

From Meyer London to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

Before there was Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, there was New York's Socialist congressman Meyer London. His experience in Washington is full of lessons for us today.

Meyer London, American Socialist Congressman, speaking at a rally of striking Brooklyn streetcar workers, July 15, 1916. Bain News Service / Wikimedia
It's apparent to both her friends and enemies — Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is different than the corporate politicians we've grown used to. Before even taking office, Ocasio-Cortez has already sparked a [membership surge](#) in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), floated the idea of a new congressional [sub-caucus](#), promoted [civil disobedience](#) inside of Nancy Pelosi's office, and opposed Amazon's [push](#) for a government-subsidized headquarters in Queens. As she put it in a [tweet](#) advocating a Green New Deal and a federal jobs guarantee, it's well past time that elected officials “push the limits of what's possible.”

In a context marked by deep popular anger at the status quo, these are encouraging signs. [Bernie Sanders](#), [Rashida Tlaib](#), [Julia Salazar](#), and other recently elected socialists seem poised to play a major role reviving a working-class left in the United States.

The political possibilities are immense, but so are the pressures from above. Moderating constraints on Ocasio-Cortez will significantly increase over time and it's not yet clear how far she is prepared to break from the norms, politics, and structures of the Democratic Party. Alongside more insurgent moves, she has also extended some olive branches to the party establishment, such as pledging her [support](#) for Nancy Pelosi as House Speaker.

The Democratic Party may not be very good at [winning elections](#), but it's great at [co-opting](#) radicals and social movements. That's why *Jacobin*'s Bhaskar Sunkara recently [argued](#) that “to make sure newly elected socialists don't end up looking like corporate Democrats, we need a democratic-socialist caucus in Congress.”

But how exactly should socialists in office act differently than your average liberal or progressive Democrat? To answer this question, we don't need to resort to speculation. A century before Ocasio-Cortez's stunning electoral upset,

a similar political earthquake hit the country when New York City elected its first socialist to Congress: Jewish immigrant and labor leader Meyer London. Though Democrats today like to take credit for the reforms of the New Deal, most of these changes were [first proposed](#) in Congress by New York City's socialist representative.

A Socialist in Congress

Meyer London and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez share a few important similarities beyond being socialist members of Congress from New York. Like Ocasio-Cortez, London came from an immigrant family and was voted into office by a primarily working-class immigrant district. While serving in Congress, first from 1915 to 1919 and then again from 1921 to 1923, London consistently fought against the federal government's racist immigration quotas on Asian migrants as well as Jews. Such restrictions, he [argued](#), "violate the fundamental principle of Socialism, which prohibits you from discrimination."

As with Ocasio-Cortez's defeat of party insider Joe Crowley, London's victory over Henry M. Goldfogle in 1914 was a direct blow to the Democratic Party machine in New York and nationwide. It was also greatly inspiring to workers in New York City, who gathered by the thousands to celebrate all night on the streets of the Lower East Side. A few days later, twelve thousand people crammed into Madison Square Garden for a victory celebration that the *New York Times* described as follows:

Their meeting was lively and enthusiastic. A lively air by the band brought the crowd to its feet cheering, every oratorical outburst meant a thundering interruption, and when Congressman-elect London appeared as their speaker the crowd cheered for almost fifteen minutes.

Although London was on the far left of Congress, he belonged to the least radical wing of the Socialist Party (SP). With only a light commitment to Marxism, London believed in an evolutionary transition to socialism and wavered in his opposition to the First World War.

But if anything, London's relative moderation throws into relief how the class struggle stances he espoused were the norm among *all* socialists at the time. What made him different from mainstream progressives was not any personal idiosyncrasy, but his long-standing membership in the SP and his commitment to its basic political project. To build a political profile that was consistently distinct from *all* wings of the establishment, London upheld three socialist maxims that remain relevant today: emphasize the class struggle, promote socialism, and stand up to the Democratic Party.

Class Versus Class

Socialists look at the world differently than even the most liberal Democrats. Whereas liberals see politics fundamentally as a left-to-right spectrum, a socialist's starting point is looking at top versus bottom — i.e., workers versus bosses.

One expression of this divergence concerns campaign funding. Unsurprisingly, Meyer London had no corporate backers. He rose to political fame primarily by leading the 1909–10 [“Uprising of the 20,000,”](#) an explosive general strike by immigrant garment workers. “We cannot trust ourselves to the kind mercies of the employers,” he declared to the strike committee. “To our sorrow we have trusted them long enough.”

Following the successful strike, Meyer's ascent to Congress relied on the resources provided by unions, the SP, and small donors. By way of comparison, almost every single member of today's Congressional Progressive Caucus [takes corporate money](#). For her part, self-described progressive [Nancy Pelosi](#) has a [net worth](#) of \$120 million — not only is she deeply reliant on [corporate](#) backers, but as the owner of a [nonunion vineyard](#) she (as well as her millionaire [husband](#)) is literally a capitalist.

Money isn't everything, but these material bases do shape the politics of elected officials. London was always clear that he sought to represent the interests of the working class against those of the capitalist class. At a mass rally of East Side laborers, he explained that “with your assistance and cooperation and good cheer to sustain me, I shall endeavor to fight for the workers of this city, state, and nation.” And unlike most well-meaning progressive politicians, he was never afraid to name capitalists as the source of workers' ills. In response to the 1917 food shortages and [riots](#) by working women, London declared:

The people cannot entrust the question of bread, the question of life, to those rulers and servants of the money bags, who are responsible for the high cost of living. Who outside of the representatives of the working masses and the Socialist movement can be entrusted with the life interests of the people in these troubled times?

Though London agitated around a wide array of issues — including support for women's suffrage, anti-lynching legislation, and Puerto Rican self-determination — he focused on the burning material demands shared by all working people. During his electoral campaigns and while in office, London consistently decried the lack of affordable housing, living wages, health care, and social insurance. This focus, he argued, was one of the key stances differentiating Socialists from their political rivals: “It is noise, noise and nothing else that we hear during the campaign. Each of the old party candidates

tries to outdo the others in dodging the real vital questions.”

A class analysis also informed London’s sober assessment of the limits of what could be accomplished through purely electoral means, particularly in a legislature dominated by corporate politicians. The *New York Call*, a socialist daily, described the situation: “He is almost literally in a cage of hostile people to which no one is admitted except his enemies.” In this context, London above all saw his role as raising class consciousness, aiding labor struggles, and spreading socialist ideas outside the halls of power. Upon election in 1914, like Bernie Sanders does today, he stressed the following to his supporters:

I do not expect to accomplish miracles in Congress. I expect to deliver a message. ... Comrades, do not permit yourselves to be deceived by this victory. Do not become less active. Begin the work of organization in every district. Ours is but a small beginning.

This commitment to changing the national political conversation and building class power was concretized in London’s main legislative project from 1914 onwards: pushing for comprehensive social insurance for all in the form of national health care, unemployment and disability insurance, and public works jobs programs. As historian Gordon Golberg [notes](#), “despite the House’s refusal to endorse his proposals, London ... helped pave the way for the reforms of the New Deal.”

Faced with a hostile Congress, London and the SP called a national day of action on February 12, 1915 to demand social insurance. To a rally of thousands in Union Square, London made it clear that mass struggle and organization was needed to force the state to grant such an ambitious reform agenda: “If the working class concentrated, it could compel action on the question.” This analysis was vindicated two decades later, when an unprecedented wave of socialist-led general strikes [compelled](#) a reluctant Roosevelt and Democratic Party to enact the more radical “second” phase of the New Deal.

The lessons of this experience are obvious for today’s fights for [Medicare for All](#) and a [Green New Deal](#). Since both of these demands constitute a frontal attack on big business, it’s very unlikely that they can be won through [backroom maneuvering](#) in House committees or compromises with corporate-bought leaders like Pelosi, who [quashed](#) all attempts to pass single-payer health care when she was House leader from 2007 to 2011. Winning the burning demands supported by both socialists and honest progressives will require class struggle, not compromise.

A Socialist Vision

Unlike socialists — and [a majority](#) of today’s millennials — liberal and

progressive Democrats openly support capitalism. At a 2017 CNN town hall, when a young NYU student suggested the Democratic Party move left and offer “a more stark contrast to right-wing economics,” Nancy Pelosi famously [responded](#): “We’re capitalists, that’s just the way it is.” More recently, Elizabeth Warren similarly [insisted](#) that she is “a [capitalist to my bones](#).”

Meyer London’s stance on this question was unequivocal. Capitalism, he declared in a 1916 speech to Congress, was an inherently irrational and wasteful system that spent billions on military expansion while letting working people starve:

Nothing illustrates more convincingly the complete economic and moral bankruptcy of the present system of individualistic or capitalistic ownership than the shortage of food in our richest cities and in the most prosperous period in the history of the country. ... Rich as never before — and bread riots! Such is capitalism. Such is the rule of private capital over human society.

For London, socialism fundamentally meant expanding democracy to the economic arena by abolishing the private ownership of the means of production: “Nothing short of industrial democracy will satisfy us. ... We shall not rest until every power of capitalism has been destroyed and the workers emancipated from wage slavery.”

Taking this position, he explained, did not mean advocating violence. Nor did it mean downplaying the fight for reforms — winning these would give workers the confidence and organization necessary to eventually fight for more fundamental social transformation. Indeed, most of London’s public agitation and legislative proposals focused on immediate issues. For instance, London successfully got Congress to pass the first ever law enabling workers to demand back wages owed to them by bankrupt companies — a victory that set a legal precedent for the campaign of laid-off Toys “R” Us workers [promoted by](#) Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez among other things.

Though London generally focused on the fight for urgently needed reforms, a larger vision of a socialist future was an important part of his belief system and his public agitation. But far from being counterposed to day-to-day politics, winning people to the view that a radically better world was possible had very real benefits for the immediate struggle.

By rejecting capitalism, London was better able to convince workers that they did not have to accept their lot in life — the status quo was neither legitimate, nor inevitable. An inspiring vision of a classless society not only helped the Socialist Party recruit over 100,000 members, it provided them with the moral and political conviction that animated their tireless work in electoral and labor battles. At his 1916 election victory rally, London explained:

You did not make these sacrifices for me. Everyone in this campaign worked for the ideal that spurs Socialists on to work against tremendous odds in the fight with capitalism. Socialism is the voice of humanity, of the future and of the world. You have a noble and a loyal task. You should not for a moment waver, but fight on, fight on.

The potency of this dynamic was again manifest during the recent campaigns of Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez. Their advocacy of democratic socialism — despite being more [social democratic](#) than London and the SP's vision — recruited tens of thousands of new members to DSA, including the rank-and-file leaders of West Virginia's 2018 [teachers' strike](#). In the coming years, continuing to use the electoral arena to deepen the influence of organized socialists in unions and mass movements will be essential to generating the social power necessary to overcome [neoliberalism](#) and, eventually, [capitalism](#) itself.

The Democratic Party Trap

Liberals and mainstream progressives see the Democratic Party as an open and neutral body capable of being utilized by the forces of good. In contrast, London and the SP argued that workers needed their own party since the Democratic Party, despite its populist rhetoric, was an institution firmly controlled by big business.

Though London remained collegial with other congressmen, and always supported any positive, pro-worker bill, he did not hold back from declaring that the other parties were “serving the capitalists against the working people.”

This was not unfounded rhetoric. As was the case with the [Obama presidency](#), Woodrow Wilson's administration (1913–1921) exposed the real class loyalties of Democratic leaders. Workers' demands for economic and political reform were met with deaf ears — indeed, it was the Democrats who were responsible for defeating London's ongoing legislative proposals for social insurance. Breaking with their progressive campaign rhetoric and promises, they even opposed his modest proposal to set up a committee to study the unemployment problem. In response, London took to the floor of the House to denounce the “ignorance and darkness” of both parties:

Forty-seven treacherous Democrats, too cowardly to vote for a Socialist measure when it had a chance to pass, who voted for it last year, refused to vote for it this year — the most contemptible political performance that any party could be guilty of.

And just as Obama's [austerity and corporate bailouts](#) paved the way for the election of Trump, the “lesser evil” of Wilson led to the election of “the greater evil” Republican Warren Harding in 1920. London was not in the least

surprised by this development, since the Democrats’ “shameful record” while in office had demonstrated the shallowness of their liberal campaign promises. It’s this consistently antagonistic approach to the Democratic Party that perhaps most clearly politically distinguishes London from Ocasio-Cortez and other recently elected socialists. Refusing as a matter of principle to run on the ballot line of a capitalist party, London had been a perennial independent socialist candidate since 1896 before finally winning in 1914 on the Socialist Party ballot line.

Though refusing to run within the Democratic Party made the path to election much more arduous, it afforded London, like all SP candidates, much greater organizational and political independence from the status quo once elected. London was entirely free to say what he thought and to boldly fight for working people, since he did not depend on the Democratic Party machine for funds, campaigners, or congressional committee posts. Nor was his independent political profile blurred by supporting mainstream Democrats — a status-quo reinforcing norm, as Kim Moody [points out](#), that the Democratic Party leadership continues to demand of its progressive wing. London only endorsed other Socialists for office and, while in Congress, he abstained from voting on the Democrats’ choice of House leader.

Of course, this independent approach had some real downsides. It meant that the ruling class presented London and the SP with far more sticks than carrots — indeed, much of his time in office coincided with a wartime [crackdown](#) on dissent and the nation’s first [red scare](#), when large numbers of radicals across the US were imprisoned, censored, and denied other basic democratic rights by the Wilson administration. Anxious to defeat a candidate they could not control, the Republicans and Democrats ran a joint “fusion” candidate to unseat London in 1918. And after this maneuver failed to defeat him in 1920, party leaders subsequently gerrymandered his district out of existence in 1922.

In contrast, today’s socialist electoral insurgency has taken place primarily through the Democratic Party [ballot line](#). Organized socialists were an important, but [not decisive](#), component of Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign. This political ambiguity has helped top Democratic Party leaders like House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer actively [downplay](#) Ocasio-Cortez’s socialist connections, arguing that at heart, “she’s a Democrat.” The party apparatus, at least for the time being, seems to be more invested in integrating rather than isolating her. Whether it will succeed is another question, which will depend not only on the choices of Ocasio–Cortez and her team, but also on the pressure from below generated by mass movements and organized socialists.

There are no easy answers or simple formulas for how to proceed in today’s

novel context. Given the relative weakness of the socialist movement, and the well-known [obstacles](#) to electing third-party candidates in the US, it made tactical sense for Ocasio-Cortez, like Sanders before her, to run on the Democratic Party ballot line. At the same time, elected socialists will ultimately need full [political independence](#) from the party establishment in order to advance their class-struggle agendas. We'll eventually need a party of our own. Playing by the rules of the game has led all too many honest politicians to cover for, and [bend to](#), a corporate-funded Democratic machine whose built-to-fail centrism led to our current [Trump](#) nightmare.

Like Meyer London a century ago, the election of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has massively raised the hopes and expectations of millions. Thankfully, she's shown her willingness to break some of the Democrats' rules. Breaking all of them will likely be necessary if we're going to forge a credible alternative to Trumpism, and rebuild a working-class movement in the United States.