

“Socialism 2010”: The politics of the International Socialist Organization Part 2: The ISO and Barack Obama

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A number of features characterize, and even determine, the outlook of the International Socialist Organization and *Socialist Worker*, and indeed the other middle class left groups in the US as well—several of whom will also be represented at the ISO’s “Socialism 2010” conferences in Chicago and Oakland, California in June and July.

When Marxists speak of “middle class politics” it is not an epithet, but a sociological definition. Like the varied social strata which find expression in their views, petty bourgeois organizations lack any independent perspective, indeed they are helplessly tied to the political apron strings of the ruling elite.

This means that such middle class politicians, no matter how “left” their rhetoric may sometimes be, accept and work within the existing political set-up. The efforts and aims of the ISO and its allies are entirely compatible with the political domination of big business, the needs of the capitalist state and the continued existence of bourgeois property relations.

Moreover, because they reject the necessity of working through an analysis of US and world capitalism, including the specific stage of its crisis, the ISO and other “lefts” operate on the basis of impressions, i.e., always at or near the surface of day-to-day events. As a matter of fact, *Socialist Worker* and the *Nation*, for example, often prove less thoughtful than the more serious publications of the bourgeoisie, which are obliged, for urgent class reasons, to make a fairly sober assessment of their own economic and social order.

Underlying this lack of serious analysis conducted by the ISO is its leaders’ conviction that there is no historic, systemic crisis of capitalism. They have a boundless confidence in the resilience of the ruling elites, their capacity to head off every challenge to their rule.

Why have the ISO and other “left” forces rallied to the figure of Obama in particular? Central to their theory of American society is the conception that race, and not social class, is the pivotal question. This may or may not extend to the argument that the bourgeois revolution was never completed due to the aborting of radical Reconstruction after the Civil War. Such a view leads to the conclusion that democratic questions need to be addressed in the US, especially racial equality, before the fight for socialism can be placed on the historical agenda.

However worked out its views may be, the American middle class left, fixated on racial divisions and never operating outside the limits set by the bourgeois political establishment, inevitably viewed the possible election of an African American, Democratic Party president as the most earth-shaking event in modern US history, if not the entire history of the nation.

For the ISO and others, race is the supreme question, but an entire constellation of related issues has come to figure prominently in American petty bourgeois and academic left thinking in recent decades, including matters of gender and sexual orientation.

There is nothing original in this. As Marxists and more perceptive

historians have pointed out, this is part of a shift that has occurred in Democratic Party, liberal and bourgeois politics in the US as a whole. The orientation toward social class that dominated the American left in particular, at least until the mid-20th century and even later, has given way largely to the politics of personal identity. We have seen a peculiar form of left-liberalism on “cultural” problems emerge, connected with an indifference or blindness to the great problems of the working class, to social inequality, to the need to alter radically the economic system.

This tendency finds strong expression at the “Socialism 2010” gatherings. And not only there. The ISO and the other groups may have sharp differences, but this political and ideological emphasis draws them together in opposition to the Marxist concentration on the struggle to clarify workers as to the class nature of society and their own historic, revolutionizing role.

Over the past decade, the International Socialist Organization has dabbled in Green Party politics and the Ralph Nader campaigns, claiming that these represent an alternative to the Democratic Party. In fact, both these formations are part of the bourgeois political framework, one of its bulwarks against the development of genuinely independent socialist politics in America.

However, even this exercise in nominally “independent” politics came to a halt in the face of the Barack Obama phenomenon. As indicated above, for the milieu toward which the ISO is oriented and within which it works, the Obama campaign proved absolutely irresistible.

One should be clear. It is not that the ISO and *Socialist Worker* were simply too politically weak and unprepared to resist the supposed Obama juggernaut and thus were dragged along by it. That would be underestimating the right-wing character of their views and actions.

As we will demonstrate, the ISO welcomed the Obama campaign; promoted it against Democratic rivals during the primary season and against the eventual Republican candidates during the summer of 2008; supported the new administration once in office, claiming that it represented a definite break with 30 years of right-wing political life in America; and continues to argue today that the Obama government can be made “progressive” if sufficient pressure is applied.

The 2008 election campaign and beyond

In the months before Obama gained the Democratic presidential nomination, the ISO clearly indicated its preference for him over rival Hillary Clinton, denouncing the latter for her “racist” campaign.

On June 3, 2008, for example, *Socialist Worker*—in an irritated editorial

headlined “McCain’s running mate?”—asked, “When will Hillary Clinton accept reality and concede that she lost the Democratic presidential nomination?” Since when has it become the job of socialists to advise bourgeois politicians and parties as to how their affairs should be put in order?

The comment, revealingly, observed that the effort by Bill and Hillary Clinton “to tear down Barack Obama ... may not be enough to save the Republican Party ... But the first party of American capitalism has gotten a helping hand from two opponents” (emphasis added).

Later, during the summer of 2008, socialistworker.org’s editors accepted the responsibility of defending Obama from the McCain-Palin campaign, taking the latter to task for its racist “crawling into the gutter,” and citing, as is its wont, a *New York Times* columnist (Bob Herbert this time) to bolster their argument.

Recurringly, *Socialist Worker* adopted the standpoint of the concerned Democratic Party voter, musing August 26 that “plenty of Democrats were worried going into their party’s convention, and it’s easy to see why. The Democrats should be poised for a landslide victory in November, and instead, they’re scrambling to keep the lead in the presidential race.”

Neither for the first time nor the last the ISO referred to “a sense of excitement about the historic character of his [Obama’s] candidacy ... and a sense of urgency about changing the political system.” His campaign, the editorial suggested, “invoked the icons of the great political and social struggles of the past.”

Could there be any doubt in anyone’s mind that the ISO was endorsing Obama and working actively to place him in the White House?

Socialistworker.org continued to reiterate a list of complaints about the Democratic campaign as the summer of 2008 wore on, as did a host of liberal pundits. Obama’s sharp and aggressive turn to the right following the Democrats’ convention had hardly gone unnoticed, receiving widespread comment, and even generating a certain amount of dismay in sections of the media.

If one searches for it, 25 paragraphs or so down, the August 26, 2008 editorial does contain a faint statement of support for the “two independent presidential campaigns to the left of Obama whose political positions match their rhetoric. Ralph Nader is repeating his independent run from 2000 and 2004, and former Rep. Cynthia McKinney has won the presidential nomination of the Green Party.” An additional four sentences are devoted to their campaigns, and that was pretty much that.

In a foretaste of the manner in which the *Nation* and other apologists continue to defend the Obama presidency to the present day, *Socialist Worker* raised the bogeyman of the Republican right to express its solidarity with the Democratic candidate. Significantly, on September 10, 2008, the ISO publication editorialized: “Whatever criticisms we make of Obama[!]¹—and we have many—we utterly reject the racist and reactionary slurs promoted by the Republican candidates, and with even more enthusiasm by the right-wing ideologues who pollute talk radio and other corners of the media.”

The ISO greeted Obama’s triumph with enthusiasm, writing November 7, “The sweeping victory of Barack Obama in the presidential elections is a transformative event in U.S. politics, as an African American takes the highest office in a country built on slavery.” A “transformative” election is one that has an impact on the lives of masses of people.

It never occurred to the ISO leadership that Obama’s candidacy was promoted by major sections of the political and business elite—from the Chicago Democrat Party machine to Wall Street investment banks—for reasons of their own class interest. Far from representing some “transformative” moment in American political life, his electoral success was seen by these forces as a means of dealing with a set of difficult problems created or exacerbated by the discredited Bush administration, including the undermining of decades of US foreign policy initiatives.

Obama enjoyed the support of the most influential, and certainly the most farsighted, sections of the American economic and political establishment.

On November 19, 2008 socialistworker.org ran an editorial whose very headline, “Great Expectations,” pandered to the illusions that the campaign for Obama organized by the US ruling elite was designed to encourage. The column sounded a theme that the ISO would pursue for several months: the incoming Obama administration represented a break with “the right-wing agenda that dominated U.S. politics for the last three decades.” Moreover, remarkably, the ISO insisted that “the scale of the problems and questions the U.S. faces—not just economically, but in the areas of foreign policy and more—is driving Obama toward a different agenda.” The editors provided no evidence for this claim.

A few weeks later, *Socialist Worker* editorialized, again without providing any proof, that “the conservative stranglehold over U.S. politics for a quarter century under Republicans and Democrats alike has been broken.” The reader was told that “the real world will present questions that can’t be answered in the same old way. If the Obama administration turns to outdated solutions on the economy or other issues, those solutions will fail—and will have to be junked eventually, one way or another.”

The ISO’s reasoning left several things out of account: above all, the nature of the Democratic Party as a *capitalist* party, and the determination of the American political and corporate establishment, including Obama and his incoming cabinet, to impose the entire burden of the massive crisis on the backs of the population.

Socialistworker.org pursued this policy through the first months of the Obama presidency, arguing again and again that the new government could be susceptible to popular pressure and that an end to politics as usual had come. In so far as its membership and readership took this seriously, the ISO contributed to deflecting opposition against the Democrats and assisted Obama in carrying out attacks on the working class.

March 2009 editorials

Socialist Worker’s insistence that Obama was breaking new ground came to a head in March 2009 in two editorials that amounted to public relations work on behalf of the administration.

On March 3, the editors expressed their excitement about Obama’s budget proposal. In “What’s at stake in the battle of the budget?” they argued that “No one expected the Obama administration’s budget proposal to look like ones from the Bush years. But the differences go beyond a change in administrations.”

They continued, “The conservative dogmas and prejudices that drove government policy during more than a quarter-century of right-wing dominance—tax cuts are good, ‘big government’ is bad, welfare is worse (unless it’s corporate welfare), deregulation spurs growth, the free market has all the answers—are in the process of being turned upside down.”

The ISO editors added, “To be sure, there are many reasons to be critical of the Obama budget”! They went on: “The Obama administration’s budget underlines the fact that *mainstream U.S. politics has shifted decisively*. ... After 30 years of Republican ascendance in Washington and the retreat of liberalism at every turn, Obama’s willingness to draw the line and promise a fight for his priorities is a welcome blast of fresh air” (emphasis added).

On March 11 (“The return of socialism?”), socialistworker.org claimed once more that “the scale of the economic crisis and the Obama administration’s break from past policies are reshaping U.S. politics—not only at the top, but throughout society.”

After noting that Obama had rejected the claim that his administration

was carrying out “socialist” policies, the ISO hastened to add, “Still, what’s actually taking place in Washington needs to be recognized as a break from the period of conservative dominance in U.S. politics that began under Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, and ran through the Bush presidency.

“In the face of a severe economic crisis, the Obama administration is seeking to reverse many of the tenets of the previous era” (emphasis added).

This was simply a political fantasy. The ISO and socialistworker.org were coming up with arguments for Obama that might even have made the editors of the *Nation* blush. The new Democratic administration was already proving itself to be one of the most right-wing in American history, pursuing imperialist war abroad and the implacable defense of the financial aristocracy’s wealth at home.

Socialist Worker was not simply wrong about Obama, it was *staggeringly* wrong. Why should anyone listen to this publication now? It is neither “socialist” nor published in the interests of “workers.”

The ISO did not give up hope. In July socialistworker.org claimed, “It’s far too early to write the final word on the Obama administration, of course. But so far, he and the Democrats in Congress haven’t seized the opportunities they were given.” Why was it far too early? Auto workers could have offered their opinion, as well as the suffering populations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

On and on. In late August 2009, readers of *Socialist Worker* were told that Obama was a “conventional Democratic Party politician ... If there’s no pressure from below, the corporations will have their way.” The ISO evidently believes that the “conventional” Democratic Party politician is vulnerable to pressure and can be torn from the clutches of the corporations.

By January 2010, socialistworker.org’s editors felt obliged to offer some sort of explanation for their wrong-headed optimism about Obama 12 months previously. They noted that “the idea that Barack Obama is part of anything to do with change seems like a joke.” But it had been *their* joke some months earlier, and not a funny one either.

They went on: “Even those on the left, like us at *Socialist Worker*, who were skeptical of Obama’s promises concluded that the multiple crises facing the White House would compel the president to move away from the free-market, neoliberal policies that characterized not only Bush, but the Clinton administration before him.”

Socialist Worker asked, “Why has Obama been such a disappointment ...?” and first noted that he “never was a maverick or a reformer.” The real culprit turned out to be the American people. The editors didn’t say this directly, blaming the unions and other elements, but this is what they meant when they wrote that “the biggest forces in the Democratic Party’s base have completely failed to hold Obama’s feet to the fire.”

In any case, that wasn’t the entirety of the ISO perspective: their claim had been that the scale of the crisis and objective logic of events were inexorably pushing the Obama administration, in spite of itself, toward ground-breaking policies on behalf of the population. *Socialist Worker*’s editors have never explained how they could have been so wrong about that.

Nothing will teach the ISO and socialistworker.org anything, because these people are held firmly and irrevocably in the gravitational sway of the Democratic Party (and its satellites in identity politics, the trade unions, “community organizations,” etc.). The real facts of life, including the social misery and imperialist atrocities over which the Obama administration presides, are only “perturbations,” forces or impulses much weaker than the main gravitational body (the Democrats and bourgeois politics in general) acting on the ISO. It is not difficult to prove that this organization is part of the left flank of the American political establishment.

Contrary to the expectations of the ISO and society faces enormous upheavals. “Left” organizations such as the ISO, based on their history, class character and program, can only play a disorienting and disastrous role. The sooner the nature of middle class left politics is grasped the better.



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