

Socialism 2019: The ex-International Socialist Organization embraces the Democratic Party

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The Socialism 2019 Conference was held in Chicago from July 4-7, the first such event since the dissolution of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) in late March.

For years, the ISO served as the main organizer of the annual conference and recently began jointly hosting it with *Jacobin* magazine, which is affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America. Following the dissolution of the ISO, the conference this year was taken over by *Jacobin*, along with Haymarket Books, the publishing company formerly associated with the ISO.

The proceedings at the event entirely bear out the analysis made by the Socialist Equality Party in its April 2 statement (“Factional provocation, middle-class hysteria, and the collapse of the International Socialist Organization”), that “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.”

The ISO, which has long functioned as an auxiliary arm of the Democrats, utilized a sex scandal to rapidly dissolve itself, with most leading members quickly finding a home in the DSA. The DSA, for its part, is an integral component of the Democratic Party.

The content of the conference was notable for both what was said and what was not said. Included in the latter category was the Democratic Party’s collaboration with Trump and the Republican Party on the assault on democratic rights, including \$4.6 billion in funding for concentration camps and \$733 billion in military. Nor was there any mention of the incarceration of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning. Instead, panel after panel promoted the illusion that it is possible to use the Democratic Party, the oldest capitalist party in the world, to fight back and even win reforms for the working class.

A central aim of ex-ISO members entering the DSA is to enforce the foreign policy line of the State Department. This is particularly the case with Ashley Smith, a longtime ISO member who supported the breakup of the organization. Smith has in recent years been tasked with denouncing those who oppose the US-backed regime change operation in Syria.

At this year’s conference, Smith led a panel devoted to asserting that China’s economic endeavors in Africa and elsewhere, and the One Road One Belt initiative, made it an imperialist power. This is under conditions in which both the Trump administration and the Democrats are pushing for greater trade war measures and military provocations against China.

Smith also downplayed the central reactionary role of American imperialism, saying the world is no longer “unipolar,” but a “multipolar” one in which the relative position of the US is lessened.

Smith repeated his oft-stated claim that the “problem we face today on the left” is “campism and pseudo anti-imperialism.” These terms have been used to denounce anyone opposing US imperialism in the Middle East as apologists of bourgeois national regimes. Those who denounce American imperialism, and in particular the ICFI, are accused of failing to oppose Russian, Iranian, or Chinese “imperialism.”

Smith stated that “apologias for Russian imperialism in the DSA is also an issue”—that is, there is not a sufficient level of support for the Democrats’ anti-Russia campaign, which has been the focus of its opposition to Trump.

Another panel featured Anand Gopal, an individual who has long been associated with the ISO and also has close connections to the state. In a panel chaired by ex-ISO member Sherry Wolf, Gopal laid out in bloody detail conditions in Manbij, in Syria, to which he traveled numerous times, undoubtedly with US state assistance. The purpose was to encourage support for the US-backed regime change operation in the country.

Overall, the conference was a Democratic Party operation. Amy Goodman, in a prominent Thursday night panel, came closest to noting that the crimes currently being perpetrated against immigrants and refugees by Trump were begun by the Democrats. She noted that deportations “did grow under Obama.” But in the next breath, she excused the deportation of millions under the previous administration, saying that “Trump is much more cruel,” and at least “no children died under Obama.”

Perhaps most significant about Goodman’s talk, which was entitled “Independent Media in a Time of Crisis,” was the fact that the dire threat to freedom of speech represented by the incarceration of Assange and Manning did not even merit a mention.

The “Green New Deal” was heavily promoted at the conference. The slogan has been taken up by DSA member and congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other Democrats in order to promote the fiction that climate change and other social problems can be addressed within the framework of capitalism.

Naomi Klein, one of the principal authors of the Canadian NDP’s Leap Manifesto, which calls for such a capitalist-based green economy, and Astra Taylor, a radical filmmaker, offered

little more than moral harangues to vote for Democrats in their closing plenary, “Care and Repair: The Revolutionary, Democratic Power of a Global Green New Deal.”

Jacobin publisher Bhaskar Sunkara and other conference figures defended the publication’s open and full embrace of Bernie Sanders, who in the 2020 elections is even more open that his aim is to buttress support among young people for the Democrats, under conditions in which both parties are deeply discredited. Sunkara described Sanders as taking a “class struggle approach.” That the Democratic Party has turned out time and time again to be a graveyard for social movements is of no importance.

“We need 20 years of patient strategy,” Sunkara said. That is, 20 years of working within the Democratic Party. In reality, Sunkara and the DSA are committed to maintaining the stranglehold of the Democratic Party forever.

Emblematic is the view put forward by Paul Le Blanc, a former member of the Socialist Workers Party, then Solidarity, then ISO, and now a member of the DSA. In a panel on Rosa Luxemburg, Le Blanc declared that the revolutionary Marxist’s writings against opportunism cannot help us understand figures like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Crudely joking that “she’s been dead for a long time,” Le Blanc admitted that Luxemburg “has something to teach us.” However, he insisted, “in the realities of our own time she doesn’t have answers to everything.” According to Le Blanc, the reason for this is that “her context was one in which there was a global working class movement of mass proportions, and that doesn’t exist now, and therefore we are confronted with choices and decisions which she wasn’t.”

Because of this we “have to take, for example, DSA more seriously” as well as the “phenomenon of socialist electoral work even in the Democratic Party.”

At the center of this exercise in political charlatanry were Jesse Sharkey, the president of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and his wife Julie Fain, who identified herself as the publisher of Haymarket Books. Both effectively played host to the conference, with Fain introducing the plenary and other important sessions. Haymarket was a prime mover in the ISO’s breakup, no doubt feeling the limitations of its origins as the ISO’s press.

The publisher has grown immensely in recent years, fueled largely by the injections of cash from wealthy individuals and non-profits, such as the Lannan Foundation, from which it received around \$1 million in grants from 2007-2017. Lannan has also provided indirect support for Haymarket authors, as well as a Chicago mansion to serve as the headquarters for Haymarket. One of the directors of the Lannan Foundation, Larry Lannan, made an appearance at the conference and was seen talking to Fain.

Sharkey, whose role in the 2012 strike and since has resulted in the closure of more than 50 schools and the elimination of thousands of teaching positions, has become an integral part of the Democratic Party in Chicago.

In 2015, the CTU endorsed and politically supported Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, now a Congressman, in the mayoral election against Rahm Emanuel. This year it backed Toni Preckwinkle, the Cook County Board President and Chair of the Cook County Democratic Party. Preckwinkle’s ties to the corrupt Democratic

political machine and reputation for cost-cutting resulted in mass abstention and her loss to Lori Lightfoot, a former prosecutor and former president of the Chicago Police Board, with whom the CTU is now working closely.

During his address to the conference at the Friday plenary, “Welcome to Red Chicago,” Sharkey shared the stage with three of Chicago’s six recently elected, DSA-affiliated aldermen. One of these, Carlos Ramirez-Rosa, received a Democratic Party endorsement and is a Democratic Party committeeman.

Sharkey attempted to temper expectations for the DSA-affiliated aldermen to the Chicago City Council, saying “we don’t represent this whole city, we don’t, we don’t have all socialists in City Council, we have six.”

The defeats the CTU has engineered, as well as those of the UAW and other unions, were not discussed, or simply downplayed. Tim Marshall, a DSA member from Oakland who participated in that sell-out of teachers, admitted “It was not a perfect contract. It was a learning lesson.”

Gender and race politics were also brought in whenever possible by speakers to shift any attention away from class politics. Lois Weiner, a professor of education and a teachers union consultant, expressed this most clearly, saying that the reason it’s so dangerous to say that “class-wide demands should take priority,” is “because it sounds to African Americans that you are saying that they have to wait.” Rejecting the idea that teachers should make broad, class-based appeals as workers, Weiner said teachers unions need “to be anti-racist because parents are our best allies,” and “if we want allies of communities of color we need to be an ally.”

This sort of identity politics is the stock in trade of the Democratic Party, whose conceptions were advanced in every form at Socialism 2019.



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