

“Socialism 2010”: The politics of the International Socialist Organization

Part 1: The ISO and the American middle-class left

By David Walsh
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The International Socialist Organization (ISO) and *Socialist Worker* are sponsoring upcoming conferences in Chicago and Oakland, California under the banner “Socialism 2010.”

To begin where one should—at the beginning—there is the unintentional irony in the title of the meetings, “Socialism 2010.” There is no aspect of the conferences that is “socialist” in a manner that would be understood by any serious figure in the history of the socialist movement.

The ISO-*Socialist Worker* would like to give the impression that its gatherings represent socialism in 2010, but the meetings entirely fail to address the central questions for socialists: the struggle against world capitalism; the political preparation of the working class for power; the international unification of the working class; the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production; the burning need to establish a socialist economy, democratically controlled by the working population.

The conferences are not oriented toward any of the complex problems associated with the socialist revolution. They possess none of the gravity and determination inevitably present when such life-and-death questions are under consideration.

Instead, we are informed by the *Socialist Worker*, the conferences’ aims are “to explore the history of struggles of ordinary people, to learn about radical figures who led social movements and to debate theoretical questions that can help us change the world.” This general perspective would be acceptable to a host of liberal protest movements in the US, none of which envisions or aspires to challenging the foundations of the existing social order.

What are these conferences then? How should they be properly and precisely defined?

We learn a good deal by looking at the leading figures at the meetings and their histories. They are largely drawn from the various tendencies that reflected and expressed the radicalization of students and others in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The ISO conference derives its essential character from this social layer, which joined and adhered to organizations that employed Marxist terminology to pursue what can only be defined as distinctly middle-class politics.

Each of the various movements represented at “Socialism 2010”—including the International Socialist tendency and the numerous groups that emerged from the Socialist Workers Party in the US long after it had abandoned revolutionary socialism—was itself the product of splits and regroupments, every one of which resulted in the given organization disassociating itself even more firmly from Marxism, from socialism, and from Trotskyism.

The radical wave of the 1960s and 1970s was an international phenomenon, encompassing, in particular, the anti-Vietnam War and “student power” movements in the US, Canada, Britain, France, Italy, Germany and the other advanced capitalist countries. Only a small

number of the participants in these movements made their way to genuine revolutionary Marxism and stayed the course.

In 1850 Marx provided a definition of the type of politics out of which the ISO conferences have emerged that is still unsurpassed to our day. He explained: “The democratic petty-bourgeois, far from wanting to transform the whole society in the interests of the revolutionary proletarians, only aspire to a change in social conditions which will make the existing society as tolerable and comfortable for themselves as possible.” Could any description be more apt?

Over the past several decades, as they have grown into successful careers in academia, journalism, liberal think tanks, or the trade unions, these once rebellious individuals have moved sharply to the right. Whatever attracted them initially to socialism has faded from memory. Not a great deal, politically and intellectually, remains. This social grouping represents, in reality, nothing more than the left flank of the political establishment.

In the US at present, the *New York Times* defines the contours and limits of liberal politics. The *Nation* adapts that, altering it in the process, for its particular left-liberal audience. The ISO and others add “radical” ingredients, and even a bit of socialist flavoring, and the admixture is passed on to their constituencies.

Petty-bourgeois “left” politics of the ISO variety is characterized by theoretical formlessness, the absence of perspective, pragmatic adaptation to the dominant political pressures, and political unseriousness.

The program advanced at “Socialism 2010” is not the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeoisie, but a mild reformist platform, a return to Keynesian policies and national government regulation (or re-regulation) of large corporations, a shift to a less belligerent foreign policy—in the US, all of this within the ambit of the Democratic Party.

The criticisms the ISO and its supporters make of US government policy are largely found within the liberal bourgeois media itself. The editorials in *Socialist Worker* do not contain a single revolutionary or even genuinely independent thought.

Trotsky discussed the political ancestors of the ISO in his article, “The Priests of Half-Truth,” in 1938: “Their philosophy reflects their own world. By their social nature they are intellectual semi-bourgeois. They feed upon half-thoughts and half-feelings. They wish to cure society by half-measures. Regarding the historical process as too unstable a phenomenon, they refuse to engage themselves more than fifty percent. Thus, these people, living by half-truths, that is to say, the worst sort of falsehood, have become a genuine brake upon truly progressive, i.e., revolutionary thought.”

The ISO, Solidarity and such tendencies have for decades led a political existence within the thoroughly petty-bourgeois confines of “gender” and “identity politics,” the trade union officialdom, environmentalism, and

innumerable single-issue and “social justice” protest movements.

No spirit of revolt animates these conferences. The ISO and its allies throw up “Socialism 2010” to cover their threadbare politics and because they are concerned by the growing radicalization.

After all, people will come along to these conferences and similar meetings looking for alternatives. In the US especially, through no fault of their own, those in attendance will have little serious knowledge of the socialist movement or its history. Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg... will be names, little more than images or fleeting associations.

Along with the various talks on this or that topical subject or social movement, “Socialism 2010” offers lectures on Trotsky, Lenin and Bolshevism. As though, if Lenin and Trotsky were alive, they would have anything to do with such a political charade.

If the organizers were honest with themselves and their audience, they would name the conferences “Left-liberalism 2010” or “Keynesianism 2010,” or perhaps “Semi-Obamaism 2010.”

This is not an honest affair, in numerous ways. The various “left” celebrities in attendance, although many of them have clashed in the past and know about skeletons in various closets, will not go over—by mutual agreement—their own histories, the history of the Fourth International and its opponents, the strategic experiences of the 20th century. That would not be polite. Past betrayals and defeats will go unexamined.

An orbit, with perturbations

The ISO conference takes place within the orbit of the Democratic Party and bourgeois politics (which includes Ralph Nader and the Green Party) in general.

The speakers list is a perfect illustration of the unprincipled character of the ISO’s methods. The “Socialism 2010” web site is a little coy about the background and views of some of the scheduled speakers, but some research brings out important facts.

There are those who function in the immediate environs of the Democratic Party, others who circle around it at a greater distance, and still other figures who stray from the Democrats...in order to support the likes of Nader.

For example, one of the conference participants speaking on immigrant rights is Jorge Mujica, described as “a leading labor organizer and immigrant rights activist in Chicago since the late 1980s.” In fact, Mujica was a candidate in the Democratic Party primary for the 3rd Congressional District in Illinois this past February, losing to the incumbent. Participation in official Democratic Party politics would automatically disqualify someone from speaking at a genuinely socialist conference.

Another scheduled speaker at “Socialism 2010” is Nativo Lopez, described as “a leading immigrant rights activist in Southern California.” A *Los Angeles Times* reporter compared Lopez to Jesse Jackson in Chicago and Al Sharpton in New York (both longtime Democratic Party operatives). This was presumably meant as a compliment.

In a piece written November 7, 2008, Lopez commented ecstatically, “The American people can now rejoice in one of the greatest blows against racism in its history—the election of President-elect Barack Hussein Obama... No matter your take on his politics—either from the left or right—president-elect Obama will be considered *an American epic figure*.” [Emphasis in the original]

Speaking on working class radicalism in the US, and the Haymarket martyrs in particular, will be Professor James Green. Green’s web site proudly reveals that “When White House speechwriters were putting together remarks for President Barack Obama’s appearance at the AFL-CIO’s annual convention in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania...they turned to UMass Boston Professor of History James Green, author of four books about the labor movement.” A photo of Green with Barack Obama adorns his web site.

James Thindwa and Salim Muwakkil, two more speakers at “Socialism

2010,” *In These Times*, write social democratic publication sol the Democratic Party fold.

Thindwa, who runs the Chicago office of “Jobs With Justice,” wrote a piece entitled “Dems, You Have the Power!” in August 2009, urging the Democrats to take on the Republicans in Congress. He observed: “Last November, at one of the most perilous moments in US history, Americans gave Barack Obama and the Democrats a mandate to change the direction of the country. They wanted to turn a page from eight years of failure on almost every front.”

Following the 2008 vote, Muwakkil penned a piece, “Proud of Obama... For Now,” in which he commented, “What was once a distant possibility—and an audacious hope—has become an extraordinary fact. The election of a black president was considered so unlikely that it seemed silly to even contemplate. I never thought it would happen in my lifetime. When CNN announced Obama had won, tears unexpectedly welled in my eyes. The election of the nation’s first black president struck some deep psychic chord.”

Another well-advertised participant, Sal Rosselli (speaking on “Rebuilding a Fighting Labor Movement”), is president of the National Union of Healthcare Workers in California. Formerly a Service Employees International Union official, he came into conflict with SEIU chief Andrew Stern over the latter’s strong-arm methods, but his politics are just as conventional. While still in the SEIU, Rosselli was a strong Obama supporter in 2008.

The *Washington Post* reported in June 2008 that “Among those pushing hardest for an Obama endorsement...was United Healthcare Workers-West, a 150,000-member SEIU chapter in California that is embroiled in a nasty power struggle with SEIU President Andy Stern. Yesterday, the chapter’s leader, Sal Rosselli, said his union’s attempt to protect itself from a breakup being sought by Stern would distract from its efforts on Obama’s behalf.”

Arun Gupta, the founder of *The Independent* newspaper and a speaker on “The Politics of Food” at the ISO conference, told “Democracy Now!” in November 2008 that with Obama, “there is the potential there for it to be a transformative presidency if it comes from below.”

Dan La Botz, co-founder of the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and longtime “left” (speaking on the Mexican Revolution at “Socialism 2010”), was inspired by Obama’s speech on race relations in the US in March 2008. La Botz termed it “the greatest speech by a major American political figure in decades, [which] elevates the discussion of race in America to a new level. What makes this speech so powerful is not only what he said, but also what it requires us to ask and what it demands that we reply.”

(The *World Socialist Web Site*, less glowingly, suggested that in giving the speech, addressed to several audiences at once, Obama was attempting to demonstrate “to the ruling elite that he can be relied on to keep the masses in check and prevent any fundamental challenge to the existing social order.”)

Kevin Oviden, speaking at the conference on the Israeli massacre of the Gaza flotilla, is a British activist from “Socialist Unity” who in 2008 suggested that anyone refusing to endorse Obama suffered from “a bunker mentality.” He commented, “The political terrain for every radical movement will be better under an Obama presidency. The Liberals are back in the US. The left can be too.”

Chris Hedges, a senior fellow at the Nation Institute and a speaker on “How Corporations Destroyed American Democracy” at the ISO conference, cast a ballot for Ralph Nader in 2008 because an Obama presidency, he wrote, would be no different than a McCain administration for “those in the Middle East.” Neither, one should add, would a Nader or, for that matter, a Green Party government be any different, as the latter party admirably demonstrated while in a national coalition government in Germany.

This is what the ISO offers up as “Socialism 2010.”

To be continued

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