

ISO opposes break with Democratic Party at Berkeley planning committee meeting

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On September 23, groups planning for a “day of action” against education cuts met in Berkeley, California to discuss preparations for an October 7 demonstration.

The course and outcome of the meeting mirrored a similar meeting in San Diego earlier in the month. Organizations involved in planning the demonstration, most notably the International Socialist Organization (ISO), worked to prevent passage of demands presented by the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) to break with the Democratic Party and carry out socialist policies. (See, “Planning committee on education cuts—the ISO supporters the Democratic Party”)

Meetings to plan the October 7 events followed demonstrations in March, in which students and workers throughout the state protested massive education cuts passed by the Democratic Party-controlled state legislature and Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Cuts in California and other states have been spearheaded by the Obama administration, which has insisted that unprecedented state budget deficits be resolved through attacks on education and other social programs.

As mass opposition grows to the corporate-driven policies of the Democrats and Republicans, the role of groups like the ISO is to try to prevent any independent political mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist program.

The composition of the September 23 meeting reflected the inability of the organizers, oriented entirely to the Democratic Party, to attract a broader layer of students and workers. There were only a few dozen people in attendance. It was controlled primarily by members of the ISO, though they did not identify themselves openly. Only after the meeting did one of the ISO members confirm that the principal organizers of the meeting were also ISO members.

The two-hour meeting consisted of three segments. The first was a video presentation by members of the ISO and a brief presentation of their agenda for the meeting, followed by a brief question-and-answer session. The second was a breakout session in which each participant was invited to join a breakout group of about 3-5 people. The breakout group was then charged with forming three concrete demands that would be included in the October 7 protest.

Finally, the meeting was scheduled to conclude with a

plenary session in which a vote was held on the demands formulated in the breakout sessions. If a majority approved a demand, it was to be added to the list presented to protestors and the general public on October 7.

The meeting was promoted on mobilizeberkeley.com as a General Assembly for students, workers, and faculty to decide demands and plan actions. Although it appeared to be planned to include at least some democratic discussion, the reality was the contrary.

After the opening remarks, a member of the ISSE, the student organization of the Socialist Equality Party, suggested that each speaker be allowed at least five minutes to discuss and explain their demands, with an additional period for group discussion of the proposals. This suggestion was immediately opposed as “too long”. In its place the group decided that two minutes was the most any individual or group representative would be allowed to speak. However, for the duration of the meeting several group insiders were allowed to stifle and intimidate political discussion at will.

ISSE supporters attempted to discuss the political issues behind the failure of the March 4th protest within these rigid limitations on discussion, but it would prove impossible.

After the initial presentation, ISSE supporters participated in its own breakout group to form demands. Per the rules of the group, the ISSE put forward the following demands: 1) Billions for education and other social programs; free education for all from kindergarten to higher education. 2) Nationalize the banks and financial institutions; and 3) Break with the Democrats and the Republicans; for the political independence of the working class.

As with the meeting earlier in the month, the aim of presenting these demands was to express the basic conception that the students and workers had to fight for their right to a quality education; that meeting these needs required a restructuring of society, including placing the major banks under the democratic control of the population; and that this program could be carried out only through the independent mobilization of workers in opposition to the Democratic Party and the Obama administration.

Upon announcing its opposition to the Democratic Party in the plenary session, ISSE supporters were immediately

subjected to hissing and insults. The same student who had demanded speakers be limited to two minutes, stood up and angrily demanded that speakers be limited to an even shorter amount of time. When the group failed to support this, he objected to the fact that the ISSE supporters had identified themselves and their political affiliation before presenting their demands.

Other speakers were not treated to such hostility, because nearly all of them presented very limited economic demands (no more fee increases for students, etc), vague calls for “student democracy”, or demands for more money and political power at UC Berkeley for groups associated with one identity or another. The protest organizers clearly expected no more than demands of a reformist character that would leave the Democratic Party, and US capitalism as a whole, unexamined and unscathed.

The discussion segment of the plenary—the only portion that allowed input from students and the public—was so restricted that it took less than half an hour. A discussion of why people were making the demands or the ultimate goal of the protest was strictly prohibited.

According to the rules explained at the outset, the entire assembly was to vote for each demand presented. However, after the ISSE submitted its demands, the rules and procedure of the vote were constantly changed and eventually became the primary subject of the meeting discussion.

Once the vote was to begin, the meeting organizers and their friends in the audience created a diversion and stall tactic centered on how the voting would be conducted. Repeatedly invoking phony time concerns, nearly an hour was consumed entertaining a number of proposals to change the voting procedure.

An ISO member in the audience suggested rewriting the demands of the breakout groups and then putting them in categories. This proposal descended into a discussion of which categories should be used. Another such discussion on whether each demand should be directed exclusively to the UC Berkeley administration or the entire University of California system was entertained by the meeting’s organizers. None of these discussions were subjected to any time limitation.

However, as many in the room became frustrated with the length of the discussion, there were frequent and significant outbursts. A member of *La Raza*—a Hispanic nationalist group—cynically suggested that there should be two categories: things that could really happen and “the other stuff”. He then suggested that all demands be restricted to the confines of UC Berkeley. Another protest organizer exclaimed, “This protest is not going to change anything anyway,” as a reason to hurry the meeting along.

Finally, in response to the ISSE demand for a break with the Democratic Party and the independent mobilization of the working class, an individual who said he was a trade union representative worried aloud: “Doesn’t [Democratic Party

candidate for California] Jerry Brown need our help right now?”

ISSE supporters vocally rejected all of these statements, calling for a simple and fair vote on the demands. However, even the voting session was subjected to a number of anti-democratic diversions, with meeting organizers repeatedly subjecting certain demands to spontaneous revisions without consent of the breakout groups or the assembly as a whole.

This method was employed most obviously to eliminate the ISSE’s third proposal for a break with the Democratic Party. The protest organizers initially called for the demand’s removal on the basis that nobody had explicitly stated support for the Democrats; however this was scuttled when another organizer pointed out that there were several members of the Democratic Party organizing the protest.

In a last ditch effort to prevent a vote on the issue, an ISO member declared, “Well, I don’t think this is really a demand, so I think we should take it off the list.” This was quickly seized on by the meeting organizers and a vote was called. After the vote, ISSE supporters vocally opposed the methods and called for clarification of what had actually happened. They were immediately told to be quiet and raise the issue later. They were then approached by organizers attempting to quiet their protest.

When an ISSE supporter demanded that the attendees confirm their support for the Democratic Party, an ISO member responded with an evasion, saying that the group had simply voted on whether the demand was actually a demand. Nonetheless, the substantive demand itself was not included and never voted on.

Before the other ISSE demands were called to a vote, the organizers abruptly announced they were ending the meeting without proposing any future date. ISSE supporters remained, handing out leaflets and speaking with some of those who remained.

Like the events in San Diego earlier this month, the outcome of this protest planning meeting powerfully exposes the real politics of the ISO. Despite its name, the ISO is adamantly opposed to any break with the Democratic Party or challenge to the profit system.



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