

More letters on “‘Socialism 2010’: The politics of the International Socialist Organization”

26 June 2010

(The first email is a response to “The presence of Tariq Ali at the ‘Socialism 2010’ conference”)

I greatly respect David Walsh’s talent as a literary critic, but perhaps he should stay off the subject of fashion. I was greatly amused to learn that members of the International Marxist Group [in Britain] went around in Mao caps and the latest gear. I was a member in that period and never managed anything better than a scruffy donkey jacket. Moreover, I never visited picket lines except when I was actually on strike as in the London Underground guards dispute in 1969.

No doubt there was someone, somewhere who fitted the caricature, but I don’t think it was really typical, at least in 1968-69. David is quite correct however as to the political characterisation of the IMG. The tendency around Michel Pablo had actually liquidated organisations into the social democratic or Stalinist movements. The United Secretariat were building organisations, but followed a similar method in that their political programme was subject to successive adaptations to trends that appeared to be moving towards socialism. In fact their class character usually meant they were doing nothing of the sort. This was not a stable perspective, and in due course the IMG fell apart. Elsewhere, sections have finally drawn the logic of their method and melted into “broad” formations.

I left the IMG in 1973 in part due to what I described at the time as a “lunatic escapade” at Red Lion Square—a head-on confrontation with police intended to stop a meeting of the National Front. A dangerous act that could easily have led to mass arrests. Something similar was repeated a year later with tragic consequences as David described.

One other point I would like to correct is the idea that IMG planned to break up Labour Party meetings. The

idea was rather more modest—leafletting and heckling. I had participated in this sort of thing in the Hull North by-election in 1966 and discussed this with Robin Blackburn as an option since we were not standing candidates. In the event there were few opportunities for this as meetings were becoming more and more stage-managed.

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(In April 1970, Robin Blackburn published an article in the Red Mole, a publication sponsored by the IMG, “Let it Bleed,” which included this passage: “In this campaign we should certainly pull none of our punches. We should disrupt the campaigns of the bourgeois parties [Conservative and Labour] and their leading spokesmen using all the imaginative and direct methods which the last few years have taught us.”)

Your critique of the ISO has a lot of truth to it. There are some parts where I disagree, but overall reflected in your critique are the very reasons why the Left is in shambles.

The main reason that you touched on is the bourgeois character of the ISO and their adherence to Left personalities who are essentially elitists and are disconnected from working class day-to-day needs. James Petras touched on this disconnect in his most recent article.

Essentially I think this is an important debate that needs to be had on the Left.

A reader in New Zealand

I went to an ISO conference a couple of years ago—I think it was right after Obama was elected, so it was probably the Northeast Conference. They were really into Obama, like he was the movement. All they were talking about was that he’s the first African American

president. (They never talk about class, class struggle.)

One of the ISO members actually got up and sang a song about “change”: the 1960s song, I think it’s by Sam Cooke, “A Change is Gonna Come”. You’re not exactly going to go into a real deep, systemic Marxist analysis after that. “We just have to apply pressure.”

I’ve also been to their big conferences a few times. It is a lot of fun though. Right before they have a plenary with several speakers, it becomes a pep rally. The audience, which is mostly young people, college kids, get up and do chants, like it’s a march. And since it’s indoors, in a hotel ballroom with low ceilings, the sound stays in and it’s really loud. It really gets everybody pumped up, flying, high, etc. So everyone is standing, some are standing on chairs, stomping, clapping, yelling, chanting like at a march for almost about fifteen/ twenty minutes before the plenary. The place is really rocking!

Someone once said to me the ISO is so much fun. (Comparing it to another group in NYC, “Workers World are a bunch of old fuddy-duddies. The ISO rocks!”) This doesn’t compare content, though it seems as though some of it is similar, especially regarding Obama.

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