

An assembly of political bankrupts: Historical Materialism and Jacobin host “Socialism in Our Time” conference

Joseph Kishore
16 April 2019

On April 13-14, the UK-based *Historical Materialism* journal and the US-based *Jacobin* magazine held their “Socialism in Our Time” conference in New York City. The event brought together most of the major pseudo-left organizations in the United States, with the dominant political line provided by the Democratic Socialists of America, with which *Jacobin* is associated.

The conference had, in fact, nothing to do with socialism, either in our time or any other. A more accurate title for the event would have been, “Democratic Party Politics in Our Time.” The entire event and its 74 panels and workshops was an exercise in political evasion and duplicity, in which every single significant political issue was ignored or covered over in soporific phrases aimed at justifying support for the trade unions and, above all, the Democratic Party campaign of Bernie Sanders, which *Jacobin* and the DSA are enthusiastically promoting.

There was no discussion of the rise of the far-right and fascist movements internationally, the significance of the growth of the class struggle, or the danger of world war. No one provided any serious assessment of the Trump administration or the role of the Democratic Party in facilitating its right-wing policies.

While it was held just two days after the arrest of Julian Assange in London, this also went unmentioned. No one considered that the seizure of the WikiLeaks founder and his threatened rendition to the United States had any relationship to the building of a socialist movement.

As for history, an ostensible theme of the conference, the participants studiously avoided any reference to the historical record, which would only expose their own record of betrayal and treachery.

In January, the Socialist Equality Party submitted a panel proposal to the conference under the headline “The fight against fascism and the lessons of history.” The featured speaker was to be Christoph Vandreier, deputy national secretary of the *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei* (Socialist Equality Party) in Germany and author of *Why Are They Back? Historical Falsification, Political Conspiracy and the Return of*

Fascism in Germany.

The SEP panel proposal was rejected by the conference organizers. Any expression of genuine socialist politics was to be excluded. Only one panel at the conference was focused on the political situation in Germany, “Germany’s Hidden Crisis,” in which no mention was made of the rise of the fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD). Instead, it was dominated by a demoralized discussion on how transformations in Germany’s economy had supposedly pitted sections of the working class against each other and undermined the basis for left-wing politics.

The main conference panel, “Why the Socialist Movement Needs Our Own Party,” encapsulated the prevailing political perspective. It featured Todd Chretien, a leader of the International Socialist Organization until its dissolution last month; *Jacobin* editor and DSA member Bhaskar Sunkara; and *Jacobin* writer and DSA member Meagan Day.

Sunkara summed up the unseriousness of everyone involved. “I don’t have the answers,” he declared on three separate occasions in his opening statement, a phrase repeated later by Chretien.

This declaration of political irrelevancy is no doubt true with regard to most matters about which Sunkara spoke. However, as for the question of the Democratic Party, his answer was clear. The DSA, he asserted, is seeking to “curate the first party of the working class in the shell of the old party”—that is, the Democratic Party. He added that “in time there may be a struggle for our own ballot line,” but he clearly viewed this as something happening in the far distant future.

Sunkara was perhaps pleased with himself for having hit on a new way of formulating the tired Democratic Party politics that the DSA has supported since its inception. The DSA is in fact not “curating” anything within the Democratic Party but its own ambitions for positions. It is now staking everything on the presidential election campaign of the 77-year-old Bernie Sanders, whose victory in 2020 is being presented in *Jacobin* as the beginning of the end of poverty in America.

Sanders is merely the vehicle through which they are justifying support for the Democratic Party. If he were to be

nominated, the DSA would defend every betrayal he would inevitably carry out.

Aside from the unprincipled character of subordinating their own activities to this right-wing, big-business party, the DSA's whole political strategy revolves around one man, five years older than the current president. What if Sanders is unable to continue? The answer is the same as if he loses the nomination: the DSA will back whatever right-wing candidate the Democratic Party selects.

Chretien was one of several of the political refugees hauled ashore from the wreckage of the ISO participating in the conference. Of the dissolution of his former party, which had been in existence for more than four decades and was shut down in a matter of weeks, Chretien had almost nothing to say. While the ISO had been "a significant organization on the left which fought against the constraints of the time," he said, "we were built for a period of defeats." When confronted with a new period, "our own shortcomings short-circuited, doing so in a smooth way."

As the WWSWS has analyzed, behind the crisis in the ISO, set off by a scandal over allegations of rape, is the sharp shift to the right of the middle-class forces that it has cultivated and recruited on the basis of identity politics. The organization had developed extensive financial relationships with Democratic Party-aligned foundations, which have financed its nonprofit umbrella organization, the Center for Economic Research and Social Change (CERSC), with millions of dollars.

Following the "short-circuiting", Chretien said, former members are currently engaged in "taking a breath" as they worked out how they would "participate in building a new left." The breath of Chretien and other ISO ex-members, however, is not particularly deep. They have already begun to search for a new place for themselves within the Democratic Party.

During his opening remarks, Chretien suggested meekly that "we need our own party," citing as possible models Podemos in Spain, the African National Congress in South Africa, AMLO in Mexico, and, particularly, Syriza in Greece. All are bourgeois parties playing a significant role in maintaining capitalist rule. Syriza, the "coalition of the radical left," has been in power in Greece for more than four years, during which time it has enforced the austerity measures demanded by the European banks and served as a frontline for the EU's anti-refugee policy.

Chretien's statement about needing "our own party" prompted Sunkara to state that "Todd was outnumbered" on the panel by DSA members, before correcting himself: "We're all one family together." To this, Chretien readily agreed, proclaiming that while he thinks the Bernie Sanders campaign "has some weaknesses," it is "a starting point that we can build upon" and provides "a real electoral opening."

The DSA is a faction of the Democratic Party, while the ISO has previously served as an auxiliary agency, supporting the

Democrats from the outside. Its dissolution is an expression of the fact that, under conditions of growing class struggle, the ISO found it impossible to any longer pretend any independence from bourgeois politics.

This determination to uphold the Democratic Party takes place as the Democrats are themselves moving further to the right. For the past two-and-a-half years, the Democrats have centered their opposition to Trump on their anti-Russia campaign, which has been used to justify Internet censorship, attacks on WikiLeaks and Julian Assange, and demands for more aggressive war in the Middle East and against Russia.

The ISO played a particularly prominent role in supporting the imperialist agenda of the US intelligence agencies for which the Democrats speak. This was expressed at the conference in a number of panels featuring former ISO leader Ashley Smith, which were dedicated to denouncing those who oppose the US war drive in Syria. At one of these panels, "Rebuilding principled anti-imperialism," Shireen Akram-Boshar, who had written regularly for the ISO's *Socialist Worker* website, attacked those who place a "hyperfocus" on US imperialism, and criticized the US government for not supplying more weapons to the CIA-backed opposition in Syria.

It was the DSA's Meagan Day who provided the clearest exposition of the outlook of the event as a whole. Pointing to the role of Social Democratic parties in Europe, she said, "We don't have institutions that can stab us in the back yet. My position is that we have to build these institutions."

This statement can serve as an adequate summary of the role of the DSA, the ex-ISO, and the other pseudo-left organizations present at the Socialism in Our Time conference—with the proviso that it is not themselves who will be stabbed in the back, but the working class. As for the upper-middle class layers that these organizations represent, they are hoping to participate in the operation. The working class, however, will have its own say in the matter.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsws.org/contact