

The cancellation of professor Adolph Reed, Jr.'s speech and the DSA's promotion of race politics

Niles Niemuth
18 August 2020

The *New York Times* published a lengthy news article last week highlighting an instructive incident that took place earlier this year within the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). A speech by professor emeritus of political science Adolph Reed, Jr. was cancelled due to objections by the AFROSOCialist and Socialists of Color Caucus over his “reactionary and class reductionist form of politics.”

The race-based caucus claimed that by inviting Reed to address a political education session on the COVID-19 crisis, the Philadelphia and NYC Lower Manhattan chapters had launched a “reactionary, class reductionist and at best, tone deaf” assault on members of the DSA who are racial or ethnic minorities. Reed is an African-American professor who has a decades-long history in critiquing racial identity politics from a left-wing perspective.

According to the *Times*, Reed had intended to speak to the branches about why the obsessive focus of “the left” on the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus pandemic on African-Americans undermined efforts to organize across racial lines and advance health and economic justice for all Americans. Reed backed Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders for president in 2016 and 2020 and was a founding member of the Labor Party initiative headed by union leader Tony Mazzocchi.

Reed had criticized the race reductionism of the *Times*'s 1619 Project in an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site* in December, no doubt raising the ire of the racialists in the DSA and broader pseudo-left who have staunchly defended the reactionary racist falsification of American history.

The morning the event was to take place, the

AFROSOCialist Caucus demanded that Reed's talk be cancelled and instead that there be a debate of his “class reductionist analysis versus our intersectional socialist analysis.” The leaders of the DSA's New York chapter quickly responded to the letter by cancelling the event.

The AFROSOCialist Caucus boasts of receiving generous funding for its first training session in 2017 from the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, which is associated with the Left Party in Germany and operates thanks to the infusion of tens of millions of dollars annually from the German state.

The furious reaction within the DSA leadership to the invitation to Reed reveals how deeply the organization is imbued with the reactionary and right-wing politics of racial division. The extreme hostility to any analysis based on the primacy of class expresses the interests of affluent sections of the petit bourgeoisie, who utilize racial and identity politics in the fight over positions of power and privilege within the apparatus of the state, the trade unions, academia and corporations.

Significantly, a leading voice in the campaign against Reed is professor of African-American studies at Princeton University Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, who is cited by the *Times* as a representative of those who see race as “America's primal wound,” which takes priority over “ephemeral class solidarity.”

“Adolph Reed and his ilk believe that if we talk about race too much we will alienate too many, and that will keep us from building a movement,” claimed Taylor. “We don't want that—we want to win white people to an understanding of how their racism has fundamentally distorted the lives of Black people.”

That is, all white people—and particularly white

workers—are racist and are responsible for the conditions faced by black workers. Taylor chided Reed’s plans to focus on the class issues that underly racial inequality in his talk as “a provocation. It was quite incendiary.”

Taylor is a former leading member of the now-defunct pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO), which dissolved itself in 2019 amidst factionally instigated denunciations of sexual assault and cover-up. As the WSWS explained at the time, the aim of this dissolution was to facilitate the integration of its leadership into the political orbit of the Democratic Party.

Taylor embodies this integration. She is now frequently published in the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*, in addition to the DSA-affiliated *Jacobin* magazine. She also has close connections with Nikole Hannah-Jones, the lead author of the *New York Times*’s

1619 Project. As a member of the ISO and after, Taylor has been a specialist in racial politics, publishing books on Black Lives Matter and the Combahee River Collective.

The only dissent over the cancellation of Reed’s speech from within the DSA came from the Class Unity caucus, which calls itself a “Marxist pole of attraction” that works from within and outside the DSA to work toward shedding the organization’s reliance on the Democratic Party and creating a “true workers party.”

Class Unity’s editorial committee released a statement criticizing middle class “DSA liberals” in the organization’s leadership for cancelling the Reed event out of concern for their own career advancements.

“The strategy of keeping our heads down and ‘doing the work’ is insufficient,” the statement declares. “Our failure to organize against liberals in DSA has left us weak and incapable of defending basic principles of free speech, let alone Marxism.”

The statement provides a revealing account of the DSA from within the organization. They write that “far from being principled ideological formations,” AFROSOCialist and other caucuses “are by and large branding exercises to facilitate competition between the squabbling cliques of middle-class careerists and social climbers who constitute their leadership strata, with rank-and-file caucus members largely excluded from a meaningful role in decision-making.”

The conflict within the DSA reflects certain tactical

differences. In particular, the Class Unity caucus strongly backed the campaign of Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Party primaries. Sanders is now campaigning heavily for Biden. Last year, the AFROSOCialist Caucus demanded that the DSA’s National Political Committee withhold the organization’s endorsement of Sanders over his refusal to unequivocally support reparations for slavery. In that case DSA leadership followed the majority of the membership that had voted to back Sanders.

Those within the DSA and in its periphery, including Reed himself, who are opposed to the obsessive fixation with identity politics, have to understand its more fundamental political roots and relation to the strategy of the Democratic Party.

The ban on criticism of identity politics within the DSA and vicious denunciations of Marxism as “class reductionism” is in line with the Democrats’ broader goals of promoting identity politics to divide the working class. At the same time, such politics is a mechanism through which priveleged sections of the upper middle class advance their own interests.

The promotion of racialist politics is central to the strategy of the Democratic Party in the 2020 elections. This has been made clear by Biden’s selection of Senator Kamala Harris as his running mate. The choice of the former attorney general of California, who threatened to jail the parents of truant students and defied Supreme Court orders to release prisoners from the state’s criminally overcrowded jails, as vice president is being hailed as historic based solely on the basis of the “intersectionality” of her various identities—female, African-American and Indian-American.

The blocking of Reed from speaking on right-wing racialist grounds should make absolutely clear, for those who had any doubts, that the DSA is not in any sense a Marxist organization that speaks for the interests of the working class or fights for genuinely revolutionary socialist politics.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact