

DEMOCRATIC LEFT

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THE MAGAZINE OF THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS OF AMERICA



CELEBRATING DSA AT 40



**DEMOCRATIC
LEFT**

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Democratic Socialists of America is 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.



RECOMMITTING TO WIN

BY MARIA SVART


This was a hard winter. And the future looks grim. Centrist Democrats will fail. In the face of a profoundly undemocratic system and with an allegiance to the owning class, they cannot build the broad electoral coalition we know it will take to beat the emboldened far Right. Meanwhile, in the economic realm, Joe Biden’s worker-friendly labor board offers only a short window of opportunity for us to expand our clout. We have our work cut out for us.

And there’s no better way to step forward than together. Conditions under this pandemic have prompted many of us to fight back, unite across our differences, and build power in our workplaces, whether at a school or a Starbucks. The future of our democracy and our planet is at stake. At work, in our communities, or at the voting booth, the only one who can enforce our rights is us—an independent mass movement.

But what does it mean to organize? To build power? To create an organization and movement strong enough to challenge and beat the ruling class in the political and economic realms? It means working with people even when you disagree on some issues, approaching every choice with a strategic eye, and analyzing every consequence for lessons to learn.

This year we celebrate DSA’s 40th anniversary, though the vast majority of our members joined in just the last few years. In our throwaway culture, there is tremendous pressure to discount our elders, but I always remember that we stand on the shoulders of the likes of Eugene V. Debs and Martin Luther King, Jr. There are many lessons for us if we but study our history and listen to those who came before us. And, in time, we’ll pass on our own wisdom to future organizers.

Besides learning from our collective experiences and engaging in good faith debate, we must open doors to bring in new people and grow our movement. This spring we’re going back to basics, and we need you to do your part in a massive campaign to reenergize our work. We will ask expired members to rejoin and current members to recommit. We will revisit the fundamentals of organizing and remind ourselves that this is all about building our power.

Now is the time for action. Too much is at stake. We have the world to win. 

JOIN! RECOMMIT! BUILD WORKING CLASS POWER!

DSA members are supporting striking workers, organizing their workplaces, fighting for a Green New Deal, and electing socialists to office all over the country. Join the struggle and build the mass multiracial working class movement we need. We have a world to win!

DSAUSA.ORG/JOIN



BACK TO THE BEGINNING: DSA AT 40

Jack Clark and Richard Healey Talk to Democratic Left

BY CHRIS RIDDIOUGH

In February of 1982, members of the New American Movement (NAM) and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) met in Detroit to join together as DSA. *Democratic Left* spoke with two of the key players in effecting the merger: Richard Healey (RH) of NAM and Jack Clark (JC) of DSOC.

What was the impetus for the merger? What were the initial steps?

RH: In 1975 or 1976 I was national secretary for the New American Movement. I realized that NAM's growth and, even more, its ability to act as a socialist organization, was declining. The energy and excitement of the sixties was dying. NAM's prospects for serious growth or serious impact on the world, particularly in leadership in the women's movement, looked very grim. We had to ask, "what would it take to survive as a socialist feminist organization, who are our friends in the world, who is sort of like us but not quite the same?" In '76, or '77, I called Jack and we had a pleasant conversation. That led me to want to start to have this bigger discussion.

JC: I remember talking about the organizations having a lot in common in terms of where DSOC was coming from. In a meeting around 1977, Jim Chapin made a motion that we should start merger talks with NAM—that was the immediate impetus. Jim played the "Man from Mars" kind of thing about why are these two organizations in different realms? They have so much in common. I had been in the Young People's Socialist League and part of the leadership of the opposition caucus that was anti-war and aligned with Mike [Harrington]

and his coalition. Because of the faction fighting in the Socialist Party (SP) in the early 1970s, we decided to form DSOC.

NAM was viewed at least by some people in NAM as being to the left of DSOC. And there were people in NAM who thought the merger would move everybody to the right. Can you tell me more about what kinds of debates there were?

RH: In 1969, after the explosive SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] convention, which broke it apart, *Socialist Revolution* carried an article by Michael Lerner titled "Towards a New American Movement." I and many people read it and thought, "Ah, yes, this, this is roughly right. It's the best of the Old and the New Left. It's feminist. It's about race and class." And so, I, like many, said, "Let's form something." It was an in-gathering of people who'd been active in the sixties.

The merger process started sometime around 1977. And in NAM

it met with opposition from various groupings. Most were younger people. They argued that we were to the left of the DSOC and we differed on feminism and other major issues. Michael (Harrington) and DSOC follow the Democratic Party too closely. Others said it sounded kind of sensible. You're influencing a mass party, and we don't do that. But that was also seen as a sign of too much compromise. So, the caucus against the merger formed. And ultimately, they quit the organization. NAM lost up to a third of our activists. One of the things about NAM that was valuable was the activism. We had very few people who were only paper members.

Now, some of the oldest people who joined NAM were from the old Communist Party. They opposed it. My mother [Dorothy Healey, who had been a major Communist leader in California until she left the party] spoke against the merger, while I spoke for it. Nonetheless, when the merger happened, she and others like her remained: all the old lefties stayed. The process took about two-and-a-half years with a merger committee from both sides discussing each issue. If we look back to 1972 as a milestone when NAM was fully formed, two things were happening: the decline of the mass mood of the sixties and the advent of neoliberalism. But we didn't see that at the time.

DSOC/NAM → Democratic Socialists of America

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Page header from the first issue of *Democratic Left* published after the merger convention.

“Isolation breeds isolation. If you’re not part of ongoing struggles, showing that you have a distinctive role to play, a leadership role to play, then why pay the extra price of being a socialist?”

JG: [Richard] Nixon actually gave a major speech after the '72 election talking about a new era in American politics of scaling back government. Because of Watergate, that moment of a right-wing ascendancy collapsed. [Jimmy] Carter picked up some of the Nixon themes with policies like deregulation.

RH: Right. Those two things are going on. I still thought revolution was in the cards in 1972. I mean, I'm not sure how much I believed that, but I certainly talked about it. And so, we didn't understand the bigger things going on in society, which makes the merger, frankly, even more important in being able to withstand the assault of neoliberalism.

JC: DSOC flourished in that period because of Nixon's collapse. We were accused in the faction fights in the SP of being enemies of the working class, essentially, because we did not follow George Meany's [head of the AFL-CIO] line on everything, including the Vietnam War. We were very, very aware of needing to relate to the labor movement, so, we paid a lot of attention to an anti-Meany tendency within the AFL-CIO. The Machinists union saw defeating Nixon as a high priority. And they were really furious that Meany didn't. Other unions and union officials joined in. We were particularly attuned to being against neoliberalism, because a lot of our leadership lived in New York City. And the New York City fiscal crisis was sort of a staging for carrying out neoliberal policies.

In the first *Democratic Left* published after the merger, Jim Chapin wrote about how unique an event this was in U.S. history (See p. 5). He also mentioned the merger that formed a socialist party in 1901. They grew to 100,000 members by the end of the first decade. DSA was formed 40 years ago, and only now has close to 100,000 members. Do you see any parallels? Does DSA's formation have any bearing on where we are today?

RH: Was the merger worth it? Yes, I think it was. Look, could things have been better after the merger? Could those of us in NAM have had a more coherent way of trying to ensure that there was more political education in the joint organization, more recruitment of activists? Sure, but the impulse behind it was right: that the dangers to the Left were our own internal dangers. Our internal demons are sectarianism, marginality, fear of liberals, fear of the center, fear of losing our identity in some larger, some less revolutionary place. Those demons have constantly, constantly, since 1870, bedeviled the Left. We were taking on those demons on both sides of the merger, and we were right to do so. Did it pay off immediately? Well, we survived. So, in one sense, it absolutely did pay off immediately, when almost nothing survived of much of the Left of the 1970s. DSA is the only thing that has emerged as a mass entity. And why did it take so long? Because isolation

breeds isolation. If you're not part of ongoing struggles, showing that you have a distinctive role to play, a leadership role to play, then why pay the extra price of being a socialist? It took the Bernie campaign and Bernie's leadership and DSA's capacity to respond, to be part of something larger, which is critical for socialists. Otherwise, the gap between socialists and others in our society is too big.

JC: For DSA, the equivalent to the 1900 convention was a merger of the existing DSA formation with large elements of the Bernie campaign. One of the reasons DSA has thrived is that the approach to Bernie's campaign was not, "We're going to set up shop and lecture people about how wrong they are and how they have to move further to the left." The approach was, "This is a great initiative. Let's join in and figure out how we can contribute to it and be a positive part again of something larger." And that positive nonsectarian tone is exactly why DSA thrived.

Any final thoughts about the merger itself, what we can learn from it now? What direction DSA should be going in at this point?

JC: I'd go back to what Richard said about how it's imperative that we connect ourselves to larger forces. If you want to cite Marx, you can take the chapter in *Capital* about the fight for the ten-hour day, which Marx called the essential political economy of the working class. It is an imperative that

with the working class in motion, any victory is liberating, and every defeat is going to isolate us. We need people who really understand that this is a long struggle. There are going to be some serious defeats, and we need to position ourselves to be there for the victories. 🌹

JACK CLARK served as national secretary for the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee from 1973 to 1979. In 1972, he was coordinator for the Coalition Caucus in the Socialist Party.

RICHARD HEALEY was chair of the New American Movement and later served as the chair of the NAM Political Education Committee.

CHRIS RIDDIOUGH served on the National Interim Committee of NAM and is a member of the *Democratic Left* editorial team. An article on socialist education drawn from a longer version of this interview will appear on the *Democratic Left* blog.

HANGING TOGETHER

BY **JIM CHAPIN** (FROM *DEMOCRATIC LEFT*, MARCH 1982)

Unity—a seductive word for everyone, particularly for those on the left. All too many times, however, the promises of unity and a bright future have been belied by the grim realities of post-union history. But some unions have succeeded. . . .

Two of the most positive cases in this century were the union of the American left in 1901 that created the Socialist Party of America, and the union of the French left in 1969 that created the *Parti Socialiste*.

On July 29, 1901, 125 delegates, representing 6,500 socialists, met in Indianapolis. Most of them were from Morris Hillquit’s so-called “Kangaroo” faction of the Socialist Labor party. . . . Some were independent socialists, but the majority of the other delegates represented the Social Democratic party, whose best-known leaders were former Populist Eugene Debs and Milwaukee socialist Victor Berger.

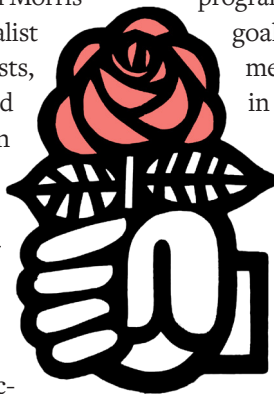
Within a decade of this convention, the unified group, the Socialist Party of America, had attracted 100,000 members. In 1912, Debs received a higher percentage of the presidential vote than did the British Labor party in the elections of 1910. Despite the crises of the World War I era, which split and destroyed the old Socialist party, that party remains the most successful expression of American socialism to date.

In 1969, delegates representing various factions of the French left came together to create the *Parti Socialiste*. . . . The 1969 unity brought together the [old French Socialist party] SFIO, François Mitterrand’s CJR (Convention of Republican Institutions), elements of the old French Radical party, and most of the independent socialist “clubs” that had sprung up

during the decade. A few years later, Michel Rocard brought his faction of the PSU (the Unified Socialist party) into the new PS. Within a dozen years of its founding, the PS elected the first left president of the French Fifth Republic, as well as an absolute parliamentary majority.

What distinguished these successful mergers from the many unsuccessful ones that litter left history? The most important factor was an agreement on a strategy. The American Socialists of 1901 agreed on the concept of an independent, electorally oriented party which would combine a program of immediate demands with a long-run socialist goal and would work with the existing labor movement. It was the collapse of this strategic agreement in later years that led to a collapse of the party. The French Socialists of 1969 agreed on the Mitterrand strategy of a broad electoral coalition with the French Communists, but a coalition in which the Socialists would keep their identity distinct from that of the Communists. It was the continued prosecution of this strategy for a dozen years that finally led Mitterrand to the president’s chair.

The DSOC and NAM delegates meeting in Detroit represent as many socialists as were represented in the Indianapolis meeting in 1901. They represent people who have come from all the main intellectual and organizational currents in the American left of this century: Socialists, Communists, Trotskyists, new leftists, liberals, labor, the women’s movement, and the civil rights movement. The future lies before us, and only time and what we do will determine whether Detroit in 1982 will have the historical resonance of Indianapolis in 1901. 🌹





LESSONS FROM EVICTION COURT

FRAN
QUIGLEY

Natasha G's eviction hearing was set to begin at any minute. A law student and I stood outside the court entrance, taking hurried notes as she explained her situation. Her abuser had been arrested recently. (I am not using clients' real names.) That protected her from his drunken beatings, but also left her without his income to help support their five kids. After she fell behind on rent, Natasha took a job 35 miles away from home, working in a warehouse on the 6 p.m. to 4 a.m. shift.

She has a rickety car and tenuous nighttime childcare arrangements. She is struggling with lack of sleep and growing health problems and does not have much help with the kids during the day. We rushed into court and helped her convince the judge to give her a few weeks to pull in some paychecks that would allow her to catch up on rent.

Her struggle is far too common. With massive work income loss during the COVID pandemic and rent taking up a huge chunk of the financial obligations of low-income families, a tsunami of evictions has descended on the nation. Nearly six million U.S. households are behind on their rent.

In our law school housing clinic, here are a few lessons we have learned:

1. Evictions exist because affordable housing doesn't.

Sylvia G lives with a severe illness and faces rent costs that exceed her monthly disability check. Jasmine T is the mother of an 11-day-old baby and still recovering from a difficult pregnancy and birth.

For them and millions of others in this country, even run-down apartments or homes cost an unsustainable

percentage of their income. Experts consider such renters to be "cost-burdened." An estimated 37 million households fall into that category.

In real life, "cost-burdened" means that our clients struggle with paying 60%, 70%, even 80% of their monthly income on rent—until they can't. A health crisis happens, their car breaks down, their child needs to stay home from school because of illness or COVID exposure. Paychecks get reduced or stop altogether. The rent comes due. And then we see them in court.

2. For-profit corporations gonna profit. James F. was 82 years old and had lived in his apartment for 30 years. Last year, a corporation bought his building and refused to renew his lease. James's neighborhood was gentrifying around him, and the corporation was determined to reap the benefits. It threw James out along with other fixed-income seniors. The building was repainted and rebranded: then the corporation started pulling in wealthier tenants.

It was about profits, and there was zero hesitation about evicting. A landlord or attorney will often tell us some variation of, "I am sorry your client will not have a place to live, but it's not my responsibility." And they are right. If we really consider housing to be a human right, and polls show most Americans do, it is madness to entrust a money-seeking enterprise, usually a for-profit corporation, with ensuring that right.

But for more than three in every four Americans who live on an income low enough to qualify them for federally subsidized housing, James included, there is no help available.

Rental housing laws vary by state and even by city, but DSA chapters should know that a few principles usually apply across the country:

- Landlords are not allowed to rent housing “as is,” disavowing any responsibility for poor conditions. Local laws usually require that the home meet health and safety codes, and local health departments may force them to meet those requirements.
- Landlords are not usually allowed to engage in “do-it-themselves” eviction. Most states require the landlord to get a court order before forcing a tenant to move, and that court order should rarely be issued unless the tenant first had notice of the proceedings and a chance to present in court.
- Leases are binding contracts on both parties. Unless the lease allows it, it is unlawful for landlords to raise rents or impose new conditions during the middle of the lease term.
- Legal help is available to tenants. Many communities have recently adopted right-to-counsel laws for eviction cases, and many others significantly expanded their legal aid programs during the pandemic. Check your local legal aid organizations to see if they can advise you, or even represent you. — F.Q.

Public housing agencies go for years on end without even opening their wait lists for vouchers or subsidized units. Often clients’ only option is to scrape together enough rent for private housing. As soon as landlords think the arrangement is not profitable enough, they tell the tenants to hit the streets.

3. Social programs work. In August of 2021, all our current eviction-court clients were safely housed. Most were using stimulus checks and/or extended unemployment benefits to make ends meet. The Centers for Disease Control eviction moratorium was protecting the roof over their heads. As a result, poverty rates actually dropped during the pandemic.

By the first week of September, everything had changed. The Supreme Court struck down the eviction moratorium, the extended unemployment benefits ran out, stimulus checks stopped coming. The safety net that had protected millions was abruptly pulled away. Landings have been rough: Our client Patricia K. was evicted and is now living in a friend’s garden shed. Elise P. is sleeping in her storage unit. Kenneth M. and his young sons are living out of their car.

4. Evictions are the business end of U.S. racism and sexism. The tenants forced into the eviction courts where we work are overwhelmingly Black, even though the jurisdiction the courts serve is majority white. Often, the tenants are young mothers. That lines up with national and state data showing that Black tenants are far more likely to lose their homes. Black women with children are particularly at risk of being evicted, continuing the shameful legacy of racist U.S. housing practices.

5. We don’t practice what we preach. The DSA believes that housing is a human right, and a majority of Americans concur. The government, acting on our behalf, needs to ensure that right is honored. The reality, however, is that three of four families eligible for federally subsidized housing don’t receive it. As a nation, we dedicate a huge amount of resources to housing; we just don’t direct those resources toward those who need it.

Consider the mortgage interest tax deduction: The vast majority of its benefits accrue to individuals who already enjoy top-20% incomes. The mortgage interest deduction alone costs the government \$70 billion per year, more than the price to provide subsidized housing vouchers to every eligible person in the nation. Or consider also the tens of billions of dollars a year in tax benefits showered on corporate landlords.

Some industrialized nations, instead of treating housing as a tool for the rich to get richer, try to guarantee housing for all who need it. They don’t necessarily succeed, because it’s impossible under capitalism, but their example and the work of many DSA chapters and others prove that we can ensure affordable housing for many, many more people than we do now. 🌹

FRAN QUIGLEY is director of the Health and Human Rights Clinic at Indiana University McKinney School of Law, the author of *Religious Socialism: Faith in Action for a Better World*, and a DSA member. An earlier version of this article appeared in *Common Dreams*.

GIVE US SHELTER!

Across the country, DSA chapters are responding to a national housing crisis. This edition of Chapter and Verse reviews some of these efforts. More reports from around the country, including legislative victories and tenant organizing in Connecticut, trans-Atlantic lessons learned in Philadelphia, and a socialist running to transform Austin's eviction courts, can be found online at democraticleft.dsausa.org.

BY ADAM KAISER

WINSTON-SALEM DSA, COALITIONS, AND RESIDENTS RALLY TO PROTECT PUBLIC HOUSING



Photograph by Rachel Fern

Crystal Towers United Member Samuel Grier addresses the media at a January victory rally in the campaign to protect Crystal Towers

Crystal Towers occupies a valuable piece of real estate. The public housing building serves a group of people ill-served by the housing market: the poor, elderly, and disabled. They do not fit into a profit-driven vision of the future of downtown Winston-Salem, North Carolina, setting up these residents and their allies—including Winston-Salem DSA—for an ultimately successful fight to keep the building in public hands.

The boomerang-shaped, tanish-yellow building rises 11-stories tall right on the edge of downtown. It has stood there since 1970—even as the surrounding neighborhood “practically became a gated community,” catering to the affluent, in the words of Phillip Carter, a member of DSA and a core member of the grassroots local group Housing Justice Now. The sale of the building, announced by the Housing Authority of Winston-Salem in 2018, threatened to complete the transformation of the area.

“If they [had] sold Crystal Towers, it would have been rennovated, it would have been made into luxury apartments, and there wouldn't have been... any low-income people in downtown Winston,” Carter said. “We did not want to see that.”

The housing authority justified its plans by citing an eye-watering \$7 million figure to maintain and modernize the building. Some digging, however, uncovered that this figure was not all it appeared to be: that sum represented an estimate of the building's needs over 20 years. More research disclosed another concerning discrepancy. The housing authority had committed to rehouse the roughly 200 residents of Crystal Towers elsewhere—but given the already long waiting list for public housing in the area, its ability to fulfill that commitment seemed doubtful.

This research formed part of a multi-year campaign to keep the building in public hands, including the organization of a tenant organization, Crystal Towers United, with the help of DSA and Housing Justice Now members. Residents were ready to seize the moment when a surge of federal COVID relief dollars took

away any excuse that local government could not afford repairs. In January 2022 the housing authority officially scuppered its plans and announced plans to partner with the city to start paying for repair and renovations, starting with \$1 million to fix the building's often broken elevators.

Building on its success in the campaign, Winston-Salem DSA is

currently trying to organize tenants across Winston-Salem, and pushing state laws to protect the rights of renters. And the chapter continues to track the situation at Crystal Towers with the goal of helping residents make sure the city follows through on its commitments. Because DSA sees the connection between the housing

system and capitalism, Carter said, it is able to identify the shared interest of working people in fair provision of housing.

“Don’t just think that this affects your traditional marginalized people. It’s affecting everyone. If you’re not a part of those that have, your head is in the guillotine, bottom line,” Carter said.

PORTLAND DSA READIES CAMPAIGN TO GET EVICTION REPRESENTATION FOR ALL ON THE BALLOT

It wasn't even close. Supporters of Preschool for All in Multnomah County, including Portland DSA, needed a simple majority. They got 64 percent of the vote in the November 2020 election. Now Portland DSA and its allies are looking to replicate that success as they try to guarantee representation in eviction court.

The Eviction Representation for All (ERA) ballot measure would fund attorneys for anybody facing eviction with a .75 percent capital gains tax, which is expected to raise \$10 to \$15 million. A newly created Tenants Resource Office of the county government would also be responsible for a rental registry, tenant education and outreach, and funds for crisis payments to help reach settlements in eviction cases and to pay liens against tenants due to court costs.

Organizers say going directly to the ballot box can provide distinct advantages over pressure campaigns targeting elected officials. It allows proponents to put forward as aggressive a design of the policy as they think a winning coalition will support, instead of compromising to allay the concerns of jumpy legislators.

The local context in Portland—where elected officials have shifted

to the right in the face of a cycle of protests in 2020—also recommended the approach. In an otherwise disappointing period at the ballot box, the passage of preschool for all had been a big win for working people.


“We had no hope that we could see, or at least the path that we saw was going to be so compromising that we were not ready [to try to secure the right to counsel by lobbying elected officials]. We wanted to have the most robust, most progressive plan we could have in this city,” said Evan Burchfield, DSA’s co-coordinator for the campaign. “DSA and a lot of other organizations that were part of universal preschool knew that we could do that through the ballot measure, the initiative process.”

The measure could appear on the ballot in November 2022 or May 2023, depending on how quickly the campaign finishes the process of gathering the necessary signatures. If the bill does pass, more work will need to be done to make sure the county government follows through. The coalition is already planning an implementation team and tightening the ballot measure’s language to make sure it allows as little wiggle room as possible, according to Colleen Carroll,

the policy coordinator for the ERA campaign.

The ballot measure will put voters face-to-face with an alternative to the fear mongering about homelessness that has become a staple of right-wing politics.

“[Displacement] is a real issue in Portland. It is very often what gives the right wing that poses as Democrats in this city and in this county the ammunition they need to pass regressive policies,” Burchfield said. “They call out our houseless neighbors as a blight on the city when, in fact, those people are residents of this city, people who have been evicted, people who have nowhere else to go. Instead of passing policies that prevent displacement, what they do is they pay for more cops.”

“If you’re actually concerned about our houseless neighbors—not just about your streets being dirty—but you think it’s a crime that there are... people on the streets without homes then you should support eviction representation for all.” 

ADAM KAISER is on the editorial team of *Democratic Left* and a member of Mid-Missouri DSA.

MARCH 2020 • First
YOLO DSA meeting



MARCH - JUNE 2020
Protesters hit the streets
for George Floyd.



ABOVE: A “March for Justice” to the Davis police headquarters drew about 1,000 people.

DECEMBER 2020 • Yolo DSA helps mobilize public comments for police reform.

137 COMMENTS FOR

22 COMMENTS AGAINST

ABOVE: Distribution of public comments before the City Council

FEBRUARY 2021
YOLO DSA public safety campaign launches: night schools, phone banking, & more.

ABOLITIONISTS WIN BIG-ISH IN SLEEPY COLLEGE TOWN

BY **MORGANNE BLAIS-MCPHERSON** AND **DOV SALKOFF**

Last fall, 10 years after Davis, California, became infamous for a photo of UC Davis security police pepper-spraying seated, nonviolent Occupy Wall Street protesters, Davis activists won a year-long abolitionist campaign to create a seven-person public safety department. This new department will take on tasks previously assigned to the city’s police department and is a significant step toward delegitimizing and hacking away at the police state.

In this sleepy, majority-white and Democratic college town of about 70,000, Davis’s biggest selling points are its quaint farmers’ market and pervasive bike culture. Although socialist and other leftist organizations exist, they are small and suffer from student turnover. The non-student organizations gravitate around the Democratic Party.

It is in this unpromising environment that an organized effort to transform policing grew and won.

A WINNING COALITION

In early winter 2020, a coalition of groups concerned with issues of public safety developed between Yolo DSA, a local progressive group (Yolo People Power), UAW 2865 (the union representing UC academic student workers) and, later, UAW 5810 (representing UC postdocs). This coalitional effort was made possible by individual DSA comrades’

participation in those organizations, as well as their interpersonal relationships.

The coalition settled on one shared demand: the creation of a Department of Public Safety independent from the Davis Police Department. Tasked with traffic and code enforcement, welfare checks, homeless outreach, mental health crisis response, and more, the proposed department would divert up to 44% of dispatcher calls away from the police.

When Yolo DSA took on the campaign, efforts around public safety had already started. Yolo People Power had recently rallied people to make public comments on a “reimagining public safety” report commissioned after the George Floyd protests. A staggering four hours of public comment followed. Davis residents wanted change.

Over the next seven months, Yolo DSA led a series of Socialist Night Schools on policing, held numerous phone banks, did door-to-door canvassing, and co-organized protests with coalition members. The national nature of DSA allowed the chapter to call in more knowledgeable speakers from across the country, while the coalitional nature of the local effort allowed unionized DSA phone bankers to call thousands of union members.

This combination of weekly night schools and phone banks helped grow DSA members’ political knowledge

and confidence. The chapter had only been founded in March 2020, and strategic leadership development was crucial to both its growth and the campaign.

We quickly learned how to flood the City Council with emails, make public comments, and circulate and deliver publicly an open letter signed by hundreds of residents. Coalition members wrote op-ed articles, scheduled coalitional meetings with individual City Council members, and had ongoing conversations with elected officials. This pressure won the campaign's first concession: Outreach to those living on the streets was removed from the police department. Our central demand, though, was ignored. Not one City Council member would commit to an independent public safety department. So, we took to the streets. Protest followed protest, keeping the campaign in the public eye and mind.

On the day of the budget vote in June of 2021, a caravan of 30 decorated cars; bikes; and a six-person, pedal-powered vehicle drove slowly through downtown Davis to City Hall. Honking cars surrounded the Council chambers as coalition members gathered in front to chant, rally, and dance. We did not win, but the mayor was clearly uneasy, and the city manager apologized for the "appearance" of an increased police budget and full-time police positions after several officials had promised that there would be no increases.

We kept up the pressure. After a chalking outside the mayor's house and publication of another critical op-ed piece, the mayor's inner circle began to consider the coalition's demands. Concessions finally came by autumn, when the the City Council voted to allocate \$1.17 million over three years to a mobile crisis program in partnership with the county. A few weeks later, it voted to create a new Department

of Social Services and Housing, incorporating several functions of the coalition's proposed public safety department.

LESSONS LEARNED

As a result of the campaign win, four positions will be moved from the police department to the new Department of Social Services and Housing to do outreach to those living with homelessness. In addition, the new department will coordinate code enforcement and mental health crisis response with the county, with the aid of two new city staff. Suicide calls to 911 will be dispatched to trained mental healthcare professionals, not the police. We didn't get everything we wanted, but now that the precedent has been set, it will be much easier for activists to push for more resources and staffing down the line.

There is still much work ahead. Traffic enforcement cannot be removed from the police department because California law currently prohibits automated speed enforcement and hinders municipalities from enacting civilian traffic enforcement. Tensions surrounding the role of police defunding existed even within our chapter, as initial demands to freeze police hires later shifted to a 10% decrease in the police budget.

Our inability to arrive at a shared funding consensus, both internally and with coalition partners, meant that the allocation of \$790,000 to the new department came from American Rescue Plan funds rather than as a reallocation from the police budget. And, as we write, Davis City Council is hiring two more sworn police officers and an additional dispatcher. This stark reversal from elected officials' initial reassurances against future police hires

(Continued on page 14)

APRIL 2021 • Coalition delivers an open letter to mayor of Davis.



FIND IT ONLINE

City Council votes to take homeless outreach responsibilities away from police.

“ Marginalized people in our community, people with mental health issues, and all of us are being hurt by the policing system that exists today - **YOLO DSA** member comment at Council meeting

MAY 2021 • Escalation: a panelist discussion and protest co-hosted by **YOLO DSA**.

JUNE 2021 • **YOLO DSA** leads a car caravan to disrupt Davis City Council meeting.

SEPTEMBER 2021 • City Council votes to give **\$1.17 MILLION** for a "Crisis Now" program.

OCTOBER 2021 City Council votes to create a department of social services and housing.

DECEMBER 2021 • But the fight isn't over—two new police hired.

NAMING THE UNNAMEABLE: ANOTHER LOOK AT EDWARD SAID'S *ORIENTALISM*

BY YASSER ALI NASSER

In the 40-plus years since Edward Said's book *Orientalism* was published, many outlets and authors have reflected on Said's legacy. One of the most recent is an authorized 2021 biography by his student and friend Timothy Brennan called *Places of Mind*. Although he died in 2003, Said's thought still lives in the minds of leftists around the world. It would not be an exaggeration to state that *Orientalism* was one of the most influential works of the last half century. Not only did it help give shape to a variety of academic subdisciplines and genres of analysis, but it spread beyond the confines of university lecture halls and graduate student seminars to leave a permanent imprint on public discourses of racism and imperialism.

The general premise of *Orientalism* seems deceptively simple to contemporary readers: Said argued that there is a dominant notion of the "Orient" that colors how the West views the "Rest." He called this "Orientalism." Orientalism was a "style of thought" that presupposed the West and the Rest—the Islamic world, in particular—as fundamentally different. Academic centers and cultural and government institutions made implicit (and explicit) assumptions about how the "Other" acts. Islamic countries came to be viewed as places that needed to be colonized and "civilized," and thus they became a foil and contrast to the so-called West.

What was most striking about the argument of *Orientalism* was not necessarily its novelty—many of Said's

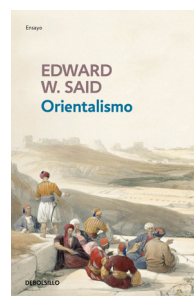
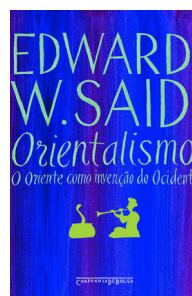
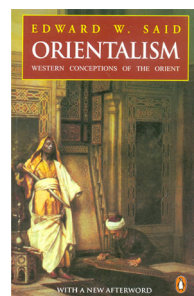
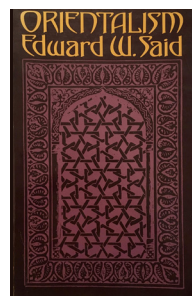
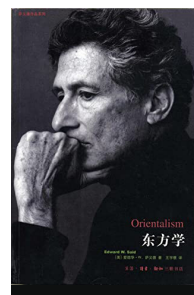
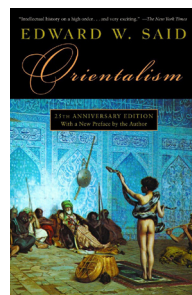
arguments had been made before, particularly by authors writing in Arabic—but its bold and often polemical tone. The immediate reaction to it was a mix of high praise and defensive critiques. Prominent figures in the field of Middle Eastern studies attacked Said as a dilettante unfamiliar with Arab culture. Some critiques were more serious, pointing at a few contradictions and flaws in Said's methodology. Said mostly focused on U.S., French, and British depictions of the "Orient," ignoring the rich history of German and Russian scholarship on the region. Likewise, he dismissed the economic and material forces undergirding imperialist mindsets. A famous critique by Syrian Marxist Sadiq Jalal al-Azm noted that Said's polemical tone hurt the details of his arguments. By tracing the origins of *Orientalism* not necessarily to just the origin of European colonialism but to a hazy past dominated by such figures as Homer and Dante, Said implies that *Orientalism* is a natural part of European thought, thus essentializing the "West" in the same way he accuses Western authors of essentializing the "East."

In addition to critiques of Said's methods, some scholars called into question the novelty of his ideas. Said's general argument borrowed from the lesser-known works of many other Arab writers, including Albert Hourani and Anouar Abdel-Malek. Though he noted this intellectual debt, his own work came to overshadow theirs. To that end, as contemporary critics have noted, Said was in a sense tokenized, taken by U.S. academia as an exceptional symbol of Arab intellectualism, contrasted with

his contemporaries instead of having his work situated in a longer tradition of work that critiqued the cultural dimensions of imperialism.

Following the publication of *Orientalism*, Said spent much of his time responding to these critiques, often successfully. He acknowledged many of the book's contradictions but stuck to his core argument: that imperialism created—and was then justified by—a discourse that presupposed the West's cultural and civilizational superiority. That argument holds up today.

Other aspects of the book have not aged as well. Said's emphasis on



cultural production and grandiose statements about the continuities between ancient and contemporary *Orientalism* weaken the book's empirical core. Even scholars sympathetic to Said's claims have pointed out that *Orientalism* is less a single discourse produced by largely white and male institutions in the West and more a heterogeneous body of discourses co-authored by people at the margins, both in imperial centers and in the colonies themselves. Others have noted that *Orientalism* affects the "ruled" as much as it does the "ruler," with many former colonies uncritically accepting assumptions about their supposedly "barbaric" pasts.

Some have taken their critiques further, arguing that Said kickstarted an age of scholarship that turned away from a rigorous analysis of economic forces in favor of vaguer and less empirically bound concepts of

culture and language. The result, while helping to flesh out justifications for imperialism, sometimes misses the forest for the trees, lost in its own esoteric language.

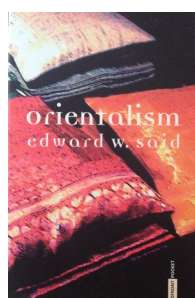
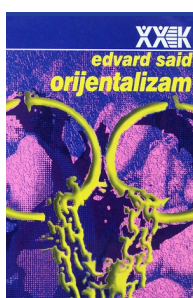
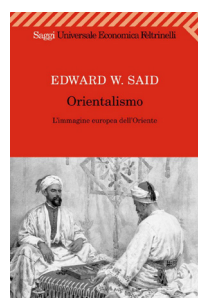
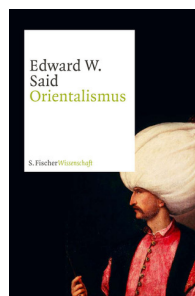
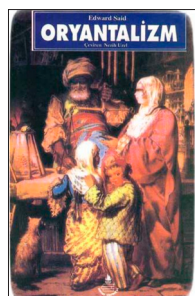
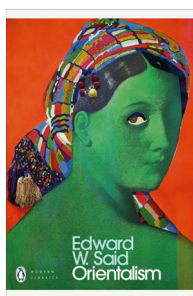
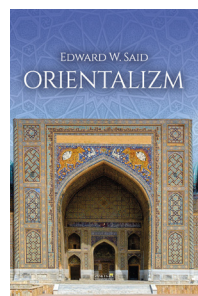
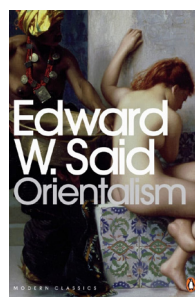
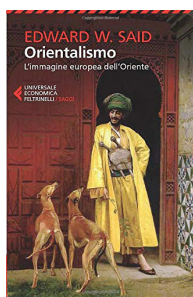
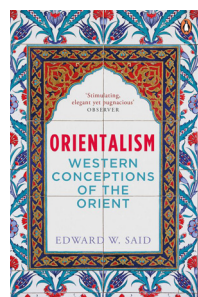
Many have tried to dismiss Said himself as emblematic of the ivory tower intellectual uninterested in "real" political analysis and activism. Among some members of the Left, "postcolonialism" and "identity politics" are seen as the reason for our intellectual and organizational failures and stagnation, however unfairly, and Said has been linked to both. But Said remained an avowedly critical and involved scholar, using the tremendous prestige and platform that *Orientalism* gave him to reflect on the duty that intellectuals have to the public and to radical causes.

Nowhere was this clearer than in his passionate advocacy for the Palestinian cause and his ceaseless critiques of U.S. interventionism in the Middle East and

anti-Arab discrimination at home. Said never separated his academic work from his activism, noting in a letter to a fellow historian Roger Owen that he found his work to be ultimately a "contribution to the struggle against imperialism." From his association with various Arab thinkers and revolutionaries to his participation in the struggles of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, including as a member of its "parliament in exile," Said remained a steadfast critic of imperialist aggression in the Middle East. As the struggle for Palestine waned, with the Palestinian leadership largely acquiescing to Israeli demands following the Oslo Accords, Said turned his anger against them, too, showing that he was willing to hold any oppressor to account, regardless of nationality. To that end, he used his cosmopolitan position as an Arab intellectual working in the West to destabilize both imperialist and self-imposed stereotypes about Arabs, Muslims, and "Others."

In that sense, Said's power and influence were not limited to *Orientalism* or the works that followed it. Rather, he should be remembered for his challenge to all of us to develop a vocabulary for critiquing the discourses of cultural superiority and civilizational hierarchies that have given shape to the world around us. In short, Said empowered us to name the unnameable, pointing to the everyday, mundane structures of knowledge and information that enable the enduring oppression of the Global South. To that end, he embodied the best of the radical intellectual tradition, as summarized by Marx himself: Many have "interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it." 🌹

YASSER ALI NASSER is on the editorial team of *Democratic Left* and a PhD candidate at the University of Chicago.



NATIONAL POLITICAL COMMITTEE SETS PRIORITIES FOR COMING PERIOD

BY KRISTIAN HERNANDEZ

At its August National Convention, DSA passed an ambitious platform and set of resolutions to guide our work in the next couple years. As DSA members, we will need to organize a massive number of people to join our organization and work with broad coalitions to achieve our shared goals. In the first quarter of its new term, the NPC chose the Labor, Electoral, and Green New Deal resolutions as national priorities. Internally, the organization will focus on our Growth and Development Committee, Multiracial Organizing Committee, and Staffing and Fundraising planning. Additionally, the NPC hopes to standardize committees in order to strengthen these national bodies to advance work mandated by Convention. The NPC unanimously passed a budget that funds our national priorities and invests in national committee work more than in previous years. We

“In a time when many on the Left are in despair, we believe that building a strong organization will enable us to win campaigns. We must be visible, clear in our demands, and buoyed by the culture of care necessary to weather the times.”

also approved a proposal at our winter NPC meeting to concentrate on the Recommitment Drive, a national dues drive effort that will incorporate our Labor, Green New Deal, and Electoral work. This includes supporting electoral primaries and hiring a labor staffer to support strike solidarity and efforts to organize Amazon and Starbucks. In a time when many on the Left are in despair, we believe that building a strong organization will enable us to win campaigns. We must be visible, clear in our demands, and buoyed by the culture of care necessary to weather the times.

Let’s get to work. 🌹

KRISTIAN HERNANDEZ is chair of the National Political Committee.

Abolitionists Win Big-ish

(Continued from page 11)

emphasizes the importance of continuous, escalating pressure on progressive elected officials, even after concessions are won.

We are not alone in learning this lesson the hard way. Many cities have faced backlash. In Austin, Texas, a “refund the police” campaign emerged in response to local slashing of police budgets. This reactionary effort was defeated by the coalition No Way on Prop A in November 2020. Be aware that if you’re not organizing, you can be assured that your opponents are.

Our participation in Davis’s public safety campaign shows how transformative even a small win can be. Not only can organizing lead a handful of people to change local government, but that handful can become smarter, nimbler, bigger, and more rooted in their community in the process. Holding tight to one’s principles, having the courage to speak up against power, intentionally building leaders and organizers, working alongside labor unions and activist organizations to reach as many ordinary people as possible while

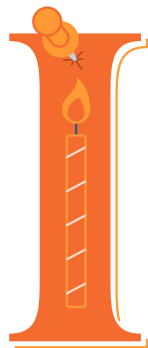
learning from each other—that’s how we will build a socialist future on more solid ground. 🌹

MORGANNE BLAIS-MCPHERSON is a member of Yolo DSA and UAW Local 2865.

DOV SALKOFF is a member of Chicago DSA and former co-chair of Yolo DSA.

BY DAPHNA THIER AND MARIANELA D'APRILE

Why universal programs are a good thing, actually



Imagine you are seven years old. You arrive at your best friend Sara's birthday party. She is turning six. In the corner, there's a big cake.

After Sara has blown out the candles, her mom tells all the kids that in order to get a piece of cake, they'll have to play Pin the Tail on the Donkey. Whoever gets the closest will get the biggest piece of cake, the next-closest will get a smaller piece, and so on and so forth.



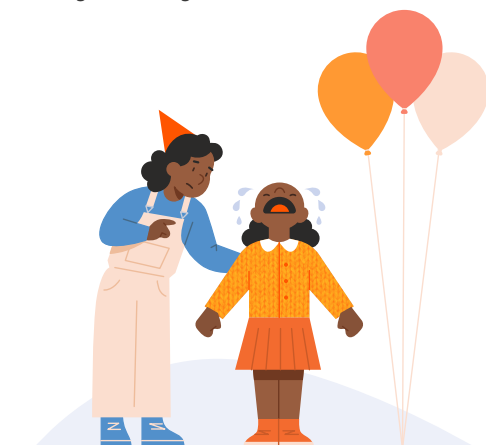
The donkey is really high up on the wall, so only Johnny, your tallest friend, can reach it. He gets a big piece of cake. Ellie, Sara's little sister, is too short to reach at all, so she doesn't get any.

Johnny's eaten so much cake that he's sick, and Ellie is crying because she can't have any.

Sound ridiculous? Yes, it does. There was enough cake for everyone, and no one had to get sick or go without.

This is also how we divide up other things everyone should have. Some kids, just because of where they live, go to better schools than others. Some people, just because of where they work, have better healthcare than others.

But everyone needs education, and everyone needs healthcare. Just like every kid at a birthday party needs cake.



Illustrations by Paul Zappia

ABOUT THE COVER

Forty years ago, members of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee and the New American Movement gathered in Detroit to form the Democratic Socialists of America. Photographer Gretchen Donart captured the hope, intensity, camaraderie, and excitement of the moment as she snapped photo after photo. Recent DSA conventions, while much larger, share the same enthusiasms and commitments. Our thanks to Megan Ganey (meganganey.com) for designing the cover and to Gretchen Donart for providing the photos.

Inspired by DSA's 40th anniversary, several comrades are working to identify NAM, DSOC, and DSA documents from the early days. If you have such documents, whether or not you're ready to donate them to a repository, please write to dl@dsacommittees.org.



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