

ISO seeks to channel anti-Trump protests behind the Democratic Party

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The first three weeks of the Trump administration have seen an unprecedented outpouring of popular opposition to a newly installed government. Millions of people in the US and around the world have taken part in demonstrations opposing Trump's anti-democratic policies.

The protests show that despite a quarter century of unending war and more than 15 years of the "war on terror," the American ruling class has been unable to create a mass popular base for imperialist war or anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant racism. On the contrary, the largely spontaneous response to Trump's attacks on democratic rights reflects the deeply felt progressive sentiments among workers and young people.

As always in the initial stages of such a process, the underlying class issues have yet to emerge openly, and the prevailing political perspective is one of protest and pressure on the existing political parties and institutions. The independent and revolutionary role of the working class has yet to find political expression.

The International Socialist Organization, one of many organizations that orbit the Democratic Party and seek to provide it with a "left" cover, is doing its best to prevent this from happening. In a series of articles on its *Socialist Worker* web site, the ISO explicitly argues that the mass protests have already shifted not only the Democrats, but even sections of the Republicans, to oppose Trump.

An editorial published February 1, "The people versus the president," provides a case study in the way that the ISO works to obscure class issues and distinctions in order to confuse opposition and direct it behind the political establishment and the capitalist system.

The ISO's method of political analysis begins with the headline. What are the "people"? This class-less term obscures the social and political distinctions that exist among those who are opposed to Trump. It is specifically aimed at lumping together and identifying the genuine opposition of workers and youth opposed to Trump's attack on democratic rights and his right-wing policies with the motivations of Trump's ruling-class opponents.

Proceeding along these lines, the article states that the widespread protests show that Trump is "going to be as widely resisted as anybody could have hoped—even if that means ordinary people have to drag their 'representatives' into the fight."

Scare-quotes notwithstanding, the ISO identifies mass opposition to Trump with opposition from within the ruling class. The editorial goes on to state that the obeisance of the political establishment to Trump "started to change the moment that Trump assumed office, when the crowd of supporters attending his inauguration ceremony were absolutely dwarfed the next day by what is being called the largest single day of protest in US history."

"These protests have reversed the dynamic of November and December," the editorial declares, "when the Democrats' meek acquiescence to Trump seemed to paralyze many liberals... That started to change in January as the growing numbers signing up for the Women's Marches pushed some unions and liberal groups into devoting resources to

build the demonstration, if still behind the scenes."

Class and political distinctions are covered over. The aim of the unions and "liberal groups" (i.e., groups aligned with the Democratic Party) is to *contain* opposition of workers and youth, not give expression to it.

Finally, we have the statement: "Trump's all-out assault could lead to greater opposition from the hitherto meek leaders of the Republican and Democratic Parties—in part because Trump is racing full steam ahead with a program that doesn't have the support of the majority of the capitalist class, but more importantly, because the wave of popular discontent is pressuring them to act."

Thus, "popular discontent," according to the ISO, is stiffening the backbone of "hitherto meek leaders" among both Democrats and Republicans. Ever greater pressure will compel such "leaders"—among which the ISO is presumably including right-wing militarists like John McCain, Lindsey Graham, Charles Schumer and others—to really stand up to Trump.

Notably absent in the editorial is any reference to the actual content of the divisions within the ruling class. In the entire editorial, there is not a single mention of foreign policy, war, imperialism, Russia or Obama (whose election in 2008 the ISO claimed was a "transformational" moment in American politics). There is no mention of "class" except for the brief reference in the sentence quoted above.

The main focus of the Democrats' campaign against Trump is his perceived softness toward Russia, which was the target of a major military and diplomatic escalation during Obama's second term. Both during the 2016 election campaign and since Trump's victory, the Democrats (and the media, along with some Republicans) have been carrying out a neo-McCarthyite campaign denouncing Russian President Putin as a war criminal and murderer and denouncing Trump's stated interest in improving relations with Russia.

That the ISO makes no mention of these issues is not an accident. It supports the anti-Russian war-mongering of the Democrats. It is, in fact, allied to the faction of the CIA and the Pentagon that is determined to maintain and escalate the confrontation with Russia, risking direct military conflict between the world's two largest nuclear powers. The opposed faction of the US intelligence/military complex, aligned with the Trump White House, is pushing for a more immediate focus on China, believing the US can settle scores with Russia later.

The ISO has, after all, enthusiastically supported Washington's neo-colonial wars in Libya and Syria as well as its machinations in Ukraine, where the US backed a fascist-led putsch that overthrew a pro-Russian government and installed a far-right, ultra-nationalist and rabidly anti-Russian regime in Kiev. It has hailed the various proxy forces of US imperialism, from the Islamist "rebels" in Libya and Syria to the fascist shock troops in Kiev, as the bearers of democratic revolutions, while churning out article after article labeling Russia as an imperialist power.

Key to the ISO's arguments in favor of a perspective of applying pressure on the Democrats is its rejection of the class criterion in the

analysis of political developments. This in itself defines it as an anti-Marxist organization, since the foundation of Marxist political and historical analysis is the understanding that all political organizations, tendencies and programs ultimately reflect definite class interests.

The ISO's method is contained in its characterization of "left" factions within the Democratic Party. It writes, "During the months after the election, it looked like [Trump] might get away with [bullying the country into meekly accepting his right-wing 'America First' agenda]. Republicans who loathe Trump's populist rhetoric got in line behind his calls to stop trade deals like the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Democrats—even the most progressive of them, like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren—pledged to find areas of common ground to work with the new nightmare of a president."

What is the significance of the designation of Sanders and Warren as "progressive"? Again, it serves to obscure class issues and cover up for the actual role of these Democratic Party operatives, while seeking to prevent those who supported Sanders from drawing the necessary conclusions from their experiences.

Notwithstanding their left-sounding rhetoric, neither Sanders or Warren is associated with a serious social reform policy or measures that in any way challenge the basic economic interests of the ruling class. On foreign policy, they both supported the imperialist war policies of the Obama administration.

Sanders and Warren bear major political responsibility for the election of Trump. Their support in the general election campaign for Hillary Clinton, a longstanding ally of the CIA and Wall Street who ran as the continuator of the Obama years, made it possible for Trump to posture as a defender of the "forgotten American" and channel discontent and anger in a right-wing direction.

Sanders played a particularly perfidious role. Presenting himself as a "democratic socialist" and opponent of the "billionaire class," he won mass support from young people and workers, receiving 13 million votes in the Democratic presidential primaries. His aim from the outset was to serve as a lightning rod for mass discontent and growing anti-capitalist sentiment, in order to channel opposition back behind the Democratic Party.

Since the election, both Sanders and Warren have been elevated into the leadership of the Democratic caucus in the Senate by Minority Leader Charles Schumer of New York, a bagman for the bankers who gets more campaign cash from Wall Street than from any other source. They also both voted to confirm retired Gen. James "Mad Dog" Mattis as Trump's secretary of defense. Their pledge now to "work with" Trump on economic nationalist policy is not an aberration, but the logical continuation of their politics.

The Democratic Party is a political organization of the ruling class. The political function of individuals like Sanders and Warren is to give this party a "left" face in order to block the emergence of genuine opposition that would challenge the entire capitalist system. The role of groups like the ISO is to provide in one form or another political cover for Sanders, Warren and the party as a whole.

In other recent articles, the ISO has explicitly denounced political criticisms of the organizations and individuals heading up the demonstrations against Trump. The February 1 *Socialist Worker* editorial approvingly cites Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, a black nationalist and frequent contributor to the publication. The previous week, she published a piece on the web site, "Don't shame the first steps of a resistance," in which she denounced as a sign of "political immaturity" criticism of the "politically liberal" attitudes of the protest organizers.

"Were liberals on the march?" Taylor asked rhetorically. "Yes! And thank god. The movement to resist Trump will have to be a mass movement, and mass movements aren't homogeneous—they are, pretty much by definition, politically heterogeneous. And there is not a single

radical or revolutionary on earth who did not begin their political journey holding liberal ideas."

The development of revolutionary consciousness, however, requires precisely what Taylor and the ISO oppose: an uncompromising exposure of bourgeois politics, above all its nominally "left" or "liberal" varieties, as the basis for the development of a genuinely independent movement of the working class, based on the principles of socialism.

Contrary to the claims of the ISO, it has been many decades since one could speak of a social reform tendency within American bourgeois politics and its two-party system. In the 1930s, the American liberal philosopher John Dewey attacked the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt as inadequate and called for a change in the "economic and financial structure of society itself," declaring that only through such a change would it be possible to ensure "the right of every person to work and enable everyone to live in security."

The Democratic Party rejected any such perspective and instead fully embraced the post-World War II drive of American imperialism for world hegemony. It joined the Republicans in the Cold War anti-socialist witch-hunt of the 1940s and 1950s and became no less a party of the CIA and Pentagon. For the past 40 years, as the decline in the global economic position of the United States has accelerated, the Democratic Party has moved further and further to the right, abandoning the social reform policies of the New Deal and Great Society and embracing the program of social counterrevolution openly inaugurated by the Reagan administration.

From the Populist movement at the turn of the 20th century, to the emergence of the industrial unions and the CIO in the 1930s, to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, and the anti-war movements of the 1960s and the early 2000s, the Democratic Party has served as the graveyard of mass opposition movements in the United States. With the election of Obama in 2008, the pseudo-left organizations that had led the anti-war movement shifted sharply to the right, becoming open supporters of the wars of American imperialism.

Through its denunciations of a principled political criticism and the fight to clarify the essential political issues among workers and youth, the ISO reveals its nervousness that the opposition to Trump could herald an independent working-class movement against the entire political and economic system.

The ISO is an organization that represents the interests of privileged layers of the upper middle class. In the course of nearly 50 years of political reaction in America, bound up with the economic decay of US capitalism and a colossal growth of social inequality, these layers have benefited from the spectacular rise of the stock market and impoverishment of the working class. They are the real base of the ISO and similar organizations.

The fundamental political question posed by the emergence of Trump is the development of a new political leadership that can mobilize the working class in opposition to the entire capitalist system, on the basis of an independent, socialist and internationalist program. It is precisely this strategic orientation the ISO emphatically opposes.



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