The International Socialist Organization: A profile of middle class radicalism

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Last month the International Socialist Organization held an educational conference at the University of Illinois in Chicago entitled, "Fight the Right—Build a socialist alternative." The event, which was attended by around 200 people, mostly college students, provided a political snapshot of the politics of the ISO.

The November 4 and 5 event consisted of 25 separate workshops and a plenary session, entitled, "Confronting US Empire" and the "The Struggle for Self-Determination in Venezuela." Several of the workshops were on themes related to Marxism, the Russian Revolution and socialism, while others focused on women's, gay and black "liberation." The eclectic mix of workshops reflected the general orientation of the ISO, which often refers to socialism and the working class in its speeches and literature, but in deeds, promotes identity politics and other forms of middle class radicalism that are antithetical to socialism, and consistently align the ISO with political forces hostile to the working class.

Throughout the course of the weekend conference, ISO leaders made it clear that their organization was not seeking to build a politically independent and socialist movement of the working class. Instead they outlined a perspective of building a large reformist protest movement capable of exerting pressure and influence on the political establishment. This theme emerged in several of the public events.

During one workshop, entitled, "Democrats: World's 2nd Most Enthusiastic Capitalist Party," ISO leader Joe Allen pointed to the inevitable clash between the expectations of American voters who oppose the war and the right-wing agenda of the Bush administration and the new Democratic majority in Congress, which is committed to continue the war and defend the interests of big business. This created the opportunity, he said, to break the damaging influence of the Democratic Party and build a genuine alternative to the two corporate-controlled parties. The alternative he proposed, however, was not a socialist movement of the working class, but the Green Party.

The Greens are not a working class or a socialist party. They are a middle class movement that claims the economic and political system can be made more democratic and humane without overturning the existing capitalist profit system. Their reformist perspective of trying to influence the corporate and political establishment has proven a dead-end for working people. In Germany, for example, where the Greens joined a coalition government with the Social Democrats, they defended the interests of big business, dropped their pacifist claims and supported the launching of wars against Yugoslavia and Afghanistan on behalf of German imperialism.

This has not stopped the ISO from actively campaigning for them. The organization supported Green presidential candidate Ralph Nader in 2000 and supported him again in 2004 even as he joined right-wing politician Pat Buchanan in denouncing "illegal aliens" from Mexico and offered himself as a semi-official advisor to Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry. In the last election, the ISO supported so-called "left Greens," such as California gubernatorial candidate Peter Camejo and US Senate candidate Howie Hawkins in New York, and ran its own member Todd Chretien as a Green in the race for US Senate in California.

Defending the Greens, Allen declared, "They fight for a little democracy. The Greens are anti-war, pro-health care and pro-working class. They want an open political system. Historical change does not follow a blueprint. A right-wing government has dominated in America. Ninety percent of all workers are not in unions. There is not the remotest sign of a labor party. A new left movement is not going to appear according to a game plan. It could be Nader. It could be new unions. There could be all sorts of developments like the immigrant rights movement, which could be the start of a new labor movement. Socialism comes in many stripes. The key thing is to have a beginning, to have some impact. We are part of that movement, and in that way we can have a more relevant socialist movement."

Allen simply reiterates the argument of all political opportunists: the ISO has to support the Greens and other reformist organizations in order to be part of the "real existing mass movement" and try to "push it to the left." Those who analyze the class character and program of political leaders and parties—i.e., genuine Marxists—are condemned to isolation and "irrelevancy," according to Allen. In reality, the ISO's support for the Greens only serves to undermine the political consciousness of workers and young people, boost illusions in reformism and retard the development of a genuine movement against the profit system.

Allen dismissed any discussion of the international role of the Greens as irrelevant. "I don't know what the Greens are doing in other countries. We're talking about the American situation, we're interested in America," he declared. "If Marx could support Abe Lincoln, I think it is OK to support Howie Hawkins," Allen concluded, suggesting that the First International's support for Lincoln's re-election in the midst of the American Civil War was on par with the ISO's opportunist relations with the Greens.

In fact, Marx's attitude towards the relations between the workers' movement and left-sounding middle class reformers was absolutely clear. In their joint report to Central Authority of the Communist League in 1850 Marx and Engels summed up the experience of the European-wide revolutions, saying, "At the present moment, when the democratic petty bourgeois are everywhere oppressed, they preach in general unity and reconciliation to the proletariat, they offer it their hand and strive for the establishment of a large opposition party which will embrace all shades of opinion in the democratic party, that is, they strive to entangle the workers in a party organization in which general social-democratic phrases predominate, and serve to conceal their special interests, and in which the definite demands of the proletariat must not be brought forward for the sake of beloved peace. Such a union would turn solely to their advantage and altogether to the disadvantage of the proletariat. The proletariat would lose its whole independent, laboriously achieved position and once more be reduced to an appendage of official bourgeois democracy. The union must, therefore, be decisively rejected."

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The ISO is seeking to build precisely the type of middle class "opposition party" which Marx and Engels condemned. This would do nothing more than trap workers and young people within what is essentially a third capitalist party and smother their strivings to find a genuine alternative to the pro-war and pro-big business parties of the Democrats and Republicans.

The building of a socialist movement of the working class requires a patient political struggle against all illusions in reformism, whether it takes the form of the Greens, Democratic Party liberalism, trade unionism or protest politics. That this is not the perspective of the ISO was once again made clear in the workshop entitled, "The Meaning of Marxism," presented by ISO leader Paul D'Amato, who recently authored a book by the same name.

There are formally correct things said in D'Amato's book, which discusses Marx's analysis of the capitalist system and includes various citations by Lenin, Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg on such questions as reformism vs. socialism, national oppression and imperialist war. The essential theme of the book, however, contradicts the very conceptions he cites, and in the end it is an apologia for the political opportunism of the ISO. Time and again, he argues that the eruption of spontaneous struggles of the working class—strikes, protests, etc.—will do the great bulk of the work in relationship to the development of socialist consciousness. Marxists are relegated to a supplementary role of "trying to move the struggle as far as it can go" and "introducing to wider layers of workers the need for a socialist alternative along the way" (p. 114).

The role of socialists is presented chiefly as the most militant trade unionists and social activists who "organize" the working class without coming into serious conflict with the political conceptions that guide its struggles. Incredibly, D'Amato points to the experiences of the Iranian workers in 1979 and the Solidarity movement in Poland in 1981 as examples of his theory of spontaneously-generated socialist consciousness, even though both experiences ended up in tragic defeats with devastating consequences for the working class, precisely because they lacked a conscious Marxist leadership—in the one case, with the consolidation of a theocratic regime on Tehran, in the other, the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy.

During his workshop, D'Amato cited Marx's insistence that "the liberation of the working class was the task of the working class itself." From this basic principle, however, he drew a fundamentally false conclusion: those who insist that socialist consciousness does not arise spontaneously through the struggles of the working class, but must be brought into the class struggle by a political party of conscious revolutionaries, are "elitist" and contemptuous of the masses. Instead, D'Amato asserted, socialist consciousness emerges out of these struggles automatically. "Conditions make people angry and they fight back—immigrant protests, the Wal-Mart walkout, janitors strikes—that raises the self-confidence and pride of the working class . . . We can't say that we're revolutionists with all the answers and we're going to give it to you. Socialism comes from the working class—it is not developed outside of the class struggle. Lenin rejected the confused formulation he wrote in 1903," D'Amato concluded.

If this were true, why did Marx conduct an exhaustive theoretical analysis of capitalism? Why did Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg spend the vast amount of their time writing on politics, history, economics and culture if socialist consciousness emerges spontaneously?

D'Amato's remark about Lenin's supposed "confused formulation" is a reference to his classical work *What is to be Done?* (actually published in 1902). Far from Lenin rejecting the conceptions in this book, they became the basis for building the Bolshevik Party and the successful taking of power by the Russian working class in the October Revolution in 1917. In the work, Lenin argues that the spontaneous consciousness of the working class can not rise on its own above the level of trade union consciousness, i.e., the elemental conception that workers need to combine to fight the employers and pressure the government to improve their condition within the existing social and economic system. If the workers' movement were to break from the grip of trade unionism, which Lenin referred to as "the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie," and set itself the task of taking political power, this would only be the result of systematic work of Marxists fighting to develop socialist consciousness against the reformist illusions of the workers. Any belittling of this ideological struggle, Lenin said, only strengthened the domination of capitalist politics over the working class.

In the US, bowing to the glorification of the spontaneous consciousness of the working class means adapting to the Democratic Party. By consistently warning its young and inexperienced members against "elitism" and "dictating to the working class," the ISO leadership is in reality functioning as a pro-Democratic Party tendency among workers and young people.

It is noteworthy that the aversion to Lenin's conception of the tasks of socialists can be traced back the ISO's ideological and political progenitors, including Tony Cliff, the former British Trotskyist who was expelled from the Fourth International in 1950 after his "state capitalist" theory led to his refusal to defend Korea and China against military aggression by US imperialism during the Korean War. Referring to the conceptions outlined in *What is to be Done?* Cliff wrote, "There is no doubt that this formulation overemphasised the difference between spontaneity and consciousness . . . The logic of the mechanical juxtaposition of spontaneity and consciousness was the complete separation of the party from the *actual* elements of working-class leadership that had already risen in the struggle. It assumed that the party had answers to all the questions that spontaneous struggle might bring forth. The blindness of the embattled many is the obverse of the omniscience of the few."

This hostility to genuine Marxism has long been the prescription for opportunist adaptation to every misleader of the working class. And it holds not only for the supposed "working-class leadership that has already risen" but non-working class leaderships such as bourgeois nationalists in the countries oppressed by imperialism. This was made clear during the plenary session of the ISO conference, which was addressed by a high-ranking representative of the Venezuelan government, who claimed the bourgeois nationalist regime of Hugo Chavez was leading the Latin American country to "socialism." Martin Sanchez, the general consul of the Chavez government in Chicago, and a member of the ISO-affiliated Party of Socialist Revolution of Venezuela, repeated all the lies used by Stalinists and reformists to subordinate workers politically to such nationalist capitalist regimes, paving the way for the bloody defeats of the working class in China in 1927, Indonesia in 1965 and Chile in 1973.

Sanchez insisted that socialism was being built in Venezuela without the working class seizing political power. Instead the pressure of American imperialism on the one side, he said, and from the Venezuelan masses on the other was forcing the former military paratrooper to move to the left, establish popular committees to institute social reforms, distribute oil wealth and "build the socialism of the 21st century."

Repeating the fatal illusions promulgated by the Stalinist and radical supporters of Chilean President Salvador Allende before the bloody US-backed military coup in 1973, Sanchez said there was no danger of a military overthrow of the Chavez government because "the Venezuelan military has a high working class composition." He then admitted that Chavez had defied the popular demands for the arrest of those implicated in the American-backed coup attempt against his regime in 2002 and was instead establishing "Committees of Reconciliation" with these right-wing elements, who are no doubt planning a new effort with Washington.

Sanchez concluded with an explicit rebuff of Marxist opponents of Chavez's regime, saying, "Even if you don't think Venezuela is moving

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towards socialism you should not place any conditions on defending a true anti-imperialist movement. Help us carry out our little experiment. You may be surprised to see what workers can accomplish even if they haven't read any books by Lenin, Trotsky or Marx."

Endorsing these remarks, Joel Geier, a longtime leader of the ISO and the associate editor of the organization's bi-monthly magazine *International Socialist Review*, said there was a "deep radicalization process coming out of Venezuela" and the "masses look to Chavez for leadership." Rather than explaining the dangers posed by the illusions in Chavez, Geier said socialists had to be "part of that process, of the Chavez movement, to push it forward as much as we can to the left." Geier continued, "Things don't move at our timetable. There is a long way to go and in the future we might have to break with Chavez if he doesn't move to the left. But we want to be part of an independent, anti-imperialist movement for self-determination and any criticism of Chavez is within that context."

Not only are the ISO leaders building up Chavez as a false Messiah, they are doing so very consciously. In the above-mentioned book "The Real Meaning of Marxism," ISO leader Paul D'Amato notes Lenin's warning against any effort to paint nationalist movements in "communist colors." This is precisely what the ISO is doing in regards to Chavez.

Turning to the political situation in the US, Geier's positions were no less opportunist, writing off any possibility of developing a politically conscious working class opposition to the bipartisan consensus of war and social reaction. Instead, he said, the best the ISO could hope for would be the revival of "some kind of antiwar activity." Again, the ISO would not fight for such a movement to be based on a socialist policy in opposition to the Democrats and reformists such as the Greens. On the contrary, Geier said, "We're not just holding up a banner and expecting people to flock to us . . . Whatever illusions we might have had about that years ago, they're gone. We want to prepare a serious cadre and build a serious radical presence in this country."

And what would be the perspective of the type of antiwar movement the ISO has in mind? This is spelled out in the first issue of the ISO's *Socialist Worker* publication issued following the elections. In a comment, entitled, "The End of the Republican Era," newspaper editor Alan Maass writes, "For anyone who cares about peace or justice, the Republicans' meltdown is sweet vindication. The end of one-party rule in Washington represents the opening up of possibilities for change...Turning back the right-wing agenda will depend on rebuilding political and social movements that can put pressure on all the politicians in Washington."

Citing a poll that showed voters expect a Democratic Congress to deliver a minimum wage, lower health care and prescription drug costs and an improved economy, the editor of the *Socialist Worker* writes, "these expectations won't come close to being met if Democrats are left to themselves. The Democrats won't pose a real alternative to the Republicans—unless they face pressure from below. But the demise of Republican one-party rule in the 2006 election creates the potential for this pressure to build."

The editorial concludes that the defeat of the Republicans was "opening up new space in the mainstream debate that can embolden people in their growing questioning of U.S. government policies overseas and at home" and concludes, "The key in all this will be to take advantage of every opportunity opened up by the crushing election rejection of the Republicans to rebuild the struggles against war and for justice and democracy."

Thus the ISO is joining the *Nation* magazine and other left-liberals in promoting the lie that the war in Iraq and the Bush administration's right-wing agenda can be reversed by exerting popular pressure on the new Democratic majority.

These advocates of middle class protest reject the struggle to build a political movement *against* the Democratic Party and instead hope the return of a Democratic majority will allow them to gain access to the chambers of political power after years of being marginalized by Republican domination in Washington. With decades of opportunist maneuvers under its belt and hostility to the fight of genuine Marxists for the political independence of the working class, the ISO is positioning itself to come in from the cold and enter the "mainstream debate" of bourgeois politics.

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