

# History of Young Democratic Socialists of America

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# Our History

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The Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA) is the youth affiliate of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the largest Left organization in the United States since the 1940s. YDSA is also the second-longest, continuous youth wing of a democratic socialist organization in US history, after the Young People's Socialist League. By 2020, the organization had grown to 120 chapters at colleges, universities, and high schools across the country.

Like its parent organization, YDSA is not a political party, but rather a national, campus-based socialist activist organization. YDSA played an important role in organizing mobilizations and campaigns around a variety of issues, such as opposing US militarism, boycotting South Africa's apartheid government, and supporting electoral campaigns, such as Bernie Sanders for President. Throughout its existence, the group consistently prioritized labor support work as well as strategic campaigns on university campuses about a variety of issues. While YDSA lacked the size and notoriety of such left-wing youth organizations as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), it trained thousands of activists, many of whom went on to hold major roles in unions and other progressive organizations.

Not only did YDSA train future leaders and organized significant rallies and campaigns, but it also demonstrated that a non-sectarian leftist group, committed to the principles of democratic socialism but open to debate, can be sustained for decades and have a meaningful impact.

YDSA's ability to survive periods that were politically challenging for the Left enabled it to take advantage of new circumstances when a new era of youthful activism – featuring Occupy, Black Lives Matter, and Bernie Sanders, followed by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez – arose.

YDSA traces its roots to the mid-1970s Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) Youth Section, which established traditions and infrastructure and enjoyed a surprising number of successes. In 1976, the first DSOC youth conference was held at a retreat center in Enon Valley, PA. The next year, four years after DSOC's formation, the youth section held its founding convention as a formal organization. This event inaugurated the tradition of summer conferences that served as annual decision-making gatherings. Tens at first, and then hundreds of students from around the country met at various locations, mainly on the East Coast. Initially, the conferences were volunteer-organized, but growth led to the need for full-time, paid staff.

In 1979, DSOC hired Joseph Schwartz as its first campus organizer. One of his first tasks involved stewarding the youth section's leading role in the National Mobilization Against the Draft, a 1980 coalition effort. More than 30,000 people – primarily in New York and Washington, DC – rallied against intervention in Afghanistan and a potential draft under the Carter administration.

In these early years, the group established the newsletter *Days of Decision*. The periodical, as well as campus visits by national staff, provided political education and information about campaigns and other activities to members across the country. Both DSOC and its youth wing began conducting international solidarity work, which continued into the 1980s. For example, campus chapters were integral to many campaigns to pressure universities to divest from apartheid South Africa's business interests. The non-sectarian, intellectual but anti-capitalist and activist nature of the youth section attracted students that might otherwise be turned off by both more ideologically rigid socialist groups and more national liberal formations lacking structural analysis. By the end of the 1970s, the youth section had grown rapidly, as dozens of chapters blossomed across the country.

In 1982, DSOC merged with the New American Movement (NAM) to form the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), so the youth organization became known as the DSA Youth Section. At this time, veterans from DSOC and NAM who came from different traditions built bridges with the incoming student socialists. This effort sought to prevent the kind of tensions that occurred between the Old and New Lefts, famously embodied by conflict between Michael Harrington, later DSA chair, and members of SDS.

In the 1980s, national progressive opposition grew to Carter's and then Reagan's foreign policy. The youth section did solidarity work with the El Salvadoran and Nicaraguan socialist movements and linked opposition to US intervention in Central America with work against US support of the apartheid regime in South Africa.



YDSA Members Protest the G20 Summit in Pittsburgh (2009)

In spring of 1986, the group spearheaded a trade-union led march against US intervention in South Africa and Central America.

While the youth section backed those struggling abroad against US imperialism, the type of solidarity was contested internally. The presence of Communists in national liberation movements and DSA's historic commitment to anti-Stalinism led to discussions about "critical support" and "support with reservations." Debates mirrored broader discussions on the Left, as did domestic policy around presidential campaigns. The Jesse Jackson presidential campaigns, especially in 1988, gave the youth section the opportunity to be part of a multi-racial, working-class coalition. Many issues touched upon by Jackson's candidacy around labor, racial justice, and economic inequality were also cornerstones of DSA campus chapter activism throughout the decade.



Summer conference in the late 1980s

The youth section built upon the campus divestment campaign strategies used by previous generations of DSA students. Activists led campaigns with allies, to pressure universities to use sweatshop-free products.

Student-labor collaboration eventually led to the creation of United Students Against Sweatshops. This type of strategic leverage was used in prison reform work as well. The Prison Moratorium Project (PMP), which later became an independent nonprofit, was a youth-section effort to get colleges to drop vendors such as Sodexo that invested heavily in the Corrections Corporation of America, the largest for-profit prison company in the United States. PMP included cultural activities such as rap albums and concerts tied to hip-hop stars connected to the Wu-Tang Clan and the Beastie Boys.

By the late 1990s, the youth section was a vibrant intellectual hub with around twenty chapters. Its activism, while more vibrant than DSA's, also faced its own struggles, as the student Left changed. Eco-socialism never became central.

In the 1990s, events outside their control influenced the fate of DSA and its youth wing. In 1989, Harrington, DSA's principal leader since its founding, died. In the same year, the Berlin Wall fell. DSA went into a general retreat, like much of the democratic and socialist Left across the globe. Two terms of a Reagan presidency had badly weakened the labor movement.

During this decade, while DSA community chapters dwindled, the youth section became the focal point of activity in the organization. Labor activism remained a core part of student chapter programming. The youth section opposed the North American Free Trade Agreement and joined mass protests against the World Trade Organization. The AFL-CIO started Union Summer to encourage young people to join their staffs, and many youth section members participated in this program. Meanwhile, the youth section organized Campus Labor Institutes to teach student activists about the labor movement.

The rise of environmentalism and support for people of color-led organizing put YDSA, a heavily white student group, on the margins of those struggles. The youth section turned inward and focused on generating political statements. Lingering tensions between DSA and its youth section culminated in the second name change: Members unanimously voted to rename their group Young Democratic Socialists (YDS), thereby establishing a separate identity in terms of both internal structure and external relations.

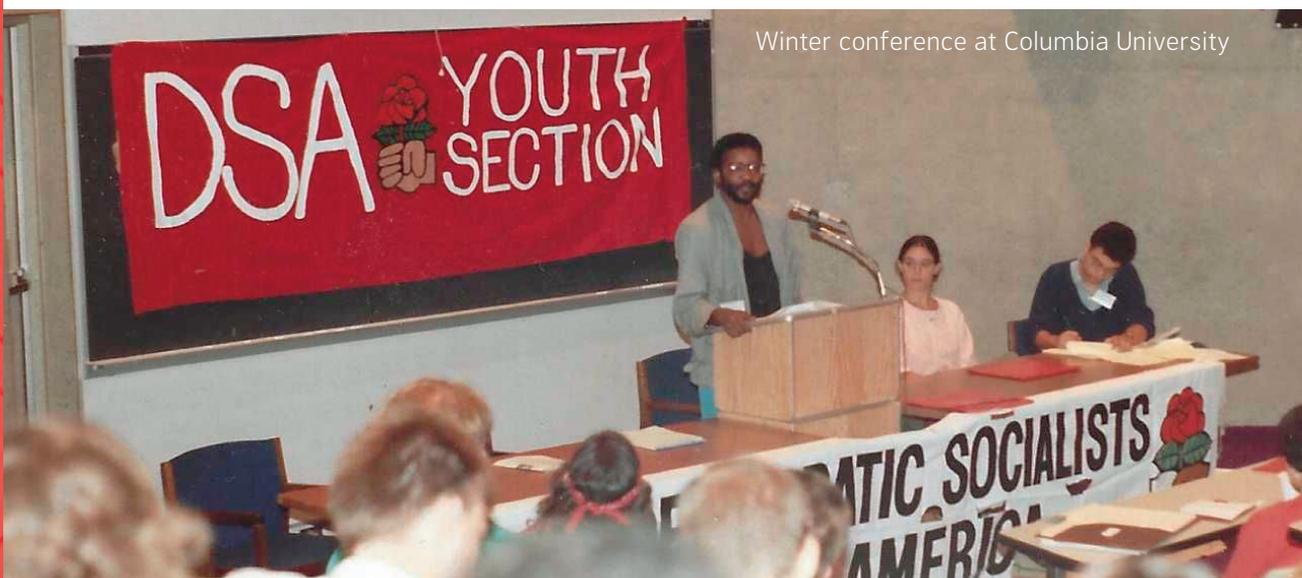
While YDS reached consensus on many global issues, the NATO bombings, the US response to the September 11, 2001 attacks, and US military action in Afghanistan divided both YDS and DSA. In addition, YDS leadership opposed Ralph Nader, the 2000 Green Party presidential candidate, more adamantly than some grassroots activists did. These schisms led some chapters to withdraw, and DSA and YDS membership dropped to record lows as the second Iraq War began.

Despite this falling-off, democratic socialists played a meaningful role in the peace movement. Both DSA and YDS belonged to United for Peace and Justice, a coalition which held rallies that mobilized hundreds of thousands against the Iraq war. YDS was also a founding member of the National Student

and Youth Peace Coalition. New York-based staff and members dedicated significant time to supporting these demonstrations.

YDS continued to prioritize workers' movement activity, often in solidarity with student labor groups. The Student Labor Week of Action, organized by Student Labor Action Project, gave chapters a way to connect with campus unions and their student allies across the country. In one long-term campaign, YDS supported the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in its successful effort to raise the wage of tomato pickers by pressuring fast food chains with college outlets. Nevertheless, YDS continued to dwindle. With a handful of chapters, the national leadership often had empty spots. To stabilize the organization, YDS narrowed its list of national priorities and focused on organizing chapters at colleges where YDS faced little competition from more established left organizations. This strategy helped YDS rebound to its size of a decade earlier.

YDS revived its magazine, *The Activist*, as a blog. One of its first editors was Bhaskar Sunkara, who recruited several contributors and YDS members to help start *Jacobin* in 2010.



Winter conference at Columbia University

In addition to *The Activist*, YDSA maintained *The Red Letter* to chronicle activities such as conferences, chapter events, and occasional political pronouncements.

For several years, DSA and YDS leaders held joint events to maintain a pipeline between campus and community DSA chapters. These summer events featured many future DSA leaders. The Bernie Sanders 2006 senatorial campaign, discussion of socialism around Barack Obama's first presidential term, and the Occupy movement in 2010 all boosted DSA's visibility and interest in the organization. As Sanders prepared to launch a presidential campaign, DSA grew larger, while YDSA remained roughly the same.

Early in the 2016 Sanders presidential campaign, YDS did not benefit from the renewed interest in socialism among students. Students for Bernie groups absorbed much of the energy, and several national student and youth groups continued for a few years, which funneled potential recruits away from YDS. After the election of Donald Trump, DSA membership nearly doubled within weeks and YDS's fortunes changed. DSA revived the position of campus organizer, and dozens of chapters sprung up around the country. The chapters continued to fight for college affordability, now more mainstream because of the Sanders campaign, and also worked to support his Medicare for All platform. YDS chapter growth also benefited from changes in the overall organizational environment on the student Left. Groups that YDS once competed against declined or disappeared.

In 2017, conference delegates voted to change the name of the organization to Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA), aligning more closely again with DSA. Recruiting from the Student for Bernie groups after Sanders withdrew from the 2020 presidential campaign, the renamed organization grew to more than 100 chapters. YDSA organized around the COVID-19 pandemic to push for stimulus funding for schools and alleviate economic and health hardships for students. The organization continued to prioritize labor activism and to respond to developments among other progressive movements.

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**Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, & Dan Georgakas,**  
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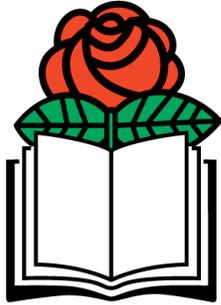
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# Made Possible By:



# DSA Fund

The **Democratic Socialists of America Fund** is a 501(c)3 fund devoted to public education and outreach about democratic socialism. The DSA Fund endeavors to demonstrate how an awareness of social democratic and democratic socialist values and policies would strengthen the quality of policy debates in the U.S. The Fund also works to introduce young activists to the history and traditions of democratic socialism.

The **Democratic Socialists of America Fund** was originally established in 1978 as the Institute for Democratic Socialism (IDS). Michael Harrington, who became famous for his 1962 work *The Other America*, was a founder of IDS as well as its sister organization, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (now merged into Democratic Socialists of America/DSA). IDS's mission, like that of the DSA Fund today, was to help spread democratic socialist ideals through educational materials and activist training.

Throughout the last quarter of the 20th century, IDS was part of several historic progressive projects and events. In December 1980, IDS organized a three-day conference, "Eurosocialism and America" that brought over 2000 U.S.-based activists to D.C. to meet with the leaders of social democratic and democratic socialist political movements from Europe and the developing world to explore how democratic socialist policy alternatives could benefit the United States. Speakers included heads of state or soon-to-be heads of state such as Willy Brandt of Germany, François Mitterrand of France, Olof Palme of Sweden, and Michael Manley of Jamaica.

A harbinger to today's Medicare-for-All movement, in 1993 IDS (with help from organized labor such as the United Automobile Workers) brought trade unionists, doctors, and parliamentarians from Canada to speak at public forums and press conferences across the United States on the applicability of the Canadian single-payer health care system to the United States. The tour played a significant role in the creation of the single-payer movement in this country.

In the mid-1990s, IDS changed its name to the Democratic Socialists of America Fund. During this time, it lent significant support to the Prison Moratorium Project, coordinated by DSA's youth section (now the Young Democratic Socialists of America). This effort to divest from private prisons into public education led Sodexo to abandon its carceral business practices.

Throughout this millennium, DSA Fund has continued to advocate for democratic socialism. More recent projects include supporting a Eugene Debs book project and GET UP, a popular education program about economic inequality. Each year, the fund has provided generous support to young socialists attending both the annual winter and summer youth conferences. In total, 10,000 college-age socialists have attended these events over the past 40 years.

Today the DSA Fund continues to build the socialist project and advance educational work around alternatives to capitalism.



## About YDSA

Young Democratic Socialists of America is the youth and student section of the Democratic Socialists of America, and a national organization of recognized campus chapters and several hundred activists. We are students organizing in our universities, colleges, and high schools to fight for the immediate needs of workers and students while building our capacity to fight for more radical and structural changes.

We work with labor campaigns to organize student workers of staff. We organize to defend immigrants through campaigns for sanctuary campuses. We campaign to divest our schools from fossil fuels. We do anti-poverty work through local mutual aid programs in our communities, and much, much more.

YDSA fights for democratic socialism through active campaigns to improve the lives of working people.

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