

SDUSA Educational Conference 2026 Day 2: Democracy, Social Justice, and Building a Working-Class Movement

September 5, 2026

On September 5, Social Democrats USA held an Educational Conference bringing together members for a full day of organizational business, political education, discussion, and debate.

The conference reflected the breadth of SDUSA's political tradition. Members considered a resolution on ending hunger, debated how SDUSA should define itself in relation to the Democratic Socialists of America, discussed constitutional and organizational questions, heard reports from chapters and affiliates, and listened to presentations on working-class organizing, Indigenous rights, community resilience, urban poverty, housing, and municipal socialism.

More than anything, the day demonstrated that SDUSA is interested not only in political ideas, but in how those ideas can be translated into organization, public policy, and solidarity in everyday life.

Fighting Hunger Through Universal Food Benefits

The conference opened with consideration of a resolution titled “**Resolution Supporting Universal Food Benefits to End Hunger in America.**”

The resolution argued that access to adequate food is a basic human necessity and that charitable organizations, while indispensable in emergencies, should not be expected to provide the long-term solution to persistent hunger.

It called for SDUSA to support the development of a universal monthly food benefit for Americans, potentially administered through the existing electronic benefit transfer system or a comparable national program. The proposal was presented as a way to reduce administrative barriers and stigma while ensuring that no one goes hungry because of financial hardship.

Following a brief opportunity for discussion, the resolution was passed by unanimous consent.

The decision reflected a recurring theme throughout the conference: basic necessities such as food, healthcare, and housing should not be treated as privileges available only to those able to afford them.

Defining SDUSA: “From a Common Tradition to Different Paths”

The most extensive organizational debate of the day centered on a proposed position piece titled “**SDUSA Isn't DSA: From a Common Tradition to Different Paths.**”

The discussion sought to clarify the distinction between SDUSA and the Democratic Socialists of America while also acknowledging their shared historical roots.

The original draft emphasized SDUSA's social-democratic tradition, its anti-communist heritage, its commitment to democratic institutions and political pluralism, and its support for a mixed economy with strong labor rights, social programs, regulation, and greater economic equality.

At the same time, participants raised an important question: should SDUSA define itself only as an organization seeking to reform capitalism, or should there remain room within the organization for members who envision a more fundamental transformation of the economic system?

That question produced a substantial discussion about the importance of having a **vision of the future while pursuing gradual democratic change in the present.**

Participants stressed that gradualism does not have to mean the absence of an ultimate goal. A movement can pursue practical reforms one step at a time while still maintaining a larger conception of the society it hopes to build.

The debate ultimately led to changes in the proposed statement. One important amendment moved language emphasizing SDUSA's broader democratic tent toward the beginning of the document. The revised language makes clear that SDUSA can include social democrats, democratic socialists, and others who believe capitalism should eventually be transformed or replaced, while maintaining democratic institutions as a fundamental boundary of the organization.

Participants also revised language describing the mixed economy. Rather than stating that the capitalist market must “predominate,” the final discussion moved toward language stating that SDUSA supports a mixed economy in which the capitalist market **coexists with social insurance, social welfare, and other public policies.**

The conference also emphasized that opposition to authoritarian communism does not mean opposition to economic equality or socialism. For participants, democratic institutions, civil liberties, political pluralism, and accountability are non-negotiable principles.

After debate and amendment, the revised statement was ultimately passed unanimously.

Organizational Renewal and Constitutional Questions

The conference also considered changes to the SDUSA Constitution.

Among the proposals discussed were reducing the membership requirement for service as Sergeant at Arms and reducing the length of continuous membership required to serve on the National Executive Committee.

The discussion reflected a larger organizational challenge: SDUSA's present size is considerably smaller than the organization for which much of its existing constitutional structure was originally designed.

Rather than treating that as simply a procedural matter, participants discussed the need to adapt the organization so that it can continue to grow while retaining meaningful democratic structures.

The proposed constitutional changes were drafted for consideration at a subsequent meeting.

Chapter and Affiliate Reports

The conference then turned toward the practical work of building SDUSA.

New York

The New York chapter reported on its continuing activity in one of the historic centers of American social democracy.

The report described regular chapter meetings, efforts to welcome new members, plans for future events and collaborations, and the chapter's broader goal of translating political enthusiasm into organized advocacy.

The chapter also highlighted its members' work in political writing and engagement with public issues through *Socialist Currents*.

Kansas City, Missouri

The Kansas City affiliate report focused on the challenge of building a local organization from the ground up.

Members described efforts to restart regular SDUSA fellowship meetings, maintain an online presence, write for the organization's blog, engage with readers, distribute membership information, and turn online interest into local participation.

The report also emphasized that SDUSA's public-facing work can be an important recruitment tool. Personal conversations, articles, social media, and informal fellowship can all become entry points into political activity.

A related update from Missouri reported that a Facebook page had grown from zero to approximately 300 followers and that several people had expressed interest in becoming involved.

The Political Culture We Practice Internally

An important theme emerged during the organizing discussion: **an organization should practice internally the values it advocates publicly.**

Conference participants discussed the importance of empathy, especially toward newcomers. Members reflected on experiences in other political organizations where established groups and informal circles could unintentionally leave new people feeling isolated.

The lesson offered was straightforward: people should not only be persuaded by what an organization says. They should also be able to see its values in the way members treat one another.

This led to a call for SDUSA to be a place where members can disagree politically without resorting to personal attacks, where newcomers are welcomed, and where members recognize that people arrive at political meetings carrying the pressures of their ordinary lives.

The goal is to build an organization whose internal culture reinforces its democratic and social-democratic ideals rather than contradicting them.

A Frank Discussion of Israel, Palestine, and SDUSA's History

The conference also included an extended discussion of Israel, Palestine, Jewish political life, and the evolution of SDUSA's foreign-policy outlook.

Participants examined the history of SDUSA's earlier pro-Israel orientation and how political events and changing understandings of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have influenced positions on the left over time.

A central point of the discussion was that organizations should not erase their own history simply because their views evolve. Instead, political development should be understood as an evolution: a recognition of what earlier generations believed, what circumstances have changed, and why new conclusions have emerged.

Participants also discussed the importance of distinguishing Jewish identity from support for the policies of any particular Israeli government. At the same time, the conference stressed that opposition to injustice should be applied consistently across countries and political movements.

The discussion included debate over one-state, two-state, and other possible political arrangements, as well as the question of how SDUSA can maintain space for differing views while remaining committed to democratic principles and opposition to oppression.

The conference ultimately returned to a broader organizational principle: members should be able to disagree on difficult questions without turning political disagreement into personal hostility.

“Socialism in the Heartland”

One of the conference's major educational sessions featured **Dr. Brian Matlock**, a political economist and educator who discussed his experience running for U.S. Senate in Kansas in 2020 as a Republican Socialist.

His presentation, titled **“Socialism in the Heartland,”** focused on a question that is increasingly important for any organization seeking to build a broad working-class movement:

How can socialists organize among people who do not traditionally identify with the left?

Matlock argued that American politics is too often understood solely through partisan and geographic divisions. In his view, economic class provides another way of understanding the country's political divisions.

He described the pressures created by rising costs for housing, healthcare, education, and other necessities while wages have failed to keep pace. His concern was that when people experience long-term economic decline without meaningful political alternatives, the result can be fertile ground for authoritarianism, scapegoating, and ethno-nationalism.

The answer, he argued, is not to abandon working-class communities that vote conservatively.

Instead, socialists should organize around the concrete problems people already experience.

Listening Before Lecturing

A major lesson of Matlock's presentation was the importance of **compassion and curiosity in organizing**.

He argued that rural America is not inherently hostile to solidarity or collective action. Many rural communities already possess strong traditions of neighbors helping one another, sharing work, caring for elderly people, and supporting people in need.

The challenge is to recognize those existing values rather than beginning conversations by condemning people for their political affiliations.

Matlock urged organizers to learn how people understand their own communities, what language resonates with them, and which practical issues most directly affect their lives.

He offered the example of farmers who increasingly feel trapped by debt and by economic systems that give them less control over their work. Those experiences, he argued, can provide a starting point for organizing.

The same principle can be applied elsewhere: begin with what people know, what they have experienced, and what they value, and then build toward solidarity.

The message was particularly relevant to SDUSA's own organizing efforts in the Midwest and heartland: **we cannot simply leave rural and working-class Americans to organizations built around fear and resentment.**

Lessons From the Republican Socialist Experiment

Matlock also spoke candidly about what he learned from his own campaign.

Running without a large organization, extensive funding, or a professional campaign infrastructure, he ultimately received more than 7,000 votes in the Republican primary.

Although the campaign did not win, he described it as an important experiment in reaching people across conventional ideological boundaries.

One of his biggest lessons was the importance of building relationships and infrastructure **before** election season. Public attention often comes too late to create a campaign organization from scratch.

He also found that people were often much more open to unconventional political ideas than he expected. Some Republican voters and local political figures were willing to discuss socialism, workers' rights, constitutional protections, and economic inequality once someone took the time to speak with them directly.

Matlock concluded with a simple call to action: organizers should show up with compassion and curiosity, identify the positive values people already possess, connect their experiences to the experiences of people they have been taught to fear, and invite them into solidarity.

His final message was equally important: political activists need community themselves. None of us can change society alone.

Indigenous Rights, Human Rights, and Community Resilience

Another deeply personal presentation came from **Jennina Rose-Gorman**, who spoke about Indigenous rights, family history, human rights, healthcare, environmental stewardship, and the importance of community.

She described growing up in a family shaped by Indigenous activism and recalled the experiences of her father, who advocated for Indigenous rights and treaty obligations.

Her presentation emphasized that many issues often treated as distant history remain living questions. Indigenous rights, racism, environmental destruction, poverty, and access to basic necessities are not merely historical subjects; they continue to affect people in the present.

She also described community practices based on sharing and mutual responsibility. In the culture in which she was raised, the idea that people should help one another was not an abstract political theory but a practical way of life.

That led naturally into a broader discussion of the **right to food, healthcare, housing, clean air, and clean water**.

The conference heard a powerful reminder that people directly experiencing a problem often understand its practical solutions more clearly than those observing it from a distance.

Jennina illustrated this through stories about homelessness and basic hygiene, arguing that organizers must learn to listen to people about the immediate problems that matter most to them rather than assuming they already know what those priorities should be.

Municipal Socialism and “Sewer Socialism”

The day's final major educational presentation came from **Jason Sibert**, who spoke about municipal socialism and the tradition often associated with “**sewer socialism**.”

The presentation examined the historical use of municipal government to expand public services, improve housing, municipalize utilities, and make city government more responsive to working people.

A major focus was the idea that socialism does not have to begin with national government.

Cities can act.

Municipal governments can shape housing, transportation, utilities, public space, infrastructure, and other parts of daily life.

The presentation discussed historic examples of municipal reform as well as contemporary questions such as housing affordability and short-term rentals.

One especially important discussion concerned cooperative and social housing. Participants argued that people should not be forced to spend unsustainable portions of their income merely

to maintain a roof over their heads, and that housing can be organized in ways that give tenants greater ownership and control.

The presentation also drew on the intellectual tradition of Eduard Bernstein, emphasizing the possibility of gradual democratic transformation rather than assuming that social change must occur through an abrupt revolutionary break.

That perspective fit closely with the day's earlier discussion of SDUSA's identity: socialists and social democrats may disagree about the ultimate destination, but democratic reform can be a practical way of building greater economic and social power over time.

A Conference About Building for the Future

Taken together, the September 5 conference was about much more than passing resolutions.

It was about asking what kind of organization SDUSA wants to become.

The discussions repeatedly returned to a few central principles:

Economic security should be treated as a matter of human dignity.

Democracy must be defended not only against authoritarianism on the right, but against authoritarianism wherever it appears.

Political organizations must be willing to learn from history without becoming trapped by it.

Working-class people cannot be abandoned because of how they vote.

Organizing begins by listening.

And a movement must practice its values internally if it expects the public to believe those values are real.

SDUSA enters the next stage of its development with the same challenge that confronted social democrats in earlier generations: turning ideals into organization, and organization into practical change.

The work ahead will require political education, local chapters, recruitment, coalition-building, public policy, and above all, relationships among people who are willing to work together.

The Educational Conference was one step in that process.

Social Democrats USA will continue organizing for democracy, social justice, economic security, and a society in which every person has the material freedom to live with dignity.