

BUILDING JUSTICE PODCAST



CRISJ Building Justice Podcast

Basic Information

- **Season 2, Episode 13** : “Organizing with Sacramento’s Democratic Socialists of America”
- **Moderator:** Professor Monicka Tutschka, Sacramento State
- **Guests:** Margot Rinaldo, co-chair of Sacramento’s Democratic Socialists of America

Please note: This transcript may be imperfect. Please contact Monicka Tutschka directly should you have questions (tutschka@csus.edu)

Transcription

Music lyrics:

Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we’re Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we’re Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, “Building Justice,” “Building Justice,” “Building Justice.” Building is to add on, or to do away with.

0:22

Monicka: Welcome to ‘Building Justice,’ a podcast by Sacramento State Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice. Our acronym is CRISJ. We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world. I’m Monica Tutstchka, a professor of political science at Sac State, and my guest for today is Margot Rinaldo. Margot is a Sac State alumna who graduated recently with a degree in political science. Margot is about to begin her third termserving as the co-chair of the Sacramento Democratic Socialists of America, the DSA. Hey, Margot. Thanks for finding the time to be with me on ‘Building Justice.’

1:11

Margot: Hi, everyone. I'm glad to be here; and, thank you so much to Monicka for hosting this podcast.

1:17

Monicka: Absolutely. It's really my pleasure to be talking to you today and to see you outside of the Sac State (kind of environment) and in a more professional environment so, "Hi."

Uh, today, we're going to be talking about how you organize the YDSA at Sac State and the lessons you learned from that experience. We'll learn more about the DSA platform here in Sacramento. We'll talk about how to differentiate the Sacramento Democratic Party from the Sacramento Democratic Socialists of America. And we'll talk a little bit about what's in store for the DSA in the years ahead. I hope that's okay with the audience and okay with you, Margot.

1:55

Margot: Yeah, that sounds great.

1:52

Monicka: Okay, super. So let's get started. Margot, let me bring us back all the way to 2016, around the time when Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders were competing to win the Democratic nomination for president. And I remember you coming into my office in the morning and telling me that you were planning to organize the YDSA at Sac State and you were working through all the necessary paperwork. And I also remember that you were talking a little bit about the Democrat, the College Dems at Sac State and ASI student government at Sac State. And so let me start with this question. Why did you decide to found the YDSA at Sac State when there already were college Dems and student government? And how did you differentiate what you were doing from what other groups were doing on campus? What need were you trying to fill or what was happening in 2016 that led you to found the YDSA?

2:50

Margot: That's a great question. Thank you. And yeah, I guess I'll start by saying that when I, you know, I'll go back back a little to 2015. But when I got to college, I was already really interested in politics. So I joined the College Democrats right off the bat. And I also ran for student government as a freshman at Sac State. So through yeah, Donald Trump's term as a president, I think you saw the Turning Point chapter on our campus become more and more active, more and more vocal, you know, in the quad. And it was really, I think it was really frustrating for me and a lot of other, you know, more left-leaning students to see kind of the hateful things that they would say while students were passing by and trying to get to their classes. And so then around 2020 (that was like Bernie's second), or, I'm sorry, around 2019, when Bernie was running the second time, some of my classmates and I decided to start the YDSA, the Young Democratic Socialists of America chapter at Sac State. And I think that our interest in doing that was because we were really frustrated that there wasn't a response to the sort of vitriol that Turning Point was kind of, you know, espousing on campus. And we really wanted there to be an alternative kind of political organizing group that would create, you know, create create more constructive spaces for students to engage. And so I think a lot of that also stemmed from the fact that we were disappointed that the other left-leaning, I guess, political organization on campus, umm, the College Democrats was not very vocal or didn't

really have a response to sort of the attacks that were coming from Turning Point. And so, really, I think the ethic of YDSA is very different than the College Democrats, and that's because (at least my experience in the College Democrats) was that it was very much about professional networking. It was a lot about finding internships and working on campaigns for, you know, representatives that were running for office. And, you know, there's nothing, there's nothing wrong with that. That's, you know, good way to learn, you know, the basics of our political systems. But it really was lacking in a lot of sort of the basic community organizing that a lot of students are actually were looking to do. And so we started YDSA with the, basically with the hope that we could provide a more grass roots, bottom down style of organizing and so.

5:57

Monicka: Margot, when I think about this distinction, I think you're making at least two really important distinctions and correct me if I'm if I'm wrong. One is that, you know, we're in some kind of structural strain emerges here, all of a sudden on campus you've got Turning Point and Turning Point saying things that are distressing, that can lead and trigger folks to want to organize some sort of response, and you had a real commitment to a bottom up or bottom down grassroots form of response. And that kind of response is really different from the Sac Dems or ASI that were oriented towards the professional class and professional networking and getting closer to power down at the Capitol. And so there was a real gap there, and YDSA was ready to fill that. And that's one distinction. I mean, is one's orientation, the professional elite or the grassroots? Both of those might be necessary, but they're different in their focus. And I think the second distinction I heard you talking about is, you know, this is a distinction that that Weber helped me think about. And it's you know, some folks are living from politics, meaning that politics is their job or their career. And they're looking to find a way through an internship to get a career in the political world. And sometimes that career comes with, you know, a lot of power, a lot of money and a lot of status. So it is a career that ambitious people search for, but that is different from people who get into politics because they're committed to certain principles and certain causes. Those folks are really living for politics and they might be willing to quit their job and lose their power and their status and their career because they put the cause ahead of that. And so you are navigating this thicket of, you know, in my living from politics or for politics. Am I more grassroots bottom up or am I more professional, elite, focused? And the YDSA kind of answered that for you, is that is that kind of where you're going?

8:17

Margot: Yeah. Yeah, that's a great summary and it's a great way to describe it. I'd also say that, like Sc State in particular, I would say some students, maybe, probably a lot of students at Sac State in particular are really oriented toward those kinds of like safe career paths, because a lot of us don't come from, you know, very privileged families. And so, yeah, if you come from a working class family, it's extremely, I think, attractive to have that proximity to power and to also be able to secure jobs that are that are kind of safe like that, and.

8:53

Monicka: Absolutely. I mean, to be willing to sort of quit your job when it violates your principles and have a certain kind of purist approach is a luxury. It assumes that you have

housing and you have some other stable income that you can float while you're looking between jobs. And not everyone has those kinds of resources. So I'm really glad that you raised that. And, you know, there's a lot of Sac State students who are also coming from immigrant families. And I'm, my parents are immigrants. And the one thing they cared about was financial security. So I'm not trying to disparage those folks who are looking for careers, but there is just a conceptual distinction to make when one orients one's self as a political animal: is one pursuing politics as a career? Are there really hard principles that you are trying to advance and you're trying to make structural reform or bring the political community into a new place? And those are just different orientations.

Musical Break

Monicka: Can you describe what principles are causes the DSA members, whether it's the YDSA or generally the DSA? What, what are you committed to? What do you oppose? What do you stand for? What's what's your platform?

10:24

Margot: Yes. Okay. In terms of democratic process, the DSA believes that regular working class people, people from marginalized communities, should have more of a say in the political decision making process, especially than we do now in the US. And I think that really deviates from what American history has been, which is that wealthy white people are usually the folks who determine what happens in political decision-making spaces. And so, yeah, we organize to realize working class collective power. And then in terms of the concrete policy goals that we believe in, there's a real effort in our organization to advocate for public housing and universal housing. We would, you know, we stand for the public control of resources, public utilities, production and economic planning and equitable distribution of, you know, the resources that we have. We believe in universal health care. You know, a public education system that is fully funded. We're also, I think, really proponents of the labor movement in the United States. And yeah, while labor is not always anti-capitalist, I think the labor movement for socialists in the United States has been a really strategic vessel for getting a lot of our demands met.

11:55

Monicka: Mm hmm. You know, when people hear the word "socialism," they often jump in their mind to Lenin and Stalin and authoritarian forms of socialism or vanguard forms of socialism, where there are these elites that are making all the decisions and thinking that they're at the cutting edge of history. And here you're talking and really distinguishing democratic socialism from that brand of socialism by saying that you believe in a really robust, participatory, grassroots, inclusive political process where collective self-governance is an activity that folks at the margins should be able to participate in and have an equal voice and equal power in that decision making because, after all, those decisions lead to laws. Those laws are binding and they're binding because they're backed by force. So the idea of that sense of a democratic socialism is really important to to to underscore.

12:57

Margot: And also I'd say that I think the "democratic" in front of socialism is a bit of a redundancy, but it's one that in America makes sense for our organization, our movement, I think.

13:11

Monicka: Mmm hmm. Uhh. Another thing I think I'm really hearing you articulate is this commitment to society and social uplift and the uplift of everyone and a sense of a public sphere and how the argument that [assumes that] privatizing everything is going to, sort of, secretly through some hidden hand benefit everyone is something that you are opposed to.

And how do we provide housing and health care and a good education and a fair distribution of our commonwealth across society? Well, that is going to require public control because sometimes, you know, and often, capitalism doesn't deliver. What lessons, when you were a member of the YDSA at Sac State, you know, what lessons did you learn when you were organizing there? What obstacles did you face? What was that experience like?

14:06

Margot: So that's yeah, that's a great question. And I think YDSA across the board has had difficulty in the stability of their college chapters, in part because none of the staff of YDSA is paid. And so everyone is there on a volunteer basis. And so when you have college students whose schedules are changing every semester, it is really difficult to organize people for long term projects. And in particular with SAC State as a commuter school, you have a lot of working class students and you have a lot of students who are not spending a lot of time hanging out on campus. And so it is a real challenge. Even when I had, when I was in ASI [student govt], you know, it was a real challenge to engage students in on campus activities and sort of, you know, create that supportive atmosphere that you see at private universities in that very, you know, collegiate atmosphere. I think it's harder to get that at Sac State, and I think it has so much to do with the fact that our students are working class. It's really difficult to organize working class people.

15:16

Monicka: Mmm hmm. Sometimes when I'm on campus, I sort of think about it like I'm at the airport because everyone is heading to their terminal, heading to their class, and then heading on to the next thing, dashing from one place to the other. And they don't really have the time because they're working and they're going to school and they're raising kids and they're commuting sometimes long distances to attend an additional meeting. And as all the schedules change, like you were saying, and as jobs, a lot of our students have these, umm, you know, they work in the service industry where their shifts change week to week. They can't really say that they're going to be free on Monday at 5:00 every week. And that just seems so hard to organize when you can't get those kind of steady long term commitments for people being available to meet and to discuss and to plan, particularly if you're bottom up and you're trying to be inclusive. It might be easier if you were top-down. Um, was there anything else that you learned as a YDSA member in the early years that you want to share with the audience?

16:23

Margot: Yeah, absolutely. And I think this still applies to any any community organizing space.

I think one of the best pieces of advice I read from, one of, a great organizer, in Sac DSA, he said he's a, he's a union organizer. And he said, "what I've learned from my years in community organizing is that you should spend less of your time on interpersonal, interpersonal conflicts and more of your time on like concrete community organizing." Interpersonal conflicts really do get in the way. I think of a lot of good organizing. And, really, I think, what these people are attempting to distinguish is whether these interpersonal conflicts are indicative of larger structural flaws or if they're simply those those interpersonal conflicts. I think some of them really are just interpersonal conflicts. And it's good to recognize that because it does take a lot of time and energy away from, you know, what you could be doing to really, you know, pursue good changes in your community.

17:26

Monicka: mmm hmm . I mean I know that serving on various committees in the university, just trying to establish democratic norms of recognition, respect, equal consideration, open mindedness, taking space, making space, it it takes a lot of work. And to not make things personal, but to keep focused on the work of advancing the initiative that you're there to do is really hard. And I can imagine that when it comes to political organizing, it can only get harder.

Music break

17:55

Monicka: Welcome back, everyone. I'm here with Margot Rinaldo, the co-chair of Sacramento's Democratic Socialists of America, the DSA. Margot, can you tell us a bit about how you went from being a founder of the YDSA on campus to becoming now the co-chair of the Sacramento DSA, which is, you know, for the whole Sacramento region? What was that transition like?

18:39

Margot: Yeah. Right. When I graduated, I had an internship kind of lined up on the Assembly Select Committee for Police Reform that was convened after the murder of George Floyd to attempt to address some of the systemic issues with police in California. So I graduated . I joined this internship, and I was hired with the promise that my job there was to research and write potential bills to reform the police. And I spent about three months in hearings with lawyers, community members and academics. And I basically wrote and transcribed their statements on what were the best methods for reforming the police. And after that, my job was to research and propose some bills based on that. And so my experience in this particular internship was really negative because once we had our bill ideas that we were going to bring forth, my boss in that office slowly started to tell me, "okay, we're not doing that anymore. Okay, we're not doing that bill anymore either." And so finally, I was really frustrated and I asked him, "why did you why did you hire me if I'm not doing anything that I was told I would be able to do?" And I really thought that our office should be working with community organizations. That was the main suggestion given by all of the hearings, from academics to lawyers to community members--all had mentioned that, you know, the smallest reform you could make is engaging with community organizations when you pursue police reform. My office then decided to only work with the L.A. sheriff. And when I asked my manager, you know, "why are we only working with the sheriff?" he told me, "Optics. Margot, you got to think about optics." And, I, shortly after that was, you know, 'ghosted' from my internship, and received a message for my chief of staff about a week

later and had a call with him where he told me, “Oh, you know, we just hired you to publish this report, but that was it.” I had already filled out my paperwork to get an email address at the State Assembly. I had already, you know, thought that I was going to be working there for two years. That's what they told me the duration of that committee would be. But because there's literally no protection for interns or, you know, lower-level staff at the Capitol, like, it didn't matter. To that point, like, I didn't really want to be there after that happened anyway. Right after, literally the week that I was leaving that internship, somebody from Sac DSA messaged me and said that their co-chair had left abruptly and they were looking for a new co-chair and asked me if I was interested. And so I was very excited after that experience to get back to DSA. And I'm thankful to have it as both political home now.

22:10

Monicka: You know, there's a through line in what you're saying that you are so committed to community organizing and getting more voices involved and and a real belief that if reforms are going to succeed, they need the buy-in, the legitimacy, the feedback, the critique from the community members themselves who are going to have to live under these reforms and live according to these reforms. And I can see how how challenging it must have been to feel shut down when you were were following on a core principle of community engagement.

22:46

Margot: It was really a sucker punch to the gut to be like---that your voice as a young person doesn't really have a say in a lot of those spaces where you're really proximate to power, but in you, you know, your voice isn't really heard.

22:59

Monicka: Yeah. Wow. Umm, now that you've been co-chair of the Sacramento Democratic Socialists of America for almost three years do you still think it's really important to draw that distinction that you were making between establishment Democrats and the DSA?

23:13

Margot: Yeah, and that's a great question. And the distinction has yeah, has a lot to do with resources, obviously, that, you know, and establishment Democrats, the Democratic Party in general, is a lot more resources, has a lot more professional connections. But one thing that it really doesn't have any more is a labor-intensive grassroots organizing camp--, way of campaigning. And so I think where we really differ is that DSA, I guess you could say, in some ways has a more, yeah, has that more labor intensive style of organizing. You know, where you're showing up to city council meetings and you're advocating with, you know, your your partners that are trying to get jails, you know, closed or not expanded. And you are also advocating for your unhoused neighbors at city council meetings. So you have a really different ethic about how you go about political organizing. I would also say that DSA works regularly alongside the labor unions for a lot of that kind of institutional work within the Democratic Party.

24:35

Monicka: In terms of coalition building, does the establishment forge coalitions with different groups than the DSA? You said union is really part of the DSA Coalition. Who do establishment

Democrats coalesce with or work alongside that could help? Who are they endorsed by? How does that how does that differ?

24:55

Margot: Yeah, great question, also. So yeah, when I say establishment Democrats, I mean folks in the Democratic Party that are funded by fossil fuel companies, funded by pharmaceutical companies, funded by police unions or developers. And I think when you see establishment Democrats get elected, they regularly have some version of that coalition right off the bat. As a DSA member, you know, those interests, those interests are extremely tied to the system of capital that we have now. And so it's within their interests, you know, to be capitalist, it's within their interests to, you know, further an economic system that always marginalizes people at the bottom because that's how they make their money. That's, you know, that's their interests. And I would say that members in DSA, like, we as a *hard line*, do not work with those groups. And we do our best to support politicians who don't, don't take money from those kinds of groups. And so, yeah, as California becomes more of a one-party state, you see the fight for the Democratic Party turning inward. And so, you know, interests that you might typically think of as conservative simply flock to Democrats who are willing to take their money. And you also have the same for the other half of the party, which tend to be more progressive and, you know, are really attempting to challenge those kinds of interests within the party.

26:37

Monicka: Given these (sort of) intraparty tensions, are those productive or paralyzing or destructive? I mean, how do the different groups within the Democratic umbrella interact? And how do you, as a DSA co-chair, interact with the Democratic establishment?

27:00

Margot: Yeah, so I think it has been really destructive. I think, you know, the reason why California doesn't have single payer is because that, you know, establishment wing of the party is still cozy with, you know, companies that will give them money, you know, take the positions against single payer. And you have also a party leadership, the current party leadership that is *extremely* antagonistic to DSA, but also the progressive wing. And so, you know, the hostility looks like, you know, fights over endorsements within the local party. Things become regularly become personal. I guess the productive coalitions within the party really are the I think those that belong to the Progressive Caucus and the Progressive Caucus are, you know, a group of folks within the Democratic Party that are really attempting to fight for changes to how the party is funded. And so even though there's still hostility within the party, I think DSA in particular works with the Progressive Caucus because I think they are very realistic about the critique of capitalism that we are bringing forth and actually have policy goals related to, you know, single payer, public housing and things like that. While there is a lot of destructiveness, I think, from the leadership currently. There's a lot of pockets where people are really pushing for kind of like more transformational change.

2850

Monicka: I can imagine when when relationships are hostile or destructive and groups are not publicly associating with one another, then, you know, a lot of important insights are being lost. I don't assume that establishment Democrats are going to embrace socialism wholesale, but they

might gain a lot of insights from learning the socialist critique of capitalism and thinking about how certain problems that we have are a consequence of a private market that is profit driven. And how could one acknowledge that and take some of those insights seriously and and work together to make incremental or transformational change, even if you're not willing to identify as full-throated socialists, or if you are willing to [identify as a full throated socialist] maybe see some some of the benefits of certain certain facets of a free market that could be useful in some domains.

Music Break

30:08

Monicka: Hello Audience. I'm here with Margot Rinaldo, who co-chairs the Sacramento Democratic Socialists of America. Margot, What, what what successes have the DSA, has the DSA had recently? I know there was a lot of momentum with the DSA in 2015 with Bernie. What's what's been some of the successes in 2022, either at the at the electoral level or in the community organizing domain?

30:37

Margot: I would say most recently was participating in the school board elections, the cycle in 2022. DSA has partnered with the Sacramento City Teachers Association to provide strike support during the strikes that happened this past year as well. We have also done the same in the past during previous strikes, but this year we actually became, sort of, some of the main canvassers for the school board races and I was one of the campaign coordinators. So really spent the last three months canvassing all of Sacramento. We were really successful in that. We were able to flip three seats, two of which were incumbents, one of which was a new elected. And I think that was a great, a great example, I think of where DSA strengths lie, which is that we're great canvassers, we do really labor-intensive organizing and we're not scared of that, which I think is really lost in sort of more professional political organizing.

I also think that one of our most successful projects in the last two years has been our mutual aid group that has started run by Chelsea Fink and Paul Andrews. Shout out! They have both really become sort of leaders in our mutual aid committee, which works, you know, has since the beginning of the pandemic, has provided meal services at Cesar Chavez Park to our unhoused neighbors and also provides hygiene kits. On top of that, a lot of our mutual aid team will also do direct service work to specific encampments that ask for specific needs that they have. And really, you know, we organize that by we have about 40 people on a Patreon that don't you could donate like \$5 a month. You donate \$2 a month, but we raise about \$500 a month to provide meal service and hygiene kits to folks and books.

32:49

Monicka: I read an article recently that that told me that the DSA or was telling me the DSA is undergoing a kind of a 'strategic identity crisis.' And this plays into exactly what you're talking about right now, Margot. This 'strategic identity crisis' centers around this question of strategic priorities. You know, does the DSA prioritize electoral politics in getting more DSA allies or DSA members into office, or does it really continue to focus on community organizing? Can you talk about that 'strategic identity crisis' and where you think the Sacramento chapter is going vis a vis these two kind of priorities?

33:34

Margot: Yeah, and I would start yeah, back at the first, 2016, the first Bernie run really changed the makeup of our organization. And we grew, I think, by a ridiculous amount. I think we had somewhere around 19,000 members and we grew to 100,000 within two, two years. And so you really have, yeah, we have this identity crisis because a lot of the people who flocked in for Bernie were really oriented toward that kind of electoral politics organizing, and we're really interested in that. And then during the pandemic, we had an influx of influx of members who are interested in mutual aid.

And really the way that I look at it is that they can really complement each other really well. And it should be because we are and because we are a big tent (I hate saying that), but because we were a big tent, I think there's room for people to experiment and I think there's room for folks to try new ways of organizing. And so I think that, yeah, like the dichotomy of direct action versus electoral work is not always useful because they do really complement themselves in great ways.

And one way I guess that I can talk about that is that our mutual aid committee, as well as the really large mutual aid committee that exists in Sacramento, have become some of the most vocal advocates of the city council meetings pushing for better policies. So I think the example that we have here in Sacramento is that they actually mesh really well together.

And we just need to find like the pockets of intervention that are fruitful for us, because I think it's correct to realize that a lot of places within electoral politics and establishment politics are not amenable to a socialist politics. But there *are* places where it is possible, and I think it's up to *us* to find those places where we can produce fruitful outcomes as social.

35:40

Monicka: And I definitely hear that there are sometimes political opportunities and sometimes those are created and sometimes those happen because of external factors. And so finding those opportunities for the community organizations to pressure and to hold elected officials accountable or to make demands when those opportunities arise, seems like a great way for that interaction between elected officials and community organizations to kind of work together, maybe in a tense way to make serious changes and reforms in a direction that the community and the elected officials can both agree upon. And, maybe make sure that those elected officials are then supported when they're running for election again. So they're rewarded, and incentivized to continue to take those kinds of risks when those opportunities emerge. Um, Margot, What's what's in store for the DSA maybe in the next six months? What are you doing?

36:46

Margot: So in February we are hosting our first regional organizing conference, which is a conference that all the local DSA chapters come to, and we provide a weekend of organizing workshops for new DSA members, and I'm *really excited* that they decided to host it in Sacramento this year. So we're working on setting up, sort ofn how we're going to facilitate that and all the logistics that go into that. And I think in the long term, we're going to keep working with labor unions, we're going to keep supporting labor in our area and really continue to work with Decarcerate Sacramento and, you know, really push forward to have a broader vision of public safety in Sacramento.

37:36

Monicka: You know, that sounds great, Margot. I just want to thank you for coming on. Is there anything you want to share before we close with the audience or with me? The floor is yours.

37:46

Margot: I'll just say, even if you're not a socialist, socialism is a great framework to understand a lot of the issues that we're facing in the United States today. And so even if you're, you know, a little cautious about learning about it or for using it as a way of analyzing our systems, I think it can teach you a lot about where we need to go.

38:11

Monicka: Thanks so much for that plug. Even if you're not a socialist, there's a lot that socialism can teach you about the crises within America today, and it opens up the mind to new possibilities. And that's something that the podcast is definitely committed to. Thank you for listening. We hope our ongoing conversations spark understandings, empathy and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all. Take care, folks. You just listened to the Building Justice podcast. The information contained in this podcast represents the views and opinions of the host and the guests, and does not necessarily represent the views or opinions of Sac State or CRISJ.

38:44

Outro Music Lyrics

No more penalties and no more wars. Based on the actions. Now, time for 'Building Justice,' 'Building Justice.' Time for building justice, justice.