

Candidate Statement, Pat Byrne

A lifelong leftist, I became more politically active than the occasional march, online petition, or call to Congress with the election of Trump. Because he represents a moral emergency which demands active opposition from anyone who considers themselves a good person. But also, though the man is a nightmare, he showed that it is possible to short-circuit the neoliberal consensus with a message that resonates. I believe he won in 2016 only by default of having any message at all. I believe our message is better.

I've been involved in workplace organizing while teaching English in Korea, where I became point person for resistance to our employer's repeated attempts to embezzle and steal from us. It involved researching labor law, social mores and political power structures in a foreign country while working a full time job under threat of deportation and I'm proud to say our record was 3-0-1. Later on, I helped organize the Engineering school at Columbia for the UAW where the unionization vote was 72% in favor.

In Korea I learned how people can be turned against their own clear best interest by poverty, fear of retaliation and social fragmentation. At Columbia, where the Engineering grad students were some of the best taken care of, we were up against the challenge of making comfortable people care about the struggles of those less valued by society. And given Columbia's refusal to bargain or recognize the union, how little official power is needed to checkmate overwhelming grassroots sentiment.

DSA San Diego Steering Committee Candidate Questionnaire, Pat Byrne

Democratic Socialists believe that both the economy and society should be run democratically to meet human needs, not to make profits for a few. We are a political and activist organization, not a party; through campus and community-based chapters DSA members use a variety of tactics, from legislative to direct action, to fight for reforms that empower working people.

Do you agree? If no, explain.

Yes of course

Will you have the time and energy to make a significant commitment to the Steering Committee given the other commitments in your life?

Yes, I'll have time. I moved away from all family and friends. DSA is like 50-60% of my social circle :)

Why did you join DSA?

I joined DSA because I've been disgusted with the center-left since 9/11 showed that selling out the left's ideal of America and endorsing torture, spying, aggressive war and repression of debate are all fine as long as there is no political risk involved. 2004 showed how aggressively they will attack their left flank, even someone as centrist as Howard Dean who merely had the temerity to say Iraq was a mistake. And then how they ran in the general, like a cringeing whipped dog, allowing a medal of honor winner and anti-war veteran to be outflanked by a silver-spoon draft dodger because to stand up would have meant sacrificing imaginary swing voters. Obama's refusal to use his bully pulpit and once-in-a-lifetime momentum to break up the banks, establish single payer, advance gay rights, prosecute terrorists, just to name a few off the top of my head, showed that under a D/R political reality justice, equality, and opportunity can only ever be degraded, and all we have to vote for is how quickly and how subtly it's done. Trump made me realize that unless every person of good will gets involved now, and exerts maximum effort for as long as it takes, we might literally be looking at fascism in the streets. DSA's message, numbers and growth all appealed to me over and above other groups. They seemed to be less about a single issue and more about how capitalism gives rise to almost all the problems we face as a culture.

What other organizations do you belong to or have belonged to that influence your identity as an activist/organizer? Do you currently hold office within any other organization(s)? If yes, which organization(s)?

Logistically: Started a running club in NYC, grew it from a few friends into a group that puts on multiple runs per year in different states and raises money for various charities

Fighting Power: led a loose organization of English teachers in Korea against our boss who was stealing from us. Not quite a union, but the same concept. Since as an engineer, I was the only one with the marketable skills and 'fuck you money' to be able to afford a plane ticket home and losing the job if he succeeded in deporting us, I was often the point man and sole person publicly on the offense. Had to do a lot of research on how to fight a labor dispute in another country, but we won most of our fights.

Traditional Leftyism: Organized the Columbia University grad student workers union. Finishing up my thesis at the time, I couldn't get involved in leadership, but I distributed commitment cards upped the union to people who were hesitant and did get out the vote on the election day. We won 72-28, but the NLRB (to which Trump is appointing two members) hasn't forced Columbia to the bargaining table, nor do I personally expect it to.

If elected to Steering Committee, what are some areas upon which you'd like to focus?

Political Action. I get that DSA is not a party and understand the reasons why. However, I'm not naive, and I understand that political clout is to a large extent dependent on how afraid of or beholden to you politicians are. I feel that we need to identify low level, competitive races and throw our weight as decisively as we can behind them. As we increase in size, clout and political savvy, we can move up the political food chain, such that when DSA and the organizations we partner with speak up, we can be sure to be listened to. When all is said and done, the changes come from politicians legislating them. Ideally, DSA members would run for offices, as part of a leftist party or independently. I am looking into getting involved with management of my local democratic club, as well as the neighborhood planning board because of my second interest:

Homelessness/Housing. I come from the east coast, where the state of structural violence against the poor and homeless, if enacted here would be the success story of the decade in improving the plight of the poor. I can say that I've never seen or even imagined something like this in America. Obviously DSA members are not culpable, but as a culture I've never seen one as cruel and hateful towards the poor as what exists here in Southern California. I've had conversations with people here about the minimum wage, housing density, and help for the homeless, where opinions were presented matter of factly that would have led to a shouting match or a fight in NYC. This problem is incredibly daunting, but the solutions are all obvious, and what is lacking is political will and pressure to make it happen.

What ideas do you have to ensure that Steering Committee decisions are made democratically?

I'd like to see our group have a combination of top-down and bottom-up decision making, with bottom up always taking precedence. I'm thinking specifically of Fetonte, who is relying on the top-down power of the Steering committee interpreting the bylaws to shield him from the anger of the grassroots at the work he did, how he covered it up, and the way he has behaved since. If we were following the spirit of the law, rather than the letter, he would be out, or at least re-running for the seat with all the facts out. Our principles create and animate the group, and as such must always and everywhere override the bylaws we create to give our organization structure.

Representative democracy is a compromise because if every member of a group had to know every facet of what is going on at all times, there is simply not time enough in the day. So they outsource that bandwidth to the working groups, who outsource up the chain and so on. It relies on having successively more competent, committed, trustworthy people at each higher level. But that is obviously not the case. It also used to be that assembling a large group to take a vote was impractical in all but the most important cases. With email, this is also not the case.

Were a crisis of confidence, or a controversy over a direction, action, or statement the DSA is taking/making to arise, I would hope that at the next general meeting an open discussion of how to proceed would take place. In the absence of consensus, a plebiscite of all members in good standing be held to decide the issue, and for that decision to be final, and to overrule any conflicting decision made higher up the chain. We need our members to believe that we represent them, that we respect them, and that when they care enough to take action, that their actions will get results and affect the course of the group. The lack of that is why the Democrats are bleeding out despite the Republicans facing down a demographic and cultural glacier that should be grinding them to dust.

As for day-to-day, I think the decisions should flow from the ground up. Members of a working group identify an issue, possibly based on open discussion in the general meeting, and propose a statement, position, or action for the SD DSA to take. That is then put to the members at the next meeting and input from the group is solicited. The input is integrated, and the measure sent to the steering committee for what should by then be a very uncontroversial vote. In the case of urgency, email blasts or doodle polls can be issued to get instant, broad-based feedback.