

Debate with ISO for SA and ISO Publications

Note from Philip and Stephan, November 20, 2017:

The letter from the IS from April 28, 2016 now being circulated to the IEC responds to the draft below of an article debating with the ISO on how socialists should approach the Sanders campaign. The US EC agreed with the ISO to have a debate be published in our publications and in theirs as we had previously done in May 2015. We believed that by boldly and self-confidently presenting the contrast of ideas in a friendly but clear way we would have everything to gain. The final version of the debate with the ISO can be found here:

<https://www.socialistalternative.org/2016/05/25/socialists-bernie-sanders-campaign-fighting-independent-working-class-politics/>

From: Philip
To: Tony Saunois; Bob Labi; Peter Taafe (Home)
Cc: Bryan Koulouris
Sent: Wednesday, April 27, 2016 6:42 PM
Subject: Proposal for ISO article

Hi Comrades,

Bryan and I have discussed the ISO article further and worked on a new, longer, draft that develops some of the points more fully and points towards some of the larger issues with the ISO's method (see below for new draft).

We think that given our prior agreement with the ISO, there is a risk they will go ahead and publish their article and say we pulled out, so it is best if we can proceed with running the debate on the SA and ISO websites, if we can reach sufficient agreement on the article ourselves.

Given the broad audience (beyond the members of SA and ISO) of new Sanders activists and socialists that we think this debate will reach, we think we need to be careful to pose things in a way that comes across in a comradely way and registers disagreements in a way that is relevant to the immediate debate on how socialists should relate to the Sanders campaign while still bringing out elements of the ISO's methods in contrast to ours.

We have included 1 paragraph on the ISO's previous positions on the Swant campaigns. The paragraph says "While they have kind words for Kshama now and endorsed Kshama's 2015 re-election campaign, the ISO didn't endorse her first campaign and didn't build her victorious 2013 campaign. We feel that this

narrow approach is also reflected--in a different way--in their intervention with Sanders supporters."

However, we both believe on balance it would be best to delete this paragraph as it seems out of place in the current draft and because we've included several new paragraphs critical of the ISO's overall method. Given the nature of the discussion we had on this issue, we both think it would help send a good signal if we could agree to disagree and take this paragraph out. However, we also both agree that we can live with including the paragraph if you would object to us publishing the article without it. If you feel strongly we should include it, then we can and still publish the article.

Please let us know what you think. Comradely,
Philip and Bryan

Debate with ISO for SA+ISO websites

1506 words (We tell the ISO it needs to be longer than the 1000 words originally agreed, and that it can be as an online publication)

"We need a new party of the 99% and we need candidates everywhere fighting for what Bernie calls for: \$15/hour, Medicare for all, and free education," stated Kshama Sawant, Seattle's Socialist Alternative city councilmember, to the applause of the huge crowd at the Bernie Sanders rally at Safeco field on March 25th.

Making the biggest possible impact amongst Sanders supporters for fundamental socialist change and to break free from the Democratic Party - that has been the goal of SA throughout the Sanders

campaign. And we have received a big echo for these ideas among the people fighting for Bernie's political revolution, at rallies, debates and within labor.

Millions are rebelling against the political establishment, inspired by Bernie's bold pro-worker demands. Over two million people donated, breaking all previous records. Hundreds of thousands have attended rallies and volunteered for the campaign of a self-described socialist.

This represents an earthquake in US politics. In such a situation, socialists have a responsibility to engage with and be part of this movement. To stand aside from a historic mobilization of this scale - as unfortunately most of the far left including the ISO has done - is a serious mistake.

That does not in any way mean we should ignore the political weaknesses of Sanders campaign. While Sanders is running on a broadly left-wing basis, there are important deficiencies in his program, especially on foreign policy. But most important is Sanders mistaken decision to run within the Democratic Party, a party controlled by the same billionaire class Sanders wants to carry out a revolution against.

Despite huge support, it is increasingly clear that Sanders will not be able to win the Democratic nomination. This underlines that the Democratic Party is a key political pillar of US capitalism. Sanders has said he will respect the outcome of the Democratic primaries and support Clinton if she is the nominee. This would transform the dominant character of his campaign from a rebellion against corporate America into a left-wing prop for an establishment candidate.

Yet a significant section of Sanders supporters - 20 to 35% in polls - say they will refuse to support Clinton in the general election. This represents the biggest opportunity for socialists in decades to build support for independent politics and a new socialist movement, but only if we have the tactical flexibility to connect with them.

New workers parties will not develop in a clean or linear fashion, and we have to be prepared for all sorts of half steps as part of a developing process. The formation of new workers parties' rarely takes place in a pure form. Often elements from capitalist

parties can be affected by the class struggle and play a contradictory role. In Greece the former workers' party, PASOK, found a part of its origins in the liberal capitalist Center Union. In Britain some elements from the Liberal Party were involved in the eventual formation of the Labour Party at the start of the 20th century.

Fighting for Leadership

[Todd Chretien writes for the ISO](#) that the Democratic Party can not be reformed into a tool for working people. We agree. Therefore Todd proposes not to join Sanders' campaign but "to work in unity with Sanders supporters around initiatives and actions outside the electoral arena" in movements.

SA has been involved in a whole range of movements over the past period. However, in all these movements the issue of how to relate to the presidential election has been a central question. Further, given the scale of the Sanders revolt, the ISO's approach is seriously insufficient. The reality is that the Sanders campaign, at this stage, has been by far the largest expression of the growing rebellion of working people and youth.

But leading elements in the Sanders campaign want to win this fresh audience to their political strategy of reforming the Democrats Party and a "socialism" which limits itself to reforming capitalism. In contrast, SA entered this battlefield to win support for building an alternative to the Democrats and for fundamental socialist change.

Unfortunately, the majority of the radical left has not been able to help the radicalizing Sandernistas resolve the contradictions of the Sanders campaign in favor of independent politics and genuine socialism. Out of fear of coming too close to the Democratic Party, they have had a negligible presence at Sanders events. In practice this has been to the benefit of the pro-Democratic Party leaders in the Sanders campaign, making it easier for them to corral newly politicized layers behind their strategy.

For example, at the recent 40,000 person Bernie Sanders rally in Manhattan, Socialist Alternative collected hundreds of signatures for Sanders to run as an independent, sold hundreds of copies of our newspaper which explained genuine socialism, and built for public meetings entitled "How Can We

Continue the Political Revolution?” In contrast, all that we saw of the ISO was a table with the slogan “Join the Socialists!” Besides appealing for people to join the ISO, there was no offer to the thousands of radicalizing Sanders supporters for how to take their struggle forward. Nor was this isolated to the NYC rally.

This is emblematic, in our view, of an important difference in method between SA and the ISO. While openly fighting for our politics and seeking to build our distinct organization, we also think socialists must fight for proposals and demands that can help a broader movement advance beyond simply saying they need to join our socialist organization or only uncritically promoting the existing movement.

This relates to a strategic question for US socialists: do we advocate for the idea of working people forming their own mass party, even if in the first instance it does not adopt a socialist program? SA believes such a step would be a historic advance for the US working class and would provide an arena for socialists to demonstrate concretely the need for a socialist program to a mass audience. In our experience this has not been the approach of the ISO.

Bernie Should Run as an Independent in November

Confronted with a defeat in this rigged primary the struggle to liberate this movement from the Democrats becomes more and more urgent for Sanders supporters. That’s why the socialist left should build momentum behind Kshama Sawant’s [call for Sanders to run outside the Democratic Party](#) - in the general election, for example on the Green ticket with Jill Stein, and lay the basis for a new party of the 99%. Over 17,000 people have so far signed this petition! What is the ISO’s position on this petition? Is the ISO prepared to take up and fight for this demand among Sanders supporters? [While they have kind words for Kshama now and endorsed Kshama’s 2015 re-election campaign, the ISO didn’t endorse her first campaign and didn’t build her victorious 2013 campaign. We feel that this narrow approach is also reflected--in a different way--in their intervention with Sanders supporters.]

The ISO focuses on debating the “safe state” issue that SA members raised as a potential option to cut across the fear of Trump and against Sanders’s own declaration that he would refuse to be a “spoiler.” While this isn’t a central issue, we think it is useful to arm Sanders supporters who are gravitating towards independent left politics to cut across the coming “lesser evil” tidal wave.

[Todd wrote](#) that SA “has made a tactical decision to follow Sanders into the [Democratic] party.” This is not true. We argued for Sanders to run as an independent, criticized him for choosing to run in the Democratic primaries, and have urged Sanders to run as an independent in the general election. SA members have not joined the Democrats or registered as Democrats, and we have made clear to activists in the Sanders campaign that we wouldn’t sign people up to register as Democrats.

Todd writes: “The problem with the SA approach is that when you tell people to vote for Sanders and organize a 'movement' in support of him, almost everyone you reach will naturally conclude that you're doing so because you support Sanders' stated strategy of reforming the Democratic Party.” When people heard us speak or read our material this was not their “natural conclusion,” as we explicitly argued that we need to build a new party as an alternative to the Democratic Party. Furthermore, is this not a danger socialists face in many struggles? Is there a danger that the Fight for 15 promotes illusions that we can make capitalism “fair?” Or that people would “naturally conclude” that if socialists supported Occupy they were supporting the semi-anarchist and populist ideas that predominated in that movement?

Finding our way towards a new radicalizing generation supporting Sanders while putting forward a principled position is critical to rebuilding a socialist left. Future developments will often be similarly “impure” like the Sanders campaign. Socialists will need to be actively involved in the movements of working people - even if these movements or its leaders have serious limitations - while fighting for an independent socialist position.