

# Former leaders of Students for a Democratic Society try to drum up support for Biden

By Genevieve Leigh  
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Last week, the *Nation* magazine published “An Open Letter to the New New Left From the Old New Left,” signed by more than sixty former leaders of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The aim of the letter is to pressure supporters of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders into voting for Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic Party presidential candidate.

The SDS was formed in 1960. The most prominent representative of what came to be known as the New Left, it was a breakaway from the youth branch of the League for Industrial Democracy (LID). The founders of SDS opposed the strident anti-communism of the LID and leadership of the AFL-CIO. They sought to appeal to a younger generation of students. While they were active in the early protests against the US war in Vietnam, the central political orientation of the SDS founders remained toward the Democratic Party, and in opposition to the fight to mobilize the working class as an independent social and political force.

Following the end of the protest movement, many of its leaders, such as Todd Gitlin (one of the more prominent signatories of the letter) and the late Tom Hayden, moved sharply to the right, integrating themselves fully into the Democratic Party. They were prominent political spokespersons of a middle class layer that became increasingly wealthy in the final decades of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st, amidst near-continuous stock market rallies and rising real estate values.

As with many in this social and political milieu, Gitlin—whose book *The Sixties: Years of Hope Days of Rage* provides details on the founding of SDS—made his political crossover into the camp of imperialism during the US-NATO interventions in the former Yugoslavia in the mid- to late-1990s. He enthusiastically embraced military intervention and regurgitated the government and media propaganda line that the bombing of Serbia by the Clinton administration was a moral crusade for “human rights” and against “ethnic cleansing.”

Later, Gitlin backed the US attack on Afghanistan as a “war of necessity” and, during the Iraq war, opposed the invasion launched by the Bush administration only on tactical grounds. Gitlin campaigned heavily for John Kerry and later Barack Obama. Hayden was for many years a Democratic State Assemblyman in California, and also a prominent backer of Obama’s campaign.

Other signers of the letter followed a similar trajectory. Carl Davidson, for example, has spent the last few decades developing

the Democratic Party electoral machine. In the 2004 presidential election, Davidson co-authored a document entitled, “Moving from Protest to Politics: Dumping Bush’s Regime in 2004,” which made the case for turning the antiwar movement into a vote-catching appendage of the Democratic Party on the platform of anybody but Bush. He went on to back John Kerry and later led “Progressives for Obama.”

These ex-SDSers are now rallying around Joe Biden.

Their letter in the *Nation* opens by applauding Senator Sanders’ long-anticipated decision to drop out of the presidential race and support Biden. However, the authors write that they are “gravely concerned that some of his supporters, including the leadership of Democratic Socialists of America, refuse to support Biden, whom they see as a representative of Wall Street capital.”

The letter is formally directed to the leadership of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which has officially stated that it will not be endorsing Biden. This is a political maneuver on the DSA’s part, as there are not in fact any principled political differences between it and the writers of the letter, of which we will say more below.

The real concern is not the DSA itself, but with workers and young people who were attracted to the Sanders campaign but are opposed to supporting Biden and are looking for a way to fight for genuine socialism. This position, the letter writers state, is not consistent with “a long-range vision of democracy, justice, and human survival.”

To make their case, they recall the experience of Germany during the revolutionary upheavals that followed the First World War. They write that during the revolution, “the great sociologist Max Weber addressed left-wing students about politics.”

“He urged upon them that the best politics must be painfully aware of the consequences of action, not just intentions. Speaking to young men, he prophetically warned them that the cost of ignoring consequences might be their deaths.”

First, it should be noted that Weber was speaking as an opponent of socialism and supporter of German militarism. He said in January 1919, “We have this [German] revolution to thank for the fact that we cannot send a single division against the Poles. All we see is dirt, muck, dung, and horse-play—nothing else. [Karl] Liebknecht belongs in the madhouse and Rosa Luxemburg in the zoological gardens.” These words were written only days before the murder of Luxemburg and Liebknecht by the German Freikorps, with the support of German Social Democracy.

Second, the ex-SDS members warn of the “consequences” of not supporting Biden and the Democratic Party. But what are the consequences of doing so?

Biden personifies the character of the Democratic Party as a party of Wall Street and the military. He has been a leading figure in American capitalist politics for nearly 50 years. His record includes support for countless US interventions, including the brutal break-up of the former Yugoslavia, a role he describes as his proudest achievement in foreign policy, the bombing of Serbia during the Kosovo crisis, and both the war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Biden is also complicit in the crimes of the Obama administration, including the persecution of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, the deportation of millions of immigrants, the largest transfer of wealth from workers to the rich in US history, and the countless bombings and military interventions carried out over the eight years of the Obama administration.

To support Biden is to support the program that he is advancing and the social interests that he represents. In relation to the coronavirus crisis, Biden has signed on to the “back to work” campaign spearheaded by Trump. The Democratic Party unanimously supported the massive bailout of corporations and Wall Street, which surpasses even what was done after the 2008 crisis.

Biden, in line with the imperialist politics of the Democratic Party, recently unveiled a campaign advertisement attacking Trump for being too soft on China.

The working class has been fed the same line in the run up to every election for decades: the Democratic candidate is the lesser of two evils. Every election year, the result has yielded an ever greater shift to the right.

The argument of the ex-SDS members ignores completely the fact that it was the right-wing character of the Democratic Party that resulted in the election of Trump in first place. During two full terms in office, Obama, sold by these same layers as the president of “hope and change,” presided over unending war, a historic transfer of wealth to the ruling class, and the continued erosion of the living standards of the vast majority of the population.

As for the DSA, while the letter is nominally directed at the decision by that organization not to officially endorse Biden, its differences with the letter writers are entirely tactical in character.

In response to the open letter, *Jacobin* magazine, affiliated with the DSA, published an article: “An Open Letter from SDS Veterans Haranguing Young Socialists to Back Biden Was a Bad Idea.” They write that “no socialist who campaigned for Bernie Sanders should feel guilty about abandoning [the Democrats] and concentrating on building a movement that is the only real hope for the planet’s future.”

However, the “movement” that the DSA and *Jacobin* have sought to build is one directed at channeling social and political opposition behind the Democratic Party. The DSA has spent the entire past four years mobilizing young people behind the Sanders campaign and promoting the illusion that the Democratic Party can be reformed. Sanders is now throwing all of his weight behind Biden, just as he did for Hillary Clinton in 2016.

Sanders’ endorsement of Biden, which has been followed by criticisms of any of his supporters not following his lead as “irresponsible,” comes under conditions in which the coronavirus pandemic is exposing the irreconcilable conflict between the interests of the working class and the ruling class.

Since Sanders’ capitulation, *Jacobin* has been working overtime to prevent youth and workers from drawing any political conclusions from the experience that would result in a break with the Democratic Party. In a lengthy article published in *Jacobin* just last week, “Like It or Not, If We Run Third Party, We Will Lose,” Dustin Guastella argues that now is not the time to leave the Democratic Party. He cynically urges people to simply “rethink what ‘independent’ means.” He goes on to claim that “there is a *potential* for a leftward lurch” in the Democratic Party “in the coming decade.”

Another article published last week in *Jacobin*, by Branko Marcetic, is headlined, “I literally wrote the case against Joe Biden. But I’ve got some free advice for him.” The article urged Biden to adopt a “left” program in order to win the support of young people.

“If Biden and Democrats of his generation,” Marcetic writes, “could cravenly sell out their principles for political expediency and pretend to be something they’re not once, they can do it again, only for the good. For the first time in a long time, the direction things are heading mean the politically expedient thing is also *the right thing* to do.”

It would be difficult to conjure up a more cynical or dishonest argument in the service of the Democratic Party.

Both the DSA and the *Nation* proceed from the basis that there can be nothing outside of the Democratic Party. They both seek to trap youth and workers within the narrow framework of capitalist politics. However, the truth of the matter is that in the “choice” between Trump and Biden there is no progressive way forward for the working class.

It is critical that workers and young people draw the necessary political conclusions from the Sanders experience.

The only genuine socialist campaign in the 2020 elections is that of the Socialist Equality Party. The SEP is fighting to mobilize the working class not for the futile aim of transforming the Democratic Party but for the construction of an independent movement of the working class in order to prepare and lead the struggle for socialism.

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