

The struggle against war demands a break with the Democratic Party

The ISO and the dead-end of protest politics

Patrick Martin
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Seven months after mass antiwar sentiment in the United States found expression in a victory by the Democratic Party in the congressional elections that was both sweeping and unexpected (above all to the Democrats themselves), Nancy Pelosi, Harry Reid & Co. have given one demonstration after another that they will do nothing to actually halt the slaughter of Americans and Iraqis. They have adopted resolutions that were nonbinding, passed restrictions on the use of US troops that were sure to be vetoed by Bush, rejected the only serious legislative method of ending the war—a cutoff of funding—and finally dropped their “antiwar” posture in the most humiliating fashion, rubber-stamping an emergency spending bill that pumps another \$100 billion into the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The six Democratic presidential candidates considered “major”—i.e., those with significant financial backing from the wealthy and significant support from the party establishment and the corporate-controlled media—all advocate the continued US occupation of Iraq for the indefinite future. Hillary Clinton, the frontrunner, voted against the funding bill, but made it clear that this was only a protest against Bush’s refusal to change tactics in Iraq, and did not signify any desire to actually force an end to the US military presence there.

The Democrats are not “surrendering” to Bush so much as removing their “antiwar” mask and revealing themselves for what they are: a party of the American ruling class that defends the interests of US imperialism, including its goal of controlling the oil wealth of Iraq and the Persian Gulf.

For the more honest and principled opponents of the Iraq war, such as Cindy Sheehan, the perfidy of the Democrats has provoked anger and disgust. After the House and Senate votes to continue funding the war, Sheehan publicly resigned from the Democratic Party, suggesting that a new political direction was required for the antiwar movement.

Those organizations that are steeped in protest politics and organically tied to the Democratic Party, however, have drawn very different conclusions. They downplay the significance of Sheehan’s recognition, after two years of bitter political experiences, that the Democratic Party is not an instrument for the realization of progressive social change, but rather one of the main

obstacles.

A case in point is the International Socialist Organization, which sponsors a conference this weekend in Chicago that will bring together hundreds of young people and college students looking for an alternative to the program of war and social reaction that is the consensus of the US political establishment. The ISO is unable to offer any real alternative: it represents only a slightly more radical-sounding variety of the pro-Democratic Party orientation that has long been a political straitjacket for working people and young people in the United States.

It is, of course, true that the ISO officially disavows the Democratic Party and describes it, correctly, as a second arm of big business and the corporate elite. But the ISO remains nonetheless connected to the capitalist political milieu by its entire political outlook. Its perspective is not to overturn and replace the existing political structure, let alone build a revolutionary movement to put an end to American and world capitalism. The ISO has no higher ambition than to apply pressure to the Democratic Party in the hopes of pushing the existing political system to the left.

For all its verbal paeans to socialism and the Russian Revolution, the ISO spells out its actual reformist perspective quite explicitly in its own publication, *Socialist Worker Online*. According to the ISO, the war in Iraq can be ended through mass protests on the streets that will compel the Democratic Party to take action to withdraw American troops.

Socialist Worker Online spelled out this orientation to the Democratic Party from the moment the Democrats regained control of Congress in the November 2006 elections. A statement published November 17 declared, “The Democrats will not deliver an end to the Iraq war without substantial pressure from below. And that requires large-scale, grass-roots struggle.” Another article published the same day added, “Left to themselves, the Democratic Congress—still less the new-look Bush administration—won’t produce meaningful change in Iraq or the Middle East.” The conclusion is clear: if the Democrats are *not* “left to themselves,” but are the focus of protests, they *will* deliver “meaningful change” and even “an end to the Iraq war.”

When the Bush administration ignored the result of the elections and announced an escalation of the war (the “surge” into Baghdad), the ISO called for a mass turnout in antiwar

demonstrations held on January 27, 2007, in Washington and San Francisco. These protests, it claimed, would “be an important first step—in the face of Bush’s surge and the Democrats’ confused and contradictory opposition.”

The ISO has maintained this orientation consistently, despite the record of the congressional Democratic leadership. The most recent editorial in *Socialist Worker Online*, dated June 8, reiterates the protest perspective, albeit with rhetorical tongue-lashing of the Democrats. “The spiraling crisis in Iraq offers Democrats a superb opportunity to take a stand against the Bush White House,” the ISO declared. “The Democrats had a chance to give voice to the antiwar majority in public opinion and increase the pressure on the Bush regime. Instead, they caved.”

The ISO points to the incontestable fact that the Democrats and the Bush administration have a common class political outlook: “their top priority is maintaining U.S. economic, political and imperial power...withdrawing from Iraq would be the worse defeat ever for U.S. imperialism.” The editorial concludes: “The key to putting an end to the occupation of Iraq lies outside Washington—in building on the anger at the politicians’ inaction to organize a bigger, stronger and more determined antiwar struggle.” In other words, larger and more militant protest actions, perhaps escalating into civil disobedience.

The ISO professes political differences with avowedly pro-Democratic Party tendencies such as those represented by the *Nation* magazine, and the liberal-led United for Peace and Justice (UPJ). These were elaborated in a commentary by Sharon Smith, published in *Socialist Worker Online* February 9, after the Washington and San Francisco demonstrations.

Smith criticizes those whose orientation is to combine protests in the streets with lobbying in the halls of Congress. “Certainly, movements must seek to pressure politicians,” she writes. “The question is how effectively to do so.”

She continues: “It can reasonably be argued, however, that lobbying undermines the potential power of angry protest. Lobbying involves an arduous effort to engage politicians in polite conversation. Protest, while no less arduous, is decidedly less friendly. Occupying a representative’s office is not lobbying.”

It is clear that the dispute between the liberals and the ISO is purely tactical. One wishes to whisper in the ears of the Democrats, the other to shout at them through bullhorns. But both accept that the decisions on war and peace will remain in the hands of the political representatives of the capitalist class. Their disagreement is over the best means of applying pressure to the Democrats and inducing them to make concessions to popular antiwar sentiment.

The ISO’s protest perspective leads it to an almost hallucinatory distortion of the political situation. A more recent commentary by Sharon Smith (May 18), imagines a “race to the left” by both Democrats and Republicans. She declares, “The political pendulum is swinging left at a rate not seen since the 1960s, when Sen. Robert Kennedy, who had built his political career as a rabid anti-communist during the 1950s McCarthy era, resurfaced as an antiwar presidential candidate in the late 1960s.”

Smith lays particular stress on the supposed shift in the political posture of Hillary Clinton, who was “riding a decidedly antiwar

horse” in the first Democratic presidential debate. She concludes: “Those who seek social change should not rely on politicians of either party, but at the same time, should recognize that mainstream politics is shifting leftward due to pressure from below. That pressure must continue for real reforms to be achieved.”

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* categorically reject this whole orientation. Our perspective is not to push the Democratic Party to the left—an exercise in futility if there ever was one—but to build an independent mass political movement of working people that will bring the working class to power and do away with imperialism and war.

The ISO, despite holiday references to Lenin and Trotsky (*Socialist Worker Online* is currently running a series of occasional articles celebrating 90 years since the Russian Revolution), has nothing in common with the independent revolutionary perspective for the working class that they personified.

The ISO declares, in its summary programmatic statement, “We support genuine left-wing candidates and political action that promotes independence from the corporate-dominated two-party system in the U.S.” What this means in practice is that the ISO has an orientation to the Green Party in the United States, participating in Green Party election campaigns and even putting forward its leading members as Green Party candidates.

The Green Party is a reformist third party based on an explicitly capitalist program. It sees itself as a pressure group pushing the Democratic Party to the left, while advocating changes in the US electoral system (proportional representation and preference voting), which would eventually make it possible for the Greens to play a role like the New Democratic Party in Canada, horse-trading in Congress with the two major parties. In other words, the Green Party’s goal is to become a “player” in bourgeois politics, a “left” prop of the existing system, spreading illusions in the possibility of achieving social reform through a combination of electoral and protest politics.

The role of the ISO and the Greens is to serve as a last line of defense for capitalist politics. A mass movement against the war and social inequality will inevitably emerge in the United States. The essential task of Marxists is not to cheerlead this movement, or to chloroform it with illusions that there is some protest substitute for the struggle to carry out a fundamental transformation of the entire social order.

Our task is to prepare the working class for the political tasks that such a mass movement will face: a ruthless break not only with the Democrats, but with the pseudo-left and radical-sounding groups that will rush in to fill the political breach produced by the breakup of the political monopoly of big business, and divert the working class from the struggle for political power and socialism.



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