

The Socialism 2026 conference and the pro-war politics of the Democratic Socialists of America

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The Socialism 2026 conference was held September 4-7 in Chicago organized by Haymarket Books and prominently endorsed by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Its panels promised to discuss the fight for “revolutionary socialism,” “anti-imperialism” and anti-colonialism.

Most of the roughly 190 sessions dealt with the concerns of the middle-class pseudo-left: racial identity politics, gender and sexuality, religion and spirituality. But the central political axis of the conference was expressed in its panels on foreign policy, which presented support for the US-NATO war with Russia and the US conflict with China as “anti-imperialism.” Behind the invocations of “anti-imperialism” and “socialism” stood the pro-war foreign policy of the Democratic Party.

At these panels, speakers denounced Russian and Chinese “imperialism,” whitewashed the Ukrainian government’s granting of state honors to perpetrators of the Holocaust, attacked China’s zero-COVID policy and echoed the Trump administration’s talking points about China’s “concentration camps” for the Uyghur minority.

The Socialism conference has been held in Chicago annually since 2002. It was founded by the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and passed, when the ISO dissolved itself in 2019, to Haymarket Books, which had been the ISO’s publishing arm, with the DSA and *Jacobin* magazine as partners. This year’s program was endorsed by more than 90 organizations, among them the DSA, the Tempest Collective, Solidarity, New Politics, the Ukraine Solidarity Network and the Boris Kagarlitsky International Solidarity Campaign.

The first of the foreign policy panels came on Saturday, when Ashley Smith spoke on “The US and China: Imperial Rivalry in a Multipolar World.” Smith, a veteran of the ISO and now a leading member of the Tempest Collective, a group formed by its former members, is a co-author of the Haymarket book *China in Global Capitalism* and a member of the Champlain Valley chapter of the DSA in Vermont.

China and Russia, he said, “are up-and-coming predators who exploit their own working class, oppress their own national minorities, oppress oppressed nations in their orbit.”

On China, Smith made comments that would not be out of place at a State Department press briefing. China is “an imperialist power rivaling the US,” and “the mass internment of Uyghurs in

concentration camps” ranks among the greatest crimes against humanity committed by any government. Any socialist “that would hold up and praise zero COVID ... has got to have their head checked,” he said of a policy under which China reported about 5,000 COVID deaths in three years.

The Sunday panel “Russian Neofascism: Imperialism Abroad & Repression at Home” was devoted to the new book *Russia's New Imperialism: Capital and Ideology* by Ilya Matveev and Ilya Budraitskis, two Russian academics who left Russia after the invasion. It was sponsored by the campaign to free Boris Kagarlitsky, the Russian sociologist jailed for five years in 2024 for a social media post about the war. The panel characterized the Russian government as “fascist,” while ignoring and downplaying the Ukrainian government’s open promotion and honoring of perpetrators of the Holocaust.

Matveev, a political scientist now at the University of Helsinki, dismissed NATO’s eastward expansion as a cause of the war with the words “all these tired arguments.” “In terms of nuclear balance, there was never a threat to Russia,” he said. He complained that before 2022 “American support to Ukraine was extremely limited.”

Budraitskis, a historian who spent the past two years as a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, rebuked the room for “talking all the way about genocide in Palestine and not talking about this openly genocidal ... Russian war.”

When the floor opened, a retired teacher who accused the Ukrainian government of holding “thousands and thousands of anti-war prisoners” was shouted down by a pro-war attendee who had scratched out his name tag. The teacher, refusing to be intimidated, told the man to “shut up” and continued his remarks.

Asked afterward whether he condemned Ukraine’s state honors for Holocaust perpetrators, Budraitskis said he knew of none. When read a list of Holocaust perpetrators honored by the Zelensky government, he refused to comment.

Vermont State Senator Tanya Vyhovsky was a panelist at the conference’s closing-day session “The Left and the National Question: Building Solidarity without Exception,” organized by the Ukraine Solidarity Network, alongside University of Chicago sociologist Eman Abdelhadi, Reza Rezaian of the United Iranian Left and the Venezuelan socialist Simón Rodríguez.

A WWS reporter asked from the floor whether the panelists

condemned the honoring of Holocaust perpetrators by the Zelensky government. Vyhovsky replied, “Nation states, none of them are free from having done harm.” She added, “I can’t know everything that’s happened,” she said, ‘but when it is brought to my attention, I will address it.”

The Holocaust was placed on the level of the harm done by any state, and its official celebration in Ukraine treated as a detail that had not yet come to her attention. The honors at issue are those bestowed by the Ukrainian state on Stepan Bandera, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the leaders of the Waffen-SS Galicia Division — Nazi collaborators implicated in the mass murder of Jews and Poles, and today officially designated Ukraine’s “national heroes.”

Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed leaflets on the case of Bogdan Syrotiuk, the 27-year-old Ukrainian Trotskyist sentenced on August 10 to 15 years in prison for opposing the war and calling on the workers of Russia and Ukraine to unite against it. Among the grounds cited by the court was his “reinterpreting” of the “national heroes” the panelists had just declined to discuss.

Only one panelist expressed opposition to Bogdan’s imprisonment, Suzi Weissman, and she coupled it with a call for the military defeat of Russia. An editor of the magazine *Against the Current* and treasurer of the Kagarlitsky campaign, who chaired the Sunday panel, Weissman said, “I too stand with ... a victory for Ukraine and the defeat of Russia. Some people could call it revolutionary defeatism. Putin has to go.” Revolutionary defeatism, as Lenin developed it, meant the struggle against one’s own ruling class in war. Weissman used the term to demand the military defeat of a government targeted by American imperialism.

Amy Goodman, the host of the news program *Democracy Now!*, and Hasan Piker, the Twitch streamer who headlined the DSA’s own panel, refused to make a statement when asked directly.

The context of the conference was a shift to the left among broad sections of workers and young people, triggered by the eruption of imperialist war and the imposition of dictatorship all over the world. This change has led to an increase in the membership of the DSA, which announced in July that it had passed 120,000 members.

These layers were overwhelmingly directed to the larger panels, where Piker and Goodman drew audiences in the hundreds. Jokes, banter and pop-culture references gave these sessions the feeling of a stand-up comedy night, while the political discussion was devoted to electoral maneuvers.

Piker urged DSA members to volunteer for and endorse Democratic candidates who do not call themselves socialists, holding up as the model the Michigan campaign of Abdul El-Sayed, the former Detroit health director who won the Democratic nomination for US Senate on August 4. Piker campaigned with El-Sayed in April and August. Asked on MS NOW on July 31 why he is not in the DSA, El-Sayed answered, “Because I’m simply not a socialist.” Campaigning for such candidates, Piker told the room, is what the DSA is for.

Never addressed in these sessions was the fact that the DSA backs and endorses the rapidly escalating US war with Russia. Its

two members of Congress, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib, voted for the \$40 billion Ukraine war package in May 2022 and the \$61 billion package in April 2024.

This is the politics of the Democratic Party. The DSA is a faction of that party, and the line laid down in Chicago’s breakout rooms is the line of the party that funded the war.

The DSA is the political descendant of Max Shachtman, who broke with Trotskyism in order to make his peace with American imperialism. In 1940, with Europe at war, Shachtman and James Burnham led a minority out of the Socialist Workers Party, the American Trotskyist party, refusing to defend the Soviet Union against imperialist attack.

Leon Trotsky answered them in *In Defense of Marxism*, writing that the minority “is leading a typical petty-bourgeois tendency” that had capitulated to bourgeois public opinion. He insisted the theoretical capitulation would be followed by a political one.

Shachtman dissolved his Independent Socialist League into the Socialist Party in 1958, backed the CIA’s invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 and championed the war in Vietnam. He steered his followers into the Democratic Party under the strategy of “realignment,” and his acolytes ended up in the neoconservative movement.

His protégé Michael Harrington founded the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee in 1973 and merged it with the New American Movement in 1982 to form the DSA. Two other Shachtman disciples ran Washington’s instruments of regime change: Carl Gershman as president of the National Endowment for Democracy and Tom Kahn as director of the AFL-CIO’s international affairs department.

In his *Letters from Afar* of 1917, Lenin called the world war a great stage manager that put every political tendency in its place. The four days in Chicago were a demonstration of it. Workers and young people entering into struggle must be warned about the warmongers and reactionaries who staff the upper echelons of the Democratic Socialists of America and determine its politics.



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