

Ex-SDS leader seeks to herd Wall Street protest behind Obama

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The month-old Occupy Wall Street movement that began in lower Manhattan has since spread to scores of cities across the US. It has won widespread sympathy from millions of working people, who welcome the prospect of a struggle against the capitalist banks, corporations and financial aristocracy that are responsible for the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

At the same time, this movement has prompted duplicitous statements of support and advice from a socio-political layer of pseudo-lefts and former activists in the middle class protest movements. These elements view the emerging movement against Wall Street with some trepidation and with the aim of foisting onto it a definite political agenda.

An op-ed column by Todd Gitlin, published in the *New York Times* Sunday is representative of this layer of ex-lefts, whose principal preoccupation is how to channel this movement behind the Democratic Party and the upcoming campaign to reelect President Barack Obama.

Gitlin, who was the president of the Students for a Democratic Society in 1963-64 and later an organizer of protests against the Vietnam War, has since secured a comfortable berth in academia as a tenured professor of journalism and communications at Columbia University in New York City.

Gitlin titled his *Times* column: “The Left Declares its Independence,” apparently in reference to the protests’ relation to the Obama administration in Washington. He argues that many of those now protesting “went door-to-door” for Obama in 2008 and quotes a fellow academic as writing that “This is the Obama generation declaring their independence from Obama.”

While Gitlin’s long-winded piece is full of professed sympathy for the demonstrations and celebration of its supposed “anarchist” and “New Left” sensibilities, the thrust of his argument is that, sooner rather than later, it will have to—and should—come under the wing of the Democrats.

He hails the efforts of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy to hijack the protest movement and turn it into a prop for the Obama reelection campaign in 2012. In this energetic movement from below, he writes, “Here, finally, is what labor and the activist left have been waiting for.”

Gitlin is anxious to ensure that this movement is directed not along socialist lines in a struggle against capitalism, but rather back into the fold of the Democratic Party and its supposed “reform” agenda.

“By allying itself with the protest, the left at large is telling the

president that a campaign slogan that essentially says ‘We’re better than Eric Cantor’ won’t cut it in 2012,” Gitlin writes. “‘We are the 99 percent’ would be more like it. If President Obama takes this direction, the movement’s energy may be able to power a motor of significant reform.”

Like no small number of similar veterans of the “New Left” and the protest movement of the 1960s, Gitlin has proven wrong the old adage “you can’t go home again.” He could and he did. From opposing US military aggression in the 1960s and early 1970s, he became a defender of imperialism beginning in the 1990s.

As with many in this social and political milieu, Gitlin’s political evolution ever further to the right coincided with his entry into the increasingly comfortable layers of the upper middle class, whose own fortunes were bound up with Wall Street and the financial speculation of the 1990s and beyond.

Also like many of them, he made his crossover into the camp of imperialism during the US-NATO interventions in the former Yugoslavia in the mid-1990s, enthusiastically embracing military intervention and uncritically regurgitating the government and media propaganda that these wars were moral crusades for “human rights” and against “ethnic cleansing.”

What characterized Gitlin and this entire layer was their refusal to make any analysis of the strategic and economic interests being pursued by Washington and the other imperialist powers in these wars or, for that matter, the role that they had played in bringing about the economic and political disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the ethnic and nationalist tensions that exploded as a result.

Gitlin backed the US attack on Afghanistan as a “war of necessity” and, in the Iraq war, opposed the invasion launched by the Bush administration only on tactical grounds. In 2003, he upbraided antiwar protesters for carrying placards condemning US sanctions and bombings of the country. Gitlin scolded the protesters, insisting that such slogans were “emblematic of a refusal to face a grotesque world” and constituted a “rejection of any conceivable rationale for using force.” It wasn’t that Gitlin opposed war against Iraq, he just didn’t like the way Bush was going about it.

More recently, Gitlin drafted an obituary for the antiwar movement for the online magazine *Salon* last July entitled “Where have all the war protesters gone?”

He made a matter-of-fact case that in the present environment there really was no more basis for mass movements against war. Gitlin wrote: “The military attacks now underway, in Libya and

elsewhere, will mainly be fought by elite units — Special Forces, Navy SEALs, drone commanders — operating from far-flung American bases, without any civilian call-up. Any revulsion by well-informed citizens against what they do is counterbalanced by popular satisfaction at their successes, by their virtual invisibility, and the unpleasantness of their intended targets. These are not recipes for popular commotion — let alone opposition.”

Further indicating his attitude towards the Obama administration’s war in Libya, Gitlin used his Twitter account to circulate the pro-war propaganda pumped out by his fellow “left” academic, University of Michigan Middle Eastern history professor Juan Cole.

While beginning his political career as a protester against the Democratic administration of Lyndon B. Johnson, he became a fervent backer of the Democrat Barack Obama. He has apparently extended this support retroactively, reaching the conclusion that it was a major error of the antiwar movement in 1968 not to back the election of Democratic presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey, even as the then-vice president was supporting Johnson’s criminal bombing of North Vietnam.

Had Humphrey won the election, Gitlin claimed in his 2003 book “Letters to a young activist”, “he would have phased out the war,” as opposed to Richard Nixon, “who proceeded to extend the Vietnam war for five years.”

Gitlin’s key conclusion? “You either vote Democratic, or submit to the rule of the Republicans...The Democratic Party is the inescapable field where we either win, lose or draw.”

Posturing as a veteran protester and “left”, it is this prostration before the capitalist two-party system and political opportunism that Gitlin brings to the Occupy Wall Street movement.

In celebrating the “anarchist impulse” in both the New Left of which he was a part and in Occupy Wall Street, Gitlin is promoting the weakest political element in the present protests, above all its lack of a clear class orientation and a program for the socialist reorganization of economic life.

“There were strong anarchist streaks in the New Left of the 1960s — stronger than the socialist streak, in fact, despite all the work Marxists did to define proper class categories for the student movement,” Gitlin writes.

What were these supposedly “anarchist streaks”? Fundamentally, it was the politics of petty-bourgeois protest, which rejected the conception that the struggle against war required the building of a revolutionary movement of the working class to put an end to capitalism. Instead, it promoted student power, black nationalism, women’s liberation and various other forms of protest politics that sought not the overthrow of capitalism, but rather its reform along lines making it more palatable for sections of the middle class.

The result was that the mass antiwar protest movement dissipated with the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam, leaving American militarism, the capitalist two-party system and the domination of the banks and corporations intact to prepare new wars and conduct a sustained offensive against the living standards and basic rights of American working people.

The new wave of protests against Wall Street is driven by powerful objective forces, principally the failure of capitalism,

which has plunged hundreds of millions of people in the United States and around the world into unemployment and social misery.

Two days after the publication of Gitlin’s bloated essay, the *New York Times* published a front-page article reporting that “members of the Democratic establishment see the [Occupy Wall Street] movement as a way to align disenfranchised Americans with their party” and believe it can be used to promote “a populist theme now being emphasized by the White House and the party.” The article recounted that Democratic operatives “are already looking for ways to mobilize protesters in get-out-the-vote drives for 2012.”

The lineup couldn’t be clearer. The Democrats are seeking to co-opt the anti-Wall Street movement, lining it up behind a president who was elected with the largest campaign war chest ever funded by Wall Street and who has spent his first term in office defending the interests of the banks, finance houses and the top 1 percent. Ex-lefts like Gitlin are enlisted in this sordid operation to provide a “progressive” gloss to what amounts to a cynical attempt to hijack the protests.

The capitalist economic crisis that has given rise to the protests will only deepen as the Obama administration and its counterparts around the world press forward policies to make the broad masses pay for the bankruptcy of the profit system. A \$4 trillion deficit reduction program has already set a second-term agenda for the Obama administration of relentless attacks on core social programs, jobs and wages, whatever “populist themes” the Democratic Party tries to promote in the 2012 campaign.

The urgent task posed to those seeking a genuine means of fighting Wall Street is an irrevocable break with the Democrats, their union backers and pseudo-left promoters like Gitlin, whose aim is to smother any genuine popular opposition movement and turn it into a front for one of Wall Street’s two major parties.

Only the turn to building an independent socialist movement of the working class can provide a way forward in the struggle for social equality and the transformation of society to meet human needs rather than the relentless and destructive drive to augment profits and increase the wealth of the top 1 percent.

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