

Kim Moody's "Breaking The Impasse": Review

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Introduction

Kim Moody argues in his book, *Breaking the Impasse*, written in 2020, that American politics is in a political cul de sac. This “impasse” is characterised by the Republican Party lurching further right and the Democratic Party taking a more centrist political and neoliberal economic positions. He argues against left-wing and socialist ventures into the Democratic Party and instead for building a mass working-class based party which “should seek to be a central piece in building the organized power of the working class” independent of positions this party may hold or seek to hold in the American state or legislative bodies.

US politics condemned to a two-party system?

Moody challenges the idea that US electoral politics is condemned to a two-party system. More specifically, he asserts that while the First Past the Post voting system (FPTP) does act as an obstacle to multi-party politics, it does not mean that US electoral politics is doomed to a two-party system. The UK and Canada also use FPTP but have (or at least have had) active and influential third parties. In fact, third parties in the US used to be more active and voter turnout higher. The significant obstacles, in Moody's opinion, were created long ago – between the 1890s and 1920s – by the introduction of state and local primaries (preliminary elections where voters choose the candidates that will contest a later election), gerrymandering, and voter disenfranchisement (e.g. through literacy tests, voter registration, length of stay requirements and citizenship requirements). These factors led to a drop in voter turnout from highs of 79% in the 1890s to lows of 49% by the 1920s. Since the 1930s voter turnout has stayed between 50% and 62%, with the most recent election in 2020 having the highest voter turnout of the 21st century.

Moody rails against the idea that direct primaries are a good form of democracy. He writes “the primary election for congressional, state, and local candidates was presented as a form of direct democracy for the public, when the reality was meant to be the opposite. It is rather the perfect capitalist marketplace of candidates in which passive consumption (voting for your choice) is substituted for the participation in the messy reality of party organization, debate and conflict” (pg 20). Moody takes particular issue with primaries, since socialists (particularly those in the DSA) argue that successful challenges and in-roads into the Democratic Party can be made via them. While primaries raise important issues and mobilise voters and activists, it is done in a short time and leaves little or no organised base behind afterwards. Moreover, much of the Democratic Party funding for congressional elections (via the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee) goes to incumbents. And there is measurable tendency for the DCCC to fund centrist candidates: “of the thirty-seven House Democrats who received substantial coordination funds from the DCCC in the 2020 election cycle, twenty were members of the centrist New Democratic Coalition, five of the conservative Blue Dog Coalition, while only two were members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus and one of those was also a centrist New Democrat” (pg 33).

Democratic Party a Political Dead-End

In Moody's opinion, socialists underestimate the effects of direct primaries, the orientation of the Democratic Party towards an increasingly wealthy voter-base, the influence of wealthy donors within the party, and the lack of democratic structures and culture within the party.

Moody explains how socialist involvement through the Democratic Party tends to end up capturing the candidate (or political movement), co-opting them and turning them into someone more centrist and less confrontational. While this is true of even left-wing parties in other countries it is particularly poignant within the Democratic Party. Whether socialists advocate out-and-out alignment or argue for a "dirty break", they are faced with a range of obstacles trying to obtain positions within the Democrats and even once they get into those positions they face further pressure to align to the political centre of the party.

While most DSAers and socialists don't hold illusions about the current political position of the Democratic Party, it is seen by many as the best hope for the working class or at least the lesser of two evils. However, as Moody points out "for years now the Democrats' strategy for winning presidential, state, and congressional elections has been to take its urban districts for granted and focus on winning suburban middle-class and wealthy moderates". The Democrats increasingly rely on a wealthier and whiter voter base. He goes on to note that "voters with family incomes of \$150,000 or more voted Democratic [as opposed to Republican] by 59 to 39 percent in 2018, up from a result of 51 to 44 percent in 2016" meanwhile "those making under \$30,000 who voted heavily Democratic fell from 28 percent of voters in 2016 to 17 percent in 2018 and 15 percent in 2020". Overall voter turnout from black voters, union households and working class households have all fallen significantly in the 2000s, mainly impacting the Democrats who saw these groups as a reliable base. The Democratic voter base has become whiter and wealthier and this trend persists.

The turn towards wealthier voters correlates with a marked increase in the role of money in election cycles and the Democratic Party taking more donations from wealthy sources. In the 2020 election cycle the Democratic National Committee (DNC) raised \$410.9 million. Half of this money came from businesses involved in finance, investment and real estate. Unions and other labour organisations contributed a lonely 1 percent of this (roughly \$3.5 million). Furthermore the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) has seen an increase in the number of large individual donations

since 2000 with 58 of the richest 100 individual donors giving to the Democrats. Moody goes into more detail on how this shift took place and the amount of money poured into elections and their corresponding primaries.

Even if you successfully elect a socialist through the Democrats, you still face further barriers. The main one being the Democratic Party bureaucracy coupled with a lack of clear avenues in which to democratically fight for and win policies within the Democratic Party. While there are a lack of groups holding candidates to account, it would be impossible for them to do this if they were to try. The result is that left-wingers get dispirited and absorbed into the party machine. Moody describes how Alexandria-Ocasio Cortez (a member of the House of Representatives) has replaced radicals with more liberal advisors, reduced support for incoming left-wingers, become integrated into the Biden campaign, and made peace with Nancy Pelosi. This does not mean that AOC has stopped talking left or nominally supporting progressive policies such as free education, the Green New Deal, or raising the minimum wage. As Moody observes “Pelosi and other leaders have not attempted to silence or suppress AOC... what is required of AOC and other dissidents is not a surrender of ideas or left identity, but conformity to the norms, protocols and discipline of the Democratic Caucus” (pg 42).

Moody also opposes the idea of a “dirty break” (the proposed strategy of being active within the Democrats only to later break off, create your own socialist party and take parts of the Democrats with you in the process). He argues that there are a number of issues with this: the difficulty of raising money to run successful candidates particularly if you are challenging incumbents; the potential of being absorbed into the party apparatus if you are successful; and a lack of clarity of when this break should take place and in what way. He disagrees with Eric Blanc’s portrayal of the Minnesota Farmer Labor Party (MFLP) as an example in favour of the “dirty break” strategy. In the early 20th century the MFLP had (ultimately unsuccessful) endeavors in the Democrats and Republicans operating as the Working People’s Nonpartisan League. Blanc argues that these forays of WPLN into both major parties laid the ground for the later success of the MFLP. Moody disagrees, arguing that Blanc misunderstands the political context of the time. It was not the MFLP’s attempts to intervene and break from the two major parties that produced successful candidates in 1922 and 1923 when the MFLP ran its own candidates, but rather the labour upsurge from 1918 to 1922 that was the major factor. Moody spells out his criticisms of the dirty break in more detail here.

Potential for an Active Socialist Movement and Mass Working Class Party

Finally Moody makes the case in favour of building a working class party independently of the Democrats. He notes a couple of factors in favour of attempts to do so: the DSA, starting with a few thousand members, grew significantly during the Sanders campaign and later in 2021 peaked at 95,000 members (it currently has around 85,000); polling suggests a large portion of the population (particularly young people) are (nominally) in favour of left-wing and socialist ideas - however this has declined somewhat since the book was published; the Bernie Sanders campaign in 2016 demonstrated an appetite and potential success of a socialist movement in US electoral politics; and, a working class party would have many electorally safe places from which to springboard as well as the potential to be active in urban areas where there are large logistics hubs and significant industrial activity.

While work has certainly sped up, become more precarious, and more heavily surveilled and monitored, these changes in the pace and form of capitalist production also open up new vulnerabilities that can be exploited - for example a slow down in logistics can cause the industry a lot of money, likewise the system is more vulnerable to IT issues. Another thing that Moody notes is that over the last few decades the working class is now different in composition. It is more multi-racial and diverse than it has been in the past - his analysis is solely on the US but is likely similar in other countries.

A further factor in favour of a working class socialist party is the emergence, and in many cases victories, of rank-and-file caucuses in US unions. Talking about the Teamsters and TDU Moody argues “the sorts of critical rank-and-file victories we’ve seen in major teachers’, transit, postal and health care unions in the last several years could now come to a broad variety of industrial workers as this huge union sweeps away decades of conservative rule and prepares to take on the giants of transportation” (pg 167). He notes a similar possibility for the United Automobile Workers (UAW).

US politics has also been marked by the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement and an upsurge in feminist politics. These are things a new working class party should engage with: “The point is to be on the ground, in the class, in the workplace, in

the tenants' organization, in the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, union reforms movements, strikes, and organizing drives. That is, the party should be active in today's struggles and efforts to build durable democratic participatory organizations of these movements" (pg 170).

What the book could have done better

While Moody lays out some neat blueprints of what this party would do, he does not give any proposal of how to get there, nor is it clear that he himself is particularly organising such an initiative. He says little about the need for face-to-face and week-to-week organising. He does not comment on the extent to which a lot of campaigning and activism has moved online, the effect of this trend and how to move away from it.

Moreover, when it comes to criticisms of the Democratic Party, Moody should have brought the lack of internal democracy into sharper focus.

Much of the criticism made by Moody of the Democratic Party comes down to how wealthy donors increasingly influence the party, the turn of the Democrats to a wealthier voter base, how socialists who have won positions in the party have become absorbed by the machinery and their politics blunted, and how the Democrats have shifted the working class and black people (particularly under Clinton). These facts are important but these are true also of left wing parties that exist nowadays (e.g. the Labour Party under Blair or Starmer) but where there is still a case to be made for socialist activity within them. The major difference, in my opinion, between the Labour Party and the Democrats is that there (a) structural links to the labour movement in the Labour Party, and (b) while it is not good, there are at least some democratic structures within the Labour Party that there are not in the Democrats. You cannot become a member of the Democratic Party – this means that even those who politically align, campaign locally and nationally over many years do not have any democratic say in how the party is run. There are also no systems or checks for accountability by party supporters. The Democratic Party, as other critics have pointed out, is more like a network of think tanks, party hacks, lawyers, and lobbyists. Moody makes these criticisms in passing rather than giving it the sharp focus that it requires. In the end many parties and unions can be horrible, corrupt, and lack any respectable culture, but that is not necessarily the measure by which you choose to intervene in them or not. You choose to intervene if they have democratic structures and a tangible connection to the working class. The Democrats have neither of these and have never had them.

What the book does well

Despite this issue, this is an excellent book. Moody does many things very well and provides an important up to date analysis (written in 2022 and still worth reading now). He argues convincingly about the damaging effects of primaries. He deals systematically and clearly with the arguments in favour of socialist activism via the Democrats and responds to them well. He gives insightful historical examples to highlight his points, particularly with regards to earlier forays by socialists into the Democrats. Furthermore, he has an interesting discussion on various myths about the rural and urban divide in the US (he shows actually that “rural” America is quite small and a lot of what could be considered so is actually quite working class with a lot of industry). Similarly he shows that despite culture war issues being used the right, progressive attitudes are actually quite widespread in the US and that this is because of the impact of previous social movements around women’s issues, anti-racism, and LGBT+ rights.

Besides this there are two essays that are worth reading on their own. Firstly, Moody’s essay criticising Jane McAlevey’s approach to building unions, her historical analysis of the US labour movement and how socialists and activists ought to engage with union activity (I have copy as a pdf if anyone wants to read it). Finally, at the back there is a very good appendix on the history of racist policing in the US.

I recommend this book to anyone who wants a good primer as well as an in-depth analysis of the current state of socialist organising in the US and the debates around it.

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