

Haymarket Books' #Resist: The International Socialist Organization props up the Democratic Party in Chicago

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On Tuesday, May 9, Haymarket Books, the publishing house of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), hosted a public conversation between authors Naomi Klein and Michelle Alexander at Roosevelt University in Chicago, Illinois. The conversation was moderated by Keeanga-Yamahitta Taylor, assistant professor of African-American studies at Princeton University in New Jersey and a leading member of the ISO.

Alexander is a Stanford University law professor and the author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010). Klein, who lives in Canada, is the author of several books that cover economic and environmental issues, including *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007) and *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (2014).

The conversation was held against the backdrop of a ferocious conflict within the ruling class in the United States. The Democrats have centered their opposition to Trump not on the deeply right-wing and authoritarian tendencies of his administration, but on his alleged ties to Russia.

The conflict was not even mentioned in the event, which took place as the ISO was maintaining a complete silence on the crisis consuming the American political system. This is because the ISO supports that faction of the ruling class that favors a harsher line against Russia, and in general seeks to channel social opposition behind the Democratic Party.

Taylor presented the opening remarks, which revealed to the audience what the meeting was really about—to build a base of support for “a multi-racial, democratic, left-wing movement” among “a left that is

disparate and seeking to define itself.” That is, to develop a new regroupment to function as a prop for the Democratic Party.

The entire event sought to provide a political cover for the Democrats. This began with the analysis of the 2016 elections, which were presented as the consequence of racist animosity among white workers. Alexander declared that the election of Obama created resentment among “whites.” “Any time there’s been a movement toward racial progress,” she said, “there’s been a whitelash throughout history.” She also blamed “sections disgusted with the establishment” that are prone to bigotry or “turn a blind eye to it,” referring to working class voters who supported Trump in the 2016 elections.

This is entirely in line with the position of the Democratic Party itself, aimed at denying and obscuring the impact of the right-wing policies of the Democrats and the Obama administration, while sowing divisions in the working class along racial and gender lines. (See “Once again on race and the 2016 elections”)

Alexander’s racist view of history is expounded upon in her book *The New Jim Crow*, which argues that nothing fundamental has changed for African Americans in the US since the era of chattel slavery of the pre-Civil War South.

In addition to covering up for the significance of the Democrats’ defeat in 2016, the participants spoke entirely uncritically of the election campaign of Bernie Sanders. Klein lamented Sanders’ loss, saying that he “almost got it.” Her solution was for Sanders to “connect the dots” between economic issues and identity politics. Such a strategy should be pursued

“next time” to assure a Democratic Party victory.

None of the panelists sought to draw any conclusions from the Sanders campaign, which was aimed at channeling social discontent behind the right-wing, pro-war agenda of the Democrats. Over the past month, Sanders, now a leader of the Democratic Party caucus in the Senate, has been touring the country with Democratic National Committee Chair Tom Perez to try to shore up support for the Democrats.

There was also an attempt to dismiss and avoid discussion of the crimes of the Obama administration outright. Taylor remarked, “Obama is probably the only president with a scandal-free presidency,” a comment which elicited no contest from the other two participants. Apparently, unending war, a US-backed right-wing coup in Ukraine, and the transfer of billions of dollars of wealth from the working class to the banks in the form of a Wall Street bailout that resulted in mass layoffs, unemployment and cuts to social programs—do not amount to scandal in Taylor’s book.

Perhaps it was not a coincidence that Klein, the only non-US resident of the three, was allowed to pass even a reluctant semblance of criticism toward the former president. Klein started off by apologizing for the forthcoming criticism, then stated that the mass deportations of immigrants and drone killings carried out by the Obama administration were “not a part of Obama’s brand.” It would have been better, in other words, if he had been a bit better at his marketing strategy.

Given that the ISO claims to be socialist, it is notable that socialism was hardly mentioned throughout the entire event. At one point, following Klein’s open embrace of the Democratic Party through a revival of a Sanders-type movement, Taylor felt obliged to ask, apologetically, “Can equality truly exist...in a free-market capitalist system?”

The response from the guests was one of nervous laughter. Alexander eventually replied by suggesting, “We need a democratic socialist model... to guarantee the basic human rights that everyone should be entitled to... but that doesn’t necessarily mean the end to all business, to all entrepreneurship.” In other words, any political undertaking by Alexander and her lot will pose no threat whatsoever to the capitalist system.

Both Alexander and Klein took a nationalist approach on the question of capitalism, criticizing globalization

of capital as the source of mass unemployment, low wages, and poor living conditions. Not a word was mentioned about the profit system itself.

Another topic that was carefully avoided was the subject of war, aside from a passing reference in Taylor’s opening comments to the dropping of the MOAB bomb in Afghanistan. Nothing was said about the attacks carried out by the Trump administration in Syria, the increasingly aggressive stance of the administration toward North Korea and Iran, or the militarization of Russia’s western border—all conflicts which could spark a global conflict, and all supported by the Democratic Party.

This was a clear expression of the true class interests present at the discussion. No mention of war—the most important political issue before the working class of the world today—spelled their allegiance to the ruling class.

All in all, the event was thoroughly conformist in its analysis and outlook. It gave expression to the politics of the pseudo-left, which speaks for privileged layers of the upper middle class. Organizations like the ISO function as arms of the Democratic Party—pro-war, pro-capitalist, and hostile to the independent mobilization of the working class. To the extent that they want any changes, it is only to secure a more favorable redistribution of wealth within the top 10 percent of the population.

Workers and youth can advance their interests only in opposition to the politics represented on the stage at Roosevelt University.



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