

DEM Party international conference: The bankruptcy of the nationalist perspective

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The Kurdish nationalist Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party) held its International Peace and Democratic Society Conference in Istanbul on December 6-7. The conference, taking place amid ongoing negotiations between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) led by imprisoned political prisoner Abdullah Öcalan, was attended by politicians, academics, and journalists from across the world.

The conference's "final declaration," published Thursday, leaves no doubt that this is an attempt to legitimize the imperialist-capitalist system with democratic rhetoric. It states, "The successful conclusion of this process toward lasting peace in Türkiye—amid rising conflicts across the world—has the potential to guide not only Kurds and the peoples of Türkiye but also the Middle East and the world." However, it conceals the imperialist and bourgeois class origins of the rise in global conflicts.

The claim that there can be "peaceful" imperialism is perpetuated by the call for the European Union (EU)—one of the main supporters of the Zionist genocide that has even according to official numbers killed more than 70,000 Palestinians in Gaza—to act as guarantor of this process: "When necessary—and if accepted by the parties—we remind that the EU could contribute to the peace process as a mediator or guarantor." This orientation, which demonstrates the bankruptcy of the nationalist perspective, attempts to conceal the fact that the European powers are not only the main defenders of imperialist war and genocide, but also wage war on the working class and democratic rights at home.

One of the main functions of the conference was to spread the illusion that these negotiations, supported by US and European imperialism, can bring about democratization and peace, and to endorse Öcalan's role and the anti-Marxist postmodern perspective he has developed.

Öcalan had been calling for cooperation with the Turkish state since his capture in a CIA operation in 1999 and subsequent handover to Ankara. The negotiation process, which had been attempted without success several times before, was revived in 2024 as part of the deepening war in the Middle East. Öcalan called for the PKK to lay down its arms and dissolve itself, and the organization took a congress decision in this direction. Arguing that the Kurdish question has been largely resolved, he presented "integration with the state" as the way forward.

A similar path was proposed for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the PKK's sister organization in Syria and the main proxy force of the US in the country.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* stated from the outset, what is at stake in the negotiations is an attempt by the Turkish and Kurdish bourgeoisies to reach agreement and forge an alliance in line with the US imperialism's goal of a "new Middle East" under its hegemony. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Öcalan have proposed a reactionary "Turkish, Kurdish, Arab" alliance against Israel's growing influence in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and the Middle East in general. Washington is also trying to unite Ankara, Tel Aviv, and other allies, including the Kurdish movement, on an anti-Iran axis.

Therefore, neither the genocide in Gaza nor the imperialist attack

against Iran was condemned in the final declaration of this "international peace" conference. In fact, both the negotiations and the conference itself confirm the continued complicity of the Turkish and Kurdish bourgeois nationalists in the destruction of the Middle East by US and European imperialism over the past 35 years.

The opening speech was delivered by DEM Party Co-Chairs Tülay Hatimo?ullar? and Tuncer Bak?rhan. Bak?rhan said, "At the root of the Kurdish issue lies the exclusion of a people from the law for a century. Kurds have not been recognized as a people for a century. For a century, they have been struggling to prove their existence and to have their laws and rights accepted."

Bak?rhan did not explain how the Turkish bourgeoisie that has denied the existence of the Kurds for decades is now capable of resolving this issue. The truth is that, as Leon Trotsky explained and foresaw in his Theory of Permanent Revolution, the 100-year history of the Turkish bourgeoisie, like that of other countries of belated capitalist development, proves that it is inherently incapable of permanently resolving these issues.

In his speech, Bak?rhan claimed that "while chaos reigns in the world and violence spreads in the Middle East, a peace process is underway here," arguing that the Turkish and Kurdish ruling elites are advancing independently of these imperialist-driven trends, even in the opposite direction.

Öcalan's "democratic socialism"

Hatimo?ullar?, former co-chair of the pseudo-left Socialist Refoundation Party (SYKP), an ally of the DEM Party, said, "We are on the eve of World War III. Unfortunately, what we call World War III will make World Wars I and II seem merciful." She then presented Öcalan's call as an initiative that would reverse the course toward world war, saying it was "profoundly historic and valuable, especially at a time when war and conflict dominate global and regional agendas and exploitation deepens."

Hatimo?ullar? concluded her remarks by saying, "We must further develop our internationalist struggle against the unjust order of the capitalist imperialist system." Hatimo?ullar?'s "anti-capitalist" and "anti-imperialist" rhetoric draws from the anti-Marxist "democratic socialism" approach that Öcalan has particularly emphasized and developed this year. This concept, which has been rapidly embraced by the Kurdish movement, aims to subordinate the growing interest in socialism among the working class and youth to a pro-imperialist and pro-capitalist politics under the guise of "peace and democratization."

Öcalan's message, read at the opening of the conference, mentioned the words socialism/socialist more than 20 times, capitalism/capitalist 8 times,

Marxism and Marx many times, and Lenin once.

However, Öcalan uses these concepts to distort Marxism and socialism for current political purposes. He claims to be advancing toward “democratic socialism” through negotiations with Islamist President Erdoğan, who established an authoritarian regime in Turkey; Ahmed al-Sharaa, who began his rule by massacring the Alawite minority in Syria and has roots in al-Qaeda; and President Donald Trump, who is establishing a fascist regime in the US and abolishing the constitution. Any reformist perspective that legitimizes imperialism, capitalism and the existing bourgeois states, and suggests that this system can be improved through “negotiations”, is hostile to socialism.

Öcalan’s fundamental argument that Marxism failed and came to deadlock because it advocated “nation-state socialism” is neither new nor correct. Its roots lie in anarchism, based on the petty bourgeois rejection of the concept of proletarian dictatorship or a workers’ state. Marxism scientifically explained the historical necessity of the workers’ state during the transition from capitalism to socialism. When Öcalan speaks of “nation-state socialism,” he is referring to Stalinism, which broke away from Marxism with its anti-Marxist theory of “socialism in one country,” but he deliberately avoids naming it.

If he did, he would have had to acknowledge that an alternative existed in the USSR in the form of the Left Opposition led by Trotsky from 1923 onwards, and that classical Marxism and the perspective of international socialism had been defended since 1938 by the Fourth International founded by Trotsky. Instead, like all anti-communists, Öcalan equates Stalinism with Marxism and socialism, completely obscuring the historical struggle and legitimacy of Trotskyism.

Trotsky warned and fought against the danger of capitalist restoration and the end of the USSR, which movements and bourgeois ideologues of Stalinist origin internationally, including the PKK, could not even imagine. He wrote in 1938: “either the bureaucracy, becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers’ state, will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back to capitalism; or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism.”

Öcalan states that the “nation-state” is an obstacle to the resolution of the Kurdish issue and other problems, but he argues that the problem can be solved by arbitrarily transforming it into a “democratic state.” This perspective, a concrete example of the failure of philosophical idealism, is powerless in the face of Marxism’s scientific explanation of the laws of capitalism and society.

Like private property in the means of production, nation states also form the foundations of the capitalist system. The contradictions between these outdated foundations and the socialization of production and the development of a global economy lead, on the one hand, to imperialist war, political oppression, and social inequality, while at the same time on the other paving the way for the socialist revolution of the international working class. The abolition of the nation-state will only be possible through the working class seizing power through revolution and eliminating capitalism worldwide.

In Öcalan’s “democratic socialism” perspective, social inequality and how to eliminate it are completely overlooked. More accurately, it has no goal of achieving social equality, which requires transferring power from the bourgeoisie to the working class.

As the WSWS pointed out in its Thursday perspective on a recent report from the World Inequality Lab: “Under the capitalist system, some 56,000 billionaires and centi-millionaires control the fate of the 8 billion human beings who inhabit this planet.” In Turkey, one of Europe’s most unequal countries, according to the report, the top one percent of the population controls 35.1 percent of total wealth, while the richest 10 percent controls 68.4 percent. The preservation of the wealth and power of this capitalist oligarchy is incompatible with democracy and peace anywhere.

The bankrupt reformist perspective of “democratic socialism” is not only hostile to Marxism, it also compromises and collaborates with the most reactionary forces in the Middle East and the United States. As a “democratic socialist,” Zohran Mamdani was elected Mayor of New York by exploiting social opposition to the Trump administration and growing interest in socialism. Mamdani’s embrace of Trump and Öcalan’s cooperation with Trump’s proxies in the Middle East complement each other. “Democratic socialism,” as in the US, represents the interests of the well-off middle class in the Middle East and elsewhere, serving to prevent the development of a genuinely socialist and anti-imperialist movement within the working class.

Öcalan’s “democratic socialism” is nothing more than a bourgeois democratic utopia advanced amid imperialist war, genocide, the return of fascism, and massive social inequality. By advocating for a “democratic republic” instead of the state, Öcalan obscures the fact that this is a type of bourgeois state. He puts forward three “fundamental principles” for “democratic integration law, in which legal norms are reconstructed in favor of society through individual and universal norms along with collective rights”: A law of the free citizen, a law of peace and democratic society and laws of freedom.

Subsequent sessions of the conference continued with international examples of this type of “democratic integration.” presented as solutions, they also fail to stand up to Marxist-Trotskyist criticism.

South African experience

Mohamed Bhabha, former senator and chairman of the Parliamentary Constitutional Committee from South Africa, claimed that they had built a democratic state from the apartheid regime. However, the initiation of negotiations in 1985 with Nelson Mandela, leader of the African National Congress (ANC), and the eventual end of the apartheid regime in 1994 were the product of the ruling class’s fear of social revolution.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in 1998:

The ANC, under the tutelage of the Stalinists of the South African Communist Party, utilised socialist phraseology to win support in the working class. But it represented the interests of a layer of the black and ‘coloured’ middle class denied social advancement under the apartheid system. The ‘reconciliation’ its leaders agreed to was a pledge to defend the profit system and thwart the social and political strivings of the workers and peasants.

In the 1994 elections, the ANC came to power by winning 62 percent of the vote. The International Committee of the Fourth International’s 1994 statement, “In whose interests will the ANC rule?” was extremely prescient:

The capitalist class had been forced to alter the form but not the substance of their rule in South Africa, in order to stave off the threat of social revolution.... The ANC has taken on the task of overseeing the economic exploitation and political repression of the South African masses, in whose name it claims to speak. It is following a well-worn path, taken by movements all over the world which once proclaimed “national liberation” as their mission—from the PLO to the Sandinistas.

In many other African countries, bourgeois nationalist movements that came to power preserved the same colonial state apparatus and class structure that they claimed to have overthrown, and the borders drawn by imperialists.

The economies of these formally independent countries remained dependent on the demands of foreign capital through debt, trade, and the plundering of raw materials. Governments such as the ANC served as instruments for integrating the new “indigenous” or “black” African bourgeoisie into the political establishment and suppressing the revolutionary movement of the working class. The decades-long escalation of austerity policies and political repression by these reactionary regimes has recently led to a wave of “Gen Z” protests.

The fact that South Africa is today the most unequal country in the world constitutes an indictment of the entire bourgeois nationalist perspective. The South African experience of “democratic integration” that Bhabha boasts about exemplifies the transformation of former nationalist movements into direct instruments of imperialist domination.

Northern Ireland

Sinn Féin National Chairman and Northern Ireland MP Declan Kearney said in his speech on the first day of the conference: “The Good Friday Agreement was between Ireland and Britain and it still holds. We haven’t finished our work in 27 years. The British Parliament’s control over Irish territory has been removed.”

The Good Friday Agreement, signed in April 1998, provided for some symbolic reforms, such as changes to the name of the police force and certain practices, limited “inclusivity” of then minority Catholics in institutional representation, and intergovernmental coordination mechanisms. However, these were not reforms that guaranteed the fundamental rights of the working class or eliminated paramilitary and state repression.

The *World Socialist Web Site* Editorial Board stated in its assessment on April 25, 1998, that the peace agreement did not reflect the interests of the working class on either side of the divided Irish border, whether Catholic or Protestant. Far from laying the groundwork for ending the sectarian conflicts that British imperialism has nurtured for centuries, the agreement “upholds the conception that the fundamental divisions in Ireland are those of religion and national identity.”

WSWS explained the class interests that laid the groundwork for similar agreements in Ireland and elsewhere as follows:

To understand the significance of the agreement one must examine the economic and social driving forces that have brought the parties together and shaped the character of their deliberations. The increasingly global nature of economic life—the rise of transnational corporations operating on a world scale, the international mobility of capital and the dominance of world markets over even the largest national economies—has, from the standpoint of international capital, rendered many of the political relationships that prevailed in the post-World War Two period obsolete.

The divergence between old political relationships and the need for corporate and financial interests to gain access to wider markets, new sources of raw materials and labour, and, in general terms, the global economy, underlay the dismantling of legal apartheid in South Africa and the attempt to incorporate the PLO into a new political set-up in the Middle East. Broadly speaking,

the same forces have been at work in the attempts to overcome the old barriers to capital investment and profit making in northern Ireland.

The main beneficiaries of this process were British imperialism and the Northern Irish bourgeoisie. A political restructuring was needed to deepen the wage exploitation of the working class, open the region up to international capital, and regulate conflicts of interest between Britain and rival imperialist powers. This fundamental objective revealed the main purpose of the post-1998 reforms: to calm internal conflict, class struggles, and social discontent, thereby making the North’s cheap, skilled labor force more attractive for global investment.

The evolution of British imperialist “democracy” demolishes claims that such integrations will bring democratization. Since the agreement was signed, British imperialism has been a key actor in turning the Middle East into a bloodbath, from the Iraq War to Israel’s genocide in Gaza. Within Britain, attacks on the social rights of the working class are accompanied by the elimination of democratic rights. The persecution of opponents of the Gaza genocide and the banning of the protest group Palestine Action are concrete examples of how the rule of the capitalist oligarchy is incompatible with democracy.

Socialist perspective

The speeches at the conference on the Catalonia and Basque issues and the Zapatista movement in Mexico did little more than demonstrate that they represent a failed pro-imperialist, middle-class perspective. The experiences presented as solutions throughout the conference exemplified the bankruptcy of nationalist movements and their integration into the capitalist system. Wherever these movements came to power, they established administrations that were compatible with international corporations and imperialist policies.

Underlying this pro-imperialist evolution of national liberation movements is, essentially, the globalization of the economy. This process has undermined not only these movements but also all kinds of nationalist and reformist projects, including Stalinism, social democracy, and syndicalism.

The PKK, established as a Stalinist petty-bourgeois nationalist movement opposing the united socialist struggle of Turkish and Kurdish workers, and its leader Öcalan, have reacted to these objective developments in a manner no different from their counterparts around the world: to move towards integration with imperialism and the capitalist state under democratic, even “socialist” rhetoric, and to prevent the masses from turning towards socialist revolution.

As explained in the Historical and International Foundations of Sosyalist E?itlik Partisi – Dördüncü Enternasyonal:

Despite its “leftist” and “anti-imperialist” rhetoric, the PKK had a bourgeois nationalist strategy of manoeuvring between the great powers and regional states and ultimately reaching an agreement with Ankara. The 1991 Gulf War and the capitalist restorations in the Stalinist regimes led the PKK to take off the mask of “Marxism-Leninism” and abandon its demand for an independent state. With its military strategy failing, the PKK sought new allies, especially among the European imperialist powers, while the change in the party’s line went hand in hand with violent internal purges and the incessant glorification of Öcalan.

From the outset, the WSWS has addressed the Ankara-PKK agreement in the context of the US's efforts to reshape the Middle East under its domination. The agreement between Turkish and Kurdish nationalists, who are accomplices of US imperialism, is not a "peace" agreement but a war preparation agreement.

This stems not only from the fact that the Middle East has been the scene of uninterrupted imperialist interventions, regime change wars, and civil wars for 35 years, but also from the nature of imperialism itself. As Lenin explained in his "The Peace Program" written in March 1916, in the midst of the imperialist war:

Whoever promises the nations a "democratic" peace without at the same time preaching the socialist revolution, or while repudiating the struggle for it—the struggle which must be carried on now, during the war—is deceiving the proletariat.

Just as no agreement between Ankara and the PKK will bring peace to the Middle East, so too the oppression of the Kurdish people and other oppressed peoples will not end, nor will their democratic rights be guaranteed. National oppression is not the subjective choice of this or that politician or government, but a product of the imperialist-capitalist system. As Trotsky explained, the full and genuine solution to democratic tasks lies in the working class establishing its own power by leading the oppressed masses in the struggle against imperialism and its capitalist agents.

One of the most telling concrete examples of the continued oppression of the Kurdish people and those who defend their democratic rights is the state intervention targeting the program of the Sosyalist E?itlik Partisi itself. In September, the Supreme Court of Appeals Prosecutor's Office's demanded that legitimate democratic demands such as "education in one's mother tongue" and "Kurdish becoming an official language with constitutional guarantees," be changed or removed in the program. This unacceptable intervention was rejected with a comprehensive response. With the exception of one party, this state intervention was completely ignored by the DEM Party, and its "leftist" allies, which claim to defend democratic rights.

The Sosyalist E?itlik Partisi, which is fighting for an immediate end to state repression against the Kurdish people and politicians, and for the recognition of fundamental democratic rights, rejects all so-called solutions that divide the working class and subordinate it to the capitalist system, and declares that the only way forward is through an international, revolutionary program based on the Theory of Permanent Revolution.

The Sosyalist E?itlik Partisi insists that the only way to secure the lasting peace and democratic rights that working people long for is the unification of workers of all nationalities in the Middle East and in the imperialist countries in the fight for global socialism and against war and neo-colonial oppression. It means fighting for the Socialist Federation of the Middle East, as part of a world socialist federation.



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