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“Socialism 2023” conference: Imperialist warmongering and Democratic Party politics

The “Socialism 2023” conference took place in Chicago from September 1 to 4. It was sponsored by Haymarket Books and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), along with a handful of pseudo-left organizations, including Left Voice, Socialist Alternative, Tempest, Firebrand and splinters from the now-defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO), which used to organize the annual conference.

The event, held under the slogan “Politics. Education. Community,” had a thoroughly bourgeois-academic character. It was dominated by the self-absorption and reactionary politics of the upper middle class milieu populating the DSA, the fraudulent “reformists” of the trade union bureaucracy and pro-imperialist state operatives.

The political concepts and viewpoints put forth were squarely within the political and ideological framework of the Democratic Party, from the moral-religious “ethics of care,” to obsessions over issues related to identity politics, to support for US imperialism.

No panel attempted to seriously address the political situation or the critical experiences of the past several years, including the COVID-19 pandemic; the colossal political, economic, social and cultural crisis in the US and internationally; the rise of fascism; and the political character of the Biden administration. To the extent any of these issues were even referenced, they were presented through the lens of identity politics.

The main aim of the conference was to provide a false socialist veneer for the US-NATO war against Russia and the escalation of conflict with China. This was combined with efforts to promote illusions in the corporatist trade union apparatus, the key means of suppressing the class struggle and subordinating the working class to the war effort.

Pro-imperialist warmongering

Two panels on imperialism and war were directed in particular at shoring up support for the war in Ukraine and regime change in Russia, under conditions in which the much vaunted Ukrainian “counter-offensive” has produced a debacle.

The first panel, “Imperialism & Anti-Imperialism,” was led by prominent former members of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization, Ashley Smith and Lee Wengraf. Smith’s decades long political activity has been that of a right-wing Shachtmanite, concentrated on aligning the foreign policy of the pseudo-left with the interests of US imperialism. Prior to the dissolution of the ISO, Smith supported the CIA-backed regime change operation in Syria. After entering the DSA, he turned his attention to backing the proxy war in Ukraine.

Wengraf and Smith presented a potted history of the last 150 years, culminating in the 1991 dissolution of the USSR. Smith explained that this resulted in the US being “the biggest bully on the block” and “the main enemy—but not the only enemy.”

After this pro-forma statement, Smith proceeded to the central argument: that it is necessary for “socialists” to support the operations of US imperialism in its conflict with other “imperialist” powers. He declared that Russia, China, Syria and Iran are “imperialist” and “sub-imperialist” powers. Referring to Brazil, China, India and Russia, he said, “They are after imperial power.”

These cynical terminological sophistries are intended to justify US-backed regime change operations under the guise of backing struggles for “national self-determination.”

The “left,” Smith continued, has made the mistake of “selective solidarity,” by dismissing US-backed regime change operations as “color revolutions.” Ignoring the role of US intelligence agencies in countries targeted for regime change, he insisted that “It’s never true that the US is manipulating masses of people, especially as the US is in decline since Iraq.”

As for the war in Ukraine, he declared, “Russia has launched an imperialist war. The US-NATO struggle for control over Ukraine doesn’t matter.” In this way, the historical background of the war is dismissed as insignificant, as is the fact that the United States and NATO powers have financed the war with unlimited weaponry.

The second panel, “Resisting Russian Imperialism: Ukraine’s Struggle for Self-Determination,” featured Hannah Perekhoda, Ilya Budraitskis and Denys Bondar. The three are kicking off a three-city tour, in Chicago at Loyola University, University of California Berkeley and New York City, agitating for expanding the war in Ukraine.

Budraitis is a cynical political adventurer who in 2014 argued in support of an alliance with Ukrainian neo-Nazis in order to bring down the pro-Russian government. A leading member of the thoroughly dubious “Russian Socialist Movement,” he is unabashed in his support for NATO. He proclaimed, semi-incoherently:

“If you want to understand the idea of NATO and this idea of NATO enlargement, you have to understand, without any justification of NATO, not only from the side of the US, but the side of all these countries, like Baltic States, like Georgia, like Poland.

“For these countries NATO is a question of guarantees for their independent existence. So if you recognize the agency of these countries, and I think we have to, as true internationalists, we should understand that the question of enlargement of NATO is much more complicated than the pure will of the American elite.”

Regardless of his throwaway phrase about not “justifying NATO,” this is just a naked argument for supporting NATO expansion, as necessary to guarantee the “independent existence” of various countries in Eastern Europe.

In fact, joining NATO means entering into direct subservience to US and European imperialism. To present Poland and the Baltic states in particular as having “secured an independent existence” obscures their total subordination to US and German imperialism. Poland and the Baltic states worked with the Obama administration, receiving training and becoming staging grounds for military conflict. This process has also resulted in the coming to power of openly fascistic political leaderships that can be counted on to advance support for imperialism and suppress working class opposition.

Perekhoda joined Budraitis in calling for unlimited military support for the escalation of the war. “The demand that we share, both the Ukrainian left and anti-authoritarian left in Russia, is the defeat of Putin’s regime,” she said.

By the “defeat of Putin’s regime,” Perekhoda means not the development of a working class movement within Russia based on an international socialist perspective but the military defeat of Russia by the US-NATO in the war over Ukraine—that is, regime change and the breakup of Russia.

The reactionary milieu that was attracted to the conference found typical expression in the remarks on an individual who identified herself as Cheryl, from the Ukraine Solidarity Network: “I support the sending of US arms to Ukraine, or from wherever they can get them. The Biden administration has nickel and dimed Ukraine. They have not gotten the weapons they’ve needed, including air power, and I fully support that, and I think

everybody here should as well, and think about ways we can increase the sending of arms to Ukraine, because the sooner they get the arms they need, the sooner the war will end.”

Promotion of fraudulent “reform” factions of the UAW

Support for imperialist war is connected to the promotion of “reform” factions of the trade union bureaucracy, aimed at suppressing the class struggle and subordinating the working class to the ruling class’s war policy.

One panel devoted to this aim was led by Tempest-affiliated United All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) activists Judy Wraight and Andrew Bergman, “Radicalizing the Labor Movement: Building a Democratic Rank-and-File Caucus in the UAW.” (The other two UAWD panelists on the program, Dan Vicente and Nevena Pilipović-Wengler, were said to be unable to attend due to pressing auto contract-related matters, since they are now part of the UAW apparatus.)

The main aim of the panel was to promote UAW President Shawn Fain, who is currently working with the Biden administration to block a strike of Big 3 autoworkers. Both worried about the limited influence of UAWD. Wraight explained, “We’re not in every local, and we don’t dominate in any local.” In this, he is expressing the concern that the UAWD—and the UAW apparatus as a whole—is ill-equipped to contain and suppress the explosive growth of the class struggle.”

Wraight continued, “We couldn’t recruit a leadership candidate for President, and we backed Shawn. But, now Shawn comes to our meetings when there’s a decision to be made, not every meeting. But we’re able to express what we’d like and push for what we want.”

Fain is a longtime apparatchik within the UAW. He was appointed in 2012 to the position of UAW International Representative, which came with a six-figure pay package. Five years later, he was appointed co-director of the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center, the Chrysler-funded facility at the very center of the corporate bribery scandal involving UAW officials.

The UAWD and the DSA worked to promote Fain as a “reformer,” in line with the efforts of the Democratic Party to refurbish the trade union apparatus. In advance of the expiration of auto contracts later this week, Fain has been meeting regularly with the Biden administration in feverish efforts to block a strike by autoworkers.

Hostility to the working class and socialism

In both support for war and promotion of the trade union apparatus, the DSA functions as a faction of the Democratic Party and the state. This was summed up in a debate-style

panel entitled, “The Future of DSA.” Speakers on the panel included Kristian Hernandez (North Texas), Ashik Siddique (NYC), Philip Locker (Seattle) and Justin Charles (NYC). The discussion ended with the miserable conclusion: support for the re-election of Joe Biden in 2024 as an “anti-Trump” vote. The view the majority of panelists espoused, described as “hegemonic within DSA” by Siddique, is that the DSA will operate within the Democratic Party indefinitely. Hernandez insisted that the “left” should take the same attitude to the Democrats as the fascistic right should to the Republicans, echoing the line promoted by *Jacobin*.

Philip Locker, speaking on behalf of the Socialist Alternative faction within DSA, called for a vote for Cornel West in the US states where Biden is already presumed to win, and for a vote for Biden in contested states. At the same time, he insisted that there should be “accountability for electeds [members of the DSA], not expulsion, which would shrink our influence.”

The DSA’s members in Congress have voted repeatedly to finance the US war machine and played a critical role in supporting the illegalization of a railroad strike last year. This is not an accident but expresses the organization’s role as a faction of the Democratic Party.

One theme that emerged in the discussion was the supposed “disorganized” and “disengaged” character working class, and relatedly, the widespread disgust with the Democratic Party.

One local DSA member complained that during her time knocking on doors in support of county commissioner and Chicago Teachers Union lobbyist Brandon Johnson’s mayoral campaign, she had difficulty winning support for the candidate that arrived in the form of the question, “‘But is he a Democrat?’ We had to do a lot of explaining around that,” she said.

The issue is not that the working class is “disengaged” but that the politics of the DSA is thoroughly hostile to the interests of workers.

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