

Socialist Alternative boosts presidential campaign of Cornel West

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The pseudo-left organization Socialist Alternative, which has long functioned as an auxiliary arm of the Democratic Party, supporting the presidential candidacy of Bernie Sanders in both 2016 and 2020, is moving to back the presidential campaign of Professor Cornel West in the 2024 elections.

Most recently, in an article published last month on its website headlined, “The Two-Party System Is Killing Us—Can We Build An Alternative?” Socialist Alternative points to West’s recently formed “Justice for All” party as a potential “mass working-class left party.” In reality, the Justice for All party is devoid of any clear political program and was established primarily as a vehicle for West to obtain ballot status.

Socialist Alternative first declared its support for West last year, when the former Democrat and former member of the Democratic Socialists of America was seeking the presidential nomination of the Green Party—after initially announcing he would seek the nomination of the Peoples Party, a political operation set up by former Sanders supporters. West later bowed out of the Green Party contest and said he was running as an independent. None of these political gyrations have given pause to Socialist Alternative.

On June 16, 2023, the Socialist Alternative Executive Committee hailed West’s campaign, declaring that his “candidacy has the potential to offer a sorely needed left alternative for working people and the oppressed.” In that statement, there were no less than 15 separate references to Bernie Sanders. The Executive Committee lamented:

The loyalty of Sanders and the “Squad” to the Democratic Party has been used in service of vicious attacks on workers, including the blocking of the railroad workers strike, and it has profoundly undercut the ability to organize movements of working people, squandering the momentum Bernie generated with his campaign’s “political revolution” against the billionaire class.

The real concern was that Sanders and the “Squad” in Congress, which Socialist Alternative had openly supported and campaigned for, have become so discredited by their association with the Democratic Party’s policies of war, genocide and austerity, that they can no longer fulfill their function as the Democratic Party’s “left” fig leaf.

In August, Socialist Alternative announced a “Students for Cornel West” campaign, writing, “We need systemic change, and Cornel West’s campaign offers us an opportunity to fight back. ... To be effective, we need Cornel West’s campaign to have a mass grassroots character. Young people have a central role to play in building the initial grassroots momentum that can draw in larger and larger layers of people hungry for change.” Socialist Alternative has since campaigned for West on every campus where it has been active.

In an article from November, Socialist Alternative raised similar concerns about “left and progressive voters who are sick and tired of the

Democrats’ false promises” and called for West to “step into the void” caused by the likely upcoming election between two widely despised candidates, the would-be Führer Trump and “genocide Joe.”

The organization’s support of the West campaign as a “left-wing, pro-worker” opposition to the Democrats and Republicans is aimed at misdirecting the growing number of workers and youth in the US turning their backs on the Democratic Party.

The political record of Cornel West

The Democratic Party is currently waging an “all-out war” on third parties and independent candidates, including the West campaign, in an effort to keep them from getting ballot status. This does not, however, mean that West represents a genuine challenge to the two-party system.

Any serious review of West’s record would both undercut the ability of his campaign to keep this immense anger tied to the dead-end of bourgeois politics and expose the reactionary role of Socialist Alternative.

West has spent decades promoting and endorsing Democratic politicians. He joined the DSA in the 1980s and served as its honorary chair. He campaigned for Jesse Jackson in the 1980s, and endorsed Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign before raising criticisms following the election.

West has made limited criticism of the Democratic Party, calling Obama “a black mascot of Wall Street oligarchs.” West, as well as Socialist Alternative, participated in the political fraud known as the People’s Party, formed in 2017 on the basis of pressuring Sanders to launch a new party. Both West and Socialist Alternative also backed Sanders’ presidential campaigns.

In 2016 West and Socialist Alternative switched to supporting Green Party candidate Jill Stein after Sanders endorsed Clinton. In 2020, they went separate ways, with West calling for a vote for Biden in the general election. Socialist Alternative backed Green Party co-founder and 2020 presidential candidate Howie Hawkins.

The Green Party operates as a pressure group oriented toward the Democratic Party. During elections, the Greens corral votes for Democratic candidates, arguing that their presence pressures Democrats to take more “progressive” political positions.

If there is any consistent thread in West’s transition from one political alliance to another, it is his opposition to Marxism and the building of a party of the working class. In his book *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, West explicitly rejected Marxism and the working class as a “preordained historical agent,” and deliberately avoided using terms like “capitalism” and “socialism.”

As the WSWS explained in an earlier comment on West’s campaign:

West's philosophy belongs to the school of American pragmatism as it was developed in particular by Richard Rorty, with whom West studied while at Princeton in the early 1970s. Pragmatism has different varieties, all revolving around a denial of the possibility of objective truth, and, bound up with this, a rejection of history as a law-governed process. In its modern forms and especially in the writings of Rorty, pragmatism is directed explicitly against Marxism and Trotskyism, which insists that the working class is an objectively revolutionary force, that the same contradictions that led to revolution in the 20th century persist at a higher level in the 21st, and that the basic task is to build a socialist leadership in the working class.

Cornel West's pragmatic approach to politics and theory entails an eclectic mixture of Black nationalist, racial and identity politics, which he combines with openly religious and irrationalist conceptions. He sees his political allies not only among the pseudo-left open and tacit backers of the Democratic Party but also libertarian and openly far-right forces.

This is most evident in his position on the pandemic, which has adapted to the anti-scientific positions of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and others. As the WSWS noted in an article published yesterday, West lists as one of his demands on his website, "Convene a federal panel of scientists and experts to study the safety and utilization of vaccines for infectious diseases."

In an interview with far-right comedian Jimmy Dore last September, West stated, "I think the kind of concerns that you and RFK Jr. and others have certainly are well-grounded."

More recently, West took part in a panel hosted by the far-right Libertarian Party of California, during which he solidarized himself with candidates who call for the abolition of the income tax and an end to all regulations on corporations.

Cornel West's politics can only serve to sow confusion and disorientation among the millions of young people and workers who are confronted with the danger of nuclear war, genocide and fascism.

Behind Socialist Alternative's support for Cornel West

The orientation by Socialist Alternative toward Cornel West is not an accident. It arises from the entire historical trajectory of the organization, which arose out of a rejection of Trotskyism.

Socialist Alternative emerged from the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI), an international group organized around the British renegade from Trotskyism, Ted Grant. Grant broke in 1950 from the Fourth International after refusing to oppose the renegacy of Jock Haston, a leading figure in the British section who declared that the Fourth International had "no right" to claim to be the leadership of the international working class.

Like Michel Pablo, whose revisionist program was rejected with the founding of the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1953, Grant promoted the conception that the Stalinists or some movement besides the revolutionary working class would overthrow capitalism. Grant's followers joined Pablo's International Secretariat in the aftermath of the 1953 split. They advocated that the Trotskyist movement liquidate itself into what Pablo called the "real" mass movement: Stalinist and social democratic parties and bourgeois national movements. In their view, there was no basis for the independent existence of the Fourth International and the independent mobilization of the working class.

Grant later broke with the Pabloite organization in 1965, which was by then known as the United Secretariat following its reunification with the American Socialist Workers Party in 1963. He led the establishment of the CWI in 1974, but on a Pabloite perspective. Grant's group, the Militant Tendency, claimed that the Labour Party could bring about socialism through state nationalisation of industry and other reformist measures and focused on winning positions for its members within the apparatus. This did not save the group from being expelled from the Labour Party in the sweeping purge of the left carried out under party leader Neil Kinnock.

The British group eventually split in 1991 as Grant opposed running candidates against the Labour Party even after the expulsions. An anti-Grant majority retained control of the British group and the CWI. Its American supporters established Socialist Alternative. This group eventually broke with the CWI in 2019 and founded International Socialist Alternative without addressing any of the fundamental historical and political issues behind the CWI's anti-Trotskyist perspective of subordinating the working class to the existing labor bureaucracies.

Socialist Alternative first gained national prominence in 2013 with the election of Kshama Sawant to the Seattle City Council. While many of her voters undoubtedly sought to express hostility to the two-party system, Sawant's campaign put forward a mildly reformist program indistinguishable from that of certain Democratic Party candidates and received the endorsement of various union bureaucrats who had collaborated closely with the Democratic Party to push through austerity contracts.

As the WSWS explained in 2013, Socialist Alternative "and similar groups represent a tendency within bourgeois politics. The difference between them and political operatives working directly within the Democratic Party is tactical in character." We further warned that the group was attempting to build a movement modeled on Syriza in Greece, which in subsequent years implemented the largest austerity ever seen within the country.

Over the last 10 years this assessment has been confirmed. Socialist Alternative endorsed various Democratic candidates and temporarily entered the DSA. Now, it is supporting West and his campaign to "put the pressure and bring to bear so that the politicians who are on the inside have spaces to breathe."

This same political and social orientation is evident in Socialist Alternative's intervention in the mass protests against the genocide in Gaza. While both Socialist Alternative and West condemn the systematic slaughter of civilians and are using demagogic rhetoric to denounce Biden, the only political solution they present is the perspective of pressuring the Biden administration to end the very bloodshed it has been funding for months.

In an article from December 23, Socialist Alternative excitedly pointed to what it describes as signs that Biden "somewhat shifted his public statements towards Netanyahu." The group wrote, "What is missing is an organized force that can turn the widespread anti-war attitude among working and young people into a sustained movement prepared to disrupt business as usual. This is ultimately what will have to be built in order to force the Biden administration to put even an inch of meaningful distance between himself and the bloodshed in Gaza."

In an article published at the beginning of February, "How We Fight For A Ceasefire," Socialist Alternative wrote, not without cynicism, that the movement against the genocide "had an important impact" because it "created an enormous headache for Biden," changed "the terrain of the 2024 election" and played "at least a partial role in the tanking of Biden's approval."

Then the article went on to declare that what is now needed was more "public pressure" on the Democrats! It argued, "Making Biden's culpability undeniable is crucial; the only way they will make concessions is if we raise the stakes by bringing the social power of the working class

to bear.”

When the article referred to the “working class,” it really meant the nationalist, corporatist trade union bureaucracy. The organization praised the UAW and other union bureaucracies that have worked systematically with the Biden administration to preempt the eruption of strikes that would threaten US imperialism’s war agenda.

The politics of both Socialist Alternative and West, entirely oriented toward pressuring the Democratic Party, expresses their hostility to the struggle to build an independent socialist party within the American and international working class. In backing Cornel West’s presidential campaign, Socialist Alternative expresses the social interests not of workers and young people, but of affluent sections of the middle class and those who want to become part of that social layer.

Whatever their radical rhetoric, their principal concern is to preempt a challenge to capitalism, US imperialism and one of its principal instruments of class rule and war—the Democratic Party—from the working class.



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