

Socialist Alternative, ISO work to channel opposition into the Democratic Party

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Over the first half of 2016, the emerging opposition of tens of millions of US workers to the political establishment has found expression in the presidential election campaign. In particular, the broad support for Bernie Sanders' bid for the Democratic Party nomination is an indication of growing anti-capitalist sentiment. At the same time, there are significant indications of a resurgence of class struggle, including the strike by 39,000 Verizon workers on the US East Coast.

The principal political function of the Sanders campaign is to direct opposition back into the Democratic Party, likely through support for the eventual nomination of Hillary Clinton. In this, his campaign is receiving the support of various pseudo-left organizations that call themselves socialist. This is clearly exemplified by Socialist Alternative leader and Seattle City Councilperson Kshama Sawant in an article titled "The Movement Route," published May 24 in *Jacobin* magazine. The perspective of Socialist Alternative is advanced in somewhat different tactical form by the International Socialist Organization.

If Sanders wins the nomination, Sawant makes clear that her group will campaign for the Democratic nominee. If Sanders loses to Clinton, Sawant calls for Sanders to run a "safe state" campaign that encourages workers and youth to vote for Clinton in swing states and for Sanders in the 40 or so states where his candidacy would not hamper Hillary Clinton's chances of securing the White House for the Democrats. "If polls indicated [Republican Donald] Trump could be within striking distance in the general election, Sanders could choose whether to continue his campaign in key swing states," Sawant writes.

In politics, parties and individuals take responsibility for the programs they advance. In Socialist Alternative's case, the group's call for a "safe state" campaign amounts to support for Hillary Clinton's campaign for president, justified by the claim that she represents a "lesser evil" than Donald Trump.

This not only gives the lie to Socialist Alternative's proclaimed "independence" from the Democrats, it also

exposes the class character of the US pseudo-left. After all, Hillary Clinton is the chosen candidate of dominant sections of the financial aristocracy and the military-intelligence apparatus. She is a proven warmonger and promoter of US imperialist interests internationally. She is a corrupt agent of the Wall Street banks who has personally enriched herself by soliciting immense fees for giving adulatory speeches before corporate audiences.

Sawant makes various criticisms of Clinton in her article. These criticisms are made from the standpoint of a Democratic Party supporter whose aim is to secure the White House for the Democrats.

"Bernie Sanders consistently polls extremely well against Trump," Sawant writes. "Why, then, has the Democratic establishment so fiercely and undemocratically backed Clinton if their goal is to defeat Trump?" She calls for "an unambiguously pro-worker, anti-establishment movement" to "undercut right-wing populism."

What, according to Socialist Alternative, would such an "Anybody But Trump" movement look like?

"The most important thing is for labor and social movements to offer a left, anti-establishment political vision," Sawant says. She calls for anti-Trump protests that will "unite working people, students, people of color, unions, and everyone else terrified by the rise of Trump."

Who is to be included in the "everyone else" category? Here, Socialist Alternative is calling for workers to ally themselves with powerful sections of finance capital, the US military and intelligence apparatus, the trade union bureaucracy, the Democratic and even the Republican Party who find the prospect of a Trump presidency a risk to corporate profits and the long-term strategy of imperialist world domination.

Such a program has nothing to do with socialism, which insists on the mobilization of the working class independently from all political supporters of capitalism—Socialist Alternative included.

The categories of social analysis employed by Sawant serve this same purpose: "Ordinary people," "the

Republican base,” “a fighting left alternative,” “labor and left leaders,” “Sanders’ base,” the Democratic Party’s “rank-and-file,” “social movements,” “an anti-establishment political vision,” etc.

Such terms are employed to obscure the class character of candidates and parties. They are based on a rejection of the fact that society is divided into classes, and they pave the way for the most bankrupt political conclusions. After all, does not Donald Trump claim to have “an anti-establishment political vision” that represents “ordinary people”?

Socialist Alternative employs these terms not out of theoretical error, but because their privileged upper-middle class position drives their hostility to Marxism and the working class.

So bankrupt are Socialist Alternative’s positions that they have come under fire from even the International Socialist Organization. The latter’s critiques of the former, however, highlight the antisocialist character of both organizations.

Writing for the ISO, Todd Chretien notes his organization’s opposition to Socialist Alternative’s “safe state strategy” while calling for a vote for the capitalist Green Party “as a step toward building an alternative to the two-party system.” Calling for the formation of an “independent left and social movement organization,” Chretien notes that Socialist Alternative’s “failure to take a similar independent course has weakened the effort to confront the two-party system, not strengthened it.”

Organizational independence from the Democratic Party does not in itself alter the class character of a party. That is determined by program, history and social base. On all three criteria, the Green Party is a capitalist party, not a working-class or socialist party. The Green Party in the US has long functioned as a pressure group on the Democrats. Where the Greens have come to power internationally, most notably in Germany, they have carried out a policy of war and austerity.

Moreover, “political independence” is not merely a catchphrase—the term has a class content. The international working class, billions strong and the producers of all of the world’s wealth, is the revolutionary social force under capitalism that is capable of abolishing war, poverty and inequality through social revolution. But the task of socialists is to make the working class aware of its tasks by exposing the class nature of capitalist society and the class character of all groups that seek to tie the working class to capitalism, regardless of whether they incorrectly label themselves “socialist.”

For all their paeans to “independent courses” and “social movements,” the ISO and Socialist Alternative each speak for privileged sections of the upper-middle class whose social interests are materially opposed to those of the

working class. This is why the ISO tells workers to vote for the Green Party, which endorses capitalism and whose campaign platform “Four Pillars and Ten Key Values” contain no references to socialism, the working class, the nationalization of major industries, imperialism or the class struggle.

Socialist Alternative, in an article included in the “debate” with the ISO, puts forward a similarly bankrupt approach. Calling for “tactical flexibility” in order to justify its support for the Democratic Party, the article notes: “New workers parties will not develop in a clean or linear fashion, and we have to be prepared for all sorts of half steps as part of a developing process. The formation of new workers parties rarely takes place in pure form. Often elements from capitalist parties can be affected by the class struggle and play a contradictory role.”

This is a fair summation of the pseudo-left’s whole political approach. According to Socialist Alternative and its partners, the American capitalist class and the working class do not have irreconcilable class interests, but rather the financial oligarchy can be persuaded to abandon its class interests under the pressure of the class struggle, and will itself create “workers parties” upon its own initiative.

This is pure sophistry. What they are setting up is not a transition to political independence or “workers parties,” but a political trap.

History has taught the working class that the fight for social equality and against war must entail a genuinely independent political struggle against the capitalist system. In Socialist Alternative and the ISO’s approach to the US elections, workers and youth have a model of everything socialism is not.



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