

DSA embraces the right-wing legacy of social democracy

Jacobin promotes Zohran Mamdani for New York City mayor, comparing him to Morris Hillquit in 1917

Fred Mazelis
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Jacobin, the unofficial publication of the Democratic Socialists of America, is promoting the New York City mayoral candidacy of Democratic Party State Assemblyman Zohran Mamdani, who is also a member of the DSA.

Mamdani entered a crowded field of capitalist politicians, most calling themselves “progressive,” who are seeking to succeed the current Democratic mayor, Eric Adams. Adams was indicted on federal bribery and other corruption charges last September. He is a right-wing figure, an ex-cop who seeks to divert attention from growing inequality, homelessness and social decay with law-and-order crackdowns and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Preparing to run in this June’s primary election, Mamdani is seeking to outflank his rivals, with a platform that promises to deal with rising rents, the unreliable and unaffordable transit system, and soaring prices for groceries and other necessities. He is telling workers that they can defend themselves and their families through the increasingly despised Democratic Party.

“When Socialists Run For NYC Mayor, Good Things Can Happen,” is the vague and simplistic headline of an article that appeared a few weeks ago in *Jacobin*. While promoting Mamdani, it highlights the 1917 election, when Socialist Party candidate Morris Hillquit received 22 percent of the vote.

“Good things” can mean almost anything, but *Jacobin* is clearly saying Mamdani’s campaign is not about fighting to replace the capitalist system, but about boosting illusions that reforms can be won within it. The DSA hopes to use the election to recruit new members, all for the purpose of propping up the Democrats.

An immigrant labor lawyer, Hillquit became one of the top leaders of the American Socialist Party until his death in 1933. According to *Jacobin*, Hillquit’s campaign for mayor featured agitation for programs that promised to reduce the cost of living. It did not confine itself to that, *Jacobin* declares, but also fought in “solidarity with the international working class fighting revolutions across the globe.” The article claims that Hillquit “became one of the most visible leaders of the American antiwar movement” as President Woodrow Wilson prepared to take the US into World War I.

“Solidarity with the international working class fighting

revolutions across the globe”? How about the Russian Revolution, which was launched in March of that year (February by the old calendar observed in Russia at that time) and led to the victory of the working class only eight months later, under the Bolshevik Party led Lenin and Trotsky? In fact, the October Revolution, the only successful taking of power by the working class, gets no mention in this article. Nor does it acknowledge that the co-leader of that successful and world-historic revolution, Leon Trotsky, lived in New York City for 10 weeks just before the outbreak of the February Revolution. Trotsky met Hillquit and he fought Hillquit. He exposed the Socialist Party leader as a two-faced reformist whose opposition to the war was completely phony.

Trotsky came to the United States after having been deported by France and Spain. In New York, he immediately began a whirlwind of political activity, writing for the Russian-language *Novy Mir* newspaper, speaking to mass meetings and discussing with other revolutionaries, fellow exiles like Bukharin and Alexandra Kollontai. Much of this is detailed in an informative and objective account published several years ago, *Trotsky in New York 1917*, by Kenneth Ackerman.

As Ackerman notes, after Trotsky’s arrival in January 1917, “Hillquit soon would become Trotsky’s leading political nemesis in America.” The author explains that the clash between them, between reform or revolution, “would define the country’s left wing for a generation.”

It did not take Trotsky long to see what Hillquit represented. He later called him “the ideal leader for successful dentists,” the kind of middle-class “socialist” whose most prominent American descendants today include the DSA.

Hillquit is sometimes described as one of the leaders of a “Center” wing of the SP. He was only a “centrist,” however, in contrast to right-wing figures like “socialist” Milwaukee congressman Victor Berger, who held openly racist views. Unlike some who enthusiastically supported the war, Hillquit opposed it in words, but he also opposed, and even more vehemently, any mass action and the mobilization of the working class to fight it. In contrast to Hillquit, a genuine left wing of the SP, numbering thousands, both immigrant and native-born, soon expressed

enthusiasm for the revolution in Russia. The left wing grew rapidly after the October Revolution, and its adherents formed the nucleus of the American Communist Party, formed several years later.

The nature of Hillquit's opposition to the war was demonstrated by his meeting with Democratic President Woodrow Wilson to try to convince this representative of American imperialism not to send US troops to Europe. The plea to Wilson is somewhat analogous to the DSA and other pseudo-lefts' calls for the US government to pressure their Zionist allies to agree to a cease-fire in Gaza, though the DSA is also one of the leading champions of the US-NATO imperialist war against Russia in Ukraine.

The WSWs has written about Trotsky's encounter with Hillquit before, but this history bears repeating in light of *Jacobin's* discovery of the supposedly admirable qualities of its 1917 predecessor.

In early February, the day after a fiery speech by Hillquit at Carnegie Hall, Trotsky wrote in *Novy Mir* to welcome the words, but denounce the assorted pacifists and bureaucrats on the platform with Hillquit. Trotsky warned against the honeyed phrases of the preachers and liberals, and insisted that what was needed was a fight against capitalism based on the working class.

Trotsky's suspicions were soon borne out. Trotsky was appointed as one of two representatives of the Socialist Party's left wing on a seven-man "special committee" established by the party in late February to draft a resolution on America's entry into the war against Germany.

When the party membership convened to vote on March 4, they were confronted by majority and minority reports, with the minority breaking angrily with Hillquit over his refusal to call for illegal mass action against the war. The minority concluded, "No to 'civil peace'! No truce with the ruling class! War does not change the issue, but emphasizes it. War against capitalism! On with the class struggle!"

Hillquit's forces won the vote, but by only 22 votes out of almost 200 total. Trotsky, only a few weeks after arriving in the US, had exposed the reformists and won a significant political victory. This helped lay the basis for the formation of the American Communist Party after the successful revolution in Russia.

The most beloved and prominent leader of American socialism at that time, Eugene V. Debs, made clear only a few days after that membership vote that he enthusiastically agreed with Trotsky, that only the class struggle waged by the working class could successfully fight against war.

Debs, who came to New York to speak at mass meetings against the war, called Trotsky and asked him to stand alongside him on the podium at a meeting at The Cooper Union. At this meeting, on March 8, Debs said he "would ... rather be lined up against a wall and shot for treason to Wall Street than live as a traitor to the working class." Debs later ran for the presidency, in 1920, while imprisoned under the Sedition Act for his 1918 speech in Canton, Ohio against the war.

On the very same day as the Cooper Union meeting, the revolution began in Russia. Within a few weeks, Leon Trotsky and his companion Natalia Sedova were on their way back to Russia, a trip that was interrupted by internment in Canada but which ended

with Trotsky's arrival in Petrograd on May 4, followed by the successful socialist revolution a few months later.

In its effort to claim that Mamdani is continuing the work of Morris Hillquit, the *Jacobin* article also compares Hillquit favorably with a later New York mayor, David Dinkins, who served for one term after his 1989 election. *Jacobin* describes Dinkins, who was formally a member of the DSA, as a "milquetoast liberal" who "never ran on or governed with socialist bonafides."

However, when Dinkins died at the age of 93 a few years ago, *Jacobin* ran not one, but two tributes to the late capitalist politician. One of the articles was entitled, "What David Dinkins Taught Us." The article bemoans the fact that "Dinkins' New York City Rainbow Coalition only lasted one term." *Jacobin* wrote that it would "not be entirely fair" to criticize the man they have now described as a "milquetoast liberal," since he was "checked by reactionary forces and a faltering economy."

One can easily imagine the identical words being used, in the unlikely event he is elected mayor, to excuse and apologize for Mr. Mamdani today.

There can be absolutely no illusions in the character and purpose of Zohran Mamdani's campaign. The verbal opposition to the Gaza genocide is to provide him with a left cover in an attempt to fool workers and youth understandably outraged by the mass murder carried out by the Zionists. Hillquit did something similar in 1917. Mamdani has had nothing to say about the danger of fascism. His campaign divorces economic and social questions from the danger of dictatorship and a third world war. He says nothing about the significance of Trump's victory and the role of the Democratic Party enablers. The purpose of his campaign is not to educate workers and build a revolutionary leadership, but to prop up the Democrats, lulling workers with reformist and pacifist phrases.

The DSA is, through its role as a faction of the Democratic Party, an integral part of the capitalist state. There is no historical figure it hates more than Leon Trotsky, and no greater enemy it faces than the Trotskyist movement today. This has recently been evidenced in DSA member Aidan Beatty's demonization, in a hack work masquerading as a biography, of British Trotskyist leader Gerry Healy, and his attack on the International Committee of the Fourth International. Unable to answer Trotskyism politically, the DSA maintains a guilty silence on the real history of 1917.



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