

Planning committee on education cuts—the ISO supports the Democratic Party

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On September 11, groups planning for a “day of action” against education cuts in California met in San Diego to discuss preparations for an October 7 demonstration.

The course and outcome of the meeting demonstrate the way in which the dominant organizations involved, and in particular the International Socialist Organization, work to derail any independent movement of the working class in opposition to the Democratic Party.

Plans for the October 7 demonstrations were initiated following the events of March 4, 2010, which saw mass protests by students and workers throughout California. The protests reflected widespread outrage over multi-billion-dollar education cuts passed by the Democratic Party-controlled state legislature and Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. The cuts have already led to sharp increases in tuition, mass teacher layoffs, and reduced class offerings.

The cuts themselves are part of an ongoing nationwide attack on social programs and education, spearheaded by the Obama administration. After bailing out the banks with trillions of dollars, Obama has starved cash-strapped states of funds. Democrats and Republicans at the state and local levels have collaborated with the administration by forcing through unprecedented attacks on the working class.

The International Students for Social Equality, the student organization of the Socialist Equality Party, participated in the March 4 demonstrations, advancing a socialist perspective for the working class, in opposition to those who sought to channel the protests behind the Democratic Party and the trade unions. (See, “After the March 4 protests against education cuts”)

The perspective of the ISSE was opposed within the planning meetings by various organizations—including the ISO, Socialist Organizer, and Labor’s Militant Voice, among others—which reacted with alarm and distress whenever the ISSE would raise the issue of the fight for a socialist perspective and the political independence of the working class.

Typical of the perspective advanced by these organizations was a statement published by the ISO’s newspaper, *Socialist Worker*, on March 4, 2010, “Building Blocks of a New Movement.” Avoiding any discussion of the objective roots of the attack on education, the article concluded with a call to pressure the Obama administration.

The ISO argued that Obama, like Roosevelt in the 1930s, would “stand up to the obstructions among capitalists and the Republican Party,” but “only when confronted with the prospect of a social

rebellion.” What was necessary was to have a large demonstration, which would “raise the profile of the left and send a message that there’s an active movement fighting the austerity being pushed from Washington to City Hall.”

In other words, Obama too would “stand up,” if only there was sufficient mass pressure. This response to the March 4 protests was entirely in line with the ISO’s overall support for Obama, whose election they referred to as “a transformative event in US politics.” It was also in line with the ISO’s slavish subordination to the right-wing and pro-Democratic Party trade union bureaucracy.

Following the initial expression of broad opposition to the cuts, the planning organizations—the so-called “March 4 committees”—have come to be increasingly the domain of groups like the ISO. Their bankrupt perspective of pressuring the Democratic Party has failed to draw in any broader layers of students and youth. This composition was clearly reflected in the September 11 meeting.

The September 11 meeting

The one-day September 11 meeting consisted of four sessions. The first was a series of speeches and a brief question-and-answer session. The second was a breakout session in which each participant could choose one of five groups based on different issues: education, immigration, health care, labor, and the upcoming November elections. Three demands were to be formulated and voted on by each group.

The third session was a breakout discussion about the specific forms of action on October 7. Finally, the meeting concluded with a plenary session in which votes were to be held on the demands formulated in the breakout sessions.

During the opening remarks, the ISSE was the only organization that sought to address the broader social and political issues. One supporter of the ISSE argued that the crisis of education could not be viewed in isolation, but had to be seen in the context of the failure of the capitalist system as a whole.

The ISSE member condemned the Obama administration, whose “bailouts of the banks have been combined with a program of ruthless austerity.” The problem is capitalism, he said, which “for millions of workers and students means poverty, unemployment,

social misery, war, all of this in the face of an ever more grotesque, obscene and socially destructive accumulation of wealth on the part of a few.” The solution, he said, is socialism.

These initial comments caused subsequent speakers, two of whom were ISO members, to declare that they too were socialists, before insisting that it was impossible to talk now of any structural change. The task, rather, was simply to build large protests.

This is the stock-in-trade response of the ISO. Amidst the greatest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, the claim that now is not the time to fight for socialism is aimed at quelling the impending workers’ struggles by channeling them behind the Democratic Party and the trade unions.

After the speeches, ISSE participants attended the breakout group on the November elections. Each group was to put forward three demands. The ISSE put forward the following: 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.

In raising these demands, the ISSE sought 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.

These resolutions encountered bitter opposition within the breakout group from trade unionists associated with the San Diego-Imperial Counties Labor Council and one ISO member. The representatives of the trade unions advocated that the rallies endorse various Democratic candidates, including Jerry Brown for governor of California. The ISO representative advocated that the demonstrations seek to “put Jerry Brown on record on the question of public education.”

The ISO only rarely manages to distinguish its politics from that of open supporters of the Democratic Party. In this case, the demand for “putting Jerry Brown on record” represented an attempt to provide a “left” fig-leaf for the direct and shameless support of the Democratic Party advocated by the unions. Although a certain division of labor is involved, both the union bureaucracy and the ISO work tirelessly to maintain the political subordination of students and workers to the Democratic Party.

Despite their slightly different form, both these proposals had the same aim—to channel opposition to budget cuts behind Brown and the Democratic Party. Brown is a self-described “born-again tax cutter” and proponent of fiscal austerity for California. He is also personally responsible for the setting up of two charter schools in Oakland.

With its weight within the breakout group, however, the ISSE was able to pass its proposals over these objections.

According to the rules of the meeting, the entire assembly was to vote for only one of the three proposed demands to come out of each breakout group. By the time it came to vote on the November 7 group’s proposals, however, the demand relating to education for all had already been adopted, albeit in a slightly different form.

This meant that, according to the rules announced at the opening plenary by the organizers of the meeting, the assembly would have to adopt the demand either to: a) Break with the Democrats and the Republicans; or b) Nationalize the banks.

The unwillingness of the ISO and other reformist, pro-Democratic Party groups to support these demands—indeed, their outright horror at the prospect—threw the entire meeting into disarray.

Violating its own procedure, the rules committee called for an ad hoc second vote to open discussion on the demands so as to allow for the rejection of both demands. Several non-ISSE members in the committee opposed this, as it clearly went against the rules that had been outlined at the beginning, discrediting any semblance of democracy. Nevertheless, the change was pushed through and the demands of the ISSE rejected.

The ISSE delegation walked out in protest over a process devoted to ensuring the outcome favored by the pro-Democratic Party participants in the conference.

The outcome could not more clearly expose the real politics of the ISO and similar organizations. They are adamantly opposed to any break with the Democratic Party, and they are opposed to raising any demands that challenge the profit system. In other words, far from being “international socialists,” they are a pro-Democratic Party, pro-capitalist organization.

The social crisis facing working class students and youth has only increased since last year. The bourgeoisie and its political representatives, Democrats and Republicans alike, are more than ever resolved to eliminate any social spending that benefits the working class. Within this context, the middle-class organizations such as the ISO move ever more sharply to the right, desperately seeking to block any break with the Democratic Party.

The ISSE intends to carry out an aggressive campaign to defend the right of all workers and youth to a quality education. In doing so, it will fight for workers to break with the Democrats and Republicans on the basis of an independent socialist program.



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