Correspondence on "'Socialism 2010': The politics of the International Socialist Organization"

30 June 2010

The WSWS has received a number of letters in reply to our two-part article devoted to the International Socialist Organization and its conferences, "Socialism 2010" ("The ISO and the American middle-class left" and "The ISO and Barack Obama"). Some of them have been supportive, some critical.

We welcome these letters, and certainly encourage more. We will post those we think especially important. Such a discussion on socialist perspectives is of immense significance, in our view. It can only help clarify the political demarcation between Marxism and opportunism.

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Thank you for this important article on the disastrous politics of the International Socialist Organization. This article could only have been written by a Marxist organization like the SEP and ICFI, because every other group out there is in one way or another doing exactly what the ISO is doing. Therefore to attack the ISO would be in many ways attacking their own organization. I really wonder why is it that all these groups aren't in the same organization.

Hopefully, the arguments raised by David Walsh reach not only all those people who are looking for an alternative to capitalism, but also reaches the membership of the ISO. See, some of the members in the ISO, to be honest, don't know any better than what the leadership tells them. I say that as a former member of the ISO.

The ISO leadership consciously keeps its membership ignorant of real Marxism and history of Trotskyism. Some may say how can that be true, if the ISO's book store carries books by Marx, Trotsky and Lenin. My response is: yes, that is true—but almost everything that the membership is encouraged to read and study is some interpretation of what Marx, Lenin and Trotsky wrote, that was written by an ISO leader.

For example, if you read what Trotsky wrote about the United Front, you would know that Trotsky never argued that in the united front socialists should build a reformist party like the middle class Green party. Well, according to the ISO's interpretation of Trotsky's United Front, supporting the Green Party and running as Greens such as the ISO did in California is part of the united front.

Also, some individual ISO members really are against the Democrats and the Green Party, but no matter what they feel as individuals, being in the ISO will eventually in practice force them to support the Democrats, because that is just part of the makeup of a group like the ISO. Therefore, in order to fight for the independence of the working class and against the Democrats, you have to break with groups like the ISO, because they tie the working class to the Democrats, as was showed very well by David Walsh.

Not surprisingly the ISO and such groups would call David Walsh's articles "sectarian." After all, one of the first lessons you get in the ISO is that you are a "sectarian" if you take principled positions such as fighting for the independence of the working class. But articles like these are important because they clarify the way forward for the working class, and put in front the politics that are needed for a socialist revolution.

Izel,
San Francisco, CA

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It is doing a great service to workers and students to make them beware of the program, affiliations and class outlook of organizations such as the ISO, which supports corporate trade union bureaucrats such as Sal Rosselli who are representative of the whole apparatus.

Rosselli became the main leader of the Sacramento and San Francisco Bay Area SEIU after defeating another, less-conservative wing of the union in 1989. After his faction won the contested election, his hand-picked, self-proclaimed union "business agent" in the Santa Cruz area, Tim McCormick, did everything possible to divide our group of newly-organized Non-Emergency Transport Drivers from the Paramedics who had been united with us. McCormick, with the full backing of Rosselli, vehemently opposed any master contracts expiring on the same date, and insisted on settling a separate contract with the Paramedics, thereby isolating our struggle.

We were told that if we went on strike, the local Santa Cruz Labor Council that was controlled by the SEIU and Rosselli would not support us in any way. This group bragged to workers and employers about settling contracts with few strikes and 2 percent wage increases. Nurses aides would tell us how McCormick, when making his rounds of the Nursing Homes, would go straight to the Human Resources Dept. and talk to management instead of meeting with the workers about their grievances. He was later promoted to head the Santa Cruz Labor Council.

Under pressure from and opposed by an alliance of the employer, the government NLRB, and the trade unions, we ended up voting not to strike and gained very little. This was a big mistake and capitulation on our part—for if we had gone on strike, we would have gotten some rank-and-file support around the city and our struggle would have led to a real political education among workers about the filthy, traitorous role of this triple alliance against the working class.

Any organization such as the ISO which collaborates with and allows anti-working class strike-breakers such as Sal Rosselli to speak at their conference is acting as an accomplice of these trade union engineers of defeat and preparing catastrophes in the future.

B.L.
Former SEIU member

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Thanks for your exposure of the ISO. I thought you might appreciate the following anecdote.

My mother bought me a subscription to the *Nation* magazine following the 2000 election theft. By 2004, I was completely fed up with their

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unshakable support for the Democratic party, no matter how right-wing its candidates were. I was in college at the time and had also become infatuated with Marxism (my professors literally told me to leave them alone about Marxism, to stop bothering them at office hours), and began looking for socialist publications to read. I recalled that the *Nation* had made references to a group called the International Socialist Organization, painting them in a favorable light as the authentic voice of Socialist Internationalism. I began reading their web site. Ironically, I found a link to wsws.org on it. It wasn't long before I was reading WSWS every day.

I soon stopped reading the ISO web site, before I had discovered and appraised their support for the Green party or state capitalist heritage, for the simple fact that it could never seem to provide what wsws.org always did: genuine Marxism. It was abundantly clear to me that the WSWS had a scientific, historical materialist perspective underlying every single article it posted, every single day.

I thought you would appreciate the link between the *Nation* and the ISO. It reminded me of what you said in a reply to a reader that there is a division of labor among the middle class political milieu, the unions and the democrats. Lenin says that we march hand in hand on a dangerous road, with the swamp of petit bourgeois politics nagging on either side. Looks like the swamp dwellers stand arm-in-arm, or at least play footsie with one another. What unites all these disparate forces? Their opposition to a politically independent movement of the working class.

EH
Virginia, USA

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Good set of articles on the ISO.

1) I went back and reviewed the writings we have done on the ISO over the past 8 years and the question of centrism came up without being fully worked out in one of them:

The Revolution Betrayed and the fate of the Soviet Union
By Peter Daniels
26 February 2009

"Today, however, I would like to deal, not primarily with the Pabloites, but with the state capitalist tendencies, which claim, utterly falsely, that the collapse of the Soviet Union somehow vindicates their theories. And in particular, I will examine the role of Tony Cliff, the British ex-Trotskyist who left the Fourth International almost 60 years ago and died in 2000, leaving behind a number of centrist groups claiming to be Trotskyist, including the British Socialist Workers Party and, in the US, the International Socialist Organization (although the SWP has broken from the ISO, they still share a common theoretical outlook).

"Before we go further, it must be said that the term 'centrist' does not apply here in the same sense as with parties such as the POUM in Spain and the SAP in Germany, in the 1930s. Those were parties that attracted thousands of workers looking for an alternative to Stalinism and Social Democracy. The state capitalists are a middle class group whose anti-Marxist outlook has been developed over decades."

But he never really comes back to the question to clarify what exactly "centrist" denotes.

The ISO is trying to establish a chapter here and I had started going over their two new members' pamphlets, as well as their longer introductory book, "The Meaning of Marxism" by Paul D'Amato, when your set of articles appeared.

The packets are certainly eclectic, with multiple references to Lenin's theory of party building and democratic centralism in an article right next to a completely demoralized article, "What Kind of Party Do We Need?" by Ahmed Shawki (pg 23-26 of "New Member Study packet"), typical centrist fare.

2) The other main point which hasn't been addressed as extensively is, who are their international co-thinkers and what is their approach to international questions.

The only group I could find they worked with was the Socialist Workers Party in the UK, a pretty damning indictment for a group who has been around since the late 1970s.

We covered and exposed their support of the "Green" revolution in Iran, with their left window dressing for American imperialism. Talking about that episode more extensively would be educational and reveal both their methods and outlook.

Thanks
CO
Nebraska, USA

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Thanks to David Walsh for his fine two part series on the middle class left. While I was not previously aware of the International Socialist Organization and socialistworker.org, I do regularly listen to Amy Goodman's "Democracy Now". From that I'm familiar with the supposed need to apply pressure on Barack Obama in order to put him on the progressive track that he presumably desires to be on.

I'm not among those who ever had any illusions about what a Barack Obama presidency might entail. Certainly I knew of the WSWS's evaluation of him, but it certainly didn't take much to convince me that his vague allusions to change were a charade. For anyone who is thoughtful and knows a little bit of history, it shouldn't come as a surprise that an individual's ethnic background or gender in any shape or form guarantees a certain political perspective. How could anyone expect that someone groomed by the Democratic Machine politics of Chicago could be anything other than a careerist?

But what I mostly wanted to comment on is the conception of the middle-class left of applying pressure on an elected representative to make him/ her act in concert with that which was previously promised in words. I am sick to death of "applying pressure".

The concept of applying pressure of the middle-class left fits in perfectly with David Walsh's analysis of the middle-class left "helplessly tied to the political apron strings of the ruling elite". The idea here, I believe, is acceptance of the sham democracy that currently exists in the U.S. where elected representatives are not beholden to their electors. That is, write letters, demonstrate outside their offices, publicize that campaign promises were broken, etc., and you might get thrown a few crumbs. Also to be taken into account is the fact that it appears that the economic elite of the U.S. economically has very little room for maneuvering.

If an elected representative must be pressured to act contrary to his own intentions, then in what sense does that representative represent those who elected him? Furthermore, if in some way he is forced to act according to the will of his electors and contrary to his own desires, isn't it likely that at the first opportunity he will seek to undo that which he was forced to do?

The working class does not deserve nor have the time to be asked to apply pressure on any elected representative reneging on the basis on which he was elected. What is needed is a new political system including the genuine possibility of the immediate recall of the working class's representatives without any ifs, ands, or buts.

Peter L
Maine, USA

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The critique of the ISO and its conferences by David Walsh provide a great understanding of the opportunist organization. The only problem I have with it is the failure to go deeper into the beginnings of this organization, and its theoretical counterpart in Britain, the Socialist Workers Party.

Both groups hold to Tony Cliff's theory of the former USSR being "state capitalist." A position the ISO still puts forward in their article, "Where We Stand."

I know very well that many SEP members have a knowledge of the

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middle-class tendency of "state capitalism," but the younger generation for the most part doesn't. Many don't know the struggle Trotsky and his followers have waged against it, or how it often translates into capitulation with imperialism (as was the case with Shachtman). With the Soviet Union's collapse the younger generation might not raise the questions about what its internal social/economic relations were, and how that affects an international perspective. All this needs to be understood to expose petty-bourgeois tendencies such as "state capitalism," and to make a Trotskyist analysis of the global situation.

I'm putting a link to a talk on *The Revolution Betrayed* from the WSWS that contains an excellent criticism of Tony Cliff's theory (and Pabloism).

Best regards,

IO

New York, USA

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A response to "The presence of Tariq Ali at the 'Socialism 2010' conference"

I greatly respect David Walsh's talent as a literary critic, but perhaps he should stay off the subject of fashion. I was greatly amused to learn that members of the International Marxist Group [in Britain] went around in Mao caps and the latest gear. I was a member in that period and never managed anything better than a scruffy donkey jacket. Moreover, I never visited picket lines except when I was actually on strike as in the London Underground guards dispute in 1969.

No doubt there was someone, somewhere who fitted the caricature, but I don't think it was really typical, at least in 1968-69. David is quite correct however as to the political characterisation of the IMG. The tendency around Michel Pablo had actually liquidated organisations into the social democratic or Stalinist movements. The United Secretariat were building organisations, but followed a similar method in that their political programme was subject to successive adaptations to trends that appeared to be moving towards socialism. In fact their class character usually meant they were doing nothing of the sort. This was not a stable perspective, and in due course the IMG fell apart. Elsewhere, sections have finally drawn the logic of their method and melted into "broad" formations.

I left the IMG in 1973 in part due to what I described at the time as a "lunatic escapade" at Red Lion Square—a head-on confrontation with police intended to stop a meeting of the National Front. A dangerous act that could easily have led to mass arrests. Something similar was repeated a year later with tragic consequences as David described.

One other point I would like to correct is the idea that IMG planned to break up Labour Party meetings. The idea was rather more modest—leafletting and heckling. I had participated in this sort of thing in the Hull North by-election in 1966 and discussed this with Robin Blackburn as an option since we were not standing candidates. In the event there were few opportunities for this as meetings were becoming more and more stage-managed.

MM

Sheffield

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(*In April 1970, Robin Blackburn published an article in the* Red Mole, *a publication sponsored by the IMG, "Let it Bleed," which included this passage: "In this campaign we should certainly pull none of our punches. We should disrupt the campaigns of the bourgeois parties* [Conservative and Labour] *and their leading spokesmen using all the imaginative and direct methods which the last few years have taught us."*)

Your critique of the ISO has a lot of truth to it. There are some parts where I disagree, but overall reflected in your critique are the very reasons why the Left is in shambles.

The main reason that you touched on is the bourgeois character of the ISO and their adherence to Left personalities who are essentially elitists and are disconnected from working class day-to-day needs. James Petras touched on this disconnect in his most recent article.

Essentially I think this is an important debate that needs to be had on the Left.

A reader in New Zealand

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I went to an ISO conference a couple of years ago—I think it was right after Obama was elected, so it was probably the Northeast Conference. They were really into Obama, like he was the movement. All they were talking about was that he's the first African American president. (They never talk about class, class struggle.)

One of the ISO members actually got up and sang a song about "change": the 1960s song, I think it's by Sam Cooke, "A Change is Gonna Come". You're not exactly going to go into a real deep, systemic Marxist analysis after that. "We just have to apply pressure."

I've also been to their big conferences a few times. It is a lot of fun though. Right before they have a plenary with several speakers, it becomes a pep rally. The audience, which is mostly young people, college kids, get up and do chants, like it's a march. And since it's indoors, in a hotel ballroom with low ceilings, the sound stays in and it's really loud. It really gets everybody pumped up, flying, high, etc. So everyone is standing, some are standing on chairs, stomping, clapping, yelling, chanting like at a march for almost about fifteen/ twenty minutes before the plenary. The place is really rocking!

Someone once said to me the ISO is so much fun. (Comparing it to another group in NYC, "Workers World are a bunch of old fuddy-duddies. The ISO rocks!") This doesn't compare content, though it seems as though some of it is similar, especially regarding Obama.

Carol

New York City

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This article is very well written. It is a savage attack on the International Socialist Organization that utterly destroys the politics of the American Cliffites [followers of British theoretician of "state capitalism," Tony Cliff]. However, I think a few things are worth raising:

1) There seems to be no reason to attack the ISO for denouncing the racist smear tactics used against Barack Obama, primarily by the Clinton campaign. Indeed, to do so presents a "teachable moment" on the history of the Democratic Party, the Clinton years and race. It goes without saying that the ISO fails to do this, but this seems to be the point of entry, not that they objected to the Clinton campaign's racist gutter tactics.

2) On this paragraph:

"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."

This case could have been made clearer and more extensively. The politics of "no historical crisis" are fundamental to the ISO. It's their original sin, it drives their entire program. The Cliffite stuff is just a mirror image of Pabloism. Cliff, Pablo and Grant are the Three Stooges of postwar Trotskyism who all fail to grasp the historical crisis of capitalism. This is a DEEP political miscalculation and a real "knock-out punch" that was not sufficiently elaborated on.

3) On this paragraph:

"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

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to be addressed in the US, especially racial equality, before the fight for socialism can be placed on the historical agenda."

The 'centrality of race' argument seems like an overgeneralization, and not a terribly accurate one. It's too specific and the case is not sufficiently made that the ISO values race above all. They seem to have taken a particular interest in sexuality as of late, a phenomenon that I have theories about which I prefer not to articulate at this time. The part about Reconstruction seems to conflate the ISO with the 1950s/60s SWP. Again, the case is simply not made. The conclusion seems accurate, but the dots aren't connected.

For what it's worth, I've followed the ISO for over half my life. During my days in the SWP-YS and my college years I made a special point to read their press for the purpose of trolling them. I retain an incredibly deep-seated (and, I might add, somewhat irrational, but ultimately political) loathing of the ISO. Hence why I think it is SO important to articulate the key points as lucidly and thoroughly as possible. Overall I think the article has savaged the organization, but on these three areas I feel a better job could have been done.

Comradely,

NP

Portland, Oregon

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