

### **Fifth Anniversary Edition**

*This statement was originally circulated as the call to the founding convention of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee held in October 1973. That convention adopted it as a basic statement of principles. While some of the specific references in this document are necessarily dated, it still serves as the best overall statement of DSOC's perspective.*

# **We Are Socialists of the Democratic Left**

## The fifth anniversary

**I**N October, 1973, a few hundred people, veterans of American socialism and younger activists seeking a new movement, met in New York. Those were difficult days for the Left. The Nixon landslide in 1972 had clearly signaled the end of the social consciousness and energy of the Sixties. In a troubled economy, many young people were turning back to private concerns; trade unionists, the minorities and the poor were confronted by the unprecedented, bewildering phenomenon of simultaneous inflation and recession; and democratic socialism was not a serious force or even a plausible presence in the country.

Against these odds, the convention in New York voted to found a new organization: The Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC). Its goals were modest because they had to be. It called itself an "organizing committee" to indicate that it was only the beginning of a beginning, not an anointed vanguard with a finished program. Some of the delegates had differed bitterly during the debates over tactics within the Left of the Sixties. They understood that those quarrels had to be laid to rest in a new period in which those fights were no longer relevant. The same spirit prevailed in the adoption of the statement of principles which is reprinted here. No one took it as holy writ or as the basis of a monolithic "line." The delegates came from many traditions—religious socialism, democratic Marxism, socialist feminism, the "Reuther" tendency in the labor movement, to name but a few—and everyone had some reservations about this or that detail. They were agreed, however, on the essentials.

DSOC would try to become "the left wing of the possible." It would work within the existing social movements, which were and are predominantly liberal, as a loyal, open socialist tendency fighting to persuade the entire democratic Left that structural change had become a practical necessity. The welfare state had been won by struggle and even at the cost of life. DSOC would defend its accomplishments and seek to deepen them. But the welfare state ac-

cepted, and sometimes even reinforced, a corporate domination of the society so pervasive that elected governments — and even liberal administrations — more often than not followed the priorities of the elite in the board room rather than those of the masses at the ballot box. So effective reform paradoxically required basic change: the democratization of economic power, the creation of a society based on cooperation and community rather than on money and profit.

Thus DSOC linked its ultimate vision and its commitment in immediate battles and set out to become a socialist leaven within the mass movements of the democratic Left. In its first five years, the organization has participated militantly within the unions, the minority communities, the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, the women's movement and in all other fights for social justice.

In the process, we have grown from a pre-convention committee of 200 people to an organization of nearly 3,000. More important, we have won broad acceptance as an explicit socialist tendency within that broad democratic and predominantly liberal Left. We have succeeded beyond our expectations —and we are still only a beginning.

Since the problems which inspired this statement have become all the more urgent, its essentials remain relevant to the America of the late Seventies and beyond. The economy has become a sickening, uncontrollable roller coaster; cities rot, and the black, the Spanish-speaking, the poor, women, the young and the old are the special victims of our collective failures. The corporations arrogantly propose to deal with these crises by holding down wages, cutting social spending and legislating increased profits. The threat of nuclear war persists and the anti-environmentalists are on the offensive. America seems to have lost its way. This statement is not "the" answer to all those troubles but it defines both a vision and a practical strategy which point the way toward a truly human society.

—Michael Harrington  
National Chair

August 1978

**W**E identify with the tradition of Eugene Victor Debs and Norman Thomas—with a socialism which is democratic, humanist and anti-war. We are the partisans of the poor, the minorities and the working people. We also seek to organize the new constituencies of educated professional and technical workers which are proliferating in late capitalist society and have their own interest in the democratization of economic and bureaucratic power.

We are not an anointed vanguard or the nucleus of a government of the future. We are socialists who feel the need to communicate with one another regularly and systematically, about our ultimate aims and our present, and very practical, struggles within the movements of the democratic Left. We are particularly concerned to educate a new generation of youth in democratic socialism. We are then a modest but hopeful new beginning.

We come together in the year of the Watergate revelations, one of the greatest political crises in the history of America. To us, Watergate is not simply a case of the most powerful officials in the land resorting to fraud, burglary, perjury, illegal electronic surveillance, and other criminal means, and considering pandering, kidnapping and bombing as well, all in the name of a "law and order" Administration. It is worse than that. Like the Dreyfuss case, it also illuminates the power relationships of the society as a whole. It tells us of how money corrupts the political process itself, how giant corporations like ITT and American Airlines try to purchase privileges. Watergate emphasizes once again a basic socialist truth: that there cannot be truly effective democracy in a society of economic oligarchy, that the corporate rich constantly make themselves more "equal" than everyone else.

As socialists of the democratic Left, we stand for fundamental change, for socialism, and for every immediate gain which can be achieved by the largely non-socialist mass movements in which we loyally and enthusiastically participate: the unions, minority and women's organizations, the student movement, the liberal wing of the Democratic Party among them. We do not compartmentalize the two aspects of our commitment, segregating vision and practical politics from one another. It is precisely because we are socialists that we feel we have a unique contribution to make to the

democratic Left, showing how increments of change must be turned toward structural transformation of the society itself.

## **Why are we socialists?**

**B**ECAUSE humanity is in the process of socializing everything but itself. We have rationalized our work and nature and the very planet in every respect save one: with regard to their underlying purpose. Therefore we are in conflict with an environment that we ourselves have brilliantly, and thoughtlessly created. Our genius threatens to overwhelm us.

Under capitalism, an intricate system of antagonistic cooperation makes a single individual more productive than a thousand once were. Science, the community of human knowledge, is casually employed for private purposes with revolutionary public consequences. In the advanced capitalist economies, this creates the highest living standard ever known, rots the cities, befouls the air and water and embitters classes, generations and races. Under Communism, these contradictions are collectivized, not resolved.

Tragically, most of the people of the world do not even have the luxury of suffering from such perverse prodigies. In the age of space exploration they claw the earth to satisfy primordial needs for food and shelter. More often than not the unification of mankind has made them more miserable than ever before. Trade more effectively exacts a tribute from the poor nations to the rich, both capitalist and Communist; medicine saves a baby from an ancient plague only to deliver him up to a new kind of hunger; a miraculous seed threatens rural unemployment and even starvation because only elite farmers can use it.

The ultimate in these contradictions is both unprecedented and obvious to the point of banality. Nuclear science has penetrated the innermost secrets of our world and discovered there the possibility of annihilating it.

Socialism proposes to socialize the control of a technology already social in its consequences, to substitute the democratic rule of the people for the domination of the corporations or the commissars. It is not a finished program with all the answers

to the problems of human life. Indeed, after the socialist defeats and failures of this century, anyone who identifies with this tradition must be chastened, anti-dogmatic and skeptical about easy or apocalyptic solutions to our crises. Still, there is, we believe, real substance in the socialist philosophy—and in the socialist accomplishments—and it is relevant to the American, and world, future.

The institutionalized maldistribution of economic power, whether in the hands of owners, managers, or commissars is a fundamental barrier to freedom and the development of the individual. In capitalist and communist countries alike that power must be democratized. There is no single technique for accomplishing that end. Among the various means are the socialization of industry, cooperatives, the democratic determination of basic decisions about the allocation and distribution of resources, the democratization of the work process itself. Whatever the mix of these techniques—or of policies not yet dreamed of in our philosophy—which develops through the specific experiences of the socialist movement, the fundamental aim remains the same: the full development of democracy in all of political, economic and social life.

Thus we consider democracy as of the socialist essence. Planning, nationalization and the other traditional socialist proposals are not socialist when they are not accompanied by democracy. Where the government owns or directs the means of production, the crucial question is: Who owns the government? There is only one way for the majority to “own” the government: through a political democracy which allows them to change its policies and personnel and which assures minorities, not only civil liberties to try and become a majority, but technical and financial means to exercise that liberty as well. So democracy is thus not simply central to the political structure of socialism; it is the guarantee, the only guarantee, of the people's economic and social power. Given this analysis, we reject the claim that Communist countries are socialist.

Socialist democracy, we believe, would make it increasingly possible for the free provision of the necessities of life. That should be done as soon as possible with medicine; eventually, it should extend to housing, food and clothing. Our ideal is nothing less than putting an end to that invidious competition based on a scramble for scarce resources which

has stunted and warped mankind's humanity from its origins.

## A socialist world

**W**E SPEAK of these things in an American context but, as internationalists, we project them on a global scale. In considerable measure, the poverty and misery of the Third World is the result of the deliberate political and economic policies of the affluent countries, first of all the capitalist countries, but also those of advanced Communism. The world market and the multi-national corporation are institutions for transferring wealth from the starving to the affluent. As an immediate priority, we work toward making the democratic modernization of Asia, Africa and Latin America possible. As a final goal, we posit a socialist world. This is obviously a distant ideal, for the agony and travail of most ex-colonial lands will almost certainly continue during our lifetime. But in these times of cynicism and big-power deals, we think it crucial to restate the socialist aim.

We say this in full knowledge that there are many experts—some decent and humanitarian people among them—who now argue that the resources of the world are not adequate to provide a decent living standard for all. There are even proposals, as politically impractical as they are morally outrageous, to freeze the inequities of consumption which now exist between the rich and poor lands as part of a program of global conservation. We continue to seek enough for all. We believe that democratic planning and the socialization of research—not, as in the United States, the public funding of research which is then utilized by private business for its own purposes—can develop new resources, new sources of energy and food, new possibilities of voluntary population control in countries with high birth rates, and new patterns of living, much less wasteful than the ones so assiduously propagated under capitalism, which can provide the means for a human world. As long as there is even the possibility of such discoveries, it is our obligation to struggle for them.

For it is obvious that the fullness of the socialist dream will not come to pass in our lifetime. The

creation of a classless planetary society based upon solidarity and cooperation is an infinitely more difficult task than the first of the modern socialist generations ever dreamed. But we state our ideal, not because we think ourselves on the verge of the promised land, but the better to approximate it in the present. Since we have a sense of the epochal possibilities which are latent in the most immediate of political battles we feel that a socialist caucus of the democratic Left can make a distinct contribution to the movement.

## Beyond liberalism

**W**E ARE trade unionists, students, intellectuals, black and white. Almost all of us are veterans of the movement to end the unconscionable American war in Vietnam and of the McGovern campaign of 1972, of the battles against racism and poverty and of the struggles of labor for decent wages and working conditions. Now the sophisticated reactionaries in the White House who plan and collectivize the economy on behalf of corporations, and the neo-conservative refugees from the Left, both tell us that the sixties failed because the nation threw money at problems in an orgy of thoughtless and radical innovation.

We reject that myth, whether it takes the form of a callous Presidential budget or an article by a deradicalized professor. The successes of the Sixties proved that the government can indeed reduce unemployment and discrimination – even if the gains were much too modest; the failures of the Sixties show that underfinanced programs which rely on the social conscience of the private sector will not accomplish their proclaimed goals—or more precisely, will follow a hidden agenda and provide a dole for the affluent rather than the poor.

So we refuse to sound retreat. Our present crisis does not demonstrate that we will somehow blunder happily into the twenty first century if only we aspire less. Rather, it proves how urgently this country needs a regrouped and renewed movement of the democratic Left with a program that looks beyond the conventional wisdom—including conventional liberal wisdom—of the 1960's.

The bi-polar world of the Soviet-American conflict is coming to an end. The once seemingly mono-

lithic Communist bloc has become polycentric and the absolute political and economic domination of the Western bloc by the United States is clearly over. But detente, welcome as it is, is a long way from peace. Until anti-war pressure in the nation and Congress forced him to some restraint, Nixon asserted his right to bomb at will in Indochina, and the Russians claim the imperial prerogative of crushing movements for freedom and/or independence within the Communist sphere. Multi-national corporations are now sovereign powers, attacking the living standards of workers in the advanced lands, speculating on the misery of the hungry in the poorer countries, trying to impose their own foreign policies on the United States.

Above all, the fate of the world still depends upon a balance of nuclear terror. But the globe in the late Twentieth century is not the Europe of Metternich, as Nixon thinks, and we do not put our trust in a conspiracy of super-powers to guarantee the peace any more than we think that the priorities of corporations and commissars will eliminate the poverty of the majority of mankind. The democratization of world political and economic power is the means to genuine disarmament and to the economic development of the Third World. There must, in short, be social and economic planning on a global scale which is more audacious than the often anti-social world planning now engaged in by General Motors, ITT and the rest of the multinationals.

In the United States, it is necessary to go beyond the conventional liberal wisdom inherited from the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the New Frontier and the Great Society. In that view, the institutional structures of American capitalism are seen as fundamentally sound and the government's function is simply to provide the context—above all, the aggregate demand – in which private decision-makers and capitalist profiteers can operate. Economic growth induced in this fashion, and then allocated according to the priorities of the market, is, the argument goes, the best guarantee of social justice for the working people, the minorities and the entire society.

We disagree. We believe that liberalism—which is the philosophy of the mainstream democratic Left—must, if it is true to its own values, move radically beyond its old positions. The basic mechanisms of the American economy maldistribute

both wealth and political power and tolerate poverty and racism while encouraging inequality. They impose social and environmental costs upon the people while maintaining profits. When, therefore, the Government intervenes to make such a system workable, it handsomely subsidizes injustice and funds the very problems which it deplors. As compared to laissez-faire, Keynesianism was a gigantic stride forward with its concern for full employment. That, however, was the last generation's victory, important as it was. We must now move toward a qualitative national product.

**There must be planned social investments, a redistribution of wealth through the progressive income tax, a shift of resources from private to public sector in areas like medicine and pensions. There must also be a revitalization—and in the case of the poor and minorities and many working people, a vitalization—of grass roots participation and decision-making. But this will only be possible if there is democratic planning at the national level. We do not seek community control of poverty and misery; we demand community control of real wealth. That can only be accomplished through a government committed to full employment and income redistribution in Washington.**

We support, of course, the immediate reforms advocated by the progressive forces of the labor and liberal movements: a right to a job for every able-bodied citizen guaranteed by the Federal government and utilized to channel human resources to social uses; national health insurance; tax justice through an end to the almost \$77 billion in annual welfare for the corporations and the rich in the internal revenue code; a guaranteed annual income for those excluded from the labor market; and so on. But our socialist convictions cause us to champion these increments of change in a distinctive way, so as to make them attack the very structures of injustice. Thus, for example, while we back the Kennedy-Griffiths health bill because it is clearly superior to the Nixon proposal to subsidize the profits of the private health insurance industry, we also argue for fully socialized medicine in which all services would be collectively paid for through funds collected by a progressive income tax and would be available on the basis of need alone. Moreover, it is that vision of socialized medicine which allows us to be more precise about the approximations of it which are possible here and now.

## Coalition politics and realignment

**T**ACTICALLY, we move toward these goals by way of coalition politics.

**The old socialist dream that disinherited workers would become the vast majority of capitalist society did not come to pass. There is no single group—neither the trade unionists, nor the poor nor the minorities, nor the middle class liberals and radicals—which is sufficiently numerous and cohesive to win a democratic majority. Therefore each potential component of the democratic Left must both organize and speak for itself and enter into a coalition with other groups.**

The organized working people must play a crucial role in this coalition. The vast majority of trade unionists in the United States receive incomes below the modest but adequate budget defined by the government. They have had to fight hard just to keep pace with the soaring cost of living during the past seven or eight years. Their health and even their lives, are threatened by that degradation of the work environment which management designs into the system in order to maximize profits; and if they own a home—or rather, if they are paying rent to the bank in the form of mortgage payments—they receive a pittance in Federal tax subsidy compared to the billions lavished upon the houses of the rich. The American workers are, for the most part, not the hungry and outcast multitude of the Great Depression but neither are they affluent. Therefore they have a vital and conscious stake in an immediate program for full employment, national health insurance, tax reform and the like and they must become a central force in any transformation in economic power.

The minorities and the poor made some gains during the 60's, particularly through the employment policies of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. But under Nixon's ingenious "game plan" of a simultaneous recession-inflation, some of them have been pushed back down into the economic underworld. In 1972, the government tells us, 300,000 blacks were added to the poverty population, even though, in the first advance registered in three years, a million whites escaped to above the poverty line. We fought in the great battles led by Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 60's to end Jim

Crow in public accommodations and voting and we rejoice in the victories that movement won. But the fact of the matter is that the very structure of the housing and labor markets still work to keep blacks and Chicanos and Puerto Ricans and American Indians disproportionately and outrageously poor. There must be planned social investments to guarantee, not simply a job, but a decently paid job with a future for all the poor and the minorities. One of the most important uses for the wasted talents of the unemployed and underemployed is destroying this nation's racial slums.

Recent events have given us new hope that the struggle for minority rights will once again be an integral part of a progressive coalition uniting the majority of whites, blacks and browns around common economic and social interests. After the horror of Vietnam subverted the "war" on poverty, and after the assassination of the two Kennedys, of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, many militant blacks turned to a bitter separatism to protest all the broken promises and the lost lives. Now there are signs that the black community has drawn positive conclusions from that experience, rightly insisting that blacks must lead, and speak for, blacks, but also understanding that a twelve percent minority cannot, by itself, transform the most powerful society on the face of the earth, that it must be part of a new majority movement. We are heartened by the growing influence of the Black Congressional Caucus, by the shift in strategy symbolized by Bobby Seale's mayoral campaign in Oakland, and by Bradley's magnificent—and integrated—victory in Los Angeles. Hopefully the other minorities—including the Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, American Indians—will come to the same conclusions.

There are also new constituencies emerging in American society. With the development of a more sophisticated technology and the growth of mass higher education, new strata of college educated professionals and technicians have appeared. They have, as their work in the anti-war movement, the Kennedy and McCarthy campaigns of 1968 and the McGovern campaign of 1972 demonstrate, a great political potential. But they have also sometimes been contemptuous of trade unionists or acted on a merely episodic commitment to social change. We do not write such people off and try to drive them out of a Left coalition because of their faults; we

seek to build upon their best qualities, their concern for peace, their opposition to poverty and racism, and to make them a part of a progressive American majority.

In recent years, the new educated strata have also been the primary source of a revitalized women's movement. Socialism in this country and in Europe was strongly identified with feminism from the very outset and the most advanced legislation for women was passed in Sweden under the leadership of the Social Democratic Party. It is clear that women can never achieve a rightful equality with men so long as the labor market systematically discriminates against them. It is the males' institutionalized advantage in the economy which provides the structural underpinning for masculine domination in so many other spheres of private life and which cuts off the possibilities for women's personal and professional development. Therefore, we believe that there must be a systematic assault upon economic and social, as well as individual, sexism, and that the society must follow affirmative action policies in this area as well as in the case of ethnic and racial minorities.

**The organizational focus for bringing together these disparate forces in the foreseeable future is, for better or worse, the Democratic Party.**

In the Congressional elections of 1974 and the Presidential election of 1976, the serious choice between Left and Right will counterpose liberal Democrats to reactionary Republicans and the latter's Dixiecrat fifth column in the Democratic Party. In that conflict, we will side with the liberals against the conservatives—which is to say with the mass Left against the mass Right.

But that does not mean that we regard the amorphousness of American party politics, or of the Democratic Party in particular, as good. There are those, including some liberals, who celebrate the unprincipled and unprogrammatic character of the American party system as a bulwark against "extremism." But the problems before America today cannot be solved on an ad hoc basis. They require democratic planning, the posing of alternatives, basic changes. Our technology and world are revolutionary and our choices are going to be radical, whether we know it or not. But if we do not know these things—if this unprecedented transformation takes place without conscious direction—the bureaucratic, authoritarian and inhuman po-

tential of our genius will surely dominate us. So it is crucial that our parties become instruments for rational discussion, debate and change.

**We act, then, as part of the Left wing of the Democratic Party in order to change the Party itself, to turn it into a new kind of mass political party in America with a democratic Left program and the active participation of forces for social change.** That would mean that trade unionists, the minorities, the poor, and the middle class liberals and radicals would not simply vote for a party which is also heavily influenced by the Dixiecrat South and Big Business; it means they would turn it into their own party with their own priorities.

## **An end to domination: the beginning of freedom**

**E**VEN such a realignment, however, is only one step—even if a gigantic one—toward our goal. We see an principled and liberal majority party as a first step in the creation of a mass socialist movement.

Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle asked

in the *Politics* if it would ever be possible to do away, not simply with slavery, but with every kind of domination. He answered that this could only happen if the statues of Daedalus—those statues of Greek legend which moved of their own motion—would come to life. In the technology of the late Twentieth century, the statues of Daedalus dance. But thus far this incredible and utterly social system of production has not been used to abolish domination but to suit the needs of the corporate rich and the Communist bureaucracies and, more often than not, to increase the gap between them and the great masses of people.

We believe that the democratic and social intelligence can plan a society—a world—in which this social technology, these modern statues of Daedalus, will be used to create the conditions of freedom for all mankind and an end to every form of domination.

Perhaps the fullness of that vision will never come to pass; perhaps it will. But whether it does or not, we believe that this dream is relevant to the increments of reform we can win in the next few years and to the reconstruction of society in the Twenty-First Century. That is why we are socialists of the democratic Left.

**DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST ORGANIZING COMMITTEE**  
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# THE TEXAS OBSERVER

A Journal of Free Voices

February 29, 1980

the next 25

## A word in edgewise

Austin

A year ago this month a group of people from across the country met in Houston to talk about the malaise of progressive politics that later preoccupied many contributors to the *Observer's* 25th anniversary issue (*Obs.*, Dec. 28, 1979). The meeting was a convention of socialists—more precisely, of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, an organization now some seven years old, with more than 3,000 members nationwide (including chapters in Austin, Dallas-Fort Worth, and Houston).

They are democratic socialists because they believe that no form of economic oligarchy, capitalist or statist, should be tolerated; that democracy is of the essence of a rightly conceived socialism; that only a mass movement for economic democracy can challenge corporate domination of our politics. They are not a third party, because they believe also that only within the Democratic Party can this movement develop.

The heart of their argument is that the liberal prescription for curing the ills of corporate capitalism has not worked. Government intervention in the economy by and large has followed corporate priorities, buttressing the corporate oligarchy, even as we have moved toward a welfare state. Economic stagnation has now put in jeopardy even the

reforms of the '30s and '60s. The clamor from the corporate sector for deregulation, the call for cutbacks in social programs, the retreat of many erstwhile liberals under pressure from business lobbyists and political action committees are all tokens of the failure of the traditional liberal approach to reform.

The democratic socialists contend that liberals with the courage of their convictions must admit the need for a radically different economic structure. Redistribution of wealth, help for the poor, for minorities, for working people, public ownership of energy resources—these goals on the liberal agenda cannot be achieved any other way.

One reason the democratic socialists met in Houston was to emphasize that drastic economic changes such as the corporate migration to the Sunbelt are already occurring in any event and are leading us still further away from the liberal tradition. In the cities the corporations leave behind, social services decline and unemployment rises. In the cities to which they flee, local officials point to the influx of corporate employers as proof that lack of generosity toward the needy is a virtue.

The immediate task of countering the new corporate militancy has fallen to the Southern labor movement, and many of the best labor organizers in the Sunbelt states were at the Houston DSOC meet-

ing. A labor organizer from Milwaukee told them, "If you don't win in the South, we're done for in the North."

Being practical people, they are not given to optimism about their chances, and most are convinced that talking up socialism is no way to talk union in their states. "You're not going to win by calling yourself a socialist in Houston, Texas," said one. The best hope, argued another, is to "talk as a socialist but not of socialism."

I think these labor organizers are right about what is possible in their situation. What the rest of us, the writers and readers of publications like the *Observer*, should do is a different matter. We can talk of socialism, and we should. As Peter Steinfels wrote last year in his *Neoconservatives*, a critique of the conservative intellectual revival, "when people repeat that politics is the art of the possible, the temptation is . . . to forget the crucial role that thinkers and writers and artists have in defining, for practical men, just what is possible."

In the national political debate and in the dialogue about the future begun in the *Observer's* 25th anniversary issue, it is time to take up explicitly the possibility of democratic socialism. It is time for democratic socialism to get more than a word in edgewise.

—E.H.

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