

To all members of the Democratic Socialists of America:

My name is Austin Gonzalez, and I am resigning my seat on DSA's National Political Committee and my membership in DSA, effective immediately.

As a former small chapter leader, I got a rude introduction to how prominent members with access to established left-leaning media could use those contacts to attack critics during the debacle surrounding the fundraising for the survivors of James Alex Fields' attack in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 12, 2017. Rather than take the harm done by the then-elected national leadership and staff personally, I sought to open up the national organization to be more accessible to the membership, to build a stronger and healthier DSA, and so I ran in 2019. In back-to-back National Conventions, I earned the most number of first place votes for NPC. Both times, I campaigned on organizational accountability and strengthening the grassroots base of DSA. The work of reforming the International Committee from 2019 until now is the best example of what I was aiming to do. We took a closed committee that did not tolerate any dissent from its ranks, that did its best to shut out opposing points of view and rebuilt it into a flourishing model of collective decision-making and debate that any member could find a way to participate in.

Unfortunately, I could not bring a similar dynamic to the leadership of DSA as a whole.

In DSA, what is presented as political disagreement is usually heavily disguised personal antipathy given a thin ideological justification, and petty bourgeois passive aggression is the default form of conflict. This makes honest disagreement about the organization's strategic direction almost impossible, as no one clearly states their views and instead uses squabbling over tactics as a proxy for their politics. Despite this, I have tried very hard to work in good faith with members of the NPC whose politics I do not share. This, unfortunately, was not enough.

There can be no clearer example of this broken dynamic (and the manifest contempt for the organization's internal democracy) than the egregious treatment of the BDS Working Group. For all the talk of a 'democratically accountable leadership' and 'respecting democratic norms', a narrow majority of the NPC decided that it was within their purview to summarily de-charter a body that was created by resolution at the 2019 National Convention. Their excuse for de-chartering this working group and folding its work into the International Committee (something that was not discussed with the IC's leadership before this happened) is venal legalism designed to conceal what actually drove this: a desire to prove their 'leadership' by disciplining any groups within DSA that do not tow their line or happen to cause them any level of embarrassment in the media, at the expense of silencing Palestinian organizers and damaging DSA's credibility within the broader left. What's worse, this narrow majority organized a public letter of support for this decision in advance of the decision being announced while stringing along the Working Group's steering committee for a month. This is unprincipled and unconscionable behavior, but sadly is the table stakes for DSA's internal political culture.

While I can support message discipline as a necessity in politics, I cannot support it within DSA at this juncture for a single very simple reason: DSA's broken and fundamentally unsound grievance system that has, time and again, failed everyone in the organization and I can very easily see 'message discipline' like this being used as an excuse to silence those who have experienced harm in our organizing spaces. What's worse, this is a dynamic that has already manifested within DSA.

I cannot emphasize the following hard enough: the current grievance process and the person who oversees it (Paula Brantner) is not fit for purpose. When I first got elected in 2019, I had heard rumblings of sex abuse scandals being covered up in several chapters. Being from a small chapter and relatively new to DSA's national politics, I did not know what to believe. I had also heard from various sources about the lengths to which our grievance system, and those who oversee it, had silenced people through liberal use of gag orders and turned survivors into the ones being punished rather than the abusers themselves. I am not sure how many members are aware of this, but when grievance reports reach NPC members, they are heavily redacted, with names and details removed and a heavily editorialized report that is almost always slanted towards a particular outcome. I could not believe this and I immediately knew something was wrong. The NPC is both the elected leadership of our organization and legally the board of DSA, with a fiduciary responsibility. It is unacceptable for members of that body to not receive the full details of what is happening in a given case. This editorializing by Paula makes it impossible for us to know if anybody is a repeat offender and who is doing the offending, rendering it virtually impossible to take action to properly rectify these situations.

The most infamous case of the process' failure was based on an incident that occurred in Pittsburgh during the 2017-2019 NPC's term. While I remain bound by the non-disclosure agreement I signed to take my seat on the NPC, and (even if I wasn't) some of these details are simply not my story to tell, if members knew the full story of what happened in Pittsburgh it would repulse them. Heavily redacted reports designed to portray survivors as bullies. Reports unsubtly pushing for punishing those who attempted to whistleblow on abuse. Make no mistake: the attacks on Pittsburgh's Coordinating Committee and Pittsburgh's membership were wholly political. Once a poster child for DSA's interventions into electoral politics, the Pittsburgh chapter committed the cardinal sin of electing a leadership that was skeptical towards Democratic Party tailism and was punished for it using a procedure meant to protect our comrades. Pittsburgh, once a large and thriving chapter, has never fully recovered from the deliberately politicized botching of this grievance and the smears that their Coordinating Committee suffered from it.

The malfeasant way that the Pittsburgh case was handled in my first term on the NPC is equaled by the ongoing crisis in Atlanta DSA. Again, I am bound by non-disclosure agreement from discussing the specifics that I have been provided as part of the NPC's discussions on the subject, but enough of the story is publicly available for any member to draw their own conclusions. That dozens of active members were purged for political disagreements on the thinnest of pretexts with no proactive response either from staff or the NPC is a stain on DSA that will linger, and it will taint our organization's efforts in Georgia for years to come, if the chapter even survives in the long run. And yet, the majority bloc (currently composed of Kristian

H., Jose L., Sabrina C., Gustavo G., Syd G., Ashik S., Gilman B., Laura G., and Sofia C.) is either willing to stand by and allow anti-democratic abuse or is actively supporting such efforts.

By politicizing the grievance process and not holding those responsible for a years-long unbroken string of failure accountable, the majority bloc on the NPC has delegitimized the only process for mending harm that is currently allowed within DSA, per Paula Brantner. They have failed every member of this organization. They have failed every person who has been harmed in DSA spaces, and they are responsible for the harm done in the future so long as this state of affairs is allowed to endure.

This failing of the grievance process extends even to people in national leadership. In the months since the 2021 National Convention I have been subjected to personal attacks, character assassination, and smears, mostly coming from people who disagree with my politics. While I have thick skin and don't hold myself immune to criticism, I cannot abide the attacks made against me in the last month likening me to a fascist or a fascist sympathizer by people in DSA. As somebody who led the DSA caravan in Charlottesville on August 12, 2017, there is no issue I have taken more seriously and fought for than the deepening of our antifascist work. You will find my name listed as an enemy on far-right websites and I've received death threats from James Alex Fields' ideological allies. As somebody who had family and friends nearly die in the streets of Charlottesville that day, I take these allegations very seriously. As a working class Latino man from the rural South, in no way will I tolerate gringo shithheads accusing me of being a fascist or a fascist sympathizer. Being likened, by alleged comrades, to the people who nearly killed me, my brother and sister, and some of my closest friends makes my blood boil. And yet, even as a member of DSA's elected leadership, I have no confidence that participating in the grievance process will actually do anything about this but make things worse.

The most infuriating part is, there is a broad understanding within DSA that the current grievance system is broken. In one of the final executive sessions of the NPC's previous term, one of the members said, "We have got to fix our grievance system. In my experience I have never encountered a single case where the accuser and accused have left this process happy or satisfied." Everybody on that call agreed. The 2021 National Convention agreed by passing grievance reform and a national grievance committee on its consent agenda. And yet, these reforms have been stonewalled by the majority bloc. I can only interpret this intransigence to be explicitly political and outright hostile to democracy within the organization and can only assume similar motives with the de-chartering of the BDS WG.

The latter decision is a political error, the former is a moral one, and I will have no part in tolerating this state of affairs any further.

I devoted most of the past six years to DSA. Some of the best moments of my life have been spent in this organization and I will be sad to leave it behind. At what point do we start fighting the ruling class with as much vigor as we fight each other? At what point do we start recognizing each other as kin to be protected? Every member that quits is a failure. Every member that is

forced out is a disaster. Every time a chapter isn't able to prevent abuse or harassment in its organizing spaces is a massive indictment on our organization, our movement, and our leaders.

We need to reckon with the deep rot that we have tolerated in DSA for too long. Not only is it chewing up and spitting out dedicated comrades like a factory that produces burnt-out organizers, it will continue to hinder our ability to organize the kind of powerful working class movement needed to address the many horrors that climate change and the rising fascist tide will bring. We fix this by confronting it, by forming a process of honest accountability, by telling those who have enabled bad actors while trying to appear above the fray to pick a fucking side. If we don't, the consequences of failure will only compound, and DSA will remain mired in disingenuous conflict, abuse, and manipulation of well-meaning people who were inspired to get serious about organizing for the first time in their lives by the Bernie campaign or because they were curious about a small group of people wearing red while fixing brakelights at a nearby church.

For my part, I am done. I am sorry that I could not do more to fix this organization's broken culture, and I am sorry to all those who supported me in 2019 and 2021 that I did not finish out my term. I wish everyone who remains to fight the good fight in DSA the best of luck.

In solidarity,

Austin Gonzalez

Formerly founding member, Richmond DSA

Former member of the National Political Committee