

DIALOG

Can a small, poor socialist group find electoral success?

More gratuitous swipes from ITT

By Jeremy Karparkin

IN THESE TIMES IS TAKING gratuitous swipes at Democratic Socialists of America's (DSA) electoral strategy again. These attacks are beginning to fly so regularly and with the same monotonous themes that one is tempted to assume that ITT readers are as bored with this argument as DSA is. I will take up some of the points raised in the August 8 editorial, "New party stirs within the old."

ITT begins by noting that DSA has been one of the few voices on the left that has long understood the importance of the Democratic Party as an electoral arena, and also that it is far easier for Jesse Jackson to "create" a party with his natural constituency than it is for an explicitly socialist political organization. Then the editorial goes on an irrelevant tangent, citing the Irving Howe-Michael Harrington article in the *New York Times Magazine* as evidence that DSA does not recognize Jackson or the Rainbow Coalition, and slighting the notion that the left might have some programmatic and intellectual impact on a potential Mondale administration.

For starters, it is unclear why ITT decided to judge DSA's electoral strategy by an article devoted specifically to left-wing economic alternatives. More importantly, ITT shows very little understanding of what DSA actually did in the elections and why. Yes, DSA did not endorse Jackson. As ITT's own editorial noted, the forces of the democratic left were divided in this race, thus making it very difficult for an organization like DSA—committed to a strategy of unifying the constituencies of the left—to endorse a single candidate. Such an endorsement would have been a signal that one constituency of the left was far and away more important than the others. In 1984, under

Reagan, neither DSA—nor ITT, for that matter—was prepared to make that statement. And DSAers were active for Jackson. DSAers for Jackson committees sprouted up in cities throughout the country. In some places, such as Portland, Ore., DSA locals made working for Jackson their highest priority. DSA threw itself wholeheartedly into the voter registration efforts. Our Youth Section made the Freedom Summer '84 Campaign a high priority, providing more than a dozen of their full-time coordinators. DSA held public meetings on the significance of the black and feminist electoral mobilizations. The DSA National Political Action Committee made quite clear to all members that work on behalf of Mondale or Jackson (and, earlier, Cranston or McGovern) would help further the aims of the democratic left by supporting candidates representing important left constituencies.

Does ITT really believe that it is not legitimate for the left to welcome a shift from Reagan to Mondale for the programmatic opportunities it offers? How short is our memory! Under Carter, the failed promises of liberal rhetoric allowed progressive organizations to make significant headway in the Democratic Party by pushing exactly the kinds of programs described by Howe and Harrington. No one wants to "wait around" to give Mondale "advice," but we would all be rare kinds of fools not to anticipate more elbow room for left ideas in public discourse under Mondale than under Reagan.

Finally, ITT would prefer DSA members in public office to be committed to DSA out of more than just principle but out of a "two-way street" reciprocal relationship. Sorry folks, that's not the way it works. A socialist organization with 7,500 members dispersed throughout the country is not going to get politicians to join out of self-preservation. In a few cities, DSA is significant enough to make socialist elected officials glad we're around in a pinch. But no public official is going to be elected by virtue of the DSA machine, not for a while anyway. The combined national budgets of DSA and ITT combined, for example, could barely finance one congressional campaign. At best, we can try to help elect

left-liberal candidates, support moderates like Hunt against crazies like Helms, and develop a climate where it will be easier for the Dellums, Britts and Messingers of this world to be open socialists. Both DSA and ITT have to accept the reality that successful politicians will join DSA out of commitment and principles, and that's good. As long as the U.S. is a deeply conservative country, where socialism and socialist ideas are anathema, socialists will have to accept a somewhat limited electoral role; and DSA and ITT will have to accept being much less relevant than we would like to be.

We all welcome comrades chiding and friendly exchanges, but next time ITT might consider talking to some DSA people before taking pokes at us. You would find that our electoral presence at the local level, far from "dwindling" is as active as ever, despite the big chill of the Reagan years.

Jeremy Karparkin is National Youth Organizer for DSA.

Forget about the socialist label

By Eugene Narrett

IN THESE TIMES' EDITORIAL, "New party stirs within the old" (ITT, Aug. 8), was valuable for sustaining dialog on how left concerns might shape the Democratic Party's agenda in coming years. But to present the goal as creating a constituency for "a socialist tendency" is to cast the challenge in self-defeating terms.

Early on, the editorial aptly criticizes the penchant of many people on the left

to drift into political isolation, to prefer ideology to the gritty business of political action. So it is a terrible but mendable irony that *In These Times'* invocation of "the socialist or proto-socialist left" reflects the self-immolating tendencies writ large, among other places, in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

To invoke socialism or define oneself as a socialist in the post-war U.S. is to choose political marginality. This is a terrible and unnecessary price to pay for rhetoric that in the era of Mitterrand, Craxi and Schmidt means very little indeed.

In These Times' self-description, as opposed to its self-labelling, offers a natural path toward significant political power. Grassroots empowerment is truly the essence of your concerns and of "the left" as a whole. As your editorial phrased the issue, "self-determination not subordinated to profit..." Renewal of grassroots political power strikes a responsive chord for a majority of Americans including the sizable minority already engaged in community and issue-oriented activism.

Andrew Kopkind and Alexander Cockburn in the *Nation* as well as your own editorial have recognized the potential of this arena for immediate political action. I urge that *In These Times* practice what it preaches to DSA *et al.* by dropping the counterproductive and vague references to socialism. This done we would gain the crucial benefit of integrating ourselves with our natural and large constituency.

The American idiom of the grassroots, of liberty and equality, belongs to us because it is threaded throughout our issues' substance. Let's reclaim the native language that truly measures our concerns and reap the political support they merit and, though inchoately, already enjoy.

Another evasion from DSA leader

By James Weinstein

IT IS TRUE THAT WE HAVE made some of the arguments in the August 8 editorial before. But, sad to say, it is not true that there has been a debate on the issues raised.

We do not consider our criticism of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) an attack, but as the sincerest form of flattery. It is only because we share so much with DSA, and because we see it as the one socialist organization with a potential for development into a significant political force in the United States that we think and write about what it does. Unfortunately, there seems but slight reciprocity. Jeremy Karparkin's response repeats much of our editorial but evades the point at issue. But his letter may be useful in clarifying what is at issue. I will take up some of his points in an attempt to do so.

1. Citing the Howe-Harrington article was neither tangential nor irrelevant—unless Harrington is no longer DSA's pre-eminent political leader and its primary public figure. I assume he still is, and so I find it disturbing that he and Howe share the view that potential DSA influence within a Democratic administration should be based on intellectual superiority and giving personal advice. I juxtaposed this view to Jesse Jackson's role because it is clear that Jackson understood that giving personal advice to president Mondale would be less effective than having a solid electoral following. Of course I noted that it was much easier for Jackson to create his "party" within the party than it will be for socialists to do so. But the principle remains the same.

2. Endorsement of Jackson was not at issue—in fact, one purpose of the editorial was to explain why there was no reason to expect labor or NOW to endorse Jackson. It was only in the course of the campaign—by creating an electoral constituency—that Jackson earned the right to be seriously considered for future en-

dorsement.

But to reduce the argument to the level of members and money trivializes the question of the role of socialist organization in our political system. If we assume, as DSA does, that to be relevant politically it is necessary to participate in the major parties, then the question is how a socialist organization distinguishes itself from the many other local and national groups that engage in the kinds of activities Karparkin describes DSA engaging in. If, as Karparkin says, socialist ideas are anathema, then there is no hope. But we know that socialist ideas are not anathema—even if the idea of socialism is. And we know that the many socialists elected to office have been elected largely on the basis of their socialist principles.

We believe that it is possible to create a constituency for socialist ideas and programs, and although we agree that we have to accept "a somewhat limited electoral role," that does not mean no role at all. On the contrary, it means commitment to the process of building a popular constituency by finding those places where it is possible to elect people on the basis of our principles. That requires leadership and initiative, not waiting around for the resources to appear magically.

5. Reading Karparkin's response makes one wonder why he does not take Eugene Narrett's advice, for if it is not possible for a socialist organization to enter politics in its own right and on the basis of its own program, why carry the burden of socialism's unpopularity?

For our part, we call ourselves socialists because we are socialists. We espouse principles of a worldwide historic movement of working people that calls itself socialist and that is recognized as such in every modern society. When one embraces socialist principles in public life, especially with any success, being attacked as a socialist is inevitable. At that point, one can either fess up and defuse the issue, or deny that one's principles are what they are and create an irrelevant and damaging dispute about integrity and deceit. Those in public life who espouse socialist principles but continue to deny that the principles are socialist usually end up moving further and further to the right in order to prove that they are "clean." That benefits no one on the left.

To reduce the argument to the level of members and money trivializes the question of the role of a socialist organization in our political system. The underlying question is how socialists can distinguish themselves from many local and national groups engaged in similar activity.

Some questions for high-pay advocates about productivity

High wages and plenty don't mix

By Jim O'Connor

HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS for Sam Bowles, David Gordon and Thomas Weisskopf (*ITT*, June 6-July 11), who have well-earned reputations for their contributions to Marxist and critical economics, but whose bizarre claim that high wages will increase labor productivity hence economic growth strikes me as one more confused sign of our confused times.

1. The authors claim that "...high wages contribute to productivity because they constitute an important source of worker motivation." Isn't it true that many if not most workers in the context of alienated, exploitative conditions of work, might work less and "less smart" if they were well paid and also had secure jobs? Isn't it so that high wages may encourage more or less work, according to the prevailing concrete situation (e.g., compare World War II and the late '60s and early '70s). In other words, isn't there a whole sociological dimension missing in their analysis?

2. The authors also claim that narrowing the wage gap between high- and low-paid workers will increase labor productivity. This may be true in socialist societies. In capitalism, isn't it true that individualism and invidious status distinctions are a powerful motivating force? Hence, that it might be true that more productivity could be squeezed out of the U.S. working class by increasing inequalities?

3. In our epoch of social, abstract labor, doesn't productivity depend on the extent of specialization of work and division of labor, the development of science and technology, new R&D in civilian and military production, and the degree of moral cooperation within the workplace (to list a few major factors)? Much more than individual wages? If so, wouldn't an "economy of high wages" have to begin in the research labs, universities and other wellsprings of science and technology?

4. As Marx showed, the higher the wage rate, the greater the supply of labor (women, returnees from the ranks of the retired, youth, legal and illegal immigrants, etc.). Wouldn't a high wage economy increase the supply of labor-power hence create a tendency for wages to fall?

5. If wages were raised across the board (as the authors advise), the most productive and/or innovating capitalists could adjust (the authors claim). Not so the less productive or less innovating capitalists (the authors also claim). Isn't this just a repackaged version of the old neo-classical theorem of the "economy of high wages"? Meaning that high wages permit a few highly productive capitalist firms to skim off the best workers, leaving the less productive and less well-trained and motivated workers for low productivity jobs, which the authors claim their scheme would eliminate?

6. Don't high wages and high employment underwrite the expansion of consumer credit, home mortgages and so on, hence tilt the economy away from capital good to consumer good produc-

tion? Didn't this actually happen in the '50s and '60s? Wasn't the result a decline in potential relative surplus value-production?

7. Aren't high wages and full employment in any economy—capitalist or socialist—impossible? I mean, how is it possible to have full and secure employment and high wages and incomes and an abundance of consumer goods at the same time? Doesn't "consumer sovereignty" presuppose labor power as "variable capital"? Doesn't worker control of the conditions, process and product of work presuppose sharp limitations on consumer sovereignty, as defined in capitalist economies? The only major country in the world known to me that enjoys high consumption and full employment is Hungary, and the steep price Hungary pays for this "economistic utopia" is a terrible housing shortage.

8. If (in a capitalist economy) wages are

Fundamental disagreements

By Samuel Bowles, David M. Gordon & Thomas E. Weisskopf

RATHER THAN RESPOND point by point to Jim O'Connor's interesting and important questions it seems more productive (and more feasible given the space available) to focus on what appear to be fundamental disagreements, one concerning economics and the other politics.

First, many of O'Connor's questions stem from a view of the economy as a zero sum game in which if labor gets more, then capital must get less. Given the rampant waste in the American economy today, we think this view is fundamentally wrong, at least in the short and medium run. The zero sum idea presumes that we are currently using all of our productive resources, and using them well. But the sensible utilization of our material and human resources would make possible a substantial increase in output. The usual "trade offs," which delight economists and set one group of us against another—environmental protection versus jobs, investment for the future versus living standards or job safety today—are simply false in an economy that over the past four years failed to produce more than a trillion dollars of goods that could have been produced had idle workers and idle machines been put to use.

The "having your cake and eating it too" approach, of which O'Connor complains is exactly what we have in mind. As his own substantial contributions to economic thought have often stressed capitalism as a system of production im-

a form of capital advanced, isn't it true that an increase in wage payments greater than the rate of accumulation (and rate of profit) presupposes a revitalized and radical labor movement devoted to militant wage struggle? Do the authors propose such a revitalization? If so, what strategies are they thinking about?

In conclusion, if the authors' real agenda is to create a situation in which capital and labor would be forced to confront each other in open class struggle, they should say so. This may not be a wise position at this point in history, but it is at least defensible. What bothers me about their proposal is that it gives the illusion that we can have our cake and eat it, too, i.e., that we can keep our possessive individualism, traditional social democratic, economistic politics, and commitment to the commodity form of need satisfaction, meanwhile having full and secure and stable employment in the wage form of labor. A scattered remark or two pertaining to the importance of who controls productivity mechanisms and rewards, in my opinion, doesn't substitute for solid thinking about the whole subject of material life and its relation to power, exploitation, alienation and oppression. ■

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poses irrational priorities and constraints on our ability to meet human needs. But this very irrationality suggests that it is capitalism, not scarcity or technology that stands in the way of surmounting the divisive tradeoffs of the dismal science. The key to sitting down to the "free lunch" we propose is to change the rules governing economic life.

Perhaps the fact that our articles made little use of the familiar Marxian terminology has given O'Connor the impression that our political intentions were considerably more modest than a wholesale transformation of the structure of our economy. But our concrete proposals—amplified in considerable detail in our book *Beyond the Waste Land*—should dispel this misapprehension.

Our second apparent disagreement with O'Connor concerns the process by which such fundamental change may realistically occur. We see a short and medium term economic alternative to the right as a necessary part of the process of political mobilization for fundamental change. Such a program must be practical, addressing peoples real concerns with

O'Connor's points stem from a zero sum view of the economy in which labor can get more only if capital gets less. This would be true only with full use of capacity.

their economic security and well being and avoiding the pie in the sky logic of some on the left. It must also be radical in the sense that each step builds the power to take the next step and builds the moral commitments that will make the next step possible.

An economic program by itself is no blueprint for the good society, nor is it even a sufficient basis for here and now mobilization. An economic program adequate to the needs of left democratic forces in the U.S. today must be complementary to a program of political and cultural change. Our objective was to provide the former, not the latter. For this reason our Economic Bill of Rights includes proposals that would allow the reduction of work hours, the transformation of family life, the reduction of our dependence on the market for the satisfaction of our needs, an equalization of wages and a rejuvenation of cultural and community life.

Having an economic program is not the same thing as being economistic. Not having an economic program is tantamount to being politically irrelevant. ■

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