

Chomsky in Chicago: The thin gruel of lesser-evil politics

Marcus Day, George Gallanis
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Noam Chomsky, professor emeritus of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and prominent critic of US foreign policy, gave a talk on September 26 at the University of Chicago. The lecture, titled, “On Power and Ideology,” was organized under the aegis of Haymarket Books, the publishing house of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO).

While the event attracted considerable interest, anyone who came looking for answers to the great problems facing humanity—above all, the threat of world war between nuclear-armed powers—was offered nothing more than the thoroughly bankrupt strategy of supporting the “lesser of two evils,” i.e. the Democratic Party.

The meeting, held on the same night as the first of the presidential debates between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, drew large numbers of young people. Tickets for the event sold out within hours. Eighteen hundred were reportedly in attendance, and over 1,000 more watched the livestream online.

Anthony Arnove, a member of the ISO who sits on the editorial boards of the group’s International Socialist Review and Haymarket Books, introduced Chomsky, saying, “He embodies, more than any other person alive, the meaning of solidarity.” The question of solidarity with whom, or with what class, was not elaborated on.

Chomsky, beginning his lecture, stated, “For the first time in human history, it’s necessary to make a crucial decision: Will organized human life continue to exist on this earth, or will it not. And that’s not in the indefinite future; it’s in the near future.”

The two major threats to “decent human survival,” Chomsky said, were those of nuclear war and environmental catastrophe. However, while criticizing certain features of US foreign and environmental policy, Chomsky continuously sought to portray the Republican Party in general and Trump in particular as a far greater menace than Clinton and the Democratic Party, stating, “Considering the stakes, it’s a fair question to ask whether there’s ever been a more dangerous organization than today’s Republican Party.”

Under conditions in which there is growing disillusionment with the Democratic Party, with millions of workers and young

people having undergone eight years of perpetual war and declining living standards overseen by the Obama administration, Chomsky is seeking to deploy his “left-wing” credentials in order to prevent at all costs a break from the Democrats. In this endeavor, he finds common cause with Senator Bernie Sanders, who is currently touring the country to drum up support among his former followers for Clinton who is broadly and justifiably despised for her pro-Wall Street and warmongering record.

In his remarks, Chomsky alluded to the threats posed by global warming in order primarily to urge support for Clinton in the elections, saying: “We can do a lot about building coal plants in the United States. And in fact a very clear choice about that extremely significant matter is arising in a few weeks, when we have to choose between a presidential candidate who’s committed to phasing out this highly destructive practice, and another candidate who calls for accelerating this race to destruction.”

Chomsky’s assertion that Clinton is preferable to Trump because of her campaign promises to “phase out” coal use would be laughable if it weren’t so insidious. Such a claim papers over the record of the Democratic Party, which has defended at every step the profit interests of the energy conglomerates against the needs of the world’s population for a safe environment.

More significantly, Chomsky went on to refer to the threat of nuclear war, stating, “The military dimension that leads us to the growing threat of nuclear war is primarily at the Russian border. There’s a secondary threat off the coast of China.”

While attributing the threat of war with Russia “in significant part” to the expansion of NATO, Chomsky avoided at any point reconciling his assessment of the war danger, which has increased exponentially under the Obama administration, with his support for Obama in previous elections and for Clinton in the current election.

In order to portray Trump as the “greater evil,” Chomsky remained virtually silent about Clinton’s explicit support for a “no-fly zone” in Syria and the bombing of President Bashar al-Assad’s forces, or the reactionary campaign by the Democratic Party and the media to portray Russia as an “outlaw state.” Nor did he mention, for that matter, Clinton’s vote in support of the

war in Iraq, which he has characterized as recently as his latest book as “the major crime of the twenty-first century.”

In reality, the dramatic escalation of US provocations against Russia and China under Obama, the plans for even more reckless war policies under a potential Clinton presidency, and the support for Clinton by nearly the entire foreign policy, military and intelligence establishment, blows apart Chomsky’s claim that the Democratic Party is the “lesser of two evils.”

Although Chomsky has recycled the moth-eaten “lesser-evil” strategy for years (in particular beginning with the 2004 presidential race between Democrat John Kerry and Republican George W. Bush), his arguments have found perhaps their most pathetic expression in an article published on June 15 this year, “An Eight Point Brief for LEV (Lesser Evil Voting).”

(In an indication of the hostility that the article has provoked, and Chomsky’s indifference to the popular hatred of the two-party system, it is prefaced with a note stating, “Professor Chomsky requests that he not be contacted with responses to this piece.”)

Juggling phrases like “ethical/moral principles” and “cost/benefit strategic accounting,” Chomsky and his coauthor, John Halle, employ a sophistic argument in an effort to blackmail workers and youth into voting for the Democratic Party.

Those who would vote for alternatives to the “major party candidates who fail to reflect our values” or “the corrupt system designed to limit choices to those acceptable to corporate elites” are essentially supporting Trump, they assert. The “exclusive consequence of the act of voting in 2016 will be (if in a contested ‘swing state’) to marginally increase or decrease the chance of one of the major party candidates winning.”

Referring to a number of right-wing proposals by Trump (and saying absolutely nothing about the record and policies of Clinton), they draw the conclusion, “The suffering which these and other similarly extremist policies and attitudes [of Trump] will impose on marginalized and already oppressed populations has a high probability of being significantly greater than that which will result from a Clinton presidency.”

As the WSWS has repeatedly explained, the Trump campaign is not an isolated aberration, but rather the expression of the extreme rightward shift of the entire political establishment, bound up with the decline of US capitalism and the resort to ever more reactionary and criminal measures by the bourgeoisie. To urge a vote for Clinton is to blind workers and young people to that reality, and to facilitate the coverup of the catastrophic war plans she and the Democratic Party are preparing.

The anti-working class policies pursued by a Clinton presidency, moreover, would only create the conditions for Trump or some other demagogue to exploit social discontent and divert it down a fascistic path. The same process is seen throughout Europe with parties like LePen’s National Front

exploiting the social disaster overseen by the official “left.”

In the preamble to the “brief,” Chomsky and his coauthor smugly assert, “The basic moral principle at stake is simple: not only must we take responsibility for our actions, but the consequences of our actions for others are a far more important consideration than feeling good about ourselves.” In other words, if you dare vote for a political alternative to the two right-wing, warmongering candidates you are nothing but selfish.

This is entirely specious. The only “consequences” Chomsky would have himself or others feel responsible for are those of a Trump presidency. Chomsky, however, refuses to take any responsibility for the policies of Obama—who he repeatedly promoted—or a future Clinton presidency.

Chomsky, a lifelong anarchist and explicit opponent of Marxism and the Russian Revolution, is a representative of the upper-middle-class intelligentsia, which has steadily shifted further to the right, particularly following the end of the anti-Vietnam war protests in the 1970s, and then accelerating after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

While Chomsky may still, on one or another occasion, note the hypocrisies and dishonesty of the justifications given for US military intervention, he nonetheless is incapable of maintaining a politically consistent opposition to imperialism, above all because of his hostility to Marxism and its scientific, historically-grounded analysis of capitalism as the root cause of war.

In Chomsky’s appearance in Chicago, there is the not-insignificant matter of his host: the ISO, which has been among the most fervent proponents of US military confrontation with the Assad regime in Syria and Russia. Although the ISO claims to oppose the “lesser evil” argument and formally endorses Green Party candidate Jill Stein, in reality it functions as a section of the Democratic Party. It has repeatedly propagated the fraudulent “human rights” justifications for US military intervention—in Libya, Syria, and elsewhere—and plays a key role in covering up for the Democratic Party’s plans for new and more catastrophic wars. About these lies and this political record, Chomsky had to say—nil.

Professor Chomsky is fundamentally opposed to any challenge to the two-party system, and thus prostrates himself before the political establishment. His call to “vote for the lesser of two evils” by urging a vote for Clinton marks him as a supporter of the Democratic Party, and renders him politically responsible for the crimes they have carried out and are preparing.



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