

Socialism Has a History — and a Future — in New York City

The three socialists who effectively won election to New York City Council this month have achieved something many would have thought impossible just a few years ago. But they won't be the first socialists elected to that body.



Ben Davis Jr (1903–1964), one of several socialists and communists who served on New York City Council, was expelled and spent three years in prison for his political beliefs. (Irving Haberman / IH Images via Getty Images)

At least three socialists have declared victory in New York's city council races: [Alexa Avilés](#) of Sunset Park, Brooklyn, [Tiffany Cabán](#) of Astoria, Queens, and Kristin Richardson Jordan of Harlem, New York. Cabán and Avilés were both endorsed by New York City Democratic Socialists of America (NYC-DSA), while Jordan is a DSA member (though not endorsed by NYC-DSA, her campaign was endorsed by socialist congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez). Their effective election is an exciting milestone for the contemporary socialist movement — but socialists and communists have a long history on this body.

Last year, when a slate of socialists won seats in New York State government, [Jacobin noted their predecessors](#) in the immigrant activists of the late teens and early 1920s, who were repeatedly elected before being expelled from the legislature by their Albany colleagues. During the same period, socialists were also active in municipal politics.

In 1917, seven socialists, all backed by the Socialist Party, were elected to the seventy-member New York City Board of Aldermen, an earlier form of the body that later became the New York City

Council. One of the best known of these men was Baruch Vladeck, a journalist. Born in a small, impoverished village near Minsk, he was drawn to revolutionary movements as a teenager, became an accomplished orator, and served time in a czarist prison for recommending “liberal books” to schoolchildren. When he came to the United States, he studied Abraham Lincoln, worked for the *Jewish Daily Forward*, and became involved in socialist politics, just as he had been in Russia. When Vladeck was elected to the Board of Aldermen, just two years after becoming a naturalized US citizen, he represented a district in Williamsburg, Brooklyn (a neighborhood currently sending socialists to the state senate and assembly — but not yet the city council). Like our present-day socialists, Vladeck advocated tirelessly for housing affordable to working-class people. He played a critical role in organizing housing cooperatives. Because of this work, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia appointed him to the New York City Housing Authority. A public housing development on the Lower East Side is [named for him](#), as is a park adjacent to the development. After a split in the Socialist Party, Vladeck became one of the founders of the American Labor Party, which was led by social democrats and labor unionists, and, in 1937, he won election to a city council newly created by a revised city charter (which dissolved the Board of Aldermen).

From 1936 to 1947, the city experimented with proportional representation in city council elections. This is quite different from ranked-choice voting; it guaranteed representation to minority parties in proportion to the support they enjoyed within the electorate. Socialists and communists were among the clear beneficiaries (indeed, Red Scare repression was the reason it was so short-lived).

Vladeck, for the American Labor Party, was elected by proportional representation the year after it was enacted, in 1937. The same year, Mike Quill was also elected to city council as part of the American Labor Party’s slate. A devotee of legendary Irish socialist James Connolly and a famously effective leader and founder of the Transport Workers Union (TWU), which in its early days had close ties to the Communist Party, Quill is (rightly) better remembered as a labor leader — winning better wages and working conditions for bus, subway, and taxi workers — than as a city council member. Still, he was able to use his position on the council to advance the interests of transport workers. In fact, whenever he faced a conflict between the American Labor Party’s position and the interests of transport workers, he would always side with the latter. Quill led the TWU to an historic victory in a strike just days before his death in 1966. Martin Luther King Jr said of Quill: “He spent his life ripping the chains of bondage off his fellow man. This is a man the ages will remember.” Quill, who served on the city council from 1937 to 1939, then again from 1943 to 1949, has a [corner named after him](#) at the end of the 1 train, at the MTA’s 204 St subway yards. A bus depot at the entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel also bears his name.

Labor leader and Communist Party activist Peter Cacchione was elected to city council in 1941, becoming, according to the *New York Times*, the first “avowed Communist” elected to public office in New York State. Born in Syracuse to immigrant parents, he worked many blue-collar jobs — a river, a trainman, a steelworker — after graduating from high school, and had joined the Communist Party in 1932, politicized by the hardships of the Great Depression. On the city council he championed price controls on rent, food, utilities, and transit; wage increases for public workers; and state aid for the city. He also fought against housing segregation and racial discrimination of all kinds. Cacchione was reelected in 1943 and 1945, serving until his death in 1947. Under proportional representation, the body would have had to appoint a replacement of the same party — the Communist Party — but that system was repealed just two days before his death, and the council refused to seat Si Gerson, Cacchione’s campaign manager, whom the Party had chosen as his successor.

Ben Davis, a leader of the Communist Party, was elected to the city council for the first time in 1943 and reelected two years later. A graduate of Harvard Law School, Davis had joined the Communist Party while defending a black Communist facing the death penalty under Georgia’s insurrection law. Describing how the case radicalized him, he later said, “I felt if there was anything I could do to fight against this thing, to strike a blow against this lynch system, I would do it.”

On the city council, Davis, only that body's second black member after Adam Clayton Powell Jr, specialized in policies combatting racial injustice; he fought housing segregation, police brutality, poor fire protection in Harlem, and racial discrimination in Major League Baseball. Davis was one of eleven party leaders convicted in 1949 under the Smith Act of conspiring to advocate the overthrow of the US government. During his trial, the council met at night so that Davis could continue to attend. After his conviction, however, the city council expelled Davis by unanimous vote, in an eerie echo of the expulsion of the socialists from Albany in 1920. In any case, proportional representation was no more, the establishment had quickly selected and rallied around a more moderate black politician, and Davis lost his election that year. Davis served more than three years in federal prison, and when he died in 1964, he was under indictment again, this time under the McCarran Act.

These radicals of the past enjoyed more institutional power and reformist successes than many Americans realize. That's why they — especially the Communists — faced persecution. The ruling class did everything it could, from prison, to repealing proportional representation, to red-baiting, to the smooth deployment of identity politics to drive them from office and defeat them. Today's socialists could face a similar backlash from the ruling class. In fact, we already do. They haven't yet refused to seat us, nor have they thrown us in prison. But the ruling class has already been using some of the other tactics they used against the Communists: backing a black moderate, as the establishment did to defeat Ben Davis, was exactly the ruling class's tactic of choice in its recent campaign to [defeat](#) Michael Hollingsworth, a DSA-backed housing activist who ran for city council in Brooklyn.

There's reason to think that red scares and red-baiting don't work as well now as they did last century. And socialist ideas may be even more popular today than they were then; after all, we've been able to win office without good-government electoral reforms like proportional representation. But history shows that even when we engage in work that doesn't sound particularly radical — what could sound less incendiary and more civic minded than city council, with its long meetings about garbage pickup or discretionary funding for basketball courts? — we must be ready to fight the ruling class.