

Socialism 2022 Conference: The pseudo-left promotes imperialist war

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The Socialism 2022 Conference took place September 2-5 in Chicago, after a hiatus of two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The event was organized by Haymarket Books following the dissolution in 2019 of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), with which Haymarket was formerly affiliated.

Like previous such conferences, the program was a conglomeration of various panels on specific topics, many focused on the identity politics concerns of different sections of the upper middle class. Many panels were sponsored by various groups and factions in and around the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

The main purpose of the conference, however, was to promote the politics of the Democratic Party and, in particular, the US-NATO war against Russia, spearheaded by the Biden administration. This was combined with an effort to bolster the trade union apparatus as an instrument to suppress the class struggle.

Notably, not a single panel addressed or sought to address in any comprehensive way the political situation or any of the critical experiences of the past several years. The pandemic was hardly mentioned outside of reminders to the audience about masking. There was certainly no effort to explain the massive political crisis in the United States, the rise of fascism, the character of the Biden administration or the experiences of the DSA itself.

Attendance was lower than previous years, at around 1,000, which was noted by several of those involved. DSA membership overall has fallen significantly over the past couple years as the bankruptcy of its political perspective has been exposed.

Several panels promoted the operations of American imperialism by portraying Russia and China, and even Iran, as “imperialist” and thus legitimate targets of political and military aggression.

One of the most significant of these was “Ukraine, Self-Determination, and Imperialist War.” Chairing the panel was Ashley Smith, a former leading ISO member and one of the main enforcers of the line of the State Department within the DSA.

The main speaker, Yuliya Yurchenko, a lecturer at the University of Greenwich and a self-described supporter of Sotsialnyi Rukh, attempted to browbeat the audience into accepting the US-NATO war against Russia as completely justified and even a legitimate employment of the principle of self-determination.

Denying that the war had anything to do with the US-backed

coup in Ukraine in 2014 or NATO’s continued expansion up to Russia’s borders, Yurchenko said:

So, of course Russia may have some concerns as they do say that they’re losing control or access to Ukraine’s economy and the Black Sea deep water port of Sevastopol. Well, they had until 2014 access to that port, so what’s your problem people? But also, it’s not in your country, so chill out. But those near-imperialistic concerns, they’re not security concerns.

Ukraine was not threatening Russia. They were not concerns, they were entitlements. This is what we need to understand. Oh, Russia feels offended! They feel sensitive! I honestly do not care. I am sorry, somebody is punching me in the face, and I need to think about their feelings? What? This is absolutely, sort of rape culture apologetics.

In fact, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was a reactionary and desperate response by a faction of the Russian oligarchy to the systematic and decades-long incitement by US and European imperialism. This has included the massive funneling of armaments into Ukraine, which functions as a wholly-owned subsidiary of the US military.

After cataloging the horrors of the war, which she portrayed as an act of imperialist, genocidal aggression on the part of Russia, Yurchenko asked rhetorically, “Where will you turn?” In the absence of “solidaristic missile defense systems,” Yurchenko argued the Ukrainian government had no choice but to seek military supplies from NATO. Although she described NATO as “horrendous,” Yurchenko said, “yet there is no alternative” for “militarily weak countries.”

Yurchenko also thanked Boris Johnson, the former fascist prime minister of the UK, saying, “If it wasn’t for Boris Johnson shitting his pants because he was going to be kicked out of office, and he wanted his Churchill moment that he was never going to have in his life, I do not know where Ukraine would have been by today.”

She dismissed questions about the presence of fascist forces in the Ukrainian military and government by asking, “What kind of purity test must the victims of Russian imperialism face?”

In the panel discussion, Sherry Wolf, a former leading member

of the ISO, claimed the United States and NATO did not want the war in Europe because it is supposedly a bad time for a war given all the crises facing the American government. Such stupidities ignore the fact that the domestic crisis within the US is a principal factor driving the ruling class to seek to impose “national unity” through war abroad.

Support for war abroad is connected to the defense of the trade union apparatus at home, as the latter functions as a critical instrument for disciplining the working class.

Many of the panels dealing with labor acknowledged in a roundabout way the growing opposition of workers to the betrayals and concessions engineered by the unions while insisting that workers subordinate themselves to the apparatus, under the guise of “reform.” One of the main Sunday night sessions was devoted to the conception of “class struggle unionism,” as formulated in the recent book by Joe Burns with the same name.

However, as Burns made clear in his panel contributions, he is fundamentally pessimistic about class struggle unionism forming the basis for a revival of the labor movement in the short or even medium term. As Burns said, “At the end of the day, even though we’ve got some bright spots, we don’t have a path right now to revive labor’s fortune and fundamentally change the balance of power between labor and capital.”

What is in fact meant by “class struggle” unionism is evident in the example Burns cited: the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). The *World Socialist Web Site* has extensively covered the record of betrayals by the CTU and its leading Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE). Former CTU President Jesse Sharkey, a former leading member of the ISO who is also married to Haymarket publisher Julie Fain, was present on several panels. Like Burns, he essentially placed the blame for defeats on the legal restrictions imposed on unions, as well as the lack of militancy among workers.

In a panel showing a film that covered the 2019 teachers strike in Los Angeles, Sharkey, who stepped down following bitter anger from teachers over the CTU’s central role in reopening schools during the pandemic, absurdly had himself introduced as a rank-and-file union member, with the introduction making sure to note the rarity of union leaders stepping down in such a way.

Under the leadership of the CORE faction, of which Sharkey was a founding member and central leader, the CTU has been the archetype for unions promoting middle class identity politics as a cover for their betrayals for more than a decade. Beginning with the 2012 strike that paved the way for the largest wave of school closures in American history, through the betrayal of Chicago teachers in 2021, which led to the reopening of schools at the behest of the Biden administration, the CTU has systematically sabotaged every struggle by teachers, students and parents to defend public education and health.

In a Saturday panel entitled “Rank-and-File Power,” Sharkey elaborated on the CTU’s reopening agreements and its effect on teachers, admitting, “I think there’s a lingering sense we got very beat up,” and “Teachers are licking their wounds.” If teachers “got very beat up,” however, it was due to the treachery of the CTU, politically aligned with the Democratic Party.

A significant element of the conference was the promotion of

illusions in the ability to fight against fascism through alliances with the Democratic Party. This was spelled out most explicitly in the panel “40 Years of DSA: Founding and Future.” Panelist Max Elbaum spoke of the “need to be in uncomfortable alliances, voting for people we don’t like.” Nonetheless, his prognosis remained somewhat bleak, saying that “empires in decline don’t tend to lead to revolutionary moments, but to reaction.”

Fellow panelist Jose La Luz, former associate director for AFSCME’s Leadership Academy and current member of the DSA National Political Committee, admitted that the DSA has no real relationship with DSA congresspersons like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or Jamaal Bowman. La Luz also acknowledged the significant presence of a “Stalinist” element within the DSA.

Panelist David Duhalde, a leading member of the DSA, explained in response to a question about why there is no national life in the DSA, that “socialism is going against a very ingrained culture of localism.” Duhalde also noted the organization’s fortunes were largely tied to the electoral campaigns of Bernie Sanders.

Reflecting the more official status of the conference and the opportunities for publicity in the pseudo-left media ecosystem, an increasing number of speakers at the conference were drawn from the ranks of tenured university professors. Many of the attendees were also drawn from academia. A great proportion staff a variety of activist groups and non-profits with ties to the Democratic Party or hold positions in the trade unions. Many of those who are not functionaries in the unions or the Democratic Party aspire to be.

The social layer whose interests were expressed and embodied at the conference is hostile to the broad mass of the population, the working class. The wave of class struggle that is erupting in the United States and internationally will pass over them like a hurricane.



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