

“Left electoral action conference” in Chicago

The American pseudo-left and the Democratic Party

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On May 2 and 3, two hundred representatives of a variety of trade unions, non-profits, Democratic Party-affiliated groups and Green Party leagues gathered for the “Left Electoral Action Conference.”

The event was held in the basement of the Chicago headquarters of the Teamsters Union and was hosted by the International Socialist Organization, Solidarity and Socialist Alternative. Representatives of the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) and the Spanish group Podemos were also in attendance.

The gathering was comprised of a series of panel discussions on a range of topics centered around the 2016 US general elections. Titles of panels included “Running for local non-partisan office,” “Elections, Labor, and the Social Movements,” “The Fight for 15 and Electoral Politics,” “Election Skills Workshop,” “Fundraising for the 99%,” and “You’re elected! So now what?”

Panel participants included many professional activists from various pseudo-left groups, as well as the perennial third-party candidates for office at the national and local level. The Green Party’s 2012 presidential candidate Jill Stein was in attendance, as was the 2014 Green candidate for New York governor, Howie Hawkins. Seattle City Councilperson and Socialist Alternative member Kshama Sawant sent video greetings, while a host of lesser Green, Democratic Party and “socialist” city council candidates from around the country rounded out the panels.

Aside from the candidates themselves, other attendees included a coterie of “left” bloggers like Louis Proyect and a number of trade union bureaucrats. Notably, Teamsters President James P. Hoffa was in attendance, eyeing the proceedings from the back of the room. A group representing Vermont Senator and Democratic Party candidate for president Bernie Sanders was also present. Though billed as a public meeting, the attendance indicates that this was primarily an insider event.

During the panels, the Democratic Party continuously emerged as a main theme of discussion. Though the Democratic Party under the Obama administration has played the leading role in overseeing the expansion of war abroad and the destruction of jobs, social programs and democratic rights domestically, the event’s main thrust was discussing how those gathered should present themselves as they orbit around and within the Democratic Party milieu.

“We’re constantly trying to attach the small wheel of the left to a slightly bigger wheel of the unions that can move an even bigger wheel [the Democrats],” said International Socialist Organization organizer and 2006 California Green Party Senate candidate Todd Chretien.

Socialist Alternative leader and 2013 Minneapolis City Council candidate Ty Moore expressed a broader sentiment at the conference when he said: “It’s not a crime in itself to pressure the Democrats.”

“There’s always been division inside the Democratic Party,” Moore added, noting that “there are tremendous opportunities for the left to

intervene in these debates and to exploit them.”

“The key thing,” Moore said, “is breaking away a base of activists and organizations that make up the left of the Democratic Party and the trade unions.”

Gayle McLaughlin, Richmond, California’s Green Party city councilperson and former mayor said, “when connecting with the Democrats, we have to make sure we stay in the lead. Like the truly progressive Democrats in Richmond that we have supported because they actually take a stand against the machine Democrats.”

It was within the framework of this thoroughly non-oppositional orientation to the Democratic Party that the conference unfolded. But the significance of the event goes beyond its reiteration of support for the Democratic Party. The event also provides insight into the process through which these organizations develop their relationship with the Democrats.

Political transmission belt

The Chicago conference laid the framework for the pseudo-left to serve as a political transmission belt—or as the ISO’s Chretien put it, a “small wheel”—to politically disarm leftward moving workers and youth in order to prevent them from breaking with the Democratic Party.

The way in which this “small wheel” operates was on display in Chicago.

The operation is based on a vague set of political positions that serve as an ideological bridge connecting the upper-middle class interests of the pseudo-left with the platform of the Democratic Party. The purpose of this “program” is to both communicate its non-threatening character to the Democratic Party as well as to employ radical slogans that give their political message a somewhat broader popular appeal. In this way, the stage is set both to maintain lines of communication with the Democrats and to politically disorient those drawn to the ostensibly “left” appeal.

The ideological bridge put forward in Chicago was based on three essential components.

First, the relationship is based on an anti-working class program that seeks not to abolish, but to make minor changes to capitalism in the interests of more privileged sections of the middle class.

This essentially anti-working class character of the conference was expressed most clearly by the representatives of Syriza and Podemos.

Socialist Alternative member and Syriza representative Alan Akrivos said: “Some discussion of Syriza is pertinent in the US. In front of our very eyes we can see a well-entrenched two-party system being demolished over the course of the last period. It reveals how political

change, how quickly political change can take place. It shows how important some of the campaigns that we've been discussing can actually flourish under the right conditions for people who are seeking a way forward."

Akrivos failed to mention the fact that his government in Greece has dutifully been carrying out the austerity demands of the European banks since coming to power early this year. The Syriza-led government, after being elected by exploiting widespread opposition and anger, quickly declared its support for the entire framework put forward by the "troika" of the European Central Bank, the EU and the International Monetary Fund.

Akrivos did, however, defend Syriza's decision to send the Greek police to violently attack student demonstrators at Athens Polytechnic University in April 2015—an event with explosive political implications in a country run for decades by a military dictatorship after the Second World War.

"I think there is an anarchist occupation taking place," he said. "They've occupied one of the main universities of Athens. They're doing the wrong thing at the wrong time. They say with a Syriza government nothing has changed, which of course is scandalous. Their idea was to incite police action against them, but that's all I can say without any great detail."

Akrivos' warnings that demonstrators had better not "do the wrong thing at the wrong time" by "inciting police action" is a pledge that the pseudo-left will use the military and police to enforce the demands of finance capital on the population. Social opposition, in the form of demonstrations or strikes, is "scandalous," and will be put down with violence.

Podemos representative Sascha Nemseff Villagran also warned of the dangers of popular "anger."

"Podemos is a gateway for all the anger to be channeled in a democratic way," he said. "A lot of anger has gone through the elections, and now there are a lot less demonstrations on the street." By a "democratic way" is meant a way that does not pose a danger to the capitalist system.

The second component of the connection between the pseudo-left and the Democrats is the preoccupation with race, gender, and sexual orientation.

During a panel discussion titled "Black Lives Matter and the Democrats," one panelist, Socialist Alternative's Darletta Scruggs, said, "we have to be inclusive."

By this she did not mean that the struggle against police killings must unite workers and youth of all races against state violence and social inequality. Scruggs continued: "When we march over the death of black people we must march for black women as well. It is not enough to say black lives matter unless you say all black lives matter. Trans, gay, youth, women, etc. None of these black lives should play second class to the lives of black men."

Another panelist, Rosa Clemente, attempted to deflect the clear class consequences arising out of the fact that African-American Democrats run many cities where police killings and crackdowns are common.

"The system of white supremacy doesn't need white people, it has black and Latino people working at their behest. The president doesn't need to be a man to institute patriarchy. We need to deconstruct this language because young people see this and they aren't stupid." In other words, the pseudo-left needs to work even harder to frame the issue as one of race and gender.

The third central component of the relationship between the upper-middle class "left" and the Democrats is centered on right-wing American nationalism.

The immense amount of time granted to discussing individual identity was in sharp contrast to the conference's failure to raise any opposition to the US-led war efforts in Eastern Europe, South East Asia, Central Asia, Africa and the Middle East. On the first day of the event, not a word was

spoken about American imperialism. The silence exemplifies the support amongst these layers for the various wars launched by the Obama administration. In fact, the only discussion of anything outside the US was centered on discussing how to copy the right-wing politics of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

In search of political "space"

In order for this ideological bridge to the Democratic Party to be transmitted to a broader audience, the pseudo-left seeks to base it within a concrete political framework. The preferred term is "political space," used to describe potential political networks that can serve as bases of operation.

In search of "political space," the groups present at the conference look primarily to the political infrastructure of the Democratic Party, and in particular to the campaign of Bernie Sanders for the party's presidential nominee.

These networks within the Democratic Party are sought-after because they provide access to Democratic "activists" and trade union bureaucrats. Moreover, by linking with the infrastructure of the Democratic Party, these groups also hope to gain access to non-profit grant money, wealthy donor lists, volunteers and legitimacy in the eyes of the bourgeois press and political establishment.

"How do you intervene in these debates [taking place in the Democratic Party on Sanders' campaign]?" Ty Moore asked. "Do we just denounce Sanders? I'm not going to support him but we need to have a very friendly, explanatory discussion with people who are going to move into action with Sanders to fight against Wall Street corruption."

After the topic of Sanders' announcement was broached, one organizer noted with laughter that "the 800-pound elephant is in the room." Indeed, Sanders' election creates a somewhat awkward situation for the attendees. As one participant from the floor put it: "Isn't it odd that we're here for an independent meeting yet most of the people in this room are going to support the Democrat, Sanders?"

Evidence of the Democratic Party's open efforts to solicit the support among the forces represented by the conference was provided in handout form to those in attendance in Chicago.

"Dear Friends in Chicago," read the opening line of a letter distributed to delegates on letterhead from the office of Bernie Sanders. The letter, written and signed by Sanders himself, read:

"Before making this difficult decision [to run as a Democrat]," the letter reads, "I received much public and private advice about whether to campaign within Democratic Party primaries or only in the general election as a progressive independent. I concluded that running an effective 50-state campaign, as a third party independent, was neither feasible nor the best way to raise, before the largest possible audience, issues and problems that our mainstream parties routinely ignore."

"I strongly believe that your efforts in Chicago this weekend and back home are still very much complementary to the national electoral campaign that I just announced this week. And I hope that the spirit of cooperation reflected in your meeting agenda will extend to our mutual ability to work together, now and in the future."

This document is an important exposition of the process through which the organizations of the privileged upper middle class and the Democratic Party communicate. The letter is an acknowledgment that the Democratic Party cannot pull the wool over the eyes of the population in 2016 without the help of the pseudo-left. Indeed, the latter are "very much complementary" to Sanders' efforts to provide a populist cover for the Democratic Party in the 2016 elections.

The letter from Bernie Sanders and the conference attendees' statements on his campaign underscore the fact that both the Democrats and the pseudo-left view the Sanders campaign as a prime staging ground upon which the orientation to the Democratic Party could be based.

The main disagreement amongst those in attendance on this question is whether they should announce their support for Sanders openly, or continue to support him tacitly, as Moore said, through "very friendly, explanatory discussions." The disagreements are not based on principle, but on concerns that open alignment with the Democrats would blow the cover on the whole operation.

For example, Todd Chretien said that "we should all develop our ideas on Sanders and have some creative tensions... But that's something we have to deal with. On the question of fusion with the Democrats or non-fusion, the question of the Democrats at the local level is a creative tension. What do we do about this? It's a reality that most of the good people in the country are members of the Democratic Party."

But those groups in attendance in Chicago also want to ensure that their own political pet projects play a prominent role in the operation. Throughout the conference, Socialist Alternative representatives made constant reference to their "Fight for 15" campaign, through which they have developed ties to the Service Employees International Union and Democratic Party functionaries. The International Socialist Organization made clear that it is more oriented toward winning positions within the Chicago trade union bureaucracy. The Green Party hopes that its own party and its own presidential candidate will serve as the network for united "left" activity in the coming years, while the trade union representatives in attendance asked about the role of the trade unions in the aftermath of the conference.

The exact framework upon which the pseudo-left builds its operation will not alter the basic function of the relationship with the Democrats. In fact, the more they talk of "independence" from the Democrats, the more thoroughly will they disorient those workers and young people whose desire for independence from the two parties is genuine.

Propping-up the Democratic Party

The so-called independence from the Democratic Party is a fraud. The image painted of the Democratic Party at the Chicago conference—that there are "good" and "bad" tendencies, that the "progressives" are to be praised and encouraged, that the Democrats can be pressured from the left—is wrong.

American history is ripe with examples of "independent" populist movements posing to the left of the framework of the two-party system.

Dating back to the last decades of the nineteenth century, the relationship between left "populist" movements and the Democratic Party in particular has been a central element of American political life. Time and time again, efforts have been mounted to stem the development of a mass socialist movement by siphoning popular discontent in an anti-Marxist and ultimately pro-establishment direction.

But the efforts in Chicago to build a new pseudo-independent crutch for the Democratic Party are of a more right-wing character than at any point in US history.

The transformation of the US economy from industrial superpower to the world capital of financial parasitism over the past four decades has produced a rightward shift in the axis of American bourgeois politics. While the Republican Party has more openly become the party of religious backwardness and chauvinism, the Democratic Party has abandoned its semi-reformist past as the party of the New Deal, the New Frontier and the Great Society.

The Democratic Party today relies programmatically on an identity politics that appeal primarily to the more privileged layers of the upper-middle class. On top of this, the trade unions that had provided a traditional base for the Democratic coalitions of the middle of the twentieth century are not only less powerful numerically, but are also widely hated by the membership on account of decades of concessions and sell-outs. In other words, the base of support upon which the Democratic Party traditionally relied every election cycle is growing ever more thin.

Aware of widespread discontent with the pro-corporate, pro-war campaign of multi-millionaire Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party is preparing an operation that it hopes will somehow channel those disenchanted with the two-party system back into the Democratic Party.

Sections of the upper middle class represented by the ISO, Socialist Alternative and the other organizations gathered in Chicago have moved sharply to the right as well. These organizations speak for layers whose interests are tied by a thousand threads to Wall Street and the American war machine's plunder abroad.

This is the fundamental significance of the Chicago conference. After eight years of endless war and continued attacks on democratic rights and living standards by the Obama administration, the Democratic Party is becoming more widely recognized as a ruthless force for war and inequality. The upper-middle class "left" is being called in to prevent workers and young people from drawing the necessary conclusion that the Democratic Party is an organ of Wall Street and the Pentagon, and that a revolutionary party of the working class must be built.



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