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SAFE SPACE SOCIALISM WRITTEN BY GARY ZABEL

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In 1979, I attended a meeting in **Boston** between the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) and the New American Movement (NAM). Its purpose was to explore a possible merger

Is identity politics running wild in Boston DSA?

Michael Harrington, author of the book, *The Other America*, that inspired President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. NAM originated in the last days of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). With 100,000 members, SDS was the premier organization of the radical left in the 1960s. The merger went through in 1982, creating the new organization, Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Common wisdom at the time was that NAM had lost its identity by merging with DSOC. That wasn't the way I saw things when I joined DSA in 1983. The Boston Local certainly showed DSOC's

influence. It was embroiled in Democratic Party politics, and had a number of union officers and staff

based identity politics. College feminism was its main expression, since DSA has always had very few

people among its members. But the local also carried the imprint of NAM in the form of a campus-

Black, Latino, or Asian members. What I mean by college feminism is simply a reference to the fact

between the two organizations. DSOC, which came from a split in the old Socialist Party, was led by

that campus politics of both the left and the right are generally more extreme and shrill than their outside-the-campus counterparts. One proponent of identity politics in the Boston Local, a university professor, argued that, while women, environmentalists, and people of color have a place in socialist politics, the blue collar working class no longer does. National DSA had about 6,000 dues-paying members in those days, most of them paper members. Until recently, that was its high point as a percentage of the US population. I left DSA after only one year, frustrated by both the Boston Local's tepid electoral orientation and its campus-based version of identity politics.

as 150, with the majority of its 900 dues-paying members inactive. When I rejoined the organization in March of this year, I found that the overwhelming number of new members are recent college graduates. Of the young members whose jobs I know about, 5 or 6 are

graduate teaching assistants, an equal number are programmers and others working in high tech,

one is a lawyer, one an RN, and three are college educated union staffers. There are also two

impression that they too have college degrees.

exclusively, in the name of protecting the "vulnerable."

warehouse workers in the mix who are members of the Teamsters Union, but I have the distinct

The problem with the passage of DSAers, not just through college, but often through Boston's elite

private universities (I've met three members who are Harvard grad students), is that it makes them

workers. It is true that most of the former students work for a living, and many are burdened by

overwhelmingly middle class. Boston DSA has very few, if any, blue collar workers or low-paid service

Over the past year, recruits have poured into the Boston Local, as well as the rest of DSA, as a result

organization had around 8,000 members in early 2016. It now claims more than 30,000. The Local

cannot have had more than ten active members before the expansion. Now it probably has as many

of the Sanders presidential campaign and the election of Trump as president. The national

student debt. But they are nevertheless "privileged," to use a much overused word, in that they belong to the upper one-third of the workforce nationwide who have college degrees. In the long run, their life-chances are much better than the two-thirds who possess only high-school diplomas. On average, they will make one million dollars more over the course of their lives than people of their age who graduated only from high school. Like contemporary campus activists, many members of Boston DSA practice a form of identity politics that assigns the status of victim or potential victim to women, LGBTQ people, and people of

color. Safe spaces and trigger points are very familiar to them from their college experience.

Unfortunately, they also have the related tendency to repress freedom of expression, often, but not

violation of basic democratic norms, several people told me that the names were missing from the Local's website because of fear of "doxing," i.e., online publication of personal data. When I replied that perhaps people who are afraid of making their names public should not be in the leadership of the Local, the response was outrage. Apparently my suggestion would make it impossible for the "vulnerable" — women, trans people, and people of color were mentioned — to hold leadership positions. Would there have been a civil rights movement in the 50s and 60s or a feminist movement in the 60s and 70s if their leaders had insisted that their names be kept secret? Secrecy may be justified for underground organizations, like resistance cells working against a foreign occupation, but

DSA holds public events and endorses candidates for political office. One person eventually sent me

a member's handbook that includes the names of those elected to the steering committee. It was

In my nine months as a member of the new Boston DSA, I was unable to discover the names of more

than 5 of the 15 members on the group's steering committee. When I pointed out that this was a

supposed to have been emailed to members in April, but I never received it. I am told that a volunteer is now working on placing the names of steering committee members in a members-only section of the website. But after eight months of their one-year terms, the names are still missing. I used the expression, "safe space socialism" in an electronic discussion on Slack of the missing names. At that point, one of the four moderators called a two hour break. And I was soon warned by another that I had been "aggressive" and offended "women and people of color." Predictably, the moderator was a white guy. To be fair, however, he claimed that some people on the other side of the electronic dispute had also been warned about being aggressive. I hadn't noticed. No one used profanity or made accusations against me, and I maintained the same decorum. There seems to be a worry in Boston DSA that debate is always on the edge of becoming rancorous, so great pains are taken to insist that members be "comradely" to one another. Maybe it's not the college campus that is the major influence here, but rather the Internet culture in which so many young people are steeped, where disagreements can degenerate into "flame wars," already an outdated expression. The truth is I

had no idea what "doxing" means until a younger friend enlightened me.

of principles as articulated in Article II of its constitution:

want.

recruiting people from their parent's generation. One member accused me of not understanding what the working class is because I have not been in the job market for guite a while, in other words, of being old. But I have been a vice-president in a union that includes young members, and I've published articles on the fate of recent college graduates in the job market. Last Saturday, those attending the monthly meeting of Boston DSA voted overwhelmingly to approve a new "code of conduct" (a military term) that establishes a procedure for disciplining members, ending in expulsion if their behavior does not change. The code ends with the following paragraph,

even though all DSA members have already agreed to abide by the national organization's statement

We are a socialist organization, so we expect members to be socialists or leftists interested in

learning more about socialism. At a minimum, we expect each other to be open-minded about

socialism. We want to create a vibrant space of open debate and discussion, but we see little to

be gained by engaging with apologists for capitalism, neoliberalism, and imperialism. We will not

tolerate far right-wing ideologies, such as fascism. We will take seriously actions grounded in

white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, such as Blue Lives Matter and Pro-Life politics. This

I now know that, of the 15 members of the Local's steering committee, only two are not millennials.

foreign to those of us who hail from an older generation of socialist activists. I've raised the issue with

It's not that older people are not welcome in Boston DSA, it's that the culture of the group is now

some of the leadership, but there doesn't seem to be any interest in addressing the problem or

especially applies to active leaders in Boston DSA. The paragraph is ambiguous, but since it concludes a code of conduct with a disciplinary procedure, its general drift seems clear. You better not be an apologist for capitalism (liberals and social democrats beware). You better not support neoliberal trade deals such as the Trans-Pacific

Partnership. And whoever deviates from the majority opinion on foreign policy, lookout. The impulse is

to quash freedom of expression, and the vibrant and open debate the authors of the code claim they

But that impulse has a bad conscience, which is a very good thing, even though the result is

incoherence. You are welcome in Boston DSA if you are a leftist who wants to learn about socialism

expect "each other to be open-minded about socialism." Does that mean that committed socialists

- but who would that be other than a liberal or social democratic "apologist for capitalism?" We

ought to consider the position of the apologists for capitalism with whom they refuse to engage? The remainder of the paragraph is just silly. How many fascists are likely to join DSA? It appears to be ok if you are a white supremacist or defender of heteropatriarchy, as long as you don't act on those beliefs. So I guess the 60 percent of Latino immigrants who oppose abortion are welcome, as long as they don't bomb any clinics. Maybe I was wrong about the high percentage of college graduates in

the organization. Or maybe those who revised an earlier draft of the code were trying to respond to

some of my criticisms without alienating the more militant members of the politically correct majority.

I certainly hope that the Boston Local eventually adopts a more defensible form of identity politics

than one that sees oppressed people as victims unable to stand up for themselves publicly. I also

hope that it begins to practice the vibrant and open debate that it preaches. Most of all, I hope that it focuses on making its own culture more palatable to working-class people as well as older activists. There is too much good work being done by Boston DSAers, especially in the areas of labor, housing, and electoral politics, to risk sacrificing it all on the altar of an incoherent intolerance.

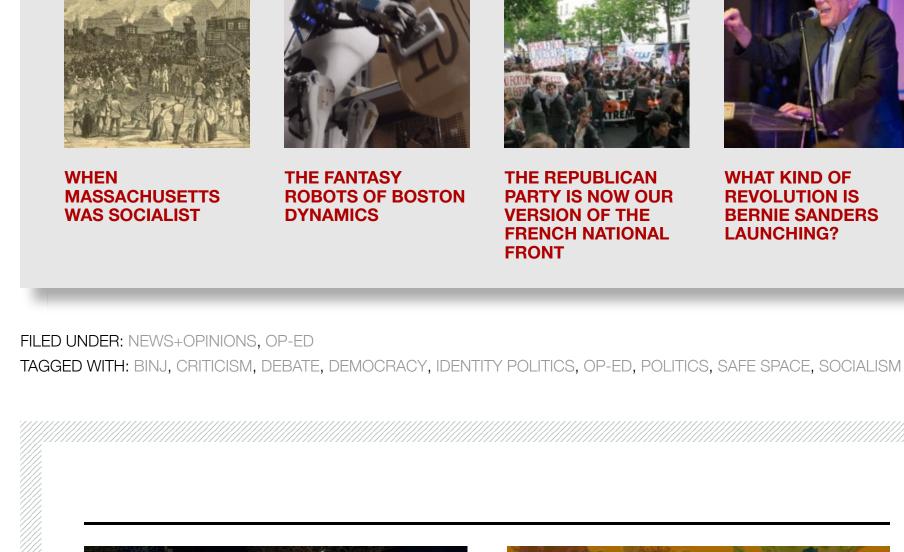
Gary Zabel is a senior lecturer in philosophy at UMass Boston, and longtime labor activist. He

recently resigned from the Boston DSA chapter, but remains a member of national DSA.

GARY ZABEL

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DigBoston and the author invite Boston DSA to respond to this op-ed.



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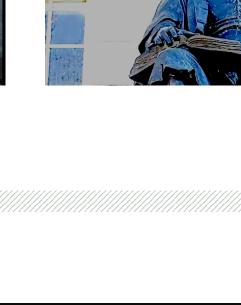
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