

Young Democratic Socialists of America's winter conference props up the Democratic Party

Genevieve Leigh
21 February 2020

This past weekend, the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA) held its annual winter conference in Chicago, Illinois, under the title, "Unite, Fight, Win."

Based on the low attendance and poorly planned character of the event, it is clear the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) were not particularly eager to bring together youth supporters for a discussion on socialism. The event featured a series of third-rate Democratic Party activists as speakers and panelists, none of whom were prepared to seriously address the political situation. While the DSA claims to have 56,000 members, only 300 young people attended the conference.

The event attracted different sections of young people, ranging from those who are genuinely interested in socialism to opportunist middle class types looking for positions in the Democratic Party and the trade unions.

Those who attended were told to integrate themselves fully into the Democratic primary election campaign of Bernie Sanders. This was the chief purpose of the event, which was effectively a public relations exercise for the Vermont senator. DSA speakers told youth to tone down references to socialism and resorted to banning attendees who opposed the idea that socialism entails working within the capitalist Democratic Party. The fundamental aim of the event organizers was to disabuse young people of the notion that socialism entails an independent struggle for political power.

Socialism and the fight against war

Supporters and members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) distributed an open letter to members of the YDSA outside the conference. The letter notes that the Democratic Party is "the oldest capitalist party in the world," responsible for the greatest crimes of the American ruling class from slavery to the atomic bomb to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Appealing to those who want to fight for socialism, the IYSSE letter stated:

The attendees of the YDSA conference want to take action in the fight for socialism. Good—urgent action is required to save the planet from capitalist barbarism. But action that ends up strengthening the Democratic Party is worse than useless and will only create cynicism and disillusionment.

This letter was well received by many attendees, who may retain illusions in Sanders but who are also hostile to the Democratic Party and to the absurd notion that socialism can be achieved through this reactionary organ of Wall Street and the Pentagon.

Some attendees were particularly opposed to Sanders' imperialist foreign policy, including his recent statement that he would consider preemptive war against Iran and North Korea. "He has proven again and again that he is willing to go to war," one YDSA delegate told the IYSSE. "If he is willing to defend US imperialist interests abroad it makes you wonder what policies he would support domestically." Another delegate said that Sanders was "imperialist swine."

The aim of the DSA was to quash any serious discussion on these or any other important issues.

During the conference panel discussions, plenary sessions and workshops, there was not a single mention of the Democratic Party's anti-Russia campaign, backed by Sanders, or even on the Democratic Party's attacks on Sanders. Nothing was said about the growth of fascism internationally, the assault on democratic rights or the danger of world war. There was no discussion of the history of the Democratic Party and the litany of failed past efforts to reform it.

The only mention of war came from a representative of the IYSSE, who in one panel pointed to Sanders' statement to the *New York Times* only a few days earlier as well as his statements that "some wars are necessary." The IYSSE member noted Sanders' opposition to open borders, his silence on the persecution of Julian Assange and his long history of support in Congress for US imperialist wars.

The IYSSE speaker said, "In response to some of these criticisms, I've heard people say that it is not about Sanders, it is about the movement. But upon what basis is this movement being built? It is being directed behind Sanders and the Democratic Party, and therefore capitalism. How can you justify your claim to be fighting for socialism while at the same time everyone here is supposed to act as foot soldiers for the Democratic Party?"

Arcadia Schmid, one of the panelists, responded: "For me personally, Bernie Sanders is not going to be the end all be all for how I organize. He is our best shot right now. I think that even if our ideals are not always the same, we need to be able to have him in office and push him left. I mean we are the left. It is up to us to decide what we are going to fight for. And so, if he does do something that we don't agree with I would love to sit and protest something that a Sanders government does."

This is a recipe for disaster and political disillusionment, which exposes the bankruptcy of the pragmatic argument that Sanders is "our best shot right now." If Sanders is going to betray "our ideals," as Schmid herself admits, then why expend so much effort to put him in the White House?

The DSA wants no discussion on the past efforts to reform the

Democratic Party or push it to the left. As the IYSSE letter to the YDSA members noted, “Each failed effort at reform has paved the way for the Democrats’ next crimes. It is for this reason that the party has earned the designation as ‘the graveyard of social movements.’”

The DSA responded to the intervention of the IYSSE by banning two of its members, including this reporter, from attending the last day of the conference. The ban exposed the anti-democratic character of the “democratic socialists” and makes clear that the DSA is not an organization in which young people can freely discuss socialist strategy. It is likely that the decision to ban IYSSE attendees came not from the event organizers, but from the Democratic Party officials who call the shots in the DSA and the Sanders campaign.

In response to the ban, this reporter wrote the following to the DSA organizers:

There is nothing inappropriate in the tweets I posted. This contrasts with the anti-communist and red-baiting tweets from other delegates. The official YDSA at Eastern Carolina University, for example, wrote in reply to the letter of the IYSSE to the YDSA members, “All trots do is read theory, yell at dsa, post online, eat ice pick and lie.” The reference to an “ice pick” is particularly menacing, as it refers to the instrument used by a Stalinist assassin to murder Leon Trotsky in 1940.

Other delegates posted vulgar or threatening comments...

The real reason for your action is your opposition to the political content of what we have said—our exposure of the Democratic Party and the pro-imperialist positions of Bernie Sanders, and our call for YDSA members to take up a genuine fight for socialism within your organization.

The more viable Sanders becomes as a potential presidential candidate, the more urgent it becomes for the DSA to suppress any discussion of genuine socialism, of Sanders’ real record in supporting US imperialism, and the character of the Democratic Party.

The DSA on “socialism”

Throughout the conference, the DSA sought to falsify and distort what socialism really is in order to conform to the politics of the Democratic Party and the pro-capitalist trade unions.

DSA National Director Maria Svart led one panel at the conference, headlined “Democratic Socialism 101.” She began by asking everyone at the workshop to form small groups and try to explain to each other what the DSA is without using the word “socialism” or any specific active DSA campaign.

“A lot of people don’t know what the word socialism means. It is helpful to talk about it in semi quasi terms,” she explained after the exercise. What this really means is that is necessary to talk (or not talk) about socialism in a way that will not alienate the Democratic Party leadership and Sanders himself.

There was a revealing exchange between Svart and a conference attendee over the issue of “sectarianism,” by which the DSA means the Socialist Equality Party and the IYSSE.

To bolster her argument against “sectarianism,” Svart quoted from a letter written by Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge in September 1843: “We do not confront the world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world

out of the world’s own principles. We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for...”

One student argued that Svart’s presentation of Marx was false. “Marx actually goes through every actually existing socialist organization and ruthlessly criticizes them,” he noted. “For Marx, it was critical for workers to unite but also to be really theoretically clear on what the right doctrine is around which they are uniting. I don’t know if I really agree with him, but I don’t think he was saying what you are saying.”

Marx’s letter to Ruge is based on the concept that the revolutionary socialist movement expresses the objective logic of the class struggle; it is not something that is simply imposed from outside. Marx understood that the fight to develop within the working class a consciousness of the objective logic of its struggles develops through relentless conflict with the parties and organizations of the ruling class, including the political ancestors of the DSA.

Svart moved on quickly to the next point, after dismissing the student’s question with an incomprehensible reference to “praxis.” The rest of the session was dominated by organizational questions.

The deliberate falsification of history was continued throughout the event. In a review of the history of the DSA, Joe Allen, a former member of the now defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO), gave a potted history of the first three socialist internationals. He claimed that he had no time to discuss the Fourth International, founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938 in opposition to the social democrats and Stalinists.

In a “Campus Labor” workshop, the speaker, similar to Svart, started by noting that socialism “is a little difficult to define.” He went on, “In the context of this presentation at least and in a lot of literature you will read socialism just means the transition away from a capitalist society... it is the point when society is not predominantly ruled by capitalist forces but rather is predominantly ruled by working class organizations. So, the working class begins to win the class struggle and begins to move away from capitalism towards the next stage. So, it is the process of ending capitalism.”

Thus, according to the DSA, achieving socialism does not require the mobilization of the working class against capitalism and its political agents. It will be achieved gradually, the ultimate product of a process in which workers “begin to win the class struggle” and achieve reforms—supposedly through the mechanism of the trade unions and the Democratic Party. But the fact of the matter is that the working class cannot “win the class struggle” so long as it is politically strangled by the parties of the capitalist class, including the Democrats.

The rest of the Campus Labor workshop was aimed at convincing students to “join unions.” Despite the fact that the most prominent union seeking to “organize” grad students is the United Auto Workers (UAW), not a single word was said about the historic corruption scandal which has engulfed the entire UAW leadership.

Trotskyism versus the Democratic Party politics of the DSA

The DSA is a faction of the Democratic Party whose primary purpose is to support a senator who is running for the Democratic nomination for president. It is not attracting wide sections of workers. Its inflated membership consists largely of layers of the upper-middle class. Its leadership consists of shameless careerists seeking greater access to positions within the state and the trade union apparatus.

The DSA functions according to the most crass pragmatism. Sanders, they say, is “our best chance” for socialism. Within the framework of the 150-year-old socialist movement, this is hardly a new position.

The Marxist movement has always insisted that awakening the political energy of the working class requires educating workers and transforming the working class into a force that is aware of its historically progressive role.

There is no short cut to the development of socialist consciousness—and certainly not through the Democratic Party. Introducing into the working class the lessons of the class struggle is a necessary prerequisite to developing a revolutionary strategy for world socialist revolution.

Young socialists today must know that the contemporary revolutionary movement is not starting from scratch. There are innumerable lessons which must be internalized in order to take effective revolutionary action today.

In 1917, the workers of Russia established workers' councils—Soviets—and through the political leadership of the Bolshevik Party, led by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, seized power from the tsar and toppled the Romanov dynasty after 300 years of imperial rule. It was Trotsky who, after Lenin's death, waged a relentless struggle to educate the working class in order to block the degeneration of the Soviet Union under the bureaucracy headed by Joseph Stalin.

The struggle for international socialism against the national opportunism of the Stalinist bureaucracy formed the political basis of the foundation of the Trotskyist Fourth International in 1938—the movement that is represented today by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

The IYSSE bases its exposure of the pro-capitalist politics of the DSA on the fight for the historical continuity of the Trotskyist movement. We encourage all YDSA members to fight within their organization for genuinely revolutionary socialist politics and to take up the study of the burning strategic questions of the class struggle in the 20th century.

This author also recommends:

New York Times falsifies history to claim Sanders is “transforming” the Democratic Party
[17 February 2020]

Why Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is in the same party as Joe Biden
[28 January 2020]

Sanders tells New York Times he would consider a preemptive strike against Iran or North Korea
[14 February 2020]

The DSA on impeachment or: How the DSA learned to stop worrying and love Bolton
[3 December 2019]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact