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USA

Jacobin editor: 'No one can say what will happen next'

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Bhaskar Sunkara is editor of the US-based socialist magazine Jacobin and a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, which has experienced rapid growth over the past year.

Sunkara visited Australia as a featured speaker at the annual Marxism conference in Melbourne over Easter. *Green Left Weekly*'s Alex Bainbridge spoke to him about US politics under President Donald Trump and prospects for socialists.

Can you tell us a bit about politics in the US under Trump?

I think there's been a kind of a breakdown, like in a lot of places, of the traditional, dominant centre-left and centre-right politics – or at least what's passed for centre-left politics in the United States.

People are looking for alternatives. They're fed up and don't want to support the establishments of either major party. This breakdown led to the very surprising, unprecedented support for the social democratic campaign of Bernie Sanders [in the 2016 Democrat primaries].

But on the right, it also led to support for Donald Trump, who was opposed bitterly by every part of the Republican Party establishment. They've now had to reconcile themselves to him, obviously, but they fought him tooth and nail during the Republican primaries.

So the real question is, what's going to go forward? Can we revive a kind of left populist option? Trump only has support from, maybe, 35-40% of the population. Or will the establishment get back control of the situation over the next two-to-four years?

This is still undetermined. No one can tell you what's going to happen next in US politics.

Can you tell us about your organisation, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)?

I've been a DSA member for 10, 11 years. We more or less came out of a anti-establishment left tradition. Many of the founders originally came from Trotskyist backgrounds.

But the actual politics of the group in the 1980s and '90s was a broad-based democratic socialism. So they tended to relate to the left wing of social democratic parties abroad, with some sympathy for the Italian Communist Party.

As it's grown in recent years, we've been able to radicalise it a bit more, so it relates a little more closely with existing far-left groups around the world. But it's a broad tent, with everyone from left social democrats to revolutionary socialists.

Can you tell us how you came to found *Jacobin* magazine and what its aims are?

I founded *Jacobin* [in 2011] when I was an undergraduate. I had been in the DSA for a few years, I had a set of politics and a group of people around me. But the left was so weak, we were having a hard time breaking through

organisationally, so we decided to try to propagandise around our ideas.

If you're in a small group, you have to recognise that a lot of what you're going to do is just propaganda and education – even if you have aspirations of doing more.

Part of our idea was to win arguments among a left that was increasingly, especially in the student movement, very anarchistic, to win over people to a more traditional Marxist politics again. [We wanted to] try to make that politics fresh and vibrant, so it just didn't seem like the old, stale and kitschy.

But we also try to win over a new mass constituency around these politics. I think a lot of people who self-identified as left-liberals or as liberals in the US in fact were quite a bit more radical than that. They just never had a language to express it in a country without a longstanding, deep socialist tradition – or rather with a forgotten socialist tradition.

That was the idea and today we have a circulation of about 40,000. We have an online readership that's much higher than that. So it's been a success.

And I do think we've helped pave the way for some of the transformations we're seeing with the growth in the DSA from an organisation when I joined of 5000-6000 people to now around 35,000 people.

Have Jacobin and DSA always been linked?

We're not linked officially. [At *Jacobin*] we're independent, we work and collaborate with people in [revolutionary socialist groups such as] the International Socialist Organisation, the US Socialist Alternative and Solidarity.

So we relate to a broad spectrum on the left. Our idea is to create tendencies and ideas across organisational boundaries, and not just be tied up with one organisation. The left is so small that even an organisation the size of the DSA can't be the be-all-and-end-all.

I don't think DSA has the answers, I do think it can be a broad big tent.

With Jacobin, we are in favour of a lot more orthodoxy [on the left]. Not just for the sake of orthodoxy, but because we thought [these ideas were right] around things like the primacy of class, and the need for parties and organisation.

We know we're very far away from a mass party, but we know that if we want to change the world, we have to actually take power. This was kind of an era where the idea of “change the world without taking power” was still very prevalent.

I think we have seen a swing where now the mainstream left is in the mentality of “let's just win elections”, so it's maybe been an overcorrection. But our stance is always that if you want to make radical change, you need a party, you need a role for trade union work and all these things that seem very unglamorous, but I think are the foundation for every single victory we've ever had for the past 120 years.

The DSA has experienced significant growth. Could you discuss the context?

Within the DSA, a lot of people who weren't politicised before have suddenly leaped into socialist politics. So people are still getting their footing, trying to understand the arguments and some of the history better.

And it is difficult without a deep tradition. So one of our main tasks is political education, not just perceiving the organisation as a way to do action. Not to say action isn't important, but we don't want people just thrown into socialist politics for two years and burning themselves out.

I wanted to ask about the Bernie Sanders experience and his Our Revolution group, and socialists running in Democratic primaries, despite the fact it is a pro-corporate party.

In New York City, for instance, we ran two different races. They both got around 30%. One was as an independent against a Democrat in the general election, one was against an incumbent Democrat but in a Democratic primary.

So socialists have run in different ways. And Socialist Alternative had very successful runs, they won a council position in Seattle with Kshama Sawant. There's been multiple socialist campaigns in Minneapolis that have been quite successful.

So there have been those breakthroughs, but that's a little bit different to what [Sanders'] Our Revolution is trying to do in the Democratic Party.

There is a tradition of running for office to talk about socialism, to have an excuse to knock on someone's door and bring up issues like [the need for a] \$15 minimum wage and other issues. And that's why I would relate to elections.

But then there's the approach of Our Revolution, which is really "We need to get the bastards out" and we need to actually run for everything from dogcatcher up to mayor and governor and so on.

My particular stance is that I don't think this does particular harm. I think it would be a good thing if one batch of Democrats are replaced with people who are left wing. I don't think it's a bad thing. I think it pushes the struggle a little forward. But I do think they're going to run into some sort of structural barriers.

The dilemma is, how do you not just be aloof and hectoring, saying "oh you're just going to fail?" You want to engage with these people. But how do you differentiate a socialist politics from this broader "Berniecrat" politics?

I kind of want one foot in with the Berniecrats and its left wing, but I also want to maintain a distinct vision of what a working-class, radical politics looks like.

Is there anything else you want to say?

I think in general, things are not maybe as bleak as they might seem in the US. If you look, for example, at what a lot of young people think about immigration, if you look at the general direction things are moving in at a social and cultural level, I think it's somewhat favourable to the left.

And even on policy issues, our key policy platform, the thing we've been working on most within the DSA, is "Medicare for All". I think there is real potential to win a socialised medical system in the United States in the next 10 years or so. And that would mean one-sixth of the largest economy in the world being turned over from private sector into something oriented towards public need.

And I think once people see a functioning system like that, they’ll start to demand more of the government. I think that’ll move things in a progressive and positive direction for us. I am cautiously optimistic about the next several years.

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