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# **Socialism of the Oppressed: The Stakes of the Bowman Affair**

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([https://docs.google.com/document/d/12qZ0RHgIL2zsDfAZtEA6D-0b\\_6tWQUkrwSnGYjYyzN8/](https://docs.google.com/document/d/12qZ0RHgIL2zsDfAZtEA6D-0b_6tWQUkrwSnGYjYyzN8/)), sketch out a strategy for building a left opposition committed to electoral discipline and unity between socialism and the international working-class. Reading: LC.



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Poster from the Egyptian Communist Party. Arabic translation reads “A Million Flags for Palestine”. Circa 1948.

## Introduction

The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) is in a state of political crisis. At its root is Congressman Jamaal Bowman’s vote in favor of Israeli military funding, a position that runs counter to DSA’s democratically chosen support of Palestine. Despite his vote, Bowman retains the support of DSA.

This is distressing. Our purpose here is to draw political lessons from the Bowman affair to help us achieve a more democratic and disciplined DSA capable of actually implementing its platform. This is becoming all the more urgent with the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine: with DSA politicians [signaling their support for economic warfare against working-class Russians](https://www.leftvoice.org/the-squad-calls-for-u-s-intervention-in-ukraine/) (<https://www.leftvoice.org/the-squad-calls-for-u-s-intervention-in-ukraine/>), another crisis on par with the Bowman debacle is on the horizon.

Commentary and reflections focused exclusively on Bowman, however, miss the forest for the trees. While the specific question of Palestinian solidarity and Bowman matters for us, we cannot let it eclipse the broader question of political strategy and working-class internationalism and the stakes it raises for the players involved. Moments like these have implications for every aspect of our movement, from international solidarity to electoral strategy and the path to building a revolutionary party autonomous from the Democratic and Republican machines. This conflict has exposed existentially dire and mutually conflicting views of the path forward for DSA. These internal fractures weaken DSA's ability to provide leadership at moments of crisis, and will continue to fester unless resolved. This is already visible through the response of DSA members to the war in Ukraine, where many among treated a horrific external event as another piece of kindling for the fire of internal division.

We will start with a brief synopsis of the Bowman affair, jumping from the facts of the case to discuss the stakes and lessons left by the conflict, asking what this moment can teach us about our strategy and aims. Does our movement serve its officials, or should officials serve the movement? What responsibilities do we have to the oppressed and exploited, and can our current trajectory fulfill them? Using these questions, we will conclude by looking toward the 2023 DSA Convention, and envision a Left opposition borne from the Bowman affair capable of transforming the socialist movement for the good of the working-class across borders.

## Synopsis of the Bowman Affair

To understand why the Bowman Affair became such a controversy, we need to understand the process of his election and the promise his election held for the Right-wing of DSA. DSA endorsed Bowman a month before his general election, a *fait accompli* after an intense primary fight against then-Representative Elliot Engels. He represents District 16, which at the time included both working-class sections of the north Bronx and Yonkers, as well as the rich and majority-Zionist towns of southern Westchester. After his election, he became a proponent of several major DSA legislative projects, including the PRO Act and the Green New Deal for Public Schools.

Over the course of 2021, however, he demonstrated his willingness to vote in support of US imperialism for the sake of his own political advantage. As Congress fought over the federal budget in the summer of 2021, Bowman voted in favor of funneling an additional billion dollars of funding to Israel's Iron Dome defense system. He continued this support in September of 2021, and in the fall of 2021 he attended an Israeli propaganda trip. In its past three conventions, DSA has voted

overwhelmingly to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle and take part in the Boycott, Divest and Sanctions movement.

DSA members have few avenues for expressing dissent and debating strategy, but Bowman's actions provoked an unheard of wave of resolutions condemning Bowman. Multiple chapters released public statements calling on a sitting DSA representative to be censured, disendorsed, or expelled, something we had never before seen. This began with Madison DSA but expanded through the coming months, with chapters as significant as San Francisco and Boston voting to dissent. Beyond this, the BDS National Working Group drafted multiple statements on the ongoing controversy, and several national caucuses like the Tempest Collective and Marxist Unity Group began organizing for censure or expulsion.

This political revolt from DSA's rank-and-file did not change the National Political Committee's final decision. In an internally circulated statement, the NPC announced they had voted to rebuke Bowman without a formal censure, disendorsement, or expulsion. The NPC's position was that Bowman was too valuable as an ally for us to disendorse, and that DSA would be able to leverage our relationship with him to ensure that Bowman would represent DSA's actual positions over the 2022 election.

## The Stakes

Other comrades have already narrated the details of the Bowman Affair, and we will sum them up concisely here. The ongoing occupation of Palestine has inflicted innumerable horrors on the Palestinian people. American imperialism and Israeli colonization are inexorably linked within both the Middle East, where Israel acts as the chief comprador of US hegemony, and the United States, where the Israeli Defense Force exports its repressive innovations to American law enforcement. This means that any political body claiming the title of socialist or anti-imperialist must work with the Palestinian movement in their quest for national liberation. This obligation manifested in a series of resolutions calling for DSA to engage in the Boycott, Divest, Sanctions (BDS) campaign to leverage the economic and moral power of workers and consumers across the world against capitalists directly complicit in the occupation of Palestine. Every national convention since DSA's membership explosion in 2017 has democratically endorsed BDS and Palestinian liberation. By voting to give billions to the Israeli Defense Force, Bowman broke with DSA's commitment to BDS. This prompted a fight to expel or discipline him as a member, which resulted in a betrayal of both the Palestinian cause and the democratic will of our membership when the National Political Committee (the leadership body of DSA) chose not to expel him.

Furthermore, DSA has been rudderless since the collapse of the Sanders campaign in March of 2020. This is not to say that DSA was not organizing both locally and nationally, but the Sanders campaign structured DSA's work and aligned it with an alliance of progressive policy experts, Leftist cultural actors, and activist organizations, which advocated for a series of policy campaigns to proselytize for a social democratic resurgence. Losing this alliance and the greater goal animating it in 2020 put us in an awkward position. Under Biden we could only *hope* to pass social democratic legislation such

as the Green New Deal, Medicare For All, and the PRO Act, a hope which Biden has dashed over the last year. Without restructuring, DSA's loose national body has only been able to participate in standardized work like advocacy and electoral campaigns. Coming off a convention with a mandate to maintain the status quo, and where several National Political Committee candidates were forced to withdraw their candidacies after a campaign of [targeted harassment](https://washingtonsocialist.mdcdsa.org/ws-articles/21-09-convention-roundup) (<https://washingtonsocialist.mdcdsa.org/ws-articles/21-09-convention-roundup>), we have a leadership unwilling to lead us, unwilling to change course from sleepwalking campaigns for dead-on-arrival policies, willing to break out democratic decisions, and with few ways for local chapters or the general membership to steer our national direction.

These are the stakes for the inchoate DSA Left emerging from this struggle. But we cannot leave our understanding there. Unless we strive to understand the viewpoints of our interlocutors we cannot hope to change their perspective, leaving us with a stunted pseudo-politics where all that is left for us to do is escalate rhetorically. Furthermore, there were not just two 'sides' in the Bowman affair.

To the defenders of Bowman, there were a variety of concerns ranging from concerns about procedure and the breakdown of organizational norms, to the hard edge which clearly sees its path of power through the bourgeois state. The first group, who were primarily concerned with the breakdown of DSA's internal harmony, have much to point to. Rhetorical and procedural escalation occurred on both 'sides' of the conflict, with accusations of bigotry and chauvinism justifying the threatened or actual breaking of internal communication norms. Major figures on the Right [leaked information to the press](https://jacobinmag.com/2021/11/democratic-socialists-j-street-bds-israel-palestine-iron-dome-aoc) (<https://jacobinmag.com/2021/11/democratic-socialists-j-street-bds-israel-palestine-iron-dome-aoc>) before the general membership was able to learn about them, while on the other side the BDS National Working Group regularly spoke as an independent actor rather than a part of a broader organization. Beyond this, to some on the Right the mere fact that chapters put out statements on internal issues was beyond the pale. This happened alongside the continued use of Twitter—a platform that encourages grandstanding and conflict without resolution—as DSA's effective internal forum.

This concern with procedure and broken norms came from across the political spectrum within DSA, stemming from anxiety about DSA's broken democratic structures. While expressing concerns and conflicts on DSA's internal forum allows for potentially better conversation, a forum cannot have the material impact of a deliberative body. The Bowman Affair gradually escalated for precisely this reason: without a national space for discussion and decision-making, many comrades see no reason to do anything but grandstand and draw ever sharper lines between their real peers and perceived ultraleftist or right-opportunist wreckers. If these lines ossify into cliques and enough of DSA's active membership gives up on their ability to change the opinions of their internal foes, DSA ceases to be viable as a national organization.

While these are legitimate concerns, the intensification of the Bowman debate is just a symptom of DSA hitting the limits of its electoral strategy rather than the cause. The problem with insistence on moving conversation to internal forums is that the internal forums have no power within the organization, and while closer relationships and the lack of Twitter's influence *may* lead to better conversation, there's no reason to engage in a powerless internal forum which a small portion of our membership uses. Unless we insist on an internal democracy that functions outside of the space of

conventions then these problems—such as the use of Twitter as both an internal and an external forum and the complete lack of need to treat comrades with respect outside of your chapter—shall continue. If we do not change both the way that we treat each other and the kind of democracy that we practice, the Bowman affair is just the start of our problems.

For partisans of the Green New Deal, Medicare for All, and other DSA legislative goals, having representatives who champion progressive legislation is not just the first step of such a strategy; it is the baseline required for it to be viable at all. Sacrificing our relationships with elected officials, acting as an unreliable ally to our representatives, demanding they conform to some litmus test is therefore something which directly weakens our capacity to act on a national level, our ability to “build power” towards the implementation of our platform.

For those who specifically champion the Green New Deal this concern is even greater. Without a massive change in US environmental policy, we will face an apocalyptic mass extinction event that could render our planet unlivable. With the stakes that high, what is a single congressional vote? We need to take these comrades seriously when they claim that the Bowman affair did not “build power,” and that anything that does not move us towards the implementation of these necessary reforms is at best a distraction and at worst organizational self harm.

These are the stakes for each side of the Bowman affair. A series of mutually conflicting worldviews in a state of perpetual escalation, as actionless conflict allows parties to continually double down. To many comrades this disagreement seems untenable, with the only possible result being a purge of dissenters or a split led by one faction. However, there is another group involved in this conflict which dwarfs any other faction: inactive and deactivated members. Anecdotally, the Bowman Affair galvanized many of these members, inspiring bursts of activity on all sides of the conflict, motivated by the material stakes of the debate and their ability to democratically ensure or avert one course or another. Chapters with declining rates of participation suddenly found their meetings flooded with members inspired to fight for or against resolutions condemning Bowman and dissenting from the NPC decision. Should they return to inactivity, these members *will* be lost by any split, and this fact forces us to seek a constructive resolution to this conflict.

A constructive approach does not mean sweeping disagreement under the rug. It means that we need to actively seek out the perspectives of all of our comrades, build unity with those on our side, and press to *convince* our interlocutors of our position. To survive and build an organization worthy of the oppressed, the DSA Left needs to begin developing a unified strategy that goes beyond condemnation of a single opportunist politician and addresses the concerns of the moderates seeking harmony over unity, winning them to our side. Only then will we be able to bring the struggle

for Palestinian liberation to broader segments of the population and coalesce with the left-wing of the Palestinian diaspora.

# The Merger of Socialism and the Oppressed

The political lessons of the Bowman affair go beyond the internal life of DSA. The arguments of both the Right and Left are dependent on external strategies for how DSA relates to mass movements and fractions of the working-class. For the Right, this takes the form of cross-class coalitions with networks of activist glitterati, progressive politicians and self-appointed community leaders to challenge the Republican Party. For the Left, it means building a united front with the most conscious and militant sections of the working-class against both the ruling-class and the reactionary Right. Both strategies serve as means to expand DSA beyond its base among primarily white, middle-income professionals, academics, and downwardly mobile children of wealthy families.

Demographics are not a new problem for socialists, who often emerge among the relatively privileged middle strata of society. There is nothing nefarious about this: synthesizing Marxism required extensive knowledge of economics, history and philosophy, which the vast majority of workers throughout history have been denied access to by barriers to education, lack of leisure time, and discouragement via ruling-class propaganda. Mass literacy and the Internet have weakened these barriers, but in practice the capitalist class still do everything in their power to prevent the emergence of organic worker-intellectuals.

This leads to a historical pattern where the socialist and workers movements develop with minimal connection. Individual workers may *become* socialists, whether by stumbling across a copy of *Assata* at the library or resonating with the rhetoric of a Leftist politician. Likewise, individual bourgeois socialists may enter the workers movement out of a sense of solidarity. Regardless of these exceptions, the grand infrastructure which makes up either movement initially remains distinct.

Our task is to bring the two together, merging the socialist and workers movements into one body capable of breaking capital under its heel and building a new world. This was our responsibility in Berlin in 1871, Petrograd in 1902, Shanghai in 1966, and here and now today. The historian Lars Lih traces this strategy, which he calls the *merger formula*, back to Marx through Lenin and Kautsky, identifying a theoretical thread that united the era of revolutionary social democracy. Kautsky summarizes the formula as follows:



*[The proletariat's] main weapon is the concentration of its totality in vast, independent organizations, free all bourgeois influences. It cannot achieve this without a socialist theory, alone capable of finding out the common proletarian interest among the colorful diversity of the various proletarian strata, and of sharply and permanently separating them altogether from the bourgeois world. Incapable of this achievement is the naive labor movement, which is bare of any theory, and which rises of its own accord in the working classes against growing capitalism. Let us examine, for example, the trade unions. They are professional associations that seek to protect the immediate interests of their members. But how different these interests are in the individual professions, how different they are with the seafarers than with the coal diggers, the cab drivers, or the typesetters! Without socialist theory, the individual proletarian professions are not able to recognize the commonality of their interests, are foreign to each other, sometimes even hostile to each other.*

Amelia Davenport, writing for *Cosmonaut*, [makes the argument that the merger formula of Kautsky and Lenin relies on having specialist-intellectuals who can interpret and spread Marxist theory, inadvertently preserving their own monopoly on knowledge and control over the organization of society](https://cosmonaut.blog/2019/11/19/organizing-for-power-stealing-fire-from-the-gods/#:~:text=Amelia%20Davenport%20argues%20for%20leftist,a%20Promethean%20vision%20of%20socialism.) (<https://cosmonaut.blog/2019/11/19/organizing-for-power-stealing-fire-from-the-gods/#:~:text=Amelia%20Davenport%20argues%20for%20leftist,a%20Promethean%20vision%20of%20socialism.>).

Drawing on the dissident Bolshevik Alexander Bogdanov, Davenport argues for a variant of the formula where the purpose of socialist intellectuals is to destroy their own specialization, putting the tools of scientific socialism into the hands of the working-class en masse:



*The single most revolutionary act an intellectual in the socialist movement can do is to make scientific theory and philosophy more accessible to the masses. If the working class is to make revolution itself, as an expression of its own interests, then it needs the means to understand and organize the world that confronts it. The role of the revolutionary intellectual, insofar as they are revolutionary, is self-abolition.*

Wherever one stands on the exact form of the merger, it should be clear that our task is to tear down the walls between socialists and the exploited, whether they are warehouse workers facing speedup and surveillance on the job, women denied reproductive healthcare by the state, or Palestinians living under Israeli apartheid.

When we speak of the *workers movement*, it is vital to specify that this isn't a synonym for the more common term *labor movement*, which refers to workplace unionism and direct action on the job, usually in contrast to *social movements* that represent discrete, single-issue grievances of the oppressed, including women, immigrants, Black people, gay people, etc. One school of thought among socialists proposes that our task is dovetailing "labor" and "social" movements, bringing



union members around to different social movements and convincing them to endorse or even strike for their demands. While there's nothing to lose and much to gain from agitating around social demands among union members, this strategy erases the complex class character of both labor and social movements.

Rather than seeing the *labor movement* on one hand representing the exploited and *social movements* on the other representing the oppressed, we should see all of the above as fragments of a single workers movement which manifests differently among different sections of the working-class. Most of these manifestations are part of wider movements with their own internal class contradictions, with the workers movement as one element of the struggle, and often the only one capable of leading it to victory. For instance, tension within trade unions between skilled and unskilled workers or between workers and labor bureaucrats, the apathy of wealthy tenants toward the struggles of poor tenants organized into tenant unions, or the desire of the Black middle-class to control the energy and organization of working-class Black youth, redirecting them from confrontations with the police toward buying from Black-owned businesses and supporting Democratic politicians. The responsibility of socialists embedded in each fragment of the workers movement is to fight for the democratic leadership of the working-class over the struggle, practice political agitation and education, and to weave each strand of the struggle into a united workers movement, capable of resolving both the particular and the universal.

In the Russian Revolution, the central struggle animating the revolutionaries was the overthrow of Tsarism and the institution of democracy. Sections of the bourgeoisie, the peasantry, the professionals and the working-class were all aligned against the aristocracy, but only the working-class had the organization and discipline to finish the revolution and build a more democratic Russia. The principle that set the Bolsheviks apart from other socialists was their faith that the working-class could lead the democratic revolution and ride its momentum toward socialism, overtaking the relatively weak and self-interested bourgeoisie. While the two allied under certain conditions, the Bolsheviks' loyalty was always to the working class, whether it cost them bourgeois support or not.

The Palestinian struggle is no stranger to these contradictions. The Right coalitionists behind the *Unity or Unanimity* letter cited "Left anti-Zionist organizations" as justification for their position, without providing any citation or reference. Many on the Right seized on an extremely vague statement by the BDS National Committee on "reconciling principles with strategic effectiveness," which indicated nothing more than that the BNC would allow its partners to make their decisions about which members of the ruling class to work with and how. On the opposite end are organizations like Samidoun, a prisoner solidarity network associated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine; the Palestinian Youth Movement; and Labor for Palestine, which advocates for solidarity with Palestine from the American working class, who among others all endorsed the BDS Working Group's call to expel Bowman.

In a [stream hosted by Cosmonaut](https://youtu.be/CayovQ3kcnQ?t=1796) (<https://youtu.be/CayovQ3kcnQ?t=1796>), Marxist academic Max Ajl framed the Bowman affair as a proxy battle over "the soul of the DSA," with the Right fighting for DSA to sacrifice the international working-class for domestic reform, and the emergent Left for it to transform into a militantly internationalist party. Ajl made the case that appeals to the BNC conceal the fractures within the Palestinian liberation movement, with the BNC on its Right and organizations

like PYM and the PFLP on its Left. Generalized appeals to listen to Palestinians are meaningless, serving only the interests of those Palestinians most enmeshed in the status quo and committed to liberal reform—as Aji put it, “people don’t want to understand that Palestinians are political subjects just like everyone else, with their own internal political fissures and fights, then you’re not going to understand what’s going on, you’re going to say ‘I want to elevate this or that Palestinian voice,’ rather than saying ‘I align with this or that Palestinian politic.’”

The coalitionism of the Right is ultimately a hollowing out of the merger formula, replacing the living workers movement with hollow, staff-based nonprofits who treat their base as political tokens under the discipline of their bureaucracy. This merger on liberal terms does nothing to grow the workers movement because nonprofits lack a mass membership capable of determining their path. The merger formula in the United States today requires that socialists directly build up the democratic organization of the workers movement *while* we develop workers into socialist leaders.

The Bowman affair illuminated two paths in front us. On the Left, there are the oppressed and exploited, represented in this case by mass organizations like PYM and Samidoun, who demand DSA stand with them unflinchingly. There lies the potential for a merger between the most radical and conscious forces of the Palestinian diaspora and the American socialist movement. On the Right, there is the liberal establishment and its web of vassals, including foundations, nonprofits, mass media and electoral machines, represented here by the Palestinians currently in control of the BNC. There lies the potential for the coalition, with the working-class as a junior partner subservient to reform-minded fractions of the ruling class.

This is not to say that no working-class Palestinians identify with the politics of the BNC, the same way a fraction of working-class Americans happily voted for Joe Biden or Donald Trump. Without question, some level of merger could occur through the Right’s strategy. Rather, the point is that this merger would be on the terms of hegemonic liberalism, shrinking DSA’s horizons and restraining it from embedding in upsurges that escape the bounds set by progressive power brokers and professional activists, when our responsibility as socialists is to equip the widest breadth of the oppressed with the science of revolution.

## Into the Fold

All of these contradictions came to a head as a part of the Bowman Affair. We were forced to ask whether internationalism is just a paper guideline or a driving force for our organization, and whether we should tail our elected officials or demand their actions further our strategy. Members of DSA have spent the last few years compartmentalizing our politics— that one working group can struggle for one cause and a second for a different one without the two intersecting or conflicting. By pitting a candidate endorsed under the banner of the Green New Deal for Public Schools against the liberation struggle of the Palestinian people, the Bowman affair demonstrated the impossibility of separating each plank of our platform into a set of disconnected committees and campaigns. This crisis then flooded DSA’s broken institutions, leading to a wave of chapters calling to expel or discipline Jamaal Bowman and a national leadership which did nothing in response.

Remarkably, many of the chapters dissenting from the NPC decision hadn't previously been hotspots of inter-caucus conflict and national politicking. Indeed, many of the more established 'left-wing' caucuses lagged behind lesser-known chapters. But while these statements give us a broad sense of unity and a roadmap forward, chapters do not have any democratic input into the national organization. This is the contradiction we need to resolve: we cannot continue *merely* at the local level, yet the groups which exist above local chapters are fragmented and listless. Conversely, we cannot democratize DSA without ending the status quo of decision-making through backroom caucus and committee meetings. Democracy without politics is a shallow husk, useful only as a cover for bureaucratic maneuvering. Clear and decisive political messaging can animate DSA's moribund national body, as it did in dozens of local chapters during the Bowman affair.

While not capable of resolving our political crisis on its own, organizing at the local level will be a necessary building block. Creating a political discussion based around clear lines of disagreement with the goal of influencing our comrades is far superior to our current situation, where disagreement is often purely personal and with the goal of shutting down conversation altogether. For all we have said about the disagreements we have with the Right, and for all that we feel that the Center's concerns are misplaced, we also know that we will continue to exist in an organization together, and even if DSA were to splinter we would continue to exist within the same movement. Which brings us to comrade Mao's old phrase: ultimately, which is better, one more revolutionary or one less?

In order to respond to this situation in a constructive way we recommend that comrades in local chapters without caucus politics embark on, if not a caucus building project, then a process of internal organizing towards strategic clarity with an eye towards the unity of socialism and the oppressed. This may seem daunting, but organizing internally is effectively the same process as external organizing. We are still engaging in one-on-ones, still doing list work, still scheduling events and managing momentum. We do this towards the goal of building a stronger and more democratic organization, which by necessity consists of actors who themselves are strategically and analytically capable, able to work together for an internally consistent goal. As the Bowman affair has shown, without developing political unity, we will continue to act at cross purposes.

We will give a broad outline as to how comrades in un-caucused chapters should proceed with these conversations, but in both internal and external organizing one can only successfully agitate when they have a preexisting relationship with someone. Consider a conversation with a tenant or a coworker. Are you going to immediately tell them the wonders of Marx and Engels? Or would it be more effective to have that conversation once the person has a basic idea of who you are, trusts you, and won't immediately blow off your beliefs?

Through our network of comrades, we need to work to unify the Left, convince the moderates, and win over as much of the Right as we can without sacrificing our principles. We need to do that while fighting for clarity on our disagreements and the stakes behind them. DSA is currently riven with factionalism, but it takes the form of backroom deals and personal infighting rather than political debate and organization. We need to cut through this at every level if we want to build a communist politics worth the name, and to do that we need to follow certain steps:

1. We need to both teach and learn from each other: while we are in a one-on-one with a comrade, the goal is not to trick them into nominally adopting your views, but to understand both their

views and yours and how they can intersect. Having earnest conversations about these issues, our analysis of the struggle around us, and how we can intervene in the struggle, is the way we come to clarity.

2. Make ideological commitments clear: It can be very easy, especially when talking to friends, to assume we have more ideological unity than we do. Be clear about where you agree and disagree, and when you find points of disagreement hone in on them. Why do we disagree about this? What are the fundamental stakes of this disagreement?
3. Unity with the oppressed: These conversations need to culminate in the creation of a practical project for the liberation of the exploited and oppressed and the merger of socialists and the workers movement.
4. Fight for a unified strategy: Ultimately, the Bowman campaign was the product of DSA's political immaturity. We thought that because we compartmentalize different issues under different working groups, that we would be able to do anything we please without one arm affecting the other. Bowman's actions have shown us our naivete, and the solution cannot just be the creation of a local BDS Working Group, but the integration of the ideal of working-class internationalism into the DNA of our chapters. This must be true for all other working groups, from ecosocialism to housing justice.

This process does not just happen once, but needs to be something we consistently iterate. You have one-on-ones with your closer comrades, identify places of agreement and disagreement, orient yourself to some practical goal, and ask what that said goal says about the rest of the work our chapter does. Once you have a solid core of comrades, you present this vision to your chapter, and then you continue this process, either talking with comrades we aren't as close to or having other comrades speak with them, identifying agreements and disagreements, how we can realize our shared vision, and how we can apply that vision more broadly.

## Toward a Left Opposition?

"Left opposition" has always been an alluring but immaterial concept in DSA. In 2019, it primarily referred to those who sought to solve DSA's woes through decentralizing authority and infrastructure. The ostensible Right defended the National Political Committee's right to represent the convention's will, while the Left campaigned to bring "all power to the locals," a bizarre variation on *all power to the soviets*, the Bolshevik slogan demanding a republic of workers, peasants and soldiers. Rather than a political movement to transform DSA's strategy and vision, the decentralizers in Build and Libertarian Socialist Caucus fought for a reshuffling of administrative power, one which would keep the content of DSA's politics the same.

Since then, communist and anarchist formations and slates have come and gone within DSA, but rarely with any material content to set them apart from the Right. Most caucuses continued to focus on bureaucratic reform: setting up or shutting down decision-making bodies, putting more or less emphasis on unionism or elections, expanding local autonomy or nationwide unity. No technical tweak succeeded in animating DSA's membership and building political momentum, but new aspirants to the throne continued to bring them forward, promising that theirs would be different

from the last. Politics came mostly in the form of abstract but agreeable platitudes with no material stakes: we support Palestinian liberation, police abolition, ecosocialism, progressive politicians, the revival of industrial unionism, etc, but most of us don't have to bleed for them.

Bowman gave us a gift by drawing a line in the sand. His vote for Iron Dome funding created a political crisis because DSA couldn't support or oppose it without rupturing the status quo. Either we support a progressive politician fighting in congress for the Green New Deal, or we stand with the Palestinian people. There was no way to sit back and passively support both without navigating the contradictions between them. This forced self-styled communists to come out of the woodwork in practical opposition to BDS, while teaching democratic socialists who'd never seen themselves as "party-builders" or "revolutionaries" the necessity of electoral discipline. For the first time, you could make out the contours of a Left opposition.

Part of this opposition existed in extant factions and committees—Marxist Unity Group, Tempest Collective, Reform & Revolution, BDS and Palestine Solidarity Working Group, and Left-wing members of the International Committee, Communist Caucus, Bread & Roses, Libertarian Socialist Caucus among others—while much of it came from ordinary, unaffiliated DSA members, who may or may not have seen themselves as Left-leaning or communist at all, but who felt moved by their opposition to imperialism.

Anecdotally, it seems that Bowman's actions drew connections between international solidarity and political discipline which may not have been apparent for many members. For many members during the 2021 convention, the purpose of proposals like *Tribunes of the People and Democratic Discipline* and *A socialist horizon* was abstract and confusing, seemingly disconnected from the living struggles around oppression and austerity that drew them to DSA. The Bowman affair was a learning moment on the relationship between these two concepts. If the ghouls in control of the Democratic Party can discipline our officials but we cannot, we will be responsible for electing which politician should take charge of oppressing the Palestinian people, rather than uniting with them in struggle against oppression.

This is not an opportunity for us to squander. For the first time we have even a shadow of practical unity among the revolutionary Left within DSA, and we can use this as either an opportunity to build bridges and synthesize our perspectives, or to return to infighting and purification. If we choose the former, we have a genuine chance of cohering our bloc, ending the Right's hegemony and relinking the socialist milieu with the movements of the oppressed.

Our nascent Left opposition has a long way to go. Arbitrarily branding ourselves a unified opposition with no clarity of program or line will lead to a repetition of 2019's mistakes, with a self-proclaimed Left trying to build itself a home with no foundation like Build and LSC. On the other hand, remaining in disparate sects or informal cliques means the Right will always outmaneuver us. This was evident in 2021, when Marxist Unity and Tempest Collective both put forward distinct resolutions for electoral discipline and party-building—*Tribunes of the People* (<https://convention2021.dsausa.org/2021-dsa-convention-resolutions/#P1F>) and *A Socialist Horizon* (<https://convention2021.dsausa.org/2021-dsa-convention-resolutions/#P2L>), respectively. If they and other revolutionary formations within DSA were able to collaborate and put forward shared slates of resolutions, on the other hand, the full force of the Left's cadre networks would be able to overwhelm the Right.

Developing this level of unity, however, will require both a higher level of coordination and political unity than any of us have broached before. There are internal fault-lines within the Left around questions of internationalism and state socialism, mass work and movement strategy, and programmatic unity and party-building. Intentionally hashing out a program on these questions—how we fight for national liberation here and abroad, how socialists can directly build the worker’s movement, what shape our electoral strategy takes, and how we strengthen our own local democracy—should be our immediate priority, whether this takes the form of polemical exchange, shared campaigns, joint events and symposiums, or mergers between caucuses. While untarnished theoretical agreement may be undesirable or impossible, building a functioning opposition with a basis for practical unity will still require an extended period of debate and discussion between subsets of the DSA Left.

Developing a Left opposition will require tying together struggle at both the local and national level. Local agitation is often the path of least resistance, allowing us to take advantage of direct relationships outside of caucus lines. However, the Bowman debacle provided a clear illustration of its limits, with a wave of local dissent having minimal impact on DSA’s national and international politics. The goal of chapter-level activity should be to raise awareness and engagement with wider questions among rank-and-file members, and ultimately to bridge divides between chapters and create a nationwide movement.

However, we can only resolve the crisis of national strategy that the Bowman affair represented at the national level. The success of our work in 2022 depends on our ability to clarify strategy, forge bonds and draw in recruits for the communist and anti-imperialist wing of the Left, with the explicit aim of entering the 2023 DSA convention as a single revolutionary opposition, defending the interests of the international working-class as a whole.

## Postscript

We wrote this article over the course of winter 2022. Much has changed in the intervening months. When we started writing we believed we were in the aftermath of the Bowman affair, only for the National Political Committee to reignite the conflict by dissolving the BDS Working Group and suspending its leadership on March 18th. That led to us writing *[For an Internationalist DSA](https://docs.google.com/document/d/12qZ0RHgIL2zsDfAZtEA6D-0b_6tWQUkrwSnGYJYzN8/edit)* ([https://docs.google.com/document/d/12qZ0RHgIL2zsDfAZtEA6D-0b\\_6tWQUkrwSnGYJYzN8/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/12qZ0RHgIL2zsDfAZtEA6D-0b_6tWQUkrwSnGYJYzN8/edit)), a petition which garnered over 1,300 signatures and played a part in forcing the NPC to reverse the dissolution a week later.

While much has happened since we began writing, our actions have followed the course we laid out here, and many of the dynamics we identified have only heightened—the DSA Left has drawn in more rank-and-file socialists, the Right has slid further into dependence on liberal political representatives like Bowman, and the radical wing of the Palestinian movement has drawn a strong line in the sand, aligning themselves against the NPC majority and with the internationalists in the BDS WG. If anything, our belief in the necessity of a nationwide, revolutionary Marxist response to

the contradictions tearing DSA apart has only strengthened. Left to its own devices, DSA will destroy itself through personalization of political conflict, incompatible strategies and drift toward hollow opportunism. Our response to DSA's spiral into oblivion must develop into more than just a cluster of individuals aligned by chance. We need a unified movement, harnessing the energy of socialists in the tens of thousands and our comrades in the movements of the oppressed and exploited toward a democratic and internationalist DSA.

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