

The “People’s Summit:” Sanders wing seeks to give Democratic Party a facelift

Jerry White
20 June 2017

The “People’s Summit,” held in Chicago June 9-11, was part of an effort by the Bernie Sanders wing of the Democratic Party and a faction of the trade union bureaucracy, backed by several pseudo-left groups, to refashion the image of the Democratic Party in the aftermath of its 2016 electoral debacle.

These forces are politically motivated by the fear that the crisis of the Democratic Party, particularly its loss of support in the working class, will prevent it from carrying out its traditional role of diverting and dissipating social opposition and subordinating the working class to bourgeois politics. Frightened by the explosive growth of anger against the entire political establishment and increasing interest in socialism among working people and particularly youth, they are seeking to give this party of Wall Street and the CIA a political facelift.

Combining the most modest social reform proposals with populist rhetoric, these forces hope to block the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class.

Since the defeat of Hillary Clinton and the Democrats’ failure to gain control of the US Senate last November, the dominant Clinton-Obama factions of the party have resisted any shift away from their orientation to wealthier and more privileged layers of the middle class, maintained largely on the basis of race, gender and sexual identity politics, and done little to mask their indifference to popular anger over the massive growth of social inequality.

Rifts and divisions are growing more bitter and open, as reflected in recriminations from the forces around Sanders over the refusal of the party establishment to seriously support and finance the campaign of “Berniecrat” Rob Quist in his unsuccessful bid for an open congressional seat in Montana.

The party establishment is instead focusing on prosecuting its anti-Russian witch-hunt and attacking President Donald Trump from the right, labeling him a stooge of the Kremlin, while all but ignoring the administration’s savage attacks on health care, immigrant and democratic rights, public education and environmental and safety regulations.

This is not to suggest that the supposed “progressives” who assembled in Chicago are opposing in any principled manner the warmongering policy of the Democratic Party leadership. They are not. In his opening address to the “People’s Summit,” Sanders made a point of solidarizing himself with the hysterical anti-Russian campaign waged by the Democrats and much of the media. Over the ensuing two days of the meeting, the issues of US wars in the Middle East and military threats against Russia, China, North Korea and Iran were barely mentioned.

Lawrence Dreyfuss, a spokesman for the Democratic Socialists of

America (DSA), echoed the Democrats’ anti-Russia rhetoric, telling the *World Socialist Web Site* that the Russians posed the greatest threat to “the autonomy of our country, perhaps in all our history.”

“Regardless of capitalism,” he said, “you have a problem because our country can’t work if it’s not an autonomous country. Even if that threat to our autonomy comes from Wall Street, I’ll take that over feeling like we’re being controlled by a country whose constitution I can’t abide by.”

In his keynote speech, Sanders focused on criticisms of the party establishment’s electoral orientation, declaring that Trump “did not win the election, the Democrats lost the election.” Pointing to the fact that the Democrats have lost the House of Representatives, the Senate and almost 1,000 state legislative seats over the last nine years, Sanders said, “If that is not a failed model, I don’t know what is.” The party, he said, needs a “fundamental change” and has to “open its doors to working people and young people and older people who are prepared to fight for social and economic justice.”

For all the talk about “political revolution” and “resistance to power,” however, the “People’s Summit” was anything but a gathering of the insurgent left. It was a bureaucratic and well-funded affair, run by top functionaries and staff members from the National Nurses United (NNU), the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the United Electrical Workers (UE) unions, who are all experienced in betraying the working class.

The meeting made clear that Sanders, who falsely calls himself an “independent socialist,” is, with the support of a faction of the trade union bureaucracy and some wealthy donors, seeking to create an electoral machine to gain greater influence over the Democratic Party. In a revealing moment, Sanders asked those in the audience who had run for office to raise their hands. After hundreds of people did so, Sanders declared, “This is the political revolution.”

Giving a “left” cover to this political operation were various liberal and pseudo-left organizations aligned with the Democratic Party. Other prominent speakers included academics, authors and journalists from liberal media outlets, including the *Nation* and *Democracy Now!* and pseudo-left organizations such as the DSA and the International Socialist Organization (ISO), which proudly displayed Sanders’ recently published *Our Revolution* at its bookstall.

From the costly venue location—the McCormick Place convention hall on the lakefront in downtown Chicago—to the prime rib dinners for several thousand participants, everything suggested that Sanders’ “revolution” was being financed by wealthy Democratic donors. Underscoring the establishment character of the event, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Guardian* and other mainstream media provided favorable reports on the summit.

The various panels, workshops and speeches were carefully stage-managed to exclude any serious questions. Even the question-and-answer period for Sanders was pre-recorded. Not a single speaker addressed the fact that Sanders had betrayed the aspirations of his 13 million voters by endorsing and campaigning for Hillary Clinton, the favored candidate of Wall Street and the bulk of the military-intelligence establishment.

The three-day event was the occasion to announce the founding of the “Sanders Institute,” described as a “progressive” think tank, which was launched on June 7. In addition to Sanders’ wife, Jane, the institute’s founding fellows include Democratic stalwarts Robert Reich, President Bill Clinton’s labor secretary; Hawaii Democratic Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard; and economist Jeffrey Sachs, author of works on the “shock therapy” free market policies that devastated the former Soviet Union.

The institute is being funded with seed money from Sanders’ “Our Revolution” organization, the electoral apparatus run by former CWA President Larry Cohen and former Ohio state Assemblywoman Nina Turner to recruit and train “progressive candidates.”

One of the most widely attended panel discussions was called “Transforming the Democratic Party,” sponsored by Our Revolution. Phillip Kim, a DSA member and former paid union organizer, boasted that he was a “newly elected delegate to the Democratic Party” and that he and other Sanders-backed candidates had won a majority of the state party’s delegate seats. “Taking over the Democratic Party,” he said, was “complicated,” but “we have to keep reading the bylaws, out-organize them and keep their feet to the fire.”

As evidence of the supposed leftward shift of state Democrats, Kim pointed to the progress of a “single-payer health care” bill in California. In reality, State Bill 562 has no chance of being funded by Democratic Governor Jerry Brown or obtaining federal approval to use existing Medicare and Medicaid funds.

Newly-elected Washington state Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal boasted that she had just talked to 300 candidates in Detroit who are running for office, Chandra Paetsch, a representative of “Our Revolution” from Oregon, said, “I know there are a lot of people saying we need to abandon the Democratic Party now. But a party is not a behemoth structure. We just need to change the people to change the party.”

Neither at this or any other session could one find a *class* analysis of the Democratic Party, one of the oldest capitalist parties in the world, whose essential political function has been to trap and strangle every potential threat by the working class to the profit system.

The reforms promoted by Sanders and his allies are, in fact, extremely limited. They do not in any way challenge the basic property interests or power of the ruling corporate-financial elite. They include a \$15 minimum wage, “Medicare for all,” student loan forgiveness and a tax on financial speculation. There are no calls, as in genuine insurgent social movements of the first part of the last century such as Populism, for public ownership of sections of industry such as the railroads and utilities. Sanders’ proposals are anemic even compared to demands raised in an earlier period by reform factions within the two major parties for universal health care, affordable public housing, etc.

The proposal to make a more pronounced appearance of sympathy for workers’ concerns has created its own set of tensions within the Democratic Party and the pseudo-left milieu that surrounds it, particularly on the issue of identity politics.

This was addressed by CNN commentator and former Obama aide

Van Jones. While Jones was one of the first to claim that Trump’s electoral victory was due to a “white-lash” against a “changing country” and a black president, he has since urged the Democrats to made a pretense, for electoral reasons, of concern over the devastating conditions facing white workers.

“Should we focus on people of color and racism, or should we focus on the white working class?” Jones asked, saying that this was a false choice. “For people concerned about overemphasizing African Americans,” he said, “we are the core vote for the Democratic Party,” which means that “if you attack us, you are attacking a women’s right to choose and the environment.”

He complained, however, that the “left” had “drawn too small a circle” by ignoring the conditions of workers in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan and Republican-controlled rural areas in California. “White men are often the rhetorical punching bag,” he said.

One got the sense from Jones and other speakers, including the January 21 Women’s March co-organizer Linda Sarsour, who spoke of the need for the “intersectionality” of race, gender and class, that these elements were calling for a temporary truce, at least until after the next election, between the fake working class “populist” and identity politics factions in the Democratic Party.

A significant number of speakers at the Summit, including author Naomi Klein, were previously associated with Stalinist politics. They see the current political radicalization of workers and youth as an opportunity to organize alliances with political opportunists of every stripe to gain entry into bourgeois governments.

“This is our moment and it is global,” Klein, a prominent leader of the New Democratic Party in Canada, proclaimed, pointing to Sanders, British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, Podemos in Spain, Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France and Die Linke (Left Party) in Germany. “In the next wave, we will see political reconfigurations, new parties, insurgent politicians—radical ideas are popular, erasing student debt, renewable energy, health care. We need people’s platforms for a broad electoral front, whether inside or outside the Democrats or both.”

If their best efforts to reform the Democratic Party fail, these people are proposing to build a new political trap such as Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) in Greece, an amalgamation of Stalinist and other pseudo-left tendencies that was elected on an anti-austerity program in 2015, only to impose the most savage austerity measures to date at the behest of the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and the European Central Bank.

The basic premise of the “People’s Summit” was that an amelioration of social inequality can be achieved without overthrowing the capitalist system. The vast economic decay of American capitalism over the last four decades, however, and the rise of a financial oligarchy to the pinnacle of economic and political power, mean that any struggle to seriously improve the conditions of the working class will require an attack on concentrated wealth and power. This can be achieved only through a socialist revolution by the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact