

Left Forum gathering's "strategy for the left": Support the Democratic Party

By Sandy English
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The Left Forum is the annual gathering held in New York City of radical protesters and academics, left liberals and the upper middle-class organizations that have emerged from the Stalinist and ex-Trotskyist milieus. It serves largely as a conduit between these elements and the Democratic Party.

That orientation was more pronounced this year than ever before, featuring an appeal to work with the Democrats in the conference's opening session. The conference theme this year was "Towards a New Strategy for the Left," and its preamble urged "unity" in the face of a right-wing onslaught by the Trump administration.

What the organizers meant by this was on display in the opening plenary, titled "A Broken System: How We Got Here" and featured as speakers Jane Sanders, director of the Sanders Institute and wife of the 2016 Democratic Party presidential candidate; Jumaane Williams, a Democratic Party member of the New York City Council; and Gayle McLaughlin, candidate for Lieutenant Governor of California who ran with Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) support.

Jane Sanders noted that the election of Trump "has a lot to do with the failure of the Democratic Party to open its doors to progressive people and progressive ideas. It also has a lot to do with the power of money ... those Democrats feel they must appeal to Trump and the right-wingers. They don't seem to realize that the better option would be to reach out to the people who have dropped out of our democracy. If it doesn't, there will be a continued loss of faith in the electoral process and there will be a third party."

Sanders then said that she would ask the audience to do something that "seems a bit off." Clearly knowing that this would be unpopular, she said, "Consider registering to vote in the Democratic primary." Boos broke out from about a third of the audience. Sanders preceded to claim that the Democratic Party could be transformed and later observed that two members of the DSA running as Democrats had won landslide victories against incumbents in Pittsburgh.

Gayle McLaughlin is the two-time Green Party mayor of Richmond, California in the Bay Area. She ran as an

independent for lieutenant governor "to unify progressives" in the recent statewide open primary election.

McLaughlin was endorsed by the DSA national leadership and local branches, the Green Party, and Socialist Alternative. Her coalition includes both Democrats and "those outside the two-party system." Her justification for working with representatives of this corporate party was that, "We cannot wait for the long struggle within the Democratic Party to be settled."

New York City council member Jumaane Williams was also a Sanders delegate in the 2016 election. He is running as Democrat for lieutenant governor against New York Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo's ally, Kathy Hochul, the current lieutenant governor. He came to show, he said, that one can be "a productive activist elected official." He told the audience, "We on the left have always made things popular for established Democrats to talk about."

Moderator Richard Wolff, a well-known economics professor at the New School University and member of Left Forum's Board, felt obligated to explain to the audience why the conference had invited Jane Sanders: "Our decision to invite Jane Sanders was not because we are taking side for the Democratic Party, but because of the Sanders' contribution to opening up space on the left in 2016. We wanted to honor this."

Wolff asked the panelists about the West Virginia teachers strike, which he said showed "all of us" that it was not true that the mass of working people are "passive, would continue to take what was being dished out by the oligarchy that runs the country and wouldn't do anything, with or without unions."

The speakers exhibited a remarkable distance from the events in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and Kentucky. They often could not seem to remember in which states teachers had struck or threatened to strike. Jumaane Williams compared the movement of teachers to a stunt where a handful of other New York City Council members were "shutting down some streets" to prevent the deportation of

immigration activist Ravi Ragbar. Referring to this and to the West Virginia strike he concluded: “When you interrupt the status quo, things do change.” Doubtlessly this prompted Jane Sanders to remark later that, “Well, Democrats are not so bad on immigration.”

The cover-up of the actual course of the teachers strikes—a rank-and-file rebellion followed by the betrayal of the unions—continued with the panel “Lessons from the 2018 Teachers Revolt” hosted by *Jacobin* magazine, which is associated with the DSA. Emily Connor, a West Virginia teacher, set the tone of the panel when she said that while the movement had emerged from the rank-and-file, it needed the teachers’ unions for negotiation. Eric Blanc, a writer for *Socialist Worker* and *Jacobin*, declared that it was to the unions’ credit that they went along with the rank-and-file.

Jane McAleve, a long-time functionary for the AFL-CIO, observed that there were limitations to what the rank-and-file could do and that while the teachers’ revolt first appeared in red states, in blue states with stronger union apparatuses, a progressive leadership would need to be installed in the unions.

In fact, the teachers strikes this year demonstrated the anti-working class, corporatist character of the unions. In every case, struggles emerged due to the actions of rank-and-file teachers, with the unions seeking to shut them down and suppress them as quickly as possible.

Among the dozens of panels over two and half days, some stood out for their cynicism and dishonesty. This was particularly the case with two panels commemorating the 200th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx.

One was “Marx 200 Years Later: The Potential for the Analysis of the Problems of the 21st Century.” Speakers included the well-known radical geographer David Harvey. Despite several references to the 20th century, panelists overall admitted that they didn’t know what was going on with the current capitalist economy aside from the efforts of ruling elites to impose austerity in a number of counties. World war was not broached as a topic.

Harvey admitted that he was frankly stumped about the question of the rise of China. The political consensus among the speakers was that some sort of social movement was necessary to frighten the ruling class into granting reforms.

In “Marx at 200: Everything Old Is Young Again,” the New York office of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, associated with German Left Party—a party currently in the German parliament with close ties to the German government—sponsored a panel of mostly younger members of the DSA who exuded arrogance and self-satisfaction as they discussed the reading of Marx’s *Capital*, focusing on the gender composition of study groups and their preferences in feminist scholarship.

Conspicuously missing at the large panel (there were ten speakers) was any discussion of contemporary politics on this bicentennial. The panel marked an alliance between the Left Party and the DSA, whose members remained completely silent on the anti-immigrant policies of the German organization.

Particularly glaring was the almost complete absence of any mention of the persecution of Julian Assange. Not one speaker on the official plenaries or a single line in the print and web media of the conference defended the journalist and founder of WikiLeaks, who has had his Internet cut off as he remains in virtual imprisonment in the Ecuadorean embassy in London, facing possible extradition to the US if he is forced out.

The silence on Assange is an expression of the overall attitude of the pseudo-left, which is ignoring the campaign of persecution against the WikiLeaks journalist as part of its support for American imperialism. The forum as a whole featured almost nothing on the growing danger of world war, and when war was discussed it was from the standpoint of supporting the US-backed civil war in Syria.

The only exception was to be found in a panel discussion called, “Russiagate and WikiLeaks.”

A statement, read to the standing room-only audience from journalist John Pilger began, “There is a silence among many who call themselves left. The silence is Julian Assange. As every false accusation has fallen away, every bogus smear ... Julian stands vindicated as one who exposed a system that threatens humanity.”

Author Max Blumenthal told the audience: “I’m here to say [Julian Assange is] a journalist who performs some extremely valuable tasks. He should be treated as a journalist. It is pretty abundantly clear that the US has a secret indictment to extradite Julian Assange, that there is a campaign of psychological torture being enacted against Julian Assange to force him out of the Ecuadoran embassy in London. He will be snatched and grabbed, as Adam Schiff, the grand Inquisitor of the House Intelligence Committee, said.”

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