

The International Socialist Organization and the 2006 election

The Bill Van Auken, Socialist Equality Party candidate for US Senate from New York
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The International Socialist Organization is holding a conference this weekend in New York City under the slogan “Socialism 2006—Build the Left, Fight the Right.”

An examination of the perspective upon which this gathering has been organized, however, makes clear that it is aimed at promoting a “left” variety of bourgeois politics, in the form of the Green Party, which can serve only to divert a mass movement that arises against the right-wing policies of the two major parties and lead it into a political dead end.

The ISO conference advances no independent policy for the working class in the 2006 midterm elections, which are less than five months away. The organization’s newspaper, *Socialist Worker*, warns regularly against orienting the protest movements in which the ISO participates to the Democratic Party, yet the ISO is mounting no direct political challenge to the Democrats.

The June 16 edition of *Socialist Worker* contains an article by journalist Joshua Frank on Senator Hillary Clinton, which notes that I am challenging her as the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for US Senate from New York, based on a socialist program that includes the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq.

Our party is intervening in this election to fight for a break with the Democrats and the two-party system and for the independent political mobilization of the working class. It is stressing that the war, as well as the attacks on democratic rights and the assault on living standards, is the product of a capitalist economic and political system characterized by an ever-widening gulf between wealth and poverty.

The SEP campaign makes clear that our party’s goal is not the reform of capitalism, but rather its replacement with a socialist system organized to meet the needs of working people, the vast majority of the population, rather than the profit interests of the financial elite. We insist that this goal can be achieved only in a common struggle of workers in the United States with workers in every other part of the world.

That the ISO leadership rejects this fundamental internationalist and socialist perspective is clear. In the course of a three-day conference replete with workshops on various forms of identity and protest politics, only one session has been scheduled dealing directly with the elections, entitled: “Red, Black, Blue, Green: Electoral Challenges to the Democrats.”

This title is a misnomer, as all four listed speakers are members or candidates of the Green Party, including Peter Camejo, Ralph Nader’s running mate in the 2004 election and Howie Hawkins, the Greens’ candidate in the New York Senate race, whom the ISO is supporting.

This is the real heart of the ISO’s political orientation. Its activities serve to provide a “left” and even “socialist” cover for the Green Party, whose program defines it as a bourgeois party.

We have no doubt that there are people, sincerely seeking an alternative to the Democrats’ and Republicans’ shared policies of war and reaction, who look to the Greens. But this makes it all the more important for socialists to explain the class nature of that organization and the necessity of building a new party of a fundamentally different character—one based on the working class and fighting for the socialist reorganization of society. The ISO’s politics serve to obscure these issues and block this necessary political clarification.

The political path of Peter Camejo

The fact that the conference features Peter Camejo as a major speaker has an unmistakable political significance. As Nader’s vice presidential candidate in 2004, and as the Greens’ gubernatorial candidate in the 2003 California recall election, Camejo has been identified with the drive to develop the Green Party as a third capitalist party capable of influencing the Democrats and Republicans.

In California, Camejo blocked with the Republican right in supporting the referendum drive to unseat Democratic Governor Gray Davis, and then campaigned for governor—with the ISO’s support—on a platform that stressed “fiscal responsibility,” virtually ignored the war in Iraq or

any other policies of the Bush administration, and rejected any radical, much less socialist, measures. He managed in the course of his campaign to accommodate himself to the Democrats, announcing that he would “understand” if the Greens’ own members voted for the Democratic candidate in order to defeat the Republican candidate Arnold Schwarzenegger.

In 2004, the Nader-Camejo ticket promoted itself as a political boon to the Democrats, with the supposedly “independent” candidates advising John Kerry on how best to defeat Bush, and proclaiming that their campaign would help the Democratic Party by energizing its base. The line of their campaign was not to build a political movement independent of the Democrats, but merely to push the Democratic Party to the left.

Nader and Camejo established a certain division of labor, with Camejo supplying the ticket’s “left” face, working with elements like the ISO, while Nader carried out sordid maneuvers not only with the Kerry campaign, but also with the Reform Party, ultra-rightist Patrick Buchanan and elements within the Republican Party. While Camejo claimed to represent the interests of Latinos, Nader appealed to the xenophobes of the Republican right, declaring his opposition to an amnesty for undocumented workers, supporting curbs on immigration, and warning that immigrants were threatening the environment.

Camejo’s own political evolution serves as a cautionary tale for anyone tempted to adopt the perspective that support for the Greens provides an avenue to socialism. He joined the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) as a student radical precisely at the point when the SWP was breaking with Trotskyism and the struggle for socialism in the working class in order to embrace Castroism, middle-class protest and various forms of identity politics.

Camejo spent over two decades in the SWP, running as its presidential candidate in 1976. Breaking with the SWP in the early 1980s—with no political accounting for his break and no explanation of political differences—he reemerged as a left-liberal politician and financial entrepreneur, working to turn the Greens into a respectable party within America’s political establishment.

Should such efforts prove successful, a clear model for their results already exists—in Germany. It is an example that supporters of the ISO who are being directed to campaign for the Greens should take with deadly seriousness.

There, another former student radical turned bourgeois politician in the Green Party—Joschka Fischer—was elevated to the post of foreign minister in the coalition government of the Social Democrats and the Greens. Once in government, the German Green Party abandoned its program with breathtaking speed, jettisoning its previous positions on war,

the environment and social policy in order to implement the policies of militarism and austerity demanded by Germany’s financial elite.

As the Greens’ leading figure in power, Fischer organized Germany’s support for NATO’s war against Serbia, its direct participation in the occupation of Afghanistan, and its intimate collaboration with Washington in the “global war on terror,” including the war in Iraq.

Having gone back into opposition following their defeat in the last German election, the Greens have by no means resurrected their pacifist slogans of yesteryear. On the contrary, they remain fervent proponents of imperialist military operations, criticizing the Christian Democratic-led government from the right. In recent weeks, they have become the strongest advocates of the deployment of German troops in the Congo, in what could easily develop into the most extensive German foreign military operation since the fall of the Third Reich. At the state level, they have entered into coalition with the right-wing Christian Democratic Party.

This is the American Green Party’s sister organization. Given the powerful political pressures exerted in the center of world imperialism, the United States, to the extent that the Greens achieve a measure of political success here one can only anticipate that its political trajectory will be even more right wing.

Those claiming to stand for socialism who facilitate such a development by helping to paint “left” bourgeois politics in socialist colors are preparing an immense betrayal of the interests of the working class.

For its part, the Socialist Equality Party is confident that a mass movement of the American working class will emerge against the war and against social inequality. Our party will use its intervention in the 2006 midterm election to prepare for this coming movement, fighting for a political break not only from the Democrats, but from all parties which—like the Greens—defend capitalism. Only such a struggle can open the way to the emergence of a new mass party of the working class capable of fighting for political power and ending militarism and social inequality by means of the socialist transformation of society.



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