

Factional provocation, middle-class hysteria, and the collapse of the International Socialist Organization

The Political Committee of the Socialist Equality Party (US)
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The International Socialist Organization is collapsing just over a month after its national convention, amidst factionally instigated denunciations of sexual assault and cover-up.

In the midst of a vicious purge of long-time leaders, ISO members have been stampeded into voting for a resolution, proposed by the surviving leadership, “for building a new model of revolutionary socialism” that begins with “develop[ing] a process for dissolving the ISO.” The membership also voted to shut down, within the next two weeks, the organization’s principal publication, *SocialistWorker.org*. These decisions effectively liquidate the International Socialist Organization.

The ISO’s collapse has taken place with extraordinary speed. The chronology of the crisis leaves no doubt that the collapse was instigated by a factional conspiracy organized by a section of the leadership, which was implemented in two stages.

The operation began barely one month ago. In late February, the ISO held its annual convention. A statement posted March 15 on *SocialistWorker.org* describes the event as the “most painful” in the history of the organization. The convention, according to the statement, was “devoted to reckoning with the damaging impacts of our past practices and internal political culture.”

The convention voted for a drastic change in the composition of the ISO’s National Committee and the Steering Committee (SC). The latter functions as the day-to-day leadership of the organization. Selected on the basis of a racial quota system, two-thirds of the SC were new to leadership. One half of these politically inexperienced and easily manipulated members were “comrades of color.”

On Monday, March 11, the second stage of the factional operation began. A document, written by a former member (identified only as FM), arrived by email at the offices of the ISO. According to the March 15 statement, FM’s document was also sent to “allies outside of the ISO whom we have worked with in socialist-feminist and queer activism.” The timing of the document and the events that immediately followed its arrival leave no doubt that it was solicited, if not entirely written, by a faction within the ISO leadership.

The document from FM revived a 2013 charge of sexual assault against a member of the ISO, who had been elected to the new SC. According to the ISO’s March 15 statement, FM had been a member of the National Disciplinary Committee (NDC) that originally heard the 2013 case.

FM’s document, which contained no new information or evidence supporting the allegations made in 2013, was immediately seized upon as the pretext for a massive purge of longstanding members of the ISO leadership. Amidst unrestrained hysteria, the SC suspended, expelled and forced the resignation of leading members.

The timeline of events exposes the unprincipled, undemocratic and sordid nature of the proceedings.

On Tuesday evening, March 12, just 24 hours after the arrival of FM’s document, the ISO SC held an emergency meeting at which it “asked the respondent [i.e., the accused] to identify himself and resign,” according to the March 15 statement. The individual resigned from the SC and “said he would take a leave of absence.” The SC “voted to suspend him and stipulated that a decision would be made on his membership status later.”

Two days later, on Thursday March 14, a “joint meeting of the NC, SC and other members agreed unanimously to expel the respondent according to the original decision of the NDC.” It took the decision, also without any due process or investigation, “to suspend from membership three members of the 2013 SC directly involved in the outcome of the case, while a complete investigation of what happened in 2013 takes place.”

Moreover, the ISO voted to “suspend from a position on any leadership body any member of the 2013 SC, along with a recently elected NC member, who had played a role in undermining the work of the NDC, for the duration of the investigation.”

Among those suspended was 80-year-old Joel Geier, one of the founding members of the Independent Socialists, the predecessor to the ISO. Geier has since resigned. Eight former leading members of the ISO have also announced their resignation. These include Sharon Smith, the former national organizer, Paul D’Amato, Lance Selfa and Ahmed Shawki.

The 2013 allegation of sexual assault

The ISO SC has not released the document from FM, nor has it made available the specific evidence that corroborated the 2013 claims of sexual assault. However, the resignation letter from Joel Geier, dated March 21, provides information that discredits the claim that there had been a cover-up.

Geier notes that he had been involved in drawing up guidelines for a new NDC, established by the ISO in 2013, and that he advocated that the committee incorporate elementary democratic rights for the accused.

The case in question involved a non-member claiming that she had been raped by a member. The NDC voted for the expulsion of the accused. The SC overturned the decision, for reasons explained by Geier.

“It was pointed out to them,” Geier writes, “that they had reached their conclusion without the opportunity for the Respondent to present his own defense in a hearing, without his ability to question the evidence and witnesses against him, without the opportunity for him to raise questions to the claimant, even through an advocate.”

Moreover, the person who made the accusation refused to participate in

the ISO's internal procedures.

After the intervention of the ISO SC, which sought to preserve some semblance of due process, the NDC reversed its decision. Subsequently, an Appeals Committee decided that there was "insufficient evidence to make a determination" in the case. No disciplinary actions were recommended.

At the 2014 ISO convention, the proceedings and outcome of the case were reported to the membership.

In unchallenged statements supporting the leadership purge, posted on *Socialist Worker.org* during the past two weeks, the reversal of the NDC's 2013 decision is denounced on the grounds that any man accused of an assault must be presumed to be guilty. There is no need for any fact-finding proceeding nor any presentation of corroborative evidence. The accuser must be believed.

A March 20 post by Elizabeth Wrigley-Field, titled "What Socialists Can Learn From #MeToo," exposes the hysterical psychology, akin to a lynch mob, that prevails among ISO members recruited on the basis of middle-class identity politics. She writes that "because I believe the accusation and am writing from my own perspective, I am going to use straightforward rather than legalistic language: rape rather than alleged rape, survivor rather than complainant, and rapist rather than respondent."

Though Wrigley-Field admits that she "never read" any documents relating to the 2013 accusation, she complains that the investigation "was obsessed with procedure rather than with truth and mitigating harm." For Wrigley-Field, "truth" is determined by and made equivalent to the assertion of the accuser. No procedural rules, demanding the submission and examination of evidence, should be allowed to test, let alone directly challenge, the accuser's "truth." Summing up the witch-hunter's philosophy, Wrigley-Field proclaims: "When we honestly believe that our rules are a barrier to discovering the truth, then fuck the rules."

The concealed political issues

In the statements issued by the ISO, there is no explicit reference to or discussion of the political differences within the organization's leadership that underlay the crisis that erupted during the week of March 11, 2019. Readers are expected to believe that the alleged mishandling of an accusation of sexual assault, which occurred six years ago, has caused the political collapse of the International Socialist Organization.

This is preposterous and will be believed only by those who are either hopelessly naïve or hopelessly stupid. The unleashing of a sex scandal in a political organization is aimed invariably at generating hysteria, stampeding the membership and preventing an open and rational discussion of program, perspective, strategy and the interests of conflicting internal factions and social forces. Only in the aftermath of the organizational massacre, as the smoke begins to clear, do the political interests and aims that precipitated the crisis begin to emerge.

On the basis of statements that have been posted on *SocialistWorker.org*, as well as an examination of the alignment of various key individuals, it is evident that the outcome of the crisis has been an extremely sharp movement to the right.

* Issue 1: The ISO and the Democratic Party

The liquidation of the ISO has effectively removed an organizational barrier to the integration of its dominant faction into the political orbit of the Democratic Party.

Prior to the February convention, the ISO was engaged in a protracted internal discussion of the political implications of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's election to Congress. The Democratic Socialists of America, of which Ocasio-Cortez is a member, is being elevated into significant

positions of power within the Democratic Party. With the 2020 election approaching, the Democratic Party is exerting immense pressure to organizationally disarm and integrate potential opposition from the left.

The DSA, which is a faction of the Democratic Party aligned with the presidential campaign of Senator Bernie Sanders, has been seeking to bring the ISO into its political fold. Significantly, the March 15 statement of the SC states that the ISO (or, presumably, its remnants) will "study how the ISO can relate to socialist campaigns run on Democratic ballot lines."

* Issue 2: The ISO and the trade unions

In recent years, leading ISO members have acquired influential and personally lucrative positions in the AFL-CIO. This development is exemplified in the rise last year of Jesse Sharkey to the presidency of the Chicago Teachers Union. The March 15 statement denounces the pre-purge ISO leadership for creating conditions in which "comrades with decades of trade union experience were held in suspicion for fear that they might stray too far from a course set by the SC."

Sharkey, who supported the ISO purge, represents a stratum of ISO-affiliated trade union bureaucrats who no longer want to be restricted by party discipline. The desire to free themselves from ISO control has been intensified by the fact that Sharkey, as CTU president, now plays a leading role in the Chicago Democratic Party. In the recent municipal elections, candidates linked either to the CTU or the DSA won nearly a dozen seats on the Board of Aldermen, giving the pseudo-left the role of junior partner to the next mayor of Chicago.

The CTU under Sharkey, moreover, has endorsed Toni Preckwinkle, a long-time Democratic Party operative, in the April 2 Chicago mayoral runoff.

* Issue 3: The ISO and financial resources

A major factor that underlies the conflicts within the ISO is control over resources. The ISO's assets run into the millions of dollars.

The ISO's non-profit 501(c)(3) organization is called the Center for Economic Research and Social Change (CERSC), whose active projects include Haymarket Books. In its 2017 tax filings, the latest year that is publicly available, CERSC reported an adjusted net income of \$3,177,938, with \$3.6 million in revenue from book sales and over \$1 million in contributions and grants from foundations.

Among the major assets of the CERSC are nearly \$200,000 in stock in Oracle, the US computer technology corporation, and a similar amount in CTO (Consolidated-Tomoka Land Co.), a Florida-based real estate company. In 2017, the CERSC paid out nearly \$900,000 in wages and benefits.

The CERSC is a major beneficiary of grants from foundations. In 2017, this included \$225,000 from the Tides Foundation (established by an R. J. Reynolds tobacco heiress and bankrolled more recently by billionaire George Soros) and \$240,000 from the Lannan Foundation, which has a close relationship with the ISO and its members.

The Lannan Foundation has given grants to several ISO members to write books, including Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, a tenured professor at Princeton, who specializes in the promotion of identity politics. It also provided the CERSC with a grant to purchase a \$2.3 million building in Buena Park, Chicago to house Haymarket.

Notably, Haymarket Books, the publishing arm associated with the ISO, issued a statement on Facebook solidarizing itself with the internal purge. Calling Haymarket "the flagship project" of the CERSC, the statement declares that "we stand with and believe survivors." It continues:

"When concerns about actions outside of the CERSC on the part of some members of the CERSC board came to our attention, we took immediate action. An entirely new board has since been constituted with individuals who have our full support and confidence."

Among the six executives or directors of the CERSC, listed in the last tax filing of the organization, are four individuals who have been purged

from the ISO: Sharon Smith, Ahmed Shawki, Lance Selfa and Paul D'Amato.

The signatories of the Haymarket statement include Anthony Arnove, an editor at Haymarket and one of the remaining directors at the CERSC. Also signing the statement was Julie Fain, the managing editor of Haymarket Books and the wife of Jesse Sharkey, the CTU president.

For all the talk of openness and transparency, it is to be expected that the settlement of conflicts relating to the disposition of assets among the conflicting leadership factions will take place in secret negotiations behind closed doors. Foundations and non-profit organizations are subject to legal constraints. Those who presently have control of the income and assets will be anxious to avoid lawsuits by those ex-leaders and foundation shareholders who have been forced out of their posts.

Political conclusions

Whether or not the complete dissolution of the International Socialist Organization was the intended outcome of the political conspiracy organized by a section of the leadership is not clear. However, it is the logical outcome of the ISO's right-wing, middle-class and thoroughly opportunist politics, in which all the various factions involved have participated.

The ISO was eminently susceptible to a #MeToo-style operation. The membership of the ISO was recruited on the basis of middle-class identity politics. Those who joined the organization received no education in Marxist theory, let alone the central historical experiences of the Fourth International. Perpetually operating in an environment of unprincipled factionalism, rampant opportunism, political cynicism and extreme subjectivism, the members are conditioned to reject concern for issues of program and political principle. Their one abiding passion is hatred of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site*. Our fight for the political independence of the working class, on the basis of the Trotskyist program of Permanent Revolution, is condemned as "sectarianism."

No serious assessment of the political causes of the breakup of the ISO will emerge from its opportunist milieu. Rather, commentaries have been posted on *SocialistWorker.org* assigning ultimate responsibility for the breakdown to a misguided adherence to "Leninist orthodoxy" and, even worse, unrealistic revolutionary aspirations. Aside from the fact that the politics of the ISO has had nothing to do, since its founding, with socialist revolution, let alone Leninism, the political demoralization that pervades its leadership is summed up by Paul LeBlanc. Ruminating on his six decades of opportunist political activity, he opines that if organizations "aspire to do more than they can possibly do [i.e., seek to mobilize the working class for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism], profoundly debilitating results are inevitable." ["Reflections on Coherence and Comradeship," posted on *SocialistWorker.org*, March 27, 2019]

Some are boasting that out of the wreckage of the ISO a "new model of revolutionary socialism" will emerge. They are whistling as they pass by the graveyard. Their quest for a "new model" is leading them squarely into the Democratic Party.

In the final analysis, the breakup of the ISO reflects the impact of the intensifying social crisis, and the initial manifestations of class struggle, on the politically bankrupt organizations of the pseudo-left. The ISO will not be the last victim of this process. As Trotsky once said of the opportunist organizations of his day, "The great events which rush upon mankind will not leave of these outlived organizations one stone upon another." This has proved to be the fate of the ISO.



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