go Beyond Fake News

BY CHRISTINE RIDDIOUGH

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DEVON MANNEY



One of my favorite television shows was *Numbers*, which ran from 2005-2010. It was about a prodigy who helped solve crimes using math. The tagline was, “We all use numbers every day.” It’s true, whether we’re checking the time, running our credit cards, or counting change. We use numbers even when we aren’t looking; after all, computers and the Internet are built on numbers—ones and zeros, to be exact.

But do we understand what’s going on with those numbers? Do we understand the data and how it’s driving policy? Most of the time, we don’t. Look at the pseudoscience around vaccines. According to the World

Health Organization, 140,000 people died from measles in 2018, down from about 2.6 million per year before the measles vaccine was introduced. No deaths from the vaccine have been reported. However, the anti-vaccine movement, based on a fraudulent study by Andrew Wakefield, continues to propagandize. We have only to check the daily newsfeed to see the effects of pseudoscience in our current coronavirus crisis.

Innumeracy around polling may not be as deadly as that around disease, but it can be quite harmful. For example, a Monmouth University poll in Pennsylvania shortly prior to the election showed Joe Biden leading Donald

Trump by 7%. This poll was based on just over 500 likely voters. The final count came in at a 1.2% Biden lead. Because the predicted difference was so small, had more people stayed home rather than going to vote, the result could have been disastrous. Such miscalculations can come from not factoring in the margin of error (typically around 3-4%) or because the poll sample was skewed. For example, if polling firms call only voters with landlines, they might reach a higher percentage of older voters than are in the population as a whole.

This isn’t an academic question. Polls in the presidential races of 1936 and 1948 incorrectly predicted that

Republicans Alf Landon and Thomas Dewey would win their respective races in landslides, based on early skewed polling and early voting numbers.

In 2016, pollsters told us that Hillary Clinton would take both the Electoral College and the popular vote. In 2020, despite today’s more sophisticated techniques that supposedly adjust for class, gender, and race, polling indicated a big win for Democrats. Instead, Democrats eked out narrow margins in the House and Senate. We on the Left want to win, and polls can be designed to help us understand how to advance our ideas and boost our candidates. That is, they can if we design polls to tell us what we need to know from people who have the information.

Beyond just looking at flawed polls, however, we must understand how math (and science) affect policy. Consider climate change. We know the average temperature on earth is higher than it was only decades ago. And so, we support a Green New Deal and oppose the Dakota Access Pipeline. But math, science, and, in particular, data science have an impact on other climate-related issues; and until recently, few were questioning assumptions about race, sex, and class. For instance, we know that climate change means hotter summers and more hurricanes, but do we think about how those hotter summers affect people without access to air conditioning or how crop failures could lead to food scarcity, especially in poorer communities? Do we notice how vast migrations from drought-stricken areas fuel anti-immigrant sentiments and regional warfare?

Leading up to the financial crisis of 2008/2009, deregulation in the financial industry had allowed banks to engage in risky hedge fund trading, often involving mortgage-backed



**Beyond just looking at flawed polls, we must understand how math (and science) affect policy.**

securities. The profitability of these financial products led to pressure on mortgage lenders to offer lower and lower interest rate mortgages in order to reel in more home buyers. The availability of low-interest mortgages drove up demand for houses and thus home prices. Many of these low-interest loans, however, started reverting to much higher interest rates around the same time the “housing bubble” burst, owing to rising interest rates in general and a stalling housing market. House values plummeted, leaving homeowners “under water,” that is, owing more money than the house was now worth. Only those who had some grounding in mathematics would have understood what a mess they were walking into when they signed the contract.

School testing, redlining, and the use of algorithms in hiring as well as

advertising are all data-based activities that affect our lives. We must examine how the biases of data scientists are incorporated into models that predict educational achievement or health care needs. In the current pandemic crisis, we learned only after it was on the market that one vaccine had not been tested on enough people over the age of 65 to determine its usefulness with that population.

Do you know how the digits in your ZIP code affect your auto insurance rates or mortgage rates? Do you know how much your smartphone can reveal to everyone from advertisers to law enforcement?

Data can be a resource for the Left as well. In January, the *Washington Post* reported that a consumer protection group had shown that factors such as education level and occupation are used by auto insurance companies when setting rates. Although this may not be a surprise, it is helpful to have this kind of data as part of our argument for change.

A left slogan should be “Question the Data.” Ask, “What’s the date on the information in this email I’m being asked to forward?” “What’s the source for this statement?” “Who was involved in this supposedly scientific study?” Lives depend on our looking at, and behind, the numbers. 🌀

**CHRISTINE RIDDIOUGH** is a founding member of DSA and a member of Metro DC DSA. She works as a computer programming and statistics teacher for a software company. For further reading on this topic, check out John Allen Paulos’s *Innumeracy: Mathematical Illiteracy and Its Consequences* and Cathy O’Neil’s *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Our Democracy*.



# Gaming the System: *Why the Stock Market is Worthless*

BY HADAS THIER



**T**he drama that swirled around GameStop and the stock market earlier this year highlighted two things: The system is rigged against working people, and the stock market is useless.

The basic story was this: Some hedge fund investors took bets on GameStop’s declining profitability through a process called “shorting.” This means that investors borrow shares of the company. They then sell those stocks on the assumption that their price will fall. Once the price has fallen sufficiently, they buy back the stocks at a lower price, return the borrowed shares, and pocket the difference. Some day traders communicating on Reddit bought up shares, driving up the prices of those stocks. This left hedge fund investors on the hook for a much higher value than they had laid out.

For a moment, some regular people made money off of the stock market. But the real winners were other Wall Street investors, who

profited handsomely from the day trading “revolt.”

The episode drew the attention of millions of people to the charade of the stock market and the financial sector.

Financial capital has always existed under capitalism, because credit is necessary for businesses to function. Without credit, businesses wouldn’t be able to pay Monday’s wages and bills until they collected Friday’s profits. They wouldn’t be able to make large investments in equipment and technology until they had accumulated enough to pay cash. All this would drastically slow down the march of capital.

Stocks theoretically play a role in raising money for companies, through the selling of shares of their future value. Each share is a claim to a fraction of the company’s future worth. The stock market functions like an auction in which the value of stocks fluctuates constantly.

This is a highly speculative process,

and—especially with increased deregulation over the last couple of decades—it has turned into more of a casino than a means of raising money or driving innovation and investment. As economist Doug Henwood has pointed out, companies have raised about \$671 billion since 2000 by issuing new stocks, while at the same time they invested \$8.5 trillion in stock buybacks in order to pay higher dividends to shareholders.

The stock market has made a few people very wealthy and has done little for working people (apart from forcing us to wager our retirements at the casino via 401(k) plans). The richest 10% of households control approximately two-thirds of individual stocks, while households earning below the median income typically have no financial assets at all.

During the COVID-induced recession, the Federal Reserve has poured trillions of dollars into the financial markets. But rather than using credit to keep payrolls and employment going, those loans have been used to speculate in financial assets. This has translated into huge windfalls for some CEOs and shareholders, while millions of people have been left out of work, facing evictions or hunger or both.

U.S. stock market indexes broke records in 2020, but their disconnect from economic reality could not be greater. 🌹

**HADAS THIER** is the author of *A People’s Guide to Capitalism: An Introduction to Marxist Economics*, a regular contributor to *Jacobin Magazine* and *In These Times*, and a member of DSA in Central Brooklyn, New York. She led the “Socialist School of Economics” for DSA on March 9, 2021, which can be viewed at [youtube.com/DSAEventLivestream](https://youtube.com/DSAEventLivestream).

# SIX WEEK SURGE

BY DON MCINTOSH

**DSA has been growing steadily**, but that growth went into turbo from October 1 to November 14, 2020, during DSA’s first-ever national recruitment drive. Membership soared 14,852 in six weeks.

DSA’s National Growth & Development Committee (GDC) led the drive, using technology-assisted people power. Its basic instrument was an online pledge. Individual DSA members pledged to recruit three new members and then received a unique referral link to track those they signed up. Chapters committed to grow by 10% and designated one or two captains to lead the effort. Captains phone-banked and text-banked chapter member lists to recruit individual pledgers, and organized online recruitment events.

An online leaderboard allowed individuals and chapters to find out whether their contacts had followed through to become members, and to see in real time who were DSA’s top-recruiting individuals and chapters. GDC leaders—together with DSAer New York State Assembly member Jabari Brisport—kicked off the drive with online trainings on how to make the ask.

Tim Zhu, a union data specialist and member of Metro DC DSA, developed the campaign’s outline in June, and worked with the National Political Committee and staff to prepare it for launch. Three weeks in, the campaign had blasted past its 5,000 goal, so the goal was raised to 8,000 and the deadline extended a week. By November

14, DSA counted 12,847 brand new members and 2,005 lapsed members who renewed.

It was election season, and DSA was growing, so how many of the new members were the direct result of recruitment? Zhu thinks at least half. Some 4,687 new or rejoining members used the referral links, and others who were contacted joined directly at [dsausa.org](https://dsausa.org). In absolute terms, the chapters that had the most tracked signups were NYC (602), LA (344), DC (264), Chicago (200), and Philadelphia (160). But proportionally, DSA saw the largest gains in its Southern chapters, biggest of all in Charleston, Southwest Louisiana, New Orleans, and San Antonio.

“One thing the recruitment drive really shows is that our ideas are popular all across the country,” says **Charleston DSA** co-facilitator Nick Rubin. “If we make the ask and organize, we can build a presence even in places some people don’t expect.”

Charleston phone-banked its entire membership of about 180 and texted or emailed those they didn’t reach. The chapter had worked in coalition with other groups, so inviting allies to join was a logical next step. The chapter gained 34 new members and doubled the number of active members, says Charleston DSA communications secretary Jasmine Rogasner.

**SW Louisiana DSA** added 19 members to the roughly 60 it had at the starting line. Drive captain Megan Romer says the chapter had built a reputation locally for its disaster relief work. Now she and others pushed outside comrades to “put a ring on it.”

“I think there’s a cultural attitude of ‘We don’t want to pressure people.’ But people need to be asked. Read your Jane McAlevey!” Romer says.

Meanwhile, on the leaderboard, a comradely competition broke out among individual pledgers around the

country to see who could bring in the most new members.

That title went to **Janet Hurtado** of Los Angeles, who recruited 122 new members. Her secret? “I just ask, wherever I’m at,” Hurtado said. “There’s no other way to do it.”

Hurtado says she recruited among neighbors, at the store, and especially among the volunteers she met as a field organizer for the 2020 Bernie Sanders campaign.

Super-recruiter **Mindy Isser** of Philadelphia DSA was a close second, bringing in 120 new members. Isser used the same strategy she employs as a union organizer: Ask everyone possible—in the most direct way—and follow up with those who commit.

“If you can, ask in person,” Isser said. “If you can’t ask in person, ask by phone. And only if you can’t ask by phone, ask by text. Calling people makes people take it more seriously.” 🌹

## RECRUITMENT BY THE NUMBERS

<b>2,165</b> DSA members signed the pledge to recruit three new members
<b>1,004</b> pledgers successfully recruited at least one new member
<b>433</b> pledgers hit their three-member goal
<b>4,335</b> new members, plus 352 lapsed members, joined via individual referral links
<b>88</b> chapters appointed one or more captains
<b>122</b> members served as chapter captains
<b>179</b> chapters grew by at least 10%
<b>12,847</b> brand new members joined during the drive
<b>2,005</b> lapsed members renewed
<b>14,852</b> total membership growth

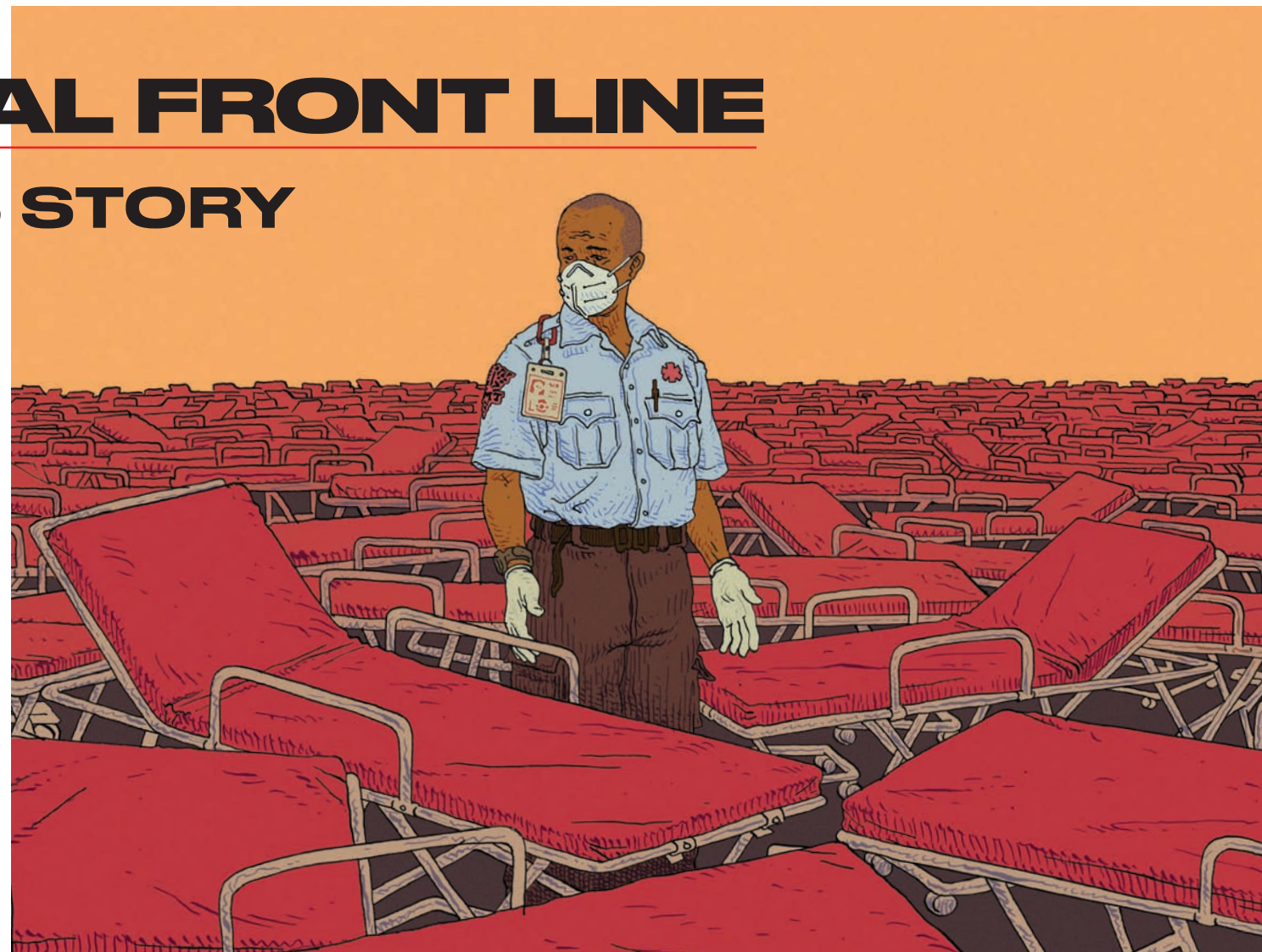


# MEDICAL FRONT LINE

## AN EMT'S STORY

**M**ost people who find out I'm an emergency medical technician think I'm first on the scene, saving lives, that sort of thing. There are people who do that, but that's not my job. I, like most EMTs, don't respond to 911 calls. We work for private companies, doing interfacility transports. On paper, it's things like bringing a psych patient from the emergency room to a mental health care center, or a heart attack victim to a hospital equipped for specialized surgery. In reality, it mostly means dumping patients—taking them from the pristine ERs of the private hospitals to the overstuffed, understaffed community hospitals that their health insurance (or lack thereof) actually covers.

On paper, there's supposed to be a medical reason for an ambulance ride to a different facility, or the patient's insurance won't cover the trip. The majority of our on-the-job training is learning which keywords to use (like "requires special positioning") in our documentation, regardless of whether it's true or not. If the insurance refuses to cover the ambulance trip, then the patient is stuck with the bill. No matter what, my company gets paid. Legally, the patient is allowed to decline the ride, but that would mean saying no first to their nurse, then to us, then listening to us explain everything that could go wrong if they don't shut up, sign the paperwork, and accept the ride. Most EMTs don't



tell people about their right to refuse care—if a patient refuses care and later their condition gets worse, we can be sued and lose our licenses if our documentation isn't perfect. I make \$15 an hour. In July 2021, I'll get a \$0.30 raise. I don't make enough to take that kind of risk.

Emergency Medical Services is a small-picture field. It deals in proximate causes. I have anecdotes, not statistics. Here's one:

"If I had known that they were going to send an ambulance, I never would have called," our patient says. Her private health insurance offers a

remote nursing hotline for non-emergency medical transport, but keeps the details opaque, likely for this reason. They heard her report a high blood pressure event and called us in, probably to cover their asses just in case. My partner and I make awkward eye contact over our gurney. We had been excited to get this house call, because, unlike our usual runs, these tend to involve doing some actual medicine. I take her blood pressure; it's in the high 190s. The woman clearly needs to see a doctor.

"How much are they going to charge me for this?" she asks. Neither of us has an answer to that question. Eventually we get her to come with

ILLUSTRATION BY  
**CONNOR WILLUMSEN**

us. We're all in agreement that she doesn't need an ambulance for this, but the rules say we have to strap her onto our gurney anyway. She has the right to tell us to go away—we can't force her to go if she doesn't want to—but if either of us tells her so, we could lose our jobs. All she talks about on the journey is how she can't afford this. Her blood pressure climbs into the 200s, probably from the stress. Who have we really helped here? We take her to the ER, and the ER takes

her as a patient, because we're all covering our asses. Lost in the shuffle of lab and legal and billing paperwork is what our patient actually wants, what she can actually afford.

We bandage a person's infected foot wound, an injury caused by years of untreated diabetes.

We transport an unhoused person to an ER to treat their psychotic episode, sure that months of living on the street without medication were what made their situation bad enough to require an ambulance.

No matter how fast our ambulance gets to the scene, it arrives months and years too late to do any good. As capitalism leaves more and more people behind, EMTs and paramedics will be the ones to respond to its failures, from health management to malnutrition to homelessness. And, given the politics of many of those working in emergency services, it's likely that this strain will breed hostility rather than solidarity.

At the time of this writing, my county has issued new instructions to ambulance crews: Because ERs are so overcrowded with COVID-19 patients, people in cardiac arrest are not to be transported. If we can't resuscitate them on scene, we declare them dead.

Prior to getting that directive, I had planned to end by saying that our healthcare system is unwilling to let anybody die, but it's unable to truly help them live. The pandemic hasn't changed this equation, only exposed the fault lines that were already there. Until our ability to stay healthy is uncoupled from our ability to produce profit, the logo on your health insurance card (if you have one) largely determines your fate. 🌀

*The author wishes to remain anonymous for fear of job retaliation.*

## HELP DSA RAISE MONEY FOR ABORTION ACCESS!

It's once again time for the National Network of Abortion Funds (NNAF) annual Fund-a-thon for abortion access! Abortion access has suffered tremendously under the Trump administration and COVID pandemic. We need your help to raise over \$100,000 for abortion funds!

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RSVP to learn how to start fundraising!

The March training:

**March 14th**  
**3pm EST / 12pm PST**

<https://bit.ly/MarchFundTraining>

The April training:

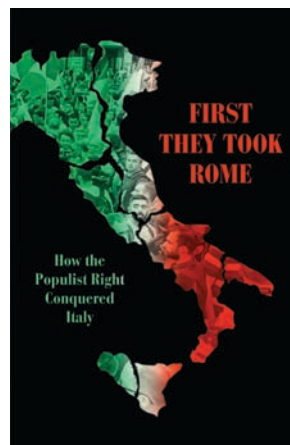
**April 7th**  
**8pm EST / 5pm PST**

<https://bit.ly/AprilFundTraining>



## ITALY: PERSONALITIES PREEMPT POLITICS

BY SPENCER BROWN



**First They Took Rome: How the Populist Right Conquered Italy**  
By David Broder

**Does Italy's often bewildering political volatility contain any lessons for the Left?**

David Broder believes it does. In *First They Took Rome* (Verso), the Europe editor of *Jacobin* magazine argues that Italian politics may be less the exception than the rule in the future. He sees Italy's political fragmentation over the past 30 years as a national case study of a larger globalized pattern. Broder is here to tell us how this came to be and what lessons we can draw from it.

Broder argues that the collapse of the mass parties of both Left and Right that structured postwar Italy led to their replacement by an ever-shifting sea of media- and personality-driven political groupings. Previously, the right-Catholic Christian Democracy party had held continuous national political power. In perennial opposition—but always excluded from national government—was the massive Italian Communist Party. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 ended this Cold War divide, thereby opening a new era for Italian politics.

This historic shift led to the domination of Italy's political system by such figures and formations as billionaire Silvio Berlusconi (a businessman with no prior political experience who has been prime minister in four different governments), Matteo Salvini's far-right Lega Party, and the ever-amorphous Five Star Movement (M5S). Broder traces their histories, analyzes their developments, and locates their social bases in Italian society.

Despite dominating Italian politics for more than a decade, Berlusconi plays the smallest role in the overall story. His Forza Italia political party is today a shell of its former self. Instead, it is now the

anti-migrant Lega (previously Lega Nord, reflecting its northern-separatist origins) that is the leading right-wing party, somewhat ironically capturing the rural-southern vote in the process. The “neither left nor right” M5S, on the other hand, has made significant inroads into the historic voting base of the Italian Left.

Broder argues that, despite their many differences, both Lega and M5S share a common “anti-political” project. Each reflects an explicit turn away from the realm of formal politics. This is in sharp contrast to Italy's previous system of mass parties, where each membership-based party sought to use electoral campaigns to organize a broader civil society, albeit often corruptly.

Today, Italy's populists place themselves in conscious opposition to party-organized politics, what they term the *partitocrazia* or the political “caste.” This is in part a legitimate reaction to the wave of corruption scandals in the early 1990s that led to the collapse of Italy's existing party system. But, as Broder notes, it also reflects a deeper and more troubling distrust among many Italians in the ability of political action to solve society's problems.

For Broder, this loss of faith in collective political action makes Italy a symbol of our present condition. The trends themselves are global: depoliticization, rising inequality, falling public investment, and growing social atomization. But in Italy, the political manifestation of these neoliberal trends has taken on a particularly acute form. *First They Took Rome* presents a compelling story of the dangers that arise when mass political parties are removed from public life.

**SPENCER BROWN** is co-chair of Boston DSA and a close observer of Italian politics.



Continued from page 5

**You're famous for skillfully clapping back at haters, but you don't come off as mean, and you never punch down. How do you stay so positive?**

Well, you know, positivity is an organizing tool. There's a reason why Jabari [Brisport] won, there's a reason why Zohran [Mamdani] won, why Marcela [Mitaynes] and Phara [Souffrant Forrest] won—these wins that we had on the state level in New York. Look at them. They are people that you want to be around. They are not cynical, and they do not engage in “more socialist than thou.” They are just relentlessly positive. And I think the most important thing that we can do in order to win is to be people and spaces that other people want to be around. We have to make Medicare for All and the Green New Deal something that everyone wants to be a part of. I think people sometimes are dismissive of this, thinking it's less serious. But who's gonna join your book club if it sucks, if they feel judged? We need to create something... excuse my language... that's fucking fun. 🌻

This interview has been edited and condensed for print. All told, AOC spent 40 minutes answering questions. In the uncut version at [dsausa.org/aoc](https://dsausa.org/aoc), she talks about her recent experience on a Teamster picket line, her blowout 2020 reelection wins against corporate-backed challengers, and much more.

Photograph (above): Corey Torpie



**READ MORE ONLINE**  
[dsausa.org/democratic-left/](https://dsausa.org/democratic-left/)

### AOC Joins Gamers to Educate Voters

In the run-up to the November election, AOC appeared on the popular online platform Twitch.tv to play the game *Among Us* and urge more than 400,000 viewers to get out to vote. In another appearance, she helped raise \$200,000 for coronavirus relief. Her willingness to go where other politicians have hesitated to tread has introduced many formerly apolitical people to left-wing politics.



Scan QR code to read more about Twitch and its potential for the Left online

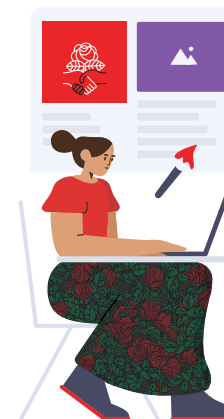


## BUILDING THE RELIGIOUS LEFT

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The *Rota Fortunae* or Wheel of Fortune has spun in our direction, creating new opportunities. Fortuna spins the wheel of time, changing the seasons and turning away the dried, thorny brambles of winter. We are inspired by the golden blossoms of new growth and we welcome the potential to build our power.



**Moving?** Let us know: [info@dsausa.org](mailto:info@dsausa.org). The Post Office charges for every returned copy of *Democratic Left*. We save money, and you don't miss an issue.

A large red graphic with white text and a white line-art illustration of a classical building with a flag on top. The text is arranged in a circular pattern around the central text.

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