

The International Socialist Organization and the 2012 US elections

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The International Socialist Organization (ISO) in the US plays a definite role in American political life. It translates the circumstances and concerns of certain better-off layers of the middle class into the language of left-liberal politics.

As a consequence, the ISO operates politically as an advocacy group in and around the Democratic Party, seeking to improve opportunities for the academics, identity politicians, trade union officials, think tank and media consultants, institute fellows and “radical” journalists and researchers who make up much of its membership and periphery.

The ISO is oppositional and “socialist” only in so far as the milieu it operates within and speaks for is discontented with the extreme concentration of wealth and political power in the US. In particular, the group’s constituencies would like to see the legal and financial position of the trade union apparatus secured and greater numbers of African Americans, other ethnic minorities, gays and women in public office, academic positions and company boardrooms. In the pursuit of those aims, the ISO calls for increased government spending (Keynesian policies) and greater regulation of big corporations.

That the ISO describes itself as socialist and revolutionary while accepting the existing political and economic set-up gives the organization’s utterances their peculiarly two-faced and deceitful character.

In regard to the 2012 elections, the ISO and its publication, *Socialist Worker*, criticize Barack Obama and the Democratic Party from within that party’s own general orbit, campaigning for greater lobbying pressure on the Democrats so that the upper-middle class “left” can get what it wants.

The ISO leadership is also highly sensitive to the danger of a popular movement against capitalism emerging outside of Democratic Party and trade union control, and feels that it can better block such a development if it has a certain flexibility of movement.

A recent article, “What’s Wrong With Lesser Evilism” (socialistworker.org, October 24, 2012), exemplifies the

group’s duplicitous words and deeds.

The column begins, “Does Barack Obama deserve your vote? That’s the question people on the left *should* be asking as Election Day approaches.”

Not so. Genuinely socialist-minded people should and will be asking themselves what is to be done about a moribund political system that guarantees that one or another reactionary millionaire will make decisions affecting the lives of tens of millions of people over the next four years. They will be asking themselves how best to proceed to uproot this anti-democratic process that serves the interests of the financial-corporate oligarchy.

The ISO, on the other hand, begins by implicitly accepting the legitimacy of the political set-up, the elections and the two-party system.

The *Socialist Worker* comment proceeds to criticize the *Nation* magazine, whom it includes among the “most liberal and even radical voices,” for its open endorsement of Obama and the Democrats.

It chides the liberal-left magazine’s editorial writers both for making undue claims about Obama’s “accomplishments” and for asserting, in the ISO’s paraphrase, that “our movements will be in a better position to accomplish our goals with Democrats in control of the White House and Congress.”

In regard to the first point, the ISO accepts the *Nation*’s contention that there have been limited advances under Obama, but that (a) the White House “moved achingly slowly on LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] rights,” for example, and (b) “that Obama had to be pushed every step of the way to follow through on any promises at all,” such as his support for same-sex marriage.

Again, the social interests involved are clear. Nothing about the tens of millions of unemployed and under-employed people, the poverty-stricken and homeless, those who have lost their life savings with the housing price collapse or seen their wages and benefits slashed. The ISO is as indifferent to the conditions of broad portions of the working population as the official Democratic Party

campaign.

Still more revealing is the ISO editorial's reasoning about how "our movements" can accomplish their goals. The *Nation's* stance, writes socialistworker.org, "enables the Democrats' shift further and further toward the right, because party leaders know they can take progressive voices for granted."

So the task of "progressive voices" is not to fight resolutely for a break with the Democrats, exposing its anti-working class, imperialist character, but to avoid being taken for granted by Democratic Party leaders. The ISO's quarrel with the *Nation*, the organ of self-satisfied, well-heeled American liberalism, proves to be a tactical one: how to position oneself so as to have one's demands taken seriously by one of the country's two big business parties.

The ISO editorial goes further. It explains that "supporting the lesser evil requires muting the criticisms of activists and the left—ultimately, tailoring our movements and struggles to the needs of the Democrats, rather than demanding that the Democrats live up to the promises they make to win votes, or face the consequences."

This could not be much clearer. The Obama re-election campaign is not promising anything to the unemployed, to auto workers (whose wages have been cut in half), to young people who face a bleak future. It does, however, seek to win votes from sections of the middle class with pledges about gay and women's rights, making it easier for unions to secure membership, greater opportunities for minority "entrepreneurs," and so on. The ISO exists, in its own words, to exert pressure on the Democrats to make good on these pledges.

In any event, even the *Socialist Worker's* nominal rejection of "lesser of two evilism" and the Democratic Party is empty and duplicitous. In practice, the ISO collaborates on a daily basis with Democrats and their public supporters in the trade unions, "civil rights movement" and elsewhere.

The organization provides platforms for and promotes charlatans such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton... and pro-Obama groupie John Nichols of the *Nation*. It invites union officials such as Sal Rosselli, president of the National Union of Healthcare Workers and formerly of the SEIU, an early and enthusiastic supporter of Obama in 2008, to address its conferences.

In 2008, it should be remembered, the ISO did everything but publicly endorse Obama. The organization would now like to pretend this didn't happen.

In September of this year, socialistworker.org ran an interview with leading ISO member Lance Selfa ("What Do Socialists Say About Election 2012?"). The anonymous interviewer began, "Many people approached the 2008

presidential election with a sense of hope and expectation, but the 2012 election is taking place in a very different atmosphere? Why is that?"

Selfa replied by noting that a poll early in 2009 gave newly elected president Barack Obama a high approval rating and indicated that a majority of those interviewed "said they were confident Obama could achieve all of his major campaign promises... It seems like a century ago, but those were the expectations of millions of people in 2009."

Selfa is being dishonest. The ISO strongly encouraged those illusions in 2008-2009, as the record demonstrates.

Immediately following the November 2008 election, for example, *Socialist Worker* wrote, "The sweeping victory of Barack Obama in the presidential elections is a transformative event in US politics, as an African American takes the highest office in a country built on slavery."

In a subsequent editorial, the ISO observed, "Four years ago, a shroud of despair and fear descended after George W. Bush's re-election... Four years later, the mood could not be more different..."

"In this sense, the [popular] celebration of Obama's win isn't just of one side beating the other, but of history being made."

The ISO claimed in late 2008 that Obama's coming to power meant "the conservative stranglehold over US politics for a quarter century under Republicans and Democrats alike has been broken" and that the depth of the crisis was inexorably "driving Obama toward a different [i.e., progressive] agenda."

The organization has never offered an explanation as to how it could have been so utterly wrong. It feels no responsibility to those who have suffered painfully under an Obama administration, in the US and abroad. The ISO's general orientation has not changed. It is merely attempting to adapt itself in 2012 to the deep disillusionment with the man whose election it once characterized as a historical breakthrough.

In 2012, as in 2008, the ISO's chief political activity is to pursue the narrow aims of the social element it represents. What this petty bourgeois "left" wants stands in opposition to workers' interests. Thus, the ISO is a staunch opponent of the political independence of the working class, the central perspective of a genuinely socialist and egalitarian movement.



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