

NPC Report

DSA today is operating in a political environment that has changed dramatically in the past few months. Put simply, the general public now views the Bush administration with the same loathing that the left has felt these past years. The Katrina disaster in particular has revealed the Reagan-Thatcher approach to the role of government as the latest “god that failed.” The alternative social democratic approach to the role of government is now more relevant than ever. Unfortunately, the Democratic Party seems singularly unwilling to advance a social-democratic, New Deal approach to politics even though real-world events beg for it.

Some past DSA national conventions were held at times when there were serious internal divisions in the organization. At the San Diego 1999 convention, the prospect of a Nader campaign for President filled many of our members with hope and others with dread. At the 2001 Philadelphia convention there was a serious division in DSA concerning the proper response to Sept. 11 and the Taliban/al-Qaida regime in Afghanistan. In contrast, for the past four years there do not seem to have been serious internal political divisions as we move into our current convention. At the 2003 Detroit convention, as at this convention, the prime concern was how to make DSA a larger and more effective organization to advance goals that we all basically agree on.

DSA is a small organization. But we can make a case that there is groundwork for future growth. One reason is that the past two NPC's have operated with a thought out approach to our political activity. We think it is fair to say that for a number of years DSA had no coherent short term political strategy. National DSA did good work in producing Democratic Left and some excellent literature. At NPC meetings we would pass resolutions on various political subjects, but if you asked what we were actually doing in terms of national program or in terms of providing leadership to the locals and members, we wouldn't have an answer.

In our opinion, this is no longer the case. For the past four years DSA has attempted, with modest success, to implement a strategy that was adopted at the Philadelphia convention. The strategy is to find ways for the national organization and the Locals to do joint work on issues relating to the Low Wage Economy. An obvious reason for this choice is that these issues reflect our core values as socialists. Another reason is that, as weak as we are, these issues allow us to make good use of the strengths that we do have. Among these strengths are:

** Our members, whether in locals or at-large, constitute a modest community of activists around the country. We have several hundred activists in our locals and YDS.

** We have some standing with the academic and policy communities that think and write about these issues.

** We have ties to people in the labor movement who are organizing around these issues. In some cases these folks are alumni of YDS or DSA who are now in policy, organizing and political action positions in their unions.

** We have a web site that we can use to promote these issues.

** We have name recognition within the wider left-liberal and progressive communities.

** In addition to our activists, we have a membership of thousands who renew annually and pay their dues.

Based on these strengths, it makes sense to emphasize issues that have national importance but are conducive to organizing at the local level. Then, the work that the National Office and NPC does in producing literature, organizing conferences, making contacts with Unions, etc. can be of practical benefit to the Locals. The members and Locals know that the local organizing that they are doing is part of a national DSA project,

An example of this approach is the Wal-Mart project. A report on DSA's Wal-Mart work is the enclosed document: "DSA Locals and Wal-Mart" by Theresa Alt. DSAers were doing this not as individual local activists but as part of the national DSA project. Whatever else we do at the convention, we hope we spend some time considering how to make the Wal-Mart project a success and major part of what DSA does. Wal-Mart is such a large part of the entire U.S. economy that its low-wage anti-union business model drives down the wages of the entire workforce. DSA has made an ideological contribution to the broad left thru this Wal-Mart Revolution theme. DSA members like Harold Meyerson have taken this theme into the Washington Post, American Prospect, etc. The real solution is to organize Wal-Mart workers into the UFCW. However, Wal-Mart workers are so intimidated that it is hard to see how this will happen without major community support, along the lines of the recent Justice for Janitors campaign. Down the line, we can envision DSA as a key ally of the UFCW in bringing this about. A first step is to help publicize the role of Wal-Mart to the progressive community and associate DSA with this issue.

The Wal-Mart campaign could easily spread to college campuses, following the examples of the grape boycott and JP Stevens. The sweatshop economy is right down the street at Wal-Mart, and even exerts downward pressure on the wages of service and maintenance and secretarial workers, including adjuncts and grad student instructors, right on campus.

DSA held three regional conferences that brought policy people and leaders together with DSA activists. These conferences allowed us to reconnect with speakers and resource folks from unions, organizations of people of color, etc. These conferences also gave the DSA locals in a region an opportunity to meet with each other, exchange best practices, and develop stronger ties.

There has been a modest increase in DSA membership in the past two years, but it would be premature to attribute this increase to our current strategy. At this convention, we encourage locals that have not come on board to combine what they are already working on with the national campaign – or perhaps just reframe what they are doing in terms of the low-wage justice concept. In addition to developing the Wal-Mart project there are other low-wage issues that need work: health care, living wage legislation, affordable housing, defending Social Security. Individual Locals are active in some of these, but for the convention the important question is how to create the national-local mix. DSA has a commitment to become a more diverse organization and to fight racism. Our low wage work has not yet resulted in a more diverse membership, but the work we do in these areas results in joint work with multi-ethnic labor movement and community organizations such as ACORN.

DSA has participated in anti-war activities, and has been a member of United for Peace and Justice. This reflects our coalition approach, and the commitment to have National DSA provide organizing tools to our membership. Our membership in the Socialist International may permit us to play a unique role in international work in the future. Again, we are trying to make use of

the strengths we have to permit us to make a special contribution. Within the Socialist International, we represent the anti-war, anti-Bush U.S. position.

We expect these initiatives to have an effect on membership, but we must place special emphasis on growing YDS. We have an excellent new Youth Organizer, Elizabeth Rothschild, whom everyone should get to know. DSA can help YDS with contacts among friendly progressive faculty (who know progressive students) and locals should get to know the campus left in their vicinity and get contacts for Elizabeth and YDS.

About the outgoing NPC:

*** We were a small group, with incomplete representation from women and wthnic minorities.

*** Democratic Left was published regularly with high quality content. We missed Kathy Quinn's contributions on the previous NPC, but her role was ably filled by John Strauss.

*** We created dsamember as a moderated discussion list open only to DSA members. There was general agreement that this was much more successful than previous unmoderated attempts.

*** The Local Development Committee kept track of locals and made reports of local activity available via Democratic Left.

*** The Personnel Committee worked with the National Director, the outgoing Youth Organizer Lucas Shapiro and YDS leadership to conduct a search that resulted in Elizabeth coming on board.

*** The budget committee encouraged locals to hold fund raising house parties to benefit the national organization.

*** In late 2004 we produced and released studies on "The Politics of Race" and "Affordable Health Care for All". These are available in pdf form in the "tools" section of our upgraded web site.

*** We passed a small number of resolutions on political subjects. The resolutions went through an iterative process before they were finalized to incorporate the best thinking of the entire NPC. They are available in leaflet form as pdf files on the web site:

 "On Israel's Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza" Oct. 2004

 "Defending Social Security" Feb 2005

 "A Democratic Socialist Perspective for the Anti-War Movement" Sept 2005

 "New Orleans Response: Just What the Right Wing Ordered" Sept. 2005

The outgoing NPC has functioned in a collegial atmosphere. The members have diverse politics, but we have worked well together for the benefit of DSA. I think we have left DSA in better shape than it was two years ago. As you consider the elections for the next NPC, in addition to selecting candidates with whom you share political perspectives, we urge you to remember that the NPC is a working body. NPC members are key to actually getting projects to happen. We write and edit DSA literature including DL, maintain the website, communicate with locals, and plan conferences. We need the next NPC to work, and to be committed to working together.