

At the People's Summit: An opportunist debate over Clinton vs. the Green Party's Stein

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One of the most heavily attended workshops at last weekend's "People's Summit" of Sanders supporters was titled "Democratic Socialism in a New Time." It attracted an audience of nearly 150 people, filling up every seat and leaving dozens more people lining the walls and spilling out into the hall.

The forum was controlled by the Democratic Socialists of America, a right-wing social-democratic group embedded within the Democratic Party. Two of the three speakers, City University of New York Professor Frances Fox Piven and Bhaskar Sunkara, editor of *Jacobin* magazine, are members of the DSA, as is the workshop chairman, Charlie Lenchner, executive director of Democrats.com in New York City.

The remaining speaker was Kshama Sawant of Socialist Alternative, who was elected as city councilwoman in Seattle, Washington in 2013 and reelected last year, running in alliance with a section of local Democrats. Sawant and Socialist Alternative have fully supported the campaign of Bernie Sanders for the Democratic presidential nomination, promoting his claims to be a "democratic socialist." They have backed an initiative called Movement4Bernie, which urges Sanders to run as an independent or Green Party candidate if he loses the Democratic nomination to Hillary Clinton.

Given that the workshop was held under the rubric of "democratic socialism," it is no small irony that neither democracy nor socialism were in evidence. Lenchner came with a list of questions for the panelists, insisted that they answer them, and berated them when they did not.

At one point, when Sawant resisted his demand to

sketch out a socialist perspective for a single city or state, Lenchner launched into a red-baiting tirade about how some socialists wanted to impose their will on others.

Most of the first hour of the workshop was a desultory, friendly discussion among like-minded people, in which there was little to distinguish between the right-wing social democrats of the DSA from the pseudo-left Sawant, who was congratulated for her electoral success and in turn flattered Sunkara and Piven as writers and thinkers.

There was no mention of revolution, outside of the "political revolution" advocated by Sanders, which amounts to mobilizing a bigger voter turnout for the Democratic Party and winning Democratic control of Congress as well as the White House.

The discussion became contentious only when Sawant insisted that the urgent topic was not the question of socialism in general, but what those present in the room, and in the conference as a whole, would be doing for the next five months. She was referring to the general election campaign. Her organization, Socialist Alternative, is opposed to the openly pro-Clinton orientation of the trade union and Democratic Party organizers of the People's Summit and calls instead for a vote for Green Party candidate Jill Stein.

Stein is not a socialist and her organization explicitly repudiates socialism in its program, calling for a market economy and incentives to favor "green" capitalists over the dirtier kind. She asked to address the People's Summit but was rebuffed by the conference organizers, the National Nurses United union and Democratic Party operatives.

In response to Sawant's appeals, Frances Fox Piven

took up the question of how to vote in the general election, offering the right-wing, pragmatic approach of a longtime supporter of the DSA and opponent of revolutionary socialism. At one point in the workshop, she declared that the word “revolution” was unhelpful and “makes me shiver a little.” She added that “The glorious French Revolution didn’t turn out well.”

Piven said that the 2016 election was taking place as “The right is getting stronger and stronger, and there’s a pretty decent chance that Donald Trump is going to become president. That’s our reality. That could happen.” Third party alternatives had a poor record, she added.

Then she declared flatly, “I’m going to vote for Hillary, but I’m not going to work for her. I’m going to work for the movements I support. I’m going to buy time to work for the movements. Trump may not give us the time ... Lesser-evilism may be a curse word, but I think it’s reasonable. Another four years of a deceptive neo-liberal government, I’m going to swallow it.”

After this uncomfortably blunt summation of the whole purpose of the People’s Summit, there was little for the other speakers to add. Neither Sunkara nor Sawant sought to rebut Piven’s statement, which was greeted with a mixture of applause and gasps.

After the workshop, Sunkara told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he would vote for Jill Stein in his home state, New York, because it is not considered competitive in the general election, so there is no chance of Trump winning there. If he lived in a “swing state,” like Virginia, he would cast his ballot for Clinton.

Sawant gave a slightly modified version of the same approach, telling the WSWS that she “personally” would vote for Jill Stein in Washington state, where she lives, or in a swing state like Nevada. But she hastened to add that she was “very understanding” of those who would choose differently and cast a vote for Clinton in a swing state.

The “swing state tactic,” much discussed in liberal and pseudo-left circles, is just that: a tactical difference among people who all proceed with the same opportunist political strategy. They all support capitalist politicians, whether of the openly pro-imperialist stripe, such as Hillary Clinton, or of the disguised “green” coloration, such as Jill Stein. Their only difference is over how best to disguise the reactionary character of

their politics from the new layers of youth and workers who are moving to the left and entering into political struggle for the first time.



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