How not to build an antiwar movement: a comment on the politics of the ISO

The Bill Van Auken
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The International Socialist Organization (ISO) is holding a conference in Chicago this weekend under the title "Socialism 2005: Build the Left Alternative."

The "left alternative" this group has in mind has nothing to do with the struggle for socialism. Rather, the program it offers can serve only as an impediment to the development of a genuinely independent political alternative for the working class based on the perspective of socialist internationalism.

As is often the case with such organizations, its real outlook emerges most clearly when it is attacked from the right. Such is the case in a reply published last month by the group's newspaper *Socialist Worker* to a reactionary polemic written by Carl Davidson, a leading figure in the United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ) antiwar protest coalition.

Davidson, an ex-Maoist, attacked a piece written by the ISO's Elizabeth Schulte, who criticized the UFPJ for voting at its last convention to "focus on lobbying Congress—read Democrats—to take more antiwar positions." Davidson accused the ISO (which works within the UFPJ) of calling for the antiwar group to "voluntarily concede the legislative arena to the pro-war forces," describing its policy as an "ultra-left deviation."

Davidson's is a thoroughly right-wing position. Yet, in their reply, Schulte and the ISO make it clear that they are for a "non-exclusionary" protest movement, i.e., one that includes both themselves and unabashed supporters of the Democratic Party such as Davidson. As a practical matter, only those who explicitly oppose such coexistence with capitalist politics are generally subjected to red-baiting and repression in such "non-exclusionary" radical movements.

Schulte declares: "A serious discussion of how to build a stronger antiwar movement is needed. And an important part of that debate is the relationship of activists to the Democratic Party."

Davidson, she continues, "ignores the debate by accusing me of ignoring Congress." She indicates that this is a false charge, because she and the ISO are committed to "grassroots organizing to pressure both wings of the political establishment."

The purpose of such organizing, she says, is to "tell the Kerrys, the Clintons and the Deans that we won't be ignored." In other words, the perspective is one of influencing the Democrats and convincing them that the protesters are a force—perhaps even a useful one.

Socialists have no need to tell these Democratic scoundrels anything at all. We are not looking to be noticed by them, but rather to destroy their credibility and to smash any political influence they have within the working class.

The real significance of the fight for socialist policies is the struggle for the emergence of a genuinely independent movement of the working class, not one that is oriented, in any fashion, to the Democratic Party. Socialism can emerge only out of such an independent movement. Its aim is the ending of capitalist exploitation and the reorganization of society on the basis of equality. It isn't a matter of lobbying the Democrats or telling them anything.

The great historical problem that has confronted the socialist movement in America from its origins has been that of breaking the political influence of the Democratic Party over the working class. From the beginning, socialists have had to battle against the enormous objective power of American capitalism. Moreover, the fact that the US was a country where the bourgeoisie was able to complete its own democratic revolution allowed the ruling elite to employ the banner of democracy with great effectiveness in maintaining its own political credibility.

When the basic antagonisms between the ruling class and its political representatives, on the one hand, and the working class, on the other, became apparent, opening up the real possibility of the emergence of an independent movement, the labor bureaucracy and the Stalinist Communist Party played an indispensable role in preventing such an advance. They directed the struggles that broke out with the CIO union movement of the 1930s and the battle for civil rights in the 1960s back into the Democratic Party.

The AFL-CIO's subordination to the Democrats has produced the destruction of an independent labor movement in America. The same problem emerged with the antiwar movement of the 1960s and the 1970s, which the ISO openly takes as its model. The struggle to break the influence of the Democrats over the fight against the Vietnam War was sabotaged, and the result was 30 years of political reaction that laid the basis for an explosive resurgence of American militarism.

Taking their "rightful place within the mainstream"

In conclusion, Schulte writes: "We need an activist movement that doesn't compromise its antiwar positions in the name of defeating the greater of two evils—a movement that none of the politicians in Washington, Democrat or Republican, can ignore. On a larger scale, this is what is needed to shift the political climate in this country—where voices against war take their rightful place within the mainstream political debate."

The ISO's differences with the reformist and pro-Democratic Party orientation of the UFPJ are of an entirely tactical character. Davidson and the UFPJ propose going into the Capitol building and talking to congressmen, while Schulte and the ISO insist that they can be more effective if they stay outside and yell at the politicians.

In the end, whether inside or outside, the perspective is the same. It is not one of drawing the working class into politics on the basis of an independent revolutionary program, but of building a pressure group

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on the Democratic Party. The ultimate aim is maintaining the domination of bourgeois politics, while influencing those in power. "We cannot be ignored," the ISO insists, meaning, "You have to do business with us."

As Schulte states, the ISO's aim is to "shift the political climate in this country" and for it and its political allies to "take their rightful place within the mainstream political debate." Thus the group's objective is not merely to influence, but to join the existing political establishment.

What does it mean to be part of the "mainstream"? The word speaks for itself. It signifies political capitulation to the basic framework of bourgeois politics in the United States. The ISO does not conceive of appealing to the working class on the basis of a genuine democratic and socialist program, with the aim of drawing millions of alienated and disenfranchised working people into political struggle against the existing social order. It does not seek to develop an understanding among working people of the essential and unbreakable link between capitalist economics and imperialist militarism. The ISO does not attempt to demonstrate that the defense of the basic rights and social interests of the working class requires an intransigent political struggle against both the Democratic and Republican wings of the two-party system.

It is not, for them, a question of raising the political level of the working class, of educating working people to recognize the Democratic Party as an instrument of the bourgeoisie and therefore to despise and hate it, but rather of carving out for the protest organizers a space as middle-men and arbiters.

Significantly, among the principal speakers at the ISO's Chicago conference is Peter Camejo, who ran as the Green Party's gubernatorial candidate in the 2003 California recall election and as the vice presidential running mate of Ralph Nader in 2004. Camejo is the subject of a lengthy and fawning interview in the most recent edition of the group's newspaper *Socialist Worker*.

The ISO has repeatedly endorsed and worked for the Greens, Nader and Camejo. It is through these campaigns that the group is pursuing its "rightful place within the mainstream" as the left wing of the capitalist political structure in America.

Through the likes of Camejo and Nader, the ISO links hands with not only the Democrats, but also with right-wing elements such as the Reform Party, which backed Patrick Buchanan in 2000 and Nader in 2004, and with Republicans. In 2004 the Republicans in several states supplied key support to Nader's ballot efforts in order to siphon off votes from the Democrats.

Earlier, Nader backed the right-wing Republican impeachment conspiracy against Bill Clinton, and in the 2000 presidential campaign—when he ran with the ISO's endorsement—Nader failed to oppose Bush's theft of the election.

The ISO's orientation to the Greens is one of building a third capitalist party, rather than the struggle to develop an independent socialist movement of the working class. Camejo personifies this orientation. In 2003, he rushed to support the ultimately successful bid by the Republican right to depose California Governor Gray Davis. He ran in that election—again with the ISO's support—on a platform that stressed "fiscal responsibility," while for the most part keeping silent on the recently launched war in Iraq.

Having spent 25 years inside the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and running as its presidential candidate in 1976, Camejo left this organization without providing any clear explanation of his political differences and has evolved into a left-liberal politician. Within the Green Party, he has sought to turn the organization more decisively toward what the ISO describes as the "mainstream."

The American Greens have as their model the Greens of Germany. There, the leaders of the Greens went from student protest politics into the state itself, with the party's leader Joshka Fischer serving as Germany's foreign minister, organizing interventions in Kosovo and Afghanistan, as well as the ongoing rapprochement with the Bush administration over Iraq. At the same time, as part of a coalition government with the Social Democrats, the Green Party is responsible for sweeping attacks on basic social and democratic rights of the German working class.

Those seeking a means of stopping war and putting an end to capitalism will not find it in protest politics, whether it is in the variant advocated by Davidson or that promoted by the ISO. Those who suggest that any kind of protest can push the capitalist politicians into ending war and militarism are either charlatans or self-deluded.

The variant espoused by the ISO is, in a real sense, the more insidious. It attempts to portray "left" bourgeois politics as socialist, prettifying what is in fact an orientation to the Democratic Party.

The war in Iraq and the eruption of US militarism around the world are expressions of a profound crisis of US and world capitalism. The fight against war is bound up with a fight against the immense concentration of wealth and growing social inequality, and the capitalist system which is their source. These issues cannot be sidestepped, and they preclude the working class finding any allies within the parties that defend capitalism.

War can be halted only through the organization of the masses of American working people as a genuinely independent political force based on an international socialist program.

A mass movement against the war and social inequality will emerge in the US. The essential preparation for this movement is a break not only with the Democrats, but also with all those parties—including the Greens and the ISO—whose orientation is to take their "rightful place" in propping up the bourgeois establishment. The politics of these organizations provide no basis for a politically principled or revolutionary struggle, and no genuine means of fighting to put an end to war.

The issue comes down to this: The ISO seeks to develop a protest movement that will exert influence on the two-party system, principally through the medium of the Democratic Party. Their leaders strive to become men and women "of influence," who can roam about the corridors of power in Washington, whispering into the ears of "mainstream" (i.e., Democratic or Republican) politicians who are willing to listen to them. In opposition to this perspective, which has led time and again to betrayals, defeats and demoralization, the Socialist Equality Party strives to create a new mass party, based on the working class, that fights for political power.

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