

Demoralization and opportunism reign at annual Left Forum in New York City

Fred Mazelis
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The Left Forum, the annual conference of assorted left Democrats, middle class protesters, academics, Stalinists, ex-Trotskyists and remnants of the 1960s counterculture and protest politics, held its meeting this year from June 2-4. The atmosphere at the New York City event was one of demoralization and political opportunism.

The conference saw a huge falloff in attendance this year. Many of the panel sessions struggled to gather an audience of even 15 or 20. The evening plenary sessions were attended by no more than several hundred, in an auditorium that was more than half-empty. This is all the more significant because it stands in such sharp contrast to the widespread anger following the electoral victory and inauguration of Donald Trump as US president.

The layers that predominate at the forum are in the orbit of the Democratic Party and quite close to the trade union apparatus, and are for that very reason very far indeed from the masses of working people. Despite occasional rhetorical references to socialism, the vast majority of participants advocate either transforming the Democratic Party, pressuring it to move to the left, or, if the Democrats cannot be rescued, transferring their support to a third capitalist party such as the Greens or another reformist alternative.

One of the panels, for instance, was sponsored by “Draft Bernie for a People’s Party.” Several were under the auspices of the Green Party. Others pointed to Castroism, Hugo Chavez and various forms of Stalinism as the alternative to 21st century capitalism. Also playing a role in the weekend’s events were representatives of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which has for decades occupied a position as part of the “left” inside the Democratic Party, and Socialist Alternative and the International Socialist Organization (ISO), backers of Bernie Sanders and the Greens.

The panel on “Socialists and Greens in the ballot box and in the streets” was expressive of the general politics

that dominated. It featured six speakers and an audience that numbered barely 20, mostly older veterans of middle class protest. The answer to the question of how to fight Trump from all of the panelists, representing the Greens and various pseudo-left tendencies, was a “broad left” regroupment.

Adrian Boutoureira of the Greens began with a question: “Can the Left create a broad front, as has happened across the world? ...We either figure something out or we’re not going to survive.”

Boutoureira pointed to Podemos in Spain as an example. Later he referred in passing to developments in Latin America. He said nothing at all about the record of various nationalist regimes in Latin America, including those of the Workers Party in Brazil, Kirchner in Argentina, and Chavez and Maduro in Venezuela.

Boutoureira also was silent on the bitter experiences of the Greek working class with the vicious austerity policies of the Syriza government. Only two years ago, the Left Forum was dominated by delirious enthusiasm for the newly-elected government headed by Alexis Tsipras, which was hailed as the model for a rejuvenated socialist movement. Within weeks, Syriza had ignored the results of a referendum, which it had itself organized, in order to surrender to the dictates of the IMF and the World Bank.

Also speaking at this session was Ajamu Baraka, last year’s vice-presidential candidate of the Greens on the ticket headed by Jill Stein, and representatives of Socialist Alternative and the ISO.

Todd Chretien of the ISO boasted of his longtime association with the Greens, going back to the its electoral successes in 2000 and subsequent years, when it won certain local offices in northern California. Unfortunately, according to Chretien, “many Greens rejoined the Democrats.”

Whether intentionally or not, Chretien had put his finger on the fundamental class issue in the relationship between

the ISO and the Greens. The ISO's support for the Greens is another means of opposing independent working class political action. There is no fundamental class difference between the Greens and the Democrats, and the role of the ISO is to cover up this essential reality, working to sabotage the political education of the most advanced workers and youth.

Particularly noteworthy in this panel discussion was the absence of any mention of the growing danger of war. The speakers had little to say on any political issues, but the omission of the steadily growing inter-imperialist tensions as well as the threats against Russia and China, both nuclear-armed powers, was especially revealing.

The final plenary session of the Left Forum was chaired by Bhaskar Sunkara, the editor of *Jacobin* magazine, the "left" publication that was founded several years ago and whose respectability in ruling class circles is attested to by flattering profiles in the *New York Times* and elsewhere.

As it turned out, this session perfectly summed up the combination of demoralization and opportunism that pervaded the weekend. The speakers included journalist Christian Parenti, economist Richard Wolff, DSA spokesperson Tascha Van Auken, and Karina Garcia, a representative of the pro-Stalinist Party for Liberation and Socialism.

In a panel concluding the entire affair, there was absolutely no discussion of the urgent political situation that is taking shape only months after the inauguration of Donald Trump: the escalating attacks on the working class, the signs of deepening class struggle internationally, the raging factional war within the US ruling class, in which the Democrats have attacked Trump for being too "soft" on Russia.

Sunkara, who is also a member of the DSA, opened this session by declaring that, "a lot of the old debates...[like] reform or revolution...are less relevant today." As both Sunkara and the rest of the panelists made clear, this was because, according to them, revolution is unthinkable and impossible.

Conducting himself at times more like an ill-equipped late-night television host than the editor of a supposedly socialist publication, Sunkara closed the proceedings with two questions that elicited some revealing answers.

"Is there a route to transforming the Democratic Party?" he asked, including running in primary elections of this party of American imperialism. Most of the speakers replied enthusiastically in the affirmative. "The Democratic Party at the local level is open to being taken over or at least heavily influenced," Parenti declared.

Van Auken, who worked on both the Obama and Sanders campaigns, bragged that one DSA member is running in the Democratic primary this year in New York, and another as a Green Party candidate. Wolff opened with what sounded at first like an angry reply. "I don't care about the Democratic Party one way or another," he said—and then immediately explained, "If the opportunity arises to do something, fine."

On the question of socialism, Van Auken said that she "doesn't identify with anything... I don't define myself as a Democrat, I don't define myself as anything." She added, "Having any label bothers me, because I like to be able to just see what people have to say." This declaration of a principled lack of principles in fact translates into support for capitalism and the Democratic Party, which is the politics of the DSA.

Garcia was the only speaker who declared, demagogically, that "the Democratic Party are not our friends." She said nothing about the role of Bernie Sanders, however. She later went on to make clear that her demagoguery was empty, saying in response to a question about whether the PSL would support people running as Democrats, "We want to fight wherever the fighters are." She then went on to credit Sanders for making it a lot easier to discuss socialism. The rest of the panelists agreed that, as one put it, "Bernie opened up the door."

The reality is that Sanders' role has been to try to capture the explosive anger among millions of workers and youth, and channel it back into the two-party capitalist system. The various tendencies and organizations represented at the Left Forum are performing, each in their own way, the same function.



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