

The ISO's Socialism 2018 Conference: Socialist phraseology in the service of American imperialism

By Alexander Fangmann
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The International Socialist Organization's (ISO) annual Socialism conference is taking place this weekend at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Chicago, Illinois.

As with past events, the ISO conference will include dozens of panels on various topics, from "What do socialists say about white privilege?" to "Marxism and intersectionality" and "The politics of pregnancy." The politics that emerges from the cornucopia of sessions is the politics of the Democratic Party and a complacent layer of the upper middle class that surrounds it, namely identity politics, support for the trade union bureaucracy, and, above all, support for US imperialism.

For the second year in a row, the conference is being co-sponsored by *Jacobin*, published by Bhaskar Sunkara, a former vice-chair of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The DSA has grown substantially over the past year and a half, increasing its membership from about 7,000 to 29,000. The organization is being cultivated by the media and the Democratic Party establishment following the victory in the New York primary elections last month of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, whom DNC President Tom Perez called Tuesday the "future of our party."

During the 2016 election, the DSA heavily promoted the campaign of Bernie Sanders, who is now in the leadership of the Democratic Party caucus in the Senate. One of the panels at the ISO conference sponsored by *Jacobin* is "Who's Afraid of Bernie Sanders: The Right fears him. The Center fears him. But should the Left?"

The ISO sees the growth of the DSA as an opportunity, but also views it with concern. It above all wants to ensure that any leftward movement of young people is infused with support for imperialism. It functions as an arm of the State Department in the milieu of pseudo-left politics.

The individuals brought in to speak on foreign policy issues expose this fact, including Anand Gopal, Joseph Daher and Gilbert Achcar.

Gopal (who is leading the panel, "Revolution and Imperialism in the Middle East: Eyewitness to the Syrian Uprising") is currently a fellow in the International Security Program at the New America Foundation (NAF), a Washington, DC think tank. He holds a sinecure as a research professor at Arizona State University's Center on the Future of War and the Center for the Study of

Religion and Conflict.

The NAF is a think tank with intimate state and business ties, currently run by Anne-Marie Slaughter, a former state department official in the Obama administration. Its board of directors is chaired by Eric Schmidt, the former executive chairman of Google, who himself has longstanding ties to the American foreign policy establishment.

Gopal's reputation stems from his journalism, particularly two years he spent embedded in the Taliban in Afghanistan. After his time in Afghanistan, his expeditions moved to Syria, where he has boasted of slipping into Islamist rebel-held areas on many occasions, a feat that would require the support of US and foreign intelligence services. For many years, Gopal has advocated for the arming of Syrian Islamist forces by the United States.

Daher is the founder of the blog Syrian Freedom Forever. He is a Swiss-Syrian academic at the University of Lausanne and holds a PhD from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). He is a member of the Syrian Revolutionary Left Current, which is close to the New Anticapitalist Party of France (NPA), one of the main Pabloite groups that publish *International Viewpoint (IV)*, to which he has regularly contributed.

Daher, like other figures around the ISO and its publishing arm, Haymarket Books, is also associated with the Middle East Institute (MEI) and appears on its website as a guest contributor, though he is not officially affiliated with it. The MEI is a think tank chaired by Richard A. Clarke, a long-standing operative within the upper echelons of the American national security apparatus. Its positions on Middle East policy are openly pro-imperialist, advocating in favor of more aggressive US intervention in Syria and against Russia.

Like the ISO and Gopal, Daher (Panel: "The Kurdish Question and the Syrian Revolution") specializes in promoting the fiction that the CIA-backed opposition forces in Syria represent a popular or revolutionary movement. This narrative is the basis for their demand that the US increase arms to the anti-Assad militias. The US is not the main enemy in Syria, they argue, because it is not fighting "the revolution," but rather Assad, Russia and Iran, who are. In this way, Daher and the ISO function as instruments of US and European imperialism.

In October 2016, Daher attacked critics of a military escalation

in Syria, writing, “Simply calling an end to all interventions, putting them on the same level, to reach peace in Syria ... is not enough and is simply wrong.” More recently, in an interview published April 12 in *International Viewpoint*, Daher explicitly says that the left “should also support the provision of weapons and arms to these democratic forces in the region to combat both counter-revolutionary forces [Assad and ISIS].”

Achcar, a professor at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies and a prominent spokesman of France’s NPA on the Middle East, is a supporter of the war in Syria who already in 2011 was advising members of the CIA-linked Syrian National Council. Achcar has dismissed anti-imperialism as a perspective that “does not fit the situation” in Syria and famously supported the NATO war in Libya.

Based upon his well-documented statements in support of imperialist intervention in the Middle East, Achcar, whose scheduled talk at the conference is entitled “Is Karl Marx Relevant to the Middle East?” would have to answer “no,” if he had any intention of being honest about his own perspective.

The ISO serves not only to channel the social crisis outward into imperialist wars, but also to ensure that working-class struggles within the country do not encroach on the wealth or prerogatives of the ruling class. The primary vehicle for this is the trade unions, which have worked for decades to suppress the class struggle, but in the course of this year have begun to lose their control over the working class.

Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) acting president and ISO member Jesse Sharkey is being given the spotlight for two nights in a row to moderate panels with a number of ISO- and DSA-linked teachers and teachers’ union leaders from around the country who have played roles in the recent betrayals of teachers’ struggles. Indeed, the importance of the ISO’s work here is indicated by the fact that one is the conference’s main plenary session (“Striking Back: Voices of the Teachers’ Rebellion”).

With Sharkey as vice president, the CTU was responsible for shutting down the 2012 Chicago teachers strike and handing a victory to Democratic Party Mayor Rahm Emanuel. On the basis of the strike’s defeat, Emanuel was able to close 50 schools over the next year. In 2016, just prior to the last election, CTU agreed to another concession contract, paving the way for more school closures and layoffs.

Several figures who played key roles in the shutdown of teachers strikes—which emerged, particularly in West Virginia, as rebellions against the unions—will be speaking as part of these panels. Noah Karvelis, part of the panel at the main plenary, is one of the leaders of Arizona Educators United (AEU), a pro-union front group that was created in March 2018 after discussions between Karvelis and Joe Thomas, president of the Arizona Education Association (AEA). By remaining nominally independent, the AEU could pose as a grassroots rank-and-file organization, while preventing workers from breaking free of the unions.

Larry Cagle, appearing on Saturday (Panel: “Rank-and-File Teachers Speak: How We Organized the Rebellion”), is an administrator of the Oklahoma Teachers United (OTU) Facebook page. Opposing any independent organization and political mobilization of teachers, OTU blocked WSWS articles from being

posted to the group. Cagle said he was “elated” and “relieved” when the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) offered to support the struggle, even while criticizing the OEA for sabotaging the strike.

A great number of panels are devoted to various forms of identity politics, the stock-in-trade of the Democratic Party. Two members of the Combahee River Collective, Barbara Smith and Demita Frazier, are featured at the conference, following their collaboration with Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, an ISO member and Princeton University professor, on a book published by Haymarket, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*.

The Combahee River Collective played an instrumental role in popularizing the concept of “intersectionality,” reducing class to one identity among many and devaluing its scientific and explanatory role. Dismissing the idea of a class-based mass struggle transcending race and gender, the Combahee River Collective statement’s second to last line is a quotation from Robin Morgan: “I haven’t the faintest notion what possible revolutionary role white heterosexual men could fulfill, since they are the very embodiment of reactionary-vested-interest-power.”

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, a professor who played a role in establishing Native American studies and women’s studies in the academy, is another invited speaker with a long history in the promotion of identity politics and a publishing arrangement with Haymarket. In one of her memoirs, Dunbar-Ortiz speaks fondly of her early and long-standing support for Valerie Solanas, the woman who shot Andy Warhol and advocated the creation of a group called SCUM, or the Society for Cutting Up Men.

The composition of the conference is an expression of the nature of the ISO, which is a pro-imperialist organization that represents privileged sections of the middle class in the trade unions, academia and in the orbit of the Democratic Party.

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