

Democratic Socialism's moral theater

It's a cringe subculture, not a party

Stuck in peak woke. Credit: X

BERNIE SANDERS

DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS OF AMERICA

DSA

LEFTISM

POLITICS

THE SQUAD

US

ZOHRAN MAMDANI



Ryan Zickgraf

AUGUST 13, 2025 6 MINS

If you only paid attention to Right-wing media, you’d be forgiven for imagining that the Democratic Socialists of America’s latest biennial convention was the planning committee for Reign of Terror II. The Murdoch press scrutinized the gathering for evidence that the DSA-backed Zohran Mamdani stood ready to summon legions of Marxist cadres, guillotine in tow, to slay the Cuomos in the streets of Queens.

Thanks to the rise of Mamdani and other DSA-adjacent progressive insurgents running for local office across the land, the group is once more being taken seriously as a political force (a sinister one among conservatives). But it shouldn’t be. In truth, the largest socialist organization in America is a paper tiger. The convention that wrapped up in Chicago over the weekend didn’t showcase an ascendant and aggressive Left. Rather, it offered more proof that Leftists remain hopelessly weak and are mostly content to eat each other, rather than the rich.

There’s little scary about DSA conventions on the ground. (These days, it’s the Right’s CPAC gabfests that look more like a freak show, what with Elon Musk prancing around the stage while brandishing a chainsaw.) When I attended a Chicago DSA convention in 2017 — full disclosure: I was a dues-paying member back then — it confirmed Oscar Wilde’s famous quip: “The trouble with socialism is that it takes up too many evenings.”

It’s a lot of meetings with squabbling over arcane rules and procedures broken up by panel discussions and parties, like a mix of an academic conference, a parent-teacher association meeting, and a pep rally. There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s what DSA *didn’t* do this time that’s the problem.

For one, the DSA still can’t seem to control its weirdos. There was fighting over the fact that Covid masks were “strongly encouraged,” rather than required like in 2023. For the Left’s Covid dead-enders, the change in policy was tantamount to “eugenics for the disabled.” A few weeks earlier, the DSA-adjacent Socialism 2025 convention hosted a discussion on abolishing marriage and the family, with one panelist saying, “the only real difference between marriage and prostitution is the price and the duration of the contract.” Why not keep such cringe locked up in the basement of a hipster bookstore in Portland?



MORE FROM THIS AUTHOR

We’re still distracting ourselves to death

BY RYAN ZICKGRAF

Mamdani’s victory offered a sane blueprint to the DSA: he largely backed away from his maximalist *Abolish Everything!* stances from the peak-woke era and ran unapologetically on practical economic issues. Since winning the Democratic mayoral primary in the Big Apple, he has remained focused on New Yorkers’ struggle to make ends meet, while taking aim at the the party’s gerontocracy.

A credible DSA would take the hint and rally against President Trump’s attacks on organized labor and his dismantling of parts of the safety net, thus building a counterweight to mainstream Democrats’ do-nothingness. The convention offered some of that, to be sure. But it was overshadowed by grandiose internationalist moralism, especially over Gaza. The delegates voted almost 9-to-1 in favor of “a movement that will be able to fight against genocide and war across the globe.” But how do you *fight war* when half your members can’t change a tire?

Meanwhile, matters got ugly over a rancorous vote on declaring DSA an explicitly anti-Zionist organization. Online, there was debate over whether to purge the 40% of members who voted against it. “I couldn’t live with myself if I were funding and mingling with so many genocidal Nazi halfwits,” one agitated person tweeted. “You’re living amongst monsters. You do realize that?”

This is not to say the Palestinian cause lacks moral urgency. The situation in Gaza is, to put it mildly, a horror show. But the convention’s treatment of it as the overriding priority in Trump’s America — at a time when the Left has a genuine shot at expanding its small footprint — attested to a deeper pathology. It’s the politics of powerlessness: the belief that if you can’t change an outcome in material terms, you can compensate by making your rhetoric more extreme and obsessing about the topic that you have the least control over.

“These are liberal-arts grads who can’t free their faces from Covid masks,

much less free America from capitalism.”

The organizer Bayard Rustin, reflecting on similar Left foolishness in *Harper's* in 1970, observed: “Since real victories are thought to be unattainable, issues become important in so far as they can provide symbolic victories. Dramatic confrontations are staged which serve as outlets for radical energy but which in no way further the achievement of radical social goals.” Rustin saw no value in symbolic victories. He called such symbolic achievements a “politics of escape rooted in hopelessness.”

Yet the post-Oct. 7 period has only deepened this instinct on the Left. After the collapse of US Left-populism with Bernie Sanders's loss in 2020 and the drift of The Squad, the DSA suffered. In early 2024, Maria Svart, the organization's national director, stepped down with a grim parting shot: the DSA was \$1 million in the hole and had no realistic plan to climb out. Paid membership cratered by nearly 30 percent nationally, down to just over 52,000, and most chapter meetings drew fewer than 15 people — hardly the socialist mass movement of Sean Hannity's nightmares.

The Western Left got its groove back by simplifying yet expanding its moral framework to make everything about Gaza. Today, Palestinians aren't just engaged in a struggle with Israel. They've been recast as the tip of the spear in a global war against “the West,” “the Global North,” or “the colonizers” — pick your villain. “The Global South” has displaced the working classes of old as the imagined revolutionary subject, and the antifada has become the new class struggle. It's as if the messy prism of intersectionality that defined the Left of a few years ago was replaced with something more elemental, almost biblical: a moral universe of pure good and pure evil, where every battle anywhere slots neatly into the same epic. Which is why one panel at the DSA convention was titled — for some reason — “From Mexico to Gaza.”

It's a seductive framework, because it makes the Left feel powerful in its own mind, as if tweeting about a student protest in London is part of the same chain of resistance as a worker's strike in Argentina or a Gazan family's struggle to survive the next eight hours. In the US context, this posture is a political cul-de-sac. It makes the difficult work of coalition building, labor organizing, and contesting elections take a back seat to a permanent foreign-policy morality play.

Inside the DSA, factionalism magnifies the problems. The group is split into what amount to three informal “wings”: the Right (old-school social democrats focused on winning elections); the Left (revolutionary, anarchist, and anti-state types who view electoral politics as a sellout); and the center, which borrows from both but mistrusts compromise. All are far to the left of the median American voter. Yet instead of finding proper common ground, they launch miniature cold wars within the organization. Energy that could go into making

more Mamdanis gets burned in procedural fights over who's "truly" socialist. Fox News and the like may love to bash socialists, but you won't find many people who despise DSA more than its own members and other Leftists.



SUGGESTED ARTICLE

So Trump nixed your bullshit DEI job

BY RYAN ZICKGRAF

Last year, Eric Blanc, a labor-studies scholar at Rutgers University, posted that "DSA is at a crossroads. It can become another marginal far-Left group with a narrow program, rigid formulas, and tight discipline — or it can remain a big tent, flexible, and welcoming organization oriented to mass working-class politics." Spoiler alert: the group chose the former. Now the DSA can't organize a Valentine's Day dating event without it imploding into a brouhaha over whether trance is a Zionist genre of music (no, really, this happened).

All this is tragic from an authentically socialist perspective. The United States remains a country in decline: its public infrastructure is crumbling; its for-profit health system plunges more than half of Americans into medical debt; working-class life expectancy is declining; and real wages remain stagnant for the bottom half. Yet the activist energy that once might have gone toward reviving the labor movement or Medicare for All is now absorbed by an abstracted, performative global struggle; the battlefield is always somewhere else, even as the home front decays.

Meanwhile, just to the south, Mexico shows what disciplined Left-populism can achieve. President Claudia Sheinbaum, the successor to Andrés Manuel López Obrador (popularly known as AMLO), won the presidency with nearly 60% of the vote and delivered her party, Morena, a congressional supermajority. She and AMLO did it by combining populist anti-elite messaging with concrete policy delivery: raising the minimum wage, making it easier to organize workers, expanding social welfare, and investing in neglected regions.

Morena translates slogans into legislation and legislation into tangible improvements in ordinary people's lives. The party, to be sure, isn't without its share of problems, internal contradictions, and ideological disputes. But these finally don't eclipse Morena's core mission. The Mexican Left treats electoral power as something to be built and wielded; the American DSA treats it as a side hustle to its internal culture wars and moral theater.

Mamdani's win could have been the start of a similarly successful revamp: proof of concept that disciplined, class-based campaigning still works in America. Instead, the DSA has shown it's still more comfortable as a subculture than a political force. That makes the conservative scaremongering about the DSA all the more farcical. These are liberal-arts grads who can't free their faces from Covid masks, much less free America from capitalism.

Correction: An earlier version of this essay incorrectly suggested that a family-abolition discussion took place at the DSA convention.

Ryan Zickgraf is a columnist for *UnHerd*, based in Pennsylvania.

✕ [ryan_zickgraf](#)

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37 COMMENTS



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John Galt ⌚ 3 days ago

> Meanwhile, just to the south, Mexico shows what disciplined Left-populism can achieve. President Claudia Sheinbaum, the successor to Andrés Manuel López Obrador (popularly known as AMLO), won the presidency with nearly 60% of the vote and delivered her party, Morena, a congressional supermajority. She and AMLO did it

Because the cartels wanted her to be in and murdered all of her appointments. Seriously I remember seeing something like 7 different presidential candidates in Mexico were murdered. Mexico is a narco state run by the cartels.

This is the same kind of thing that happened in

UnHerd

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Kent Ausburn ⌚ 2 days ago

🗨️ Reply to [John Galt](#)

There is no way I could take anyone serious who holds Mexico up as an ideal. Mexico is a corrupt narco state with normalized industrial-scale murder and mayhem. It has de-nationalized the oil industry after opening it up and experiencing significant growth and increased efficiency, and is now trying to do the same to the mining industry, likely killing a golden goose. I used to enjoy working in Mexico in the past, but have no desire to return until things drastically change, which does not look likely in the near future.

👍 5 | 0 🗨️ ↩️ REPLY

RA Znayder ⌚ 1 day ago

The Gaza obsession is not new; the Palestinian cause has always been at the forefront of the global “New Left”. However, back in the day groups like the PLO actually did have Marxist roots. Today, many movements who see themselves fighting an anti-colonial battle essentially switched to ultra-conservative ideologies, especially in the Muslim world.

The switch by the left from class struggle to cultural and international issues is of course not new either. This occurred in the 60s already. One of the reasons was that under the postwar consensus the Western world essentially already achieved the goals of social democracy. Solid welfare states, strong labor

representation, progressive taxation leading to high levels of equality. The bargain between labor and capital seemed to work.

Of course much of this been abolished. The middle class is slowly disappearing. Basic needs like housing and healthcare are becoming precarious again, elites are flirting with abolishing hard earned labor laws. The left, however, has a hard time switching back to the economic base as the author shows. It is a missed opportunity. Surveys show that basic social-democratic policies are supported by large majorities in the U.S.

2 | 0

REPLY

Graham Bennett 1 day ago

Wow – this article explains a lot! I knew the Left were discombobulating, but this shows the real hole they’re in, shadow boxing to the death imaginary opponents. They are truly lost, which is probably a good thing. I hope Corbyn and Sultana read it as a crystal ball into the fate of their new party.

2 | 0

REPLY

Martin Bollis 1 day ago

Was champagne socialist a speaker at this event?

2 | 0

REPLY

RR RR 1 day ago

Stick to Old Woke

Economic Opportunities, Fair Pay for Fair Hard Work, Mitigating the Negative Affects/Identifying Opportunites of Climate Change as opposed to foolishly trying to stop it , Affordable housing not Blackrock and anti Big Money in Politics.

And drop the New Woke bollocks. Women with Prostates, Open Borders etc.... because it has zero credibility.

I ain't holding my breath bearing in these idiots still wear masks

2 | 0

REPLY

paul soto 2 days ago

Makes me think of the Life of Brian and the JPF and PFoJ

2 | 0

REPLY

Martin M 2 days ago

Reply to [paul soto](#)

Whatever happened to the Popular Front?

0 | 0

REPLY

Jerry Carroll 3 days ago

We'll know when to worry about the Democratic Socialists when the sale of purple hair dye spikes.

2 | 0

REPLY

Martin M 3 days ago

“For one, the DSA still can’t seem to control its weirdos”. I would have thought that being a Socialist nowadays pretty much makes you a weirdo by definition.

2 | 0

REPLY

Alan Melville 3 days ago

Reply to [Martin M](#)

Indeed.
More to the point, socialism, like its close associate communism, is not that keen on democracy.
Oh, it talks a good game, but ultimately socialists believe that everything should be property of “the people” – that is, the almighty State – and that if that occurs we will have utopia. As Mr Churchill so accurately put it, its inherent virtue is the equal sharing of miseries.
Socialists hate success, hate people who strive to be more, to be better, to have their own beliefs and ideas unsanctioned by their alleged betters. But all humans instinctively strive for more, want, even need, to be better. We may be herd animals, but within the herd people have

differing views and opinions, varying ideas. That is human nature.
Thus the only possible means of enforcing socialism on the populace is to suppress dissenting views, which logically must lead us down the road to totalitarianism. Every socialist country has eventually gone down this route – or ejected the socialists before they could force us there, and reverted to capitalism.
I consider that “democratic socialism” is a lie.

 3 | 0   REPLY

T Bone  3 days ago

 Reply to [Alan Melville](#)

I don’t disagree with much of this but wouldn’t the NIH be a form of Democratic Socialism? It’s a totalizing system where the State controls the means of production. Its more than a safety net program like SS or Medicare in the US. The people of the UK seem to want the NIH to be the greater insurer of public health.

 0 | 0   REPLY

Steve Jolly  2 days ago

 Reply to [Alan Melville](#)

An excellent and succinct statement of why socialism doesn’t work at the level of basic human nature. The conditions it presupposes lead to human thriving do not actually lead to human thriving. It is a dog chasing its own tail. It matters not how spirited the chase, the goal will remain persistently out of reach because the goal is itself an impossibility. I would also add that globalism is the next of kin to socialism and communism because it purports to erase national boundaries and equalize outcomes between nations. Just as competition between individuals is a part of the human condition and the natural order, so too is competition between ethnic, tribal, religious and other groups, up to and including the modern nation state which translates those primitive instincts to reduce internal conflict and encourage internal cooperation.

The author glances right over this particular elephant when he notes that the modern left is no longer interested in western working classes and now focused on the privations of the ‘global south’. He seems to regard this as some failure of their logic or intellect, a betrayal of their original purpose, but in fact it is a perfectly logical extension of their core philosophical tenets based on their flawed premises. The logic is the same but they’ve replaced the internal with the external, the national with the international. It’s the same narrative of oppression and unfairness with different names for oppressors and oppressed. This transition has been encouraged by corporations and global financial oligarchs who benefit from unchecked globalism and for whom national governments are a potential obstacle to their scheme of undemocratic rule by expertise, rule by committee, rule by bureaucracy, and unlimited profits for those privileged few to pursue their own personal goals. The left, the socialists, the wokesters, have been used by the globalist establishment as useful idiots, and when they’re no longer useful, they’ll be cast aside in favor of whoever is offering the most, probably the populist/nationalist consensus that is emerging at lower levels of politics in the US and elsewhere.

At some point years or decades from now, they’ll realize that they’re the dogs still barking after the caravan has long since moved on. Perhaps the reason they spend their time trying to impose various dogmas over their tiny faction is that on some level they’re aware of the hopelessness of their philosophy. If they can’t bring themselves to question their basic beliefs about humanity, then perhaps they at least understand they’re hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned. I suspect at some point this author will realize he’s not actually a socialist or a leftist, just a decent human being who cares about the issues and well being of the bottom half of the population in his nation and wants to address their concerns in a pragmatic and effective way, or in other words, just another alt-right populist.

 1 | 0   REPLY

paul soto  2 days ago

 Reply to [Steve Jolly](#)

Brilliant

 1 | 0   REPLY

RA Znayder  1 day ago

 Reply to [Alan Melville](#)

I find the entire discussion a nonsensical semantic exercise. Every modern economy incorporates some (proto-)socialist principles. If that wasn't the case, you and your children would be working 16 hours a day in some factory right now.

1 | 0 REPLY

Vince B 2 days ago

In a very real sense, mainstream “look at me!” liberalism is just as purely performative as the hard left nose ring crowd's, no different in kind but in degree.
I've long considered liberalism a form of fashion than a serious set of ideas and understandings about the world.

1 | 0 REPLY

peter worthington 3 days ago

I thought it was a solid article that made many excellent points. Alternative parties need to keep focus on Class Struggles within the US. For example, I have met many conservatives that retire in their mid fifties whom wish they had Medicare For All here in the US. I have also met many Liberals that are tired of Identity Politics. The core message here is bringing populist left and populist right together under class issues.

1 | 0 REPLY

Maverick Melonsmith 3 days ago

Reply to [peter worthington](#)

Let us know how you go with that.

1 | 0 REPLY

T Bone 3 days ago

Reply to [peter worthington](#)

Ryan is a tremendous descriptive writer but being able to diagnose problems does not automatically qualify one to solve them.

Why does Medicare need to be for all? Medicare is understandably designed to pay as little as possible as a state expenditure. There's a reason seniors so often purchase private insurance on top of Medicare. Medicare can't even adequately cover a fraction of the population over 65. What makes you think it can be scaled?

Medicare for All actually refers to a total takeover of the medical system. No thank you. My government is large enough and broke enough as is.

0 | 0 REPLY

RA Znayder 1 day ago

Reply to [T Bone](#)

How about, because every industrialized country has universal healthcare except for the US? Even in the third world some countries are civilized enough to at least provide healthcare if they can. The US has the most expensive healthcare system in the world because of all kinds of predatory private entities. And for that you don't even get the best. Don't see universal healthcare as a takeover by “the big evil government” but as a takeover by the people.

3 | 0 REPLY

Daniel Archer 3 days ago

Pushing Minimum wage in Mexico works because the constant corruption means most Mexicans are working at or just above minimum wage. The focus on minimum wage in America means trying to get a bunch of teenagers, recovering drug addicts, recently released felons a raise. Meanwhile the majority of the country is far more focused on improving things for all those that are making well above minimum wage. Hence why the socialist are only flourishing in the bluest and most corrupted areas of America.

1 | 0 REPLY

B Joseph Smith 3 days ago

President Trump's attacks on organized labor? This article is published on the day that the Teamsters effectively endorsed Trump. Credit to the author though on the *change a tire* observation

1 | 0 REPLY

Steve Jolly ⌚ 2 days ago

|  Reply to [B Joseph Smith](#)

I thought that was particularly inspired. Such an inability to sustain internal beliefs that contradict reality makes me suspect this fellow isn't cut out for socialism in any form. Sooner or later his fellow socialists will notice he's using logic and his own powers of observation to draw his own conclusions independent of the group consensus and they'll throw him out of the drum circle, assuming he doesn't get fed up with them first. From the article's tone, it sounds like he's well on his way there already. I stand ready to embrace him as yet another disillusioned cynic whenever that occurs.

 1 | 0   REPLY

Frank Duffield ⌚ 1 day ago

|  Reply to [B Joseph Smith](#)

But 50% could not? More like 80%.About the same figure as for mainstream liberals. None Of them are grounded.

 0 | 0   REPLY

UnHerd Reader ⌚ 3 days ago

Hahaha. It reminds me of my leftie days in the 1980s. The WRP arguing it out with the 'reformists' (SWP), and all of us having to vote – at – Equity conferences of all places – on banning the Zionists or voting for international revolution. I love the bit about eating each other. And as for the covid masks ?

 1 | 0   REPLY

Bret Larson ⌚ 22 hours ago

It's Marxists bs Communists round 500.

It's good to keep them in the same ring duking it out.

Axe handles optional.

 0 | 0   REPLY

Nancy Kmaxim ⌚ 2 days ago

Very long piece, no actual concern for actual people. Since when is restricting public benefits to people who actually need them “dismantling the social net”. Mr Mamdani hasn't demonstrated the competence or commitment of a middle manager, much less a competent leader. Mama's calling for you. Time to go home to bed.

 0 | 0   REPLY

wade oliver ⌚ 2 days ago

The only Dem that really seems to talk about issue that affect everyone is Fetterman (S-PA). The issue the Dems have is that it is difficult to discuss the need for higher wages, while also wanting open borders. If they can start talking about traditional Dem issues like labor, workers rights and drop the men that pretend that they are girls in girls sports, they might be more competitive next time around.

 0 | 0   REPLY

Sisyphus Jones ⌚ 3 days ago

Now we're using 'cringe' [adj.] in headlines above perfectly flunktastic content. (Hey, if ya'll can make up words then so can I.) Good-ness. How far must Unherd fall before I pull my subscription?

 0 | 0   REPLY

Carissa Pavlica ⌚ 3 days ago

Platitudes, in-fighting, and virtue signaling. That's exactly what anyone would want out of a government party. I'm shocked you admitted you were once a card carrying member.

 0 | 0   REPLY

tug ordie ⌚ 3 days ago

Ryan definitely looks like a card carrying DSA member, zero surprise there

 0 | 0   REPLY

Alex Lekas 3 days ago

What in the world did I just read? Democratic socialism is, first and foremost, an oxymoron. The two terms are incompatible. In the end, it’s socialism.

The author – and this person is in Unherd columnist? – can talk about internal weirdos and external conservative boogeymen all he wants. In the end, the issue is one of embracing an ideology that has never, ever worked, no matter how often or how loudly the DS people claim to be emulating much of Europe. They remain willfully blind to how those societies work, or used to work, so why is this person given credence?

0 | 0

REPLY

Maverick Melonsmith 3 days ago

Reply to Alex Lekas

I got a laugh out of the article. That can’t be said of most articles on UnHerd.

0 | 0

REPLY

T Bone 3 days ago

Reply to Alex Lekas

All that is true but he’s an excellent writer and not oblivious to the people that rise to the top of Socialists hierarchies. He’s effectively saying competent people could implement Socialism.

Obviously we know this isn’t the case but I welcome a Socialist that can correctly identify it’s current state of functionality.

1 | 0

REPLY

Steve Jolly 2 days ago

Reply to T Bone

I think he’s an intelligent younger person in the first stages of the realization that socialism is just another bad philosophy to come out of the Romantic tradition. He’ll eventually come to terms with the fact that the things he wants to believe about the inherent goodness of people aren’t actually true and the nattering nabobs of negativism had it right all along. It’s not easy for most people to accept that. Most of us aren’t blessed/cursed to be jaded by age fifteen as I was or even twenty five when I was long past the anger and confusion of shattered illusions. He’ll still care about the working class, the poor, and etc. but in a way that’s less stupid, less hopeless, and more pragmatic therefore more effective.. Age brings wisdom and all that.

2 | 0

REPLY

T Bone 2 days ago

Reply to Steve Jolly

Yes he’s moving rightward.

1 | 0

REPLY

Andrew Holmes 3 days ago

Reply to Alex Lekas

I think socialism is nonsense, but I learned from this article. While it’s worthy of concern that many of the idealistic, passionate young are sucked into it from their need for a unisolution, it has been ever thus. This report of the weakness of its main, organized proponent gives me a better basis for assessing other reports. Unheard is doing its job.

1 | 0

REPLY

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