

Leftist Candidate Jabari Brisport of DSA Makes Strong Showing in Brooklyn

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Jabari Brisport, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), made an extraordinarily strong showing in his first bid for the New York City Council. Running on both the Green Party and Socialist lines in Crown Heights, District 35 of Brooklyn where he grew up, Jabari won almost 30 percent of the vote, receiving 8,619 votes. He was defeated by Democrat Laurie Cumbo, who took 68 percent of the vote while the Republican Christine Parker got just 4 percent.

Jabari ran as a socialist in a diverse district with a mixed population of African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, orthodox and Hassidic Jews, upper middle class white newcomers, and young hipsters. The district has a population of 124,170, larger than many cities. The 2017 election saw one of the lowest turnouts in years. Only about 22 percent of the 5,053,842 registered voters in New York City as a whole cast ballots in the election.

Jabari wore his politics on his sleeve. As he told a reporter from *New York magazine*, “I want to win because I’m not seeing the results. I’m hearing people talk the talk of being progressive, but it’s not enough to be progressive. You’ve got to be revolutionary, you’ve got to be socialist, you have to want to change society, and that means going on the offense.”

Brisport ran principally on opposition to a plan to turn a publicly owned armory building that covers an entire city block into luxury housing, arguing that it should be used for low-income housing and facilities for the community. He called for converting the property to a community land trust. He took up the position of the Crown Heights Tenants Union, which had opposed the deal. His opponent Cumbo had supported the armory deal until public turned against it, as manifest in the spread of “Kill the Deal” signs in local home and store windows. While Cumbo, under pressure, later came out against the armory deal, many doubted her sincerity and had no confidence in her actual commitment to resist it.

Shortly before the election, Jabari was arrested after he and other housing activists disrupted a City Planning Commission meeting that voted 11-1 in favor of the plan to turn the publicly owned property into a private development of luxury apartments.

While housing was the big issue, Jabari also defended public education against charter schools, supported Black Lives Matter and called for criminal justice reform, as well as speaking out for climate justice.

Following the election Jabari wrote to his supporters, “We just did something the political establishment never would have thought possible. Our campaign got over 8000 votes, nearly 30

percent. One thousand of those voted specifically on the Socialist ballot line! We should all feel proud. We have just sent City Hall a clear message – socialism is rising in New York City.”

The Role of DSA

DSA, which has over 1,000 members in Brooklyn, mobilized its members to support Brisport’s campaign. Jabari won the Green Party primary election, while DSA circulated petitions and won enough signatures to put a Socialist line on the ballot.

DSA had its own operation, independent of the Green Party, in which its members helped to produce campaign literature, canvassed the neighborhoods, and mobilized to get out the vote. DSA members approached local residents saying, “I’m a member of the Democratic Socialists of America and I’m supporting Jabari Brisport...”

Jabari’s was one of two campaigns supported by Brooklyn DSA in the last few months. In the Democratic Party primaries, DSA had supported Rev. Khader El-Yateem an Arab-American Lutheran minister and community organizer. Born in Bethlehem, Palestine in 1962, El-Yateem migrated to the United States in 1992 and settled in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn in 1995. While he ran primarily on local community issues, El-Yateem also took controversial stands on broader political questions, such as his vocal support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement against Israel, known as BDS.

In the District 43 Democratic primaries, El-Yateem, also a DSA member, received 31 percent of the vote, while Justin Brannan won with about 39 percent, other candidates dividing the rest.

For many years DSA principally worked within the Democratic Party and supported its candidates and didn’t expect or ask candidates to run as socialists. These two races give expression to DSA’s new approach to politics, willing to support both progressive Democratic Party candidates, especially if they run as open socialists, but also independent, Green Party or socialist candidates. The race also demonstrates DSA’s desire to link politics to the building of social movements, such as the fight for decent housing and against Islamophobia.

DSA’s political approach has put them at odds both not only with some progressive Democrats and also with the Working Families Party. The WFP did not support either El-Yateem in the primary or Brisport in the general election. We will see more such candidacies backed by DSA in New York City and other areas of the country.

*Dan La Botz is a Co-Editor of *New Politics*. He was the Socialist Party USA candidate for the U.S. Senate in Ohio in 2010. He worked as a volunteer in the Jabari Brisport campaign for NYC City Council.