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An interview with Joel Richards



Joel Richards is a teacher, union activist, and socialist running for Boston City Council. In an interview, Richards discusses his plans to fight for Bostonâ€™s working class, why the city needs its own Green New Deal, and how Christianity shapes his socialism.

Joel Richards is a longtime public school teacher running for Bostonâ€™s District 4 city council seat on November 2, 2021. A first-generation American and union member, heâ€™s running on a platform that speaks directly to the needs of Bostonâ€™s working class: equity in education, housing for all, and a local Green New Deal.

A member of Boston Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), Richardsâ€™s campaign has been endorsed by the Boston Teachers Union, Sunrise Boston, the Greater Boston Labor Council, and the DSA.

In this interview, Richards discusses the structural problems facing his district, how he wants to transform Bostonâ€™s public schools, and the role of Christianity and faith in his vision of socialism. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

SB
Why are you running for Boston City Council?

JR
I have to give credit to being called to be a teacher. God has used teaching to shape my heart, to prepare me for a season like this where thereâ€™s a lot of change going on in Boston, but where thereâ€™s a lot of hurt going on at the same time.
"I want to help my students and their families who are being crushed at the margins of our society."

As a teacher, Iâ€™ve only worked in schools that are overcrowded and underfunded. Iâ€™ve seen students lose their housing, or become housing unstable, and that just devastates their learning, their family, and their school community at large. Iâ€™m tired of seeing students get

asthma or breathing problems from their school environment, from schools that are not maintained or havenâ€™t been retrofitted. Too many of my students have left my school because their family is priced out of the community they love.

I want to help my students and their families who are being crushed at the margins of our society. So thatâ€™s why Iâ€™m running. Iâ€™m running for those people.

SB
Tell us about the city council district youâ€™re running in.

JR
District 4 comprises Mattapan, Dorchester, Jamaica Plain, and Roslindale. It comprises immigrants, working-class people, first-generation Americans, small-business owners of color, a proud and vibrant Asian community, and a vibrant black community. Historically, District 4 hasnâ€™t gotten the same level of investment as other parts of the city. Itâ€™s a community thatâ€™s in desperate need of social workers, mental health counselors, and housing advocates.

Thatâ€™s why the whole slogan of my campaign is â€œMore for D4.â€ More funding for our schools that have been historically underfunded, more union green jobs, more green infrastructure, more affordable housing, more bike lanes, and more buses.

I currently live in Dorchester, but I used to work in Mattapan. I took the Mattapan trolley every day for three years, and then I would have to walk down Cummins Highway, because the buses werenâ€™t coming and Iâ€™d be late to work. I walked with the people that lived in those areas. The people that I see in District 4 are people that have survived and attempted to thrive no matter what. To quote Tupac, District 4 is like that rose that grew from the concrete.

SB
Your campaign has been endorsed by the Democratic Socialists of America. What led you to becoming a socialist? What role has DSA played in your campaign?

JR
I feel like a majority of black leaders who have really thought about society, who were really fighting for justice, who really thought about what racial reconciliation means, came to the realization that socialism is the only way. As a person whose ancestors were brought to this side of the world as property â€” we came here on boats, but in chains â€” I understand the depths of capitalism. When you really start to think about society, you see that socialism is the only way.
"Socialism is the only way."

DSA has been amazing with my campaign. DSA is a brother in this campaign work. Together, we have proudly knocked on thirteen thousand doors. We have fifteen to twenty Boston DSA members on a Saturday morning coming out and door knocking with me.

SB

Youâ€™re a public school teacher. What are the current issues facing Boston public schools, and what are the changes you are going to fight for?

JR
There is a huge disparity in funding and a larger disparity in the quality of facilities at different schools. Then thereâ€™s just a huge disparity in treatment of students, like not having access to mental health care, not having access to after-school activities.

When it comes to what I want to do, I have to, as the young kids say, give Representative Jamaal Bowman his roses. Heâ€™s on a national level fighting for a Green New Deal for Public Schools, but I also know he canâ€™t do that alone. So, on the local level, I want to advocate for that in Boston. I want to enact a Boston Green New Deal for schools, where schools are retrofitted, where solar panels are installed, and all revenues generated can go to help families that are burdened by the costs of utilities. Green schools not only help us to fight climate change but also to not cause breathing problems in the students, so they can actually go to a school thatâ€™s clean and well-kept.

When it comes to the disparity in funding and how schools are run, I want to go to the mayor before the budget is written and advocate for the funding that the schools in District 4 and Boston need. But also, in the long-term, I want to move to a school board thatâ€™s elected by the people â€” similar to the City Council â€” so that thereâ€™s a person from every district who represents the district, makes decisions for the schools, and is beholden to the people that they represent. Right now, itâ€™s mainly the mayor who runs the schools, but itâ€™d be better if a representative from that district was actually making those decisions for the schools. A lot of these issues would be alleviated if we had actual community control of the schools.

SB
Housing costs in Boston, like in cities across the country, continue to soar. What can socialist city councillors do to combat the housing crisis?

JR
The main thing is not selling public land off to developers but actually developing public land not-for-profit. We need to explore this idea of what it means to develop land to house our workers. As a working-class person myself, as a teacher, I like to ask, â€œWhat does it mean to provide housing for those people?â€ That is one of the ways we could greatly alleviate the burden of soaring housing costs for people in Boston.
"We need rent control here in Boston, and other cities would say the same."

And letâ€™s not forget: one of the biggest things, too, is rent control. We need rent control here in Boston, and other cities would say the same.

SB
Boston is a city that is particularly vulnerable to climate change. How would you fight in City Hall for a Boston Green New Deal?

JR

Weâ€™re a city by the sea. I donâ€™t know about anyone else out there, but I canâ€™t breathe underwater. So this needs to be a serious issue for us. The waters are encroaching on our land more and more every day. Our inaction is costing us daily.

First of all, when you talk about green justice, that is also racial justice and economic justice. District 4 has some of the lowest air quality in the state and in the city of Boston. Heat waves are hitting the working class like crazy. Our temperatures are higher than the rest of the city and the state because of our lack of green space and the trees that are being cut down.

When weâ€™re developing better housing and developing public land for workers, we can develop green infrastructure for them. When we â€œFree the Tâ€ and make the Boston subway [the â€œTâ€] fare free as well as more reliable and accessible, then not only do we fight climate change, but we get people in District 4 more access to other parts of the city. And when we start investing in these projects, we have to use local labor, and itâ€™s another form of economic justice that creates green jobs for people in the area.

Fighting for a Green New Deal is fighting for the planet and the people who live in District 4.

SB
As a union member whoâ€™s been endorsed by their own local, your campaign has brought together organized labor and the Left. How can the Left convince more union members â€” and particularly black and Latino members â€” to run for public office?

JR
Iâ€™m gonna get spiritual on this one. As a Christian, youâ€™re supposed to be â€œsalt and light.â€ Salt enhances whatâ€™s already there; light exposes or highlights whatâ€™s in a community already. So when you want black and brown or people of color to run, you have to first of all come to the area and see whatâ€™s working already. Come to the area and ask them what they need.
"Fighting for a Green New Deal is fighting for the planet and the people who live in District 4."

If you want to encourage more people of color to run, the Left has to come in with an attitude of: â€œThere are great people here. How can we empower them? How can we be salt and light to whatâ€™s going on here already?â€ instead of coming in with the answers already. And then, naturally, from there, you will find the leaders, and the leaders who are there will step up.

SB
Faith is a strong part of your life, and the United States has a long history of Christian socialism. But currently, itâ€™s the Right that claims to represent religion in American politics. How can the democratic socialist movement make inroads with communities of faith?

JR
One of the big reasons I joined DSA was because, as a leader in my church, I wanted other Christians to start looking at DSA and explore what socialism is. Because for a long time, itâ€™s been the Right that dominates Christianity in America.

I donâ€™t want to come to DSA with the answers. Again, I want to be salt and light to DSA. I want to come in and illuminate and show the great things about socialism and the great things about DSA already. I want other people to see that.

What Christian socialism has to keep doing is being right. These are things that God wants. God wants everyone housed. You can look in the Old Testament and see how he set up the law â€” that everyone had to have their own land.
"Thereâ€™s no way that God would want a world where some people have to be homeless."

I preach at churches across Boston and Massachusetts with this message of racial reconciliation, with this message of social justice, because it is not a separate gospel â€” it actually is the gospel of Jesus Christ. He came to reconcile us with God, so at the same time, he would want us to live in a world where weâ€™re at peace with one another, where weâ€™re not fighting. He would want a world where there is no homelessness.

Thereâ€™s no way that God would want a world where some people have to be homeless. Or that some people have to be rent burdened. Or that some people are just there for the profit of others.

SB
DSA elected officials across the country are using their offices to further movement-building. How will you make your office a hub for organizing working-class people in District 4?

JR
Itâ€™s a natural by-product of who I am. As a union organizer, as a teacher, as a community leader, as a chair of Black Lives Matter at school, as someone who organizes a Dorchester Juneteenth rally, I feel naturally that anything I do is going to be about bringing people together for justice. Thatâ€™s where the moral arc of DSA is.

I will constantly partner with DSA and constantly bring them to the table with union leaders. When I meet with union leaders, one of the first things I say is that I was endorsed by DSA, and they are very happy about that, because of the work that weâ€™re doing standing on picket lines, because weâ€™re going out salsa dancing and bringing ice cream to nurses who have been on strike for 165 days. Letâ€™s keep doing the work, and then weâ€™ll start to get together, and the movement will keep growing.

The reason why DSA is growing, why socialism is growing, is, once again, because weâ€™re right. This society is working for the few at the cost of the masses. And people are finally starting to wake up to that.

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About the Author

Joel Richards is a public school teacher and member of Boston Democratic Socialists of America running for Bostonâ€™s District 4 city council seat.

About the Interviewer

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