

# An exchange on “‘Socialism 2010’: The politics of the International Socialist Organization”

David Walsh  
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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, and comment on, 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.

Here is the first email on the ISO and its conferences, with a reply below it.

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Hello there. Just back from “Socialism 2010” in Chicago. I am a great fan of wsws.org and an avid reader for more than a year. I have also been attending ISO meetings for the past half a year and have involved myself in some political action organized by the group. I wanted to make a couple of comments on this article.

First off, I think your writers are right to criticize the ISO and many of the speakers who recently were at the conference for their naïve belief that the election of Barack Obama was somehow an historical or transformative event in American history and class relations.

However, characterizing the organization itself as being nothing less than an extension of the Democratic Party is a critique which is neither accurate or fair. Moreover, assertions that the ISO as an organization is not rooted in the struggle to build a truly socialist and democratic society, or that the ISO is not well aware of the historical pitfalls of reformism, are a gross underestimation and distortion.

One thing that ISO members will tell you over and over again is that “movements never start off as radical—people radicalize in the process of struggle.” This forms part of the ISO’s core philosophy that revolutionary socialists need to participate in all popular movements which seek gains for working class people if they wish to ultimately win people over to their camp and exert their influence in a fluid society.

On the issue of the 2008 election, they were clearly proved wrong, and ended up offering legitimacy to a party which at present [is] the single most powerful enemy of the international working class.

Such a serious mistake exposes a deep flaw in the party that does need to be thoroughly examined, and may indeed be tied to the essentially middle class makeup of the organization.

However, 99.9 percent of what the ISO does and the causes it organizes around have absolutely nothing to do with the Democratic Party. To the contrary, the ISO is in a struggle to educate people in both the theory and history of Marxism. The reasons they may get caught up in movements with less than democratic/radical aims in my view are tactical, and have to

do with not sitting on the sidelines when people are galvanized to action.

Has the ISO made mistakes? Absolutely. Are there contradictions and shortcomings in the party’s views? Certainly. However, simply denouncing them as stooges for the Democrats is a childish one-dimensional characterization that ignores the productive and important role they can play as students, historians, educators, and activists of the Marxist tradition.

JS

21 June 2010

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*David Walsh replies:*

Thank you for your comment, and I am glad you are a reader of the WSWs. Let me reply to your argument.

You criticize our evaluation of the International Socialist Organization and its meetings, but your letter strongly substantiates the points we made.

We argued, in the first part of the article, that “Petty-bourgeois ‘left’ politics of the ISO variety is characterized by theoretical formlessness, the absence of perspective, pragmatic adaptation to the dominant political pressures, and political unseriousness.”

The description you provide bears out this claim. You write: “One thing that ISO members will tell you over and over again is that ‘movements never start off as radical—people radicalize in the process of struggle.’”

This is a formula for unrestrained opportunism. The ISO invokes what it asserts to be the present level of popular consciousness to justify its adaptation to the Democratic Party and the existing political set-up as a whole. In other words, it offloads on to the working class and the students the responsibility for *its own orientation* to the Obama administration and the Democrats; more precisely, it provides a quasi-“left” cover for the latter.

You continue: “This forms part of the ISO’s core philosophy that revolutionary socialists need to participate in all popular movements which seek gains for working class people if they wish to ultimately win people over to their camp and exert their influence in a fluid society.”

But you are confusing participation with opportunism. They are not the same thing. On what basis do the ISO and its membership participate? They certainly advance a political line, but they do so dishonestly and opportunistically; they intervene as a means of providing indirect, covert, but very real support for the Democratic Party and its hangers-on. They participate to maintain the subordination of the working class to this bourgeois party.

Since January 2009, the ISO has concentrated its efforts on claiming that the Obama administration could be moved to the left if sufficient pressure were applied. I offered a great deal of evidence to that effect in the original article, but more can be provided if need be.

You call them “revolutionary socialists,” but that is precisely what you

fail to prove. What makes people “revolutionary socialists” if it is not their program? If they are simply adapting to the prevailing illusions at any given moment, they are not entitled to be termed any such thing.

Socialists consciously work out their attitudes toward the great issues, and that forms the firm basis of their political activity—not disregarding the present level of consciousness, but developing methods of challenging it and bringing it in line with objective reality.

What *you* write about the ISO and Obama is entirely damning of the organization. You comment, “On the issue of the 2008 election, they [the ISO] were clearly proved wrong, and ended up offering legitimacy to a party which at present [is] the single most powerful enemy of the international working class.”

I’m not sure what to add to that. You acknowledge that the ISO was “offering legitimacy” to the “single most powerful enemy of the international working class.” One would think that would be enough of an argument for staying as far away as possible from such an organization, indeed for taking up a campaign to expose it.

I can only presume from your earlier comment, about ISO leaders’ “naïve belief that the election of Barack Obama was somehow an historical or transformative event in American history and class relations,” that you feel the policy in 2008 was an innocent mistake, resulting (as you say later) from the ISO’s desire not to sit “on the sidelines when people are galvanized to action.” In other words, the ISO simply lost its head in the face of Obama-mania and got too caught up in the action.

Why do you believe it was simply naïve? Excuse me, but I think in this case you are the naïve one. People who make a *profession* of providing aid and comfort to big business parties are not innocents. What about the Communist Party of the US? Has it simply been naïve since 1936?

The ISO leaders are individuals with long political histories, decades in some cases. You take them at their word; you don’t examine their history, their program. That is a big mistake. They knew perfectly well what they were doing, in our view, because what they did flowed from their entire history of opportunist maneuvering in the environs of the Democratic Party, in the trade unions, in the various protest movements.

You write about their support for Obama: “Such a serious mistake exposes a deep flaw in the party that does need to be thoroughly examined, and may indeed be tied to the essentially middle class makeup of the organization.”

But how was such a mistake possible, around the question of the Democratic Party, of all questions? Serious socialist politics in the US *begins* with the fight to break the working class from the Democrats, especially its liberal wing. There is a long history of this struggle that the ISO rejects. They have adopted the treachery of the Communist Party, which was denounced by Trotsky and Cannon.

In any event, *you* admit the mistake, but the ISO leadership doesn’t. Where has it acknowledged its colossally wrong attitude toward Obama and his administration? Where is the analysis of that policy, its repudiation?

Don’t you see that their support for Obama fits neatly with the argument you still defend—that “people in the process of struggle” aren’t to be tampered with? They will “radicalize,” more or less, on their own. Since many people were supporting Obama, the ISO had to go along with that. But why not try an alternative: telling them the truth? Of course, in the short-term, pouring cold water on people’s illusions is not always popular. It is the only way, however, to build a revolutionary movement.

In any event, the ISO continues the same essential policy. On February 10 of this year, *Socialist Worker* was still arguing that the nature of the Obama administration was an open question: “Unless it faces pressure from the millions of people [who] want to see the status quo change, the Obama administration will cater to the relentless pressure it faces from above.”

The March 10 editorial pointed to the “pressure from below [that] drove

President Franklin Roosevelt to undertake the big social reforms that have endured to this day,” making clear that the same kind of pressure could push Obama toward reformist measures. By April 21, 2010 *Socialist Worker* was merely complaining that Obama had “squandered much of that optimism” with which the population greeted his election. Not a word about the independent political mobilization of the working class against this government and the Democrats.

You say that “99.9 percent of what the ISO does and the causes it organizes around have absolutely nothing to do with the Democratic Party.” If you think about it seriously for a moment, you will see that this is a ludicrous claim. That would mean that the vast bulk of the ISO’s activity doesn’t impinge on the central issues in American political life. What question for socialists doesn’t raise the issue of the need to break with bourgeois politics, for a struggle against capitalism itself?

What you are saying, without recognizing it, is that the vast bulk of ISO activity consists in evading, on a daily basis, the dominance of bourgeois politics in the various protest movements and in the trade unions, and then when an election campaign comes along, the organization “legitimizes” the Democrats. Could there be a more serious indictment, or richer example of opportunism?

In any case, we never claimed that there was simply an identity between the ISO and the Democrats. From the point of blocking the growth of a revolutionary movement, what purpose would that serve? There is a political division of labor. Such “left” organizations exist to ensnare nascent opponents of capitalism and prevent them from making a conscious break with bourgeois politics.

Neither did the US Communist Party in its heyday, when it commanded considerable political support, ever function *directly* as a wing of the Democrats. Its role was to use its “left” credibility to channel social opposition into support for Roosevelt and other bourgeois politicians.

Finally, you write that we are ignoring “the productive and important role they [the ISO] can play as students, historians, educators, and activists of the Marxist tradition.”

But what tradition are you talking about? Educate people on what? The ISO’s stated policy is not to advance a socialist program, because it might offend some people. Is this the Marxist tradition? Why did Marx write *Capital*? Or Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* Or Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*? Why did Luxemburg bother with *Reform or Revolution*, and the struggle against Bernsteinism? Where would one find a justification for the pragmatic, short-term, opportunist politics of the ISO in the “Marxist tradition”?

These are important issues, I urge you to think about them.

David Walsh



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