

The politics of opportunism: a look at the International Socialist Organization

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The International Socialist Organization (ISO) held its annual conference, entitled “Socialism 2005: Build the Left Alternative,” in Chicago from July 1-4. The conference was attended by several hundred ISO members, mainly college students.

What was most striking about both the form and content of the conference was the absence of any unified analysis. There was no opening report that addressed the present political situation, evaluated the recent experiences of the organization or discussed its present tasks. The conference, instead, consisted of over 100 workshop sessions on separate and disparate topics.

The organizational incoherence of the ISO conference reflects its theoretical and political incoherence. The ISO is not a politically unified movement, with a clearly defined program upon which the membership agrees. There is little familiarity, let alone understanding, of the history of the organization. Nor is there any common appraisal of the major strategic experiences through which the American and international working class has passed during the last decade. Rather, people are invited to join based upon their willingness to become involved in one or another tactical initiative.

The structure of the conference mirrors the intellectual and political fog within which the ISO exists. The attendees wandered from session to session, from one workshop to another, without being able to find any central perspective.

This ideological and theoretical morass facilitates an adaptation to all sorts of political conceptions. The conference was designed to give something to everyone. For those interested in identity politics, there were sessions on black liberation and feminism. For those who preferred to discuss questions of sexual identity, there was a session on “Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle.” Those seeking to liquidate themselves into the Green Party could participate in two sessions featuring the Green Party leader Peter Camejo, who ran as the vice presidential candidate of Ralph Nader in the 2004 elections.

One typical session was entitled “Labor’s Future: Where Do We Go From Here?” This was devoted entirely to the current and future prospects of the trade unions.

To answer the question, “Where do we go from here?” it is first of all necessary to ask, “How did we get here?” However, there was no discussion of the economic and historical causes of the disintegration of the trade unions, both in the US and internationally, let alone a clear and honest assessment of the responsibility of these organizations and their leaders for the disastrous defeats suffered by the working class during the last 25 years.

Instead, the session, led by ISO member Lee Sustar, consisted entirely of calls for the revival of “class struggle trade unionism” in the decrepit and discredited AFL-CIO. This was combined with

reports on the generally gloomy results of the trade union work of members of the ISO.

The ISO sees the unions as the only legitimate form of working class organization. Not a word was said in the workshop about the deep internal corruption of these organizations, nor was there any acknowledgement that the trade unions have suffered a massive loss of credibility within the working class.

The ISO’s focus on activity within the trade unions boils down to maneuvering with various sections of the trade union bureaucracy. Student youth are thereby directed back to sclerotic organizations that have proven their utter bankruptcy, even in relation to preserving the gains that workers managed to win in a previous period.

The main political question that the ISO is attempting to manage is the calibration of its activity with the Democratic Party and the supposedly “progressive” milieu that surrounds the Democratic Party. The ISO is desperately seeking to find various antiwar or left organizations with which it can work. While adapting to these groups’ political orientation to the Democratic Party, it wants to maintain its formal opposition to the Democrats so as to avoid alienating people who might be mistakenly attracted to the ISO out of a sincere opposition to the two-party capitalist system.

The organization’s attitude was clearly spelled out in the session, “Which Way for the Antiwar Movement?” While in one breath an ISO speaker would denounce attempts to work with the Democratic Party, in the next he would call for the formation of a broad coalition of “independent grassroots activists horizontally networked,” a conglomeration that would include groups such as United for Peace and Justice, which is openly oriented to the Democrats.

Politically, this outlook is expressed in the increasingly intimate relationship between the ISO and Camejo, who was one of the most prominent speakers at the conference. For 25 years, Camejo was a major figure in the Socialist Workers Party. He entered the SWP in the late 1950s, at the time of its political degeneration and transformation from the Trotskyist party in the US into a middle-class radical organization oriented to various forms of Stalinist, identity and protest politics.

Camejo played a major role in the SWP’s activity in the Vietnam War protest movement, which, like the ISO’s activity today, sought to create a broad left coalition that worked against attempts to connect opposition to war with the struggles of the working class, the fight for a break with the Democratic Party, and opposition to capitalism. Camejo left the SWP in the 1980s. He later emerged as a major figure in the Green Party.

There was, in fact, a dispute within the ISO over whether or not to endorse Nader in 2004. At the time of the ISO’s conference last year,

Nader was busy ingratiating himself with the far right, and had recently given a prominent and friendly interview to Pat Buchanan. Nader's announcement that he was selecting Camejo as his running mate helped the ISO leadership pave over any concerns within its own membership, as Camejo lent Nader a left and even "socialist" face.

Despite this dispute, no questions were raised about whether or not this decision was correct or how it advanced the cause of socialism. Camejo spoke twice at the conference, first on the divisions within the Green Party nationally, and then on the situation in California, where he is considering a run for governor in 2006. Camejo clearly senses an impending breakup in the two-party system. He aims to transform the Green Party into a catch-all organization that could serve as a left prop of the political establishment.

He spoke of a division between a "radical" and a "liberal" faction in the Green Party, with the former represented primarily by himself, and the latter by David Cobb, who won the party's presidential nomination in the 2004 elections. (Nader failed to win the Green Party nomination, and ran as an independent). Camejo criticized Cobb for being completely beholden to the Democrats. He argued that this was a recipe for the collapse of the Green Party.

However, Camejo and the "radical" faction of the Green Party are no more independent from the political establishment than Cobb and the "liberal" faction. In an interview in the June 14 edition of the ISO's newspaper, *Socialist Worker*, Camejo called on the Greens and the ISO to work with so-called "progressive Democrats," thereby encouraging illusions that a section of the Democratic Party can be relied on to advance the interests of working people.

The division within the Green Party is purely one of tactics. Camejo is concerned that if the Greens are too obviously oriented to the Democratic Party, they will lack any credibility in their attempt to attract people disgusted with the two-party system.

Camejo also wants to be free to appeal to sections of the Republican Party. A number of times at the conference he spoke of support that he had garnered from leading figures in *both* political parties. And during the 2004 elections, Nader sought quite consciously to attract Republican support by appealing to nativist and anti-immigrant sentiment.

The question of independence from the two-party system is essentially a programmatic, not an organizational, question. A genuinely independent political party must, of necessity, base itself on a political program that opposes the capitalist system that the two parties of the ruling class defend. The Green Party is a petty bourgeois party, which combines calls for some reforms to curb corporate power with elements that are quite reactionary, including an essentially nationalist perspective opposed to the further development of industrial and agricultural technology.

As an international tendency, the Greens have demonstrated that whenever they come to occupy positions of power, as they have in Germany, they abandon these reform pledges and become loyal defenders of the policies of the ruling class. The "pacifist" Green Party of Germany, once it had its leader as the German foreign minister, oversaw Germany's first foreign military intervention since World War II. It is now part of a Social Democratic-led government that is carrying out a massive assault on social programs.

The anti-socialist character of the Green Party program, and of Nader, only emerged at the conference when Camejo was questioned by supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*. How, Camejo was asked, did his election campaign advance the struggle for socialism, when neither Nader nor he ever spoke of

socialism or sought to connect opposition to war, inequality and attacks on democratic rights with opposition to the capitalist system?

Camejo's answer was unequivocal: The Green Party is not socialist and never will be socialist. Socialists should join it, but it will not be a vehicle for socialism.

"The works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky are not embedded into people," he declared. "That's okay, because hundreds of thousands are beginning to listen and beginning to break with the Democratic Party. There is an opening here, which we have to pursue. If a wing of the labor movement breaks with the Democratic Party, would they call themselves socialist? No. Would we support them? Yes. We don't want the Green Party to be socialist... The last thing I am going to do is get on TV and explain what happened in the Soviet Union. It is not ideas that will win, but practical issues."

Such a statement could only be made by an inveterate opportunist without a trace of political principles, let alone political backbone. For Camejo to proclaim, after spending 45 years in supposedly socialist politics, that ideas don't really matter is a declaration of cynicism, demoralization and intellectual bankruptcy.

The politics that flows from such an outlook has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with socialism, which requires the education of the working class in great ideas. But that is not what interests a "practical" politician like Camejo, who is looking for "space" within which he can wheel-and-deal on the fringes of bourgeois politics. That an individual of this sort was paraded before the conference as a political paragon says everything about the perspective of the ISO.

There is a definite logic to the type of politics espoused by organizations such as the ISO, even if its members are not completely aware of it. The ISO talks constantly of unity, united fronts, "non-exclusion," and the creation of "broad mass organizations."

What is this unity? It is all well and good to bring people together, but on what basis? The aim of the ISO is not to build a strong, united movement of the international working class based on a socialist program. Rather, its aim is to create a left alliance of various groups hostile to socialism and the working class, but united on the basis of this or that tactical demand, this or that means of pressuring the powers-that-be.

The leaderships of organizations such as the ISO are completely demoralized, seeing no real prospect for an international socialist movement of the working class. They are therefore continuously casting about for some organization or "mass movement" to which they can adapt.

The very name of the International Socialist Organization appears to be something of a misunderstanding. It is not international, as it is a nationally-based party with a nationalist perspective. It is hardly an organization, as there is no cohesive framework upon which the movement is built. And it is not socialist, as it makes no serious attempt to fight for a socialist program.



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