A Debate

SHOULD SOCIALISTS BE DEMOCRATS?

On June 29, the International Socialists (IS) and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) sponsored a debate in Detroit on the topic, "Should Socialists Be Democrats?" The debate was widely advertised and attended by a large spectrum of the Detroit left.

Chairing the debate was Saul Wellman, long-time socialist activist and now a member of the Detroit New American Movement. He stated: "I believe the question goes much more deeply than simply the question of should socialists be Democrats. It's a problem that's been confounding the socialist movement in the United States for over a hundred years, and confounding the working class of the United States for many decades: how to relate to the problem of political action? How do you relate to the existing structures, and how do you develop an independent political expression and an independent political form? As the crisis of the system intensifies and increases and as people seek forms and structures, this question is not an unimportant one. In this sense we hope to open up a discussion of interest to the Detroit community and hopefully of interest to the Detroit socialist community."

CHANGES is reprinting the debate in order to present it to a wider audience, because we in the IS feel that confronting the real nature of the Democratic Party is crucial to the very survival of the revolutionary left in the U.S.

The speakers for the IS were Mark Levinson and Gay Semel; for DSOC, Roger Robinson and Paul Warshall. We are reprinting the initial presentations of both sides, and excerpts from the rebuttal and summary statements of both sides which followed discussion from the floor. Both sides have had the opportunity to correct the transcripts of the debate and have made minor changes to ensure the greatest possible clarity.
Mark Levitan (IS)

Thank you, Saul. Tonight, we in the I.S. are going to explain why socialists should not be members of the Democratic Party.

The night before the 1976 Presidential election, DSOC Chair Michael Harrington gave a talk on why you should vote for Jimmy Carter. Harrington claimed that Carter was committed to important issues like national health insurance, tax reform and full employment. He said that this election was a political class struggle and that a Carter victory would be a victory for the working class. It would be the precondition for further working class militancy.

Harrington was wrong. Carter’s National Health Insurance bill is much like the old Nixon bill. Carter’s tax reform became a tax cut for the corporations. The man who was committed to full employment is now inducing an economic recession which will bring unemployment back up to eight per cent if not higher. There has been working class militancy, but it’s been in opposition to Carter’s policies—like the miners who held out against Taft-Hartley, or the Teamsters who fought the wage guidelines.

Now Harrington is saying that “Jimmy Carter is the first President since Roosevelt to actually dismantle some of the gains of New Deal liberalism.”

What went wrong? How did Carter the liberal become Carter the conservative? And what is it about DSOC’s politics and strategy of trying to reform the Democratic Party that could allow them to make such a blunder?

In a few minutes DSOC is going to tell you that they are the left wing of the possible. That the forces for social change in America are liberal in their political outlook, and that they are in the Democratic Party. They are going to tell you that as bad as the Democratic Party is, socialists have no choice but to work as the left wing of liberal politics so as to transform the Democratic Party into a truly progressive force.

Tonight we are going to argue that this strategy is a loser. It’s a loser because the Democratic Party, including its left wing, is not moving to the left, is not getting “better,” but is moving to the right. It’s a loser because supporting capitalism’s lesser evil perpetuates the great evil in American politics—that there is no working class political alternative to capitalism’s two parties.

Liberalism is moving to the right. Let’s examine what that means and why it is happening.

This audience does not have to be told that world capitalism is in crisis and that the American economy is mired in chronic inflation, high unemployment, lower rates of growth and profit. The crisis is bringing about a profound change in our society. For the past 40 years, most of the capitalist class has been committed to a certain combination of economic and political program. It used to be called “guns and butter.”

Those policies meant massive government spending to create a high level of demand, of purchasing power. Government spending took the form of both the arms budget and a very modest program of social welfare. But government spending kept the economy expanding, providing profits for the corporations and jobs for the working class.

Today the capitalist class no longer believes that its system can afford either full employment or the ever expanding cost of social welfare. It has come to a new consensus, an austerity consensus.

We know that the last man DSOC supported for President is for austerity. So is the Congress that has a Democratic majority. But—and I think this is very important for this discussion—so is the next great Liberal DSOC would like to see as President, Edward Kennedy. Let me make my case.

Every year the Joint Economic Committee of the Congress issues a report. For the first time in 20 years this year’s Report is unanimous. It spells out in detail what austerity is all about. The report says that you can only beat inflation by curtailing demand, by reducing personal income. So it applauds Carter’s wage and price guidelines, not because the guidelines control prices, but because if you can hold wages down to seven per cent while inflation is surging forward at fourteen percent you are effectively cutting real wages by seven per cent, you are reducing income.

The Report endorses Carter’s efforts to balance the budget. This year, balancing the budget will mean cutting poverty programs while increasing military spending three per cent.

The Report is in favor of another conservative proposal, deregulation of industry. Finally the Report argues that the way to spur growth and restore vitality to the economy is through a program of tax incentives for new business investment.

The net effect of these policies is obvious. It is a program of shifting income away from the working class toward capital. In the 50’s and 60’s the politicians promised us guns and butter. Now they are telling us all we can have are guns.

In case you haven’t gotten the punch line it’s this: Teddy Kennedy is a member of the Joint Economic Committee. He endorsed the report. He is part of the austerity consensus.
There is more.

Two weeks ago, Kennedy made a speech to the Iowa Bar Association. It’s not the speech he gives at UAW Conventions. Its theme was very conservative: “we have to save the American free enterprise system from big government. Here is a sample. I quote:

“Our lives and our economy are increasingly caught up in an ever constraining web of laws and regulations that threaten to bring our vaunted free enterprise system to its knees unless we act.

“Above all, the delegalization of America means reducing the oppressive burden of laws and regulations that stifle vast areas of the economy where the free enterprise system ought to flourish.

“There is a better way. The key to lower prices is greater competition. We have begun to learn that economic regulation imposed by government is self defeating.”

America has to be delegalized and deregulated. This is not just conservative rhetoric either. Kennedy is now working with Carter to deregulate the trucking industry. Deregulation will mean more competition and lower transportation costs for business. But for working Teamsters it will mean less unionization, lower wages, longer hours and less safe working conditions.

What did Kennedy mean by delegalization? He is the cosponsor, with Senator John McClellan of a new federal criminal code. It’s often called the son of S-1. Every civil liberties organization in the United States believes that this bill is the most repressive piece of federal legislation in a generation.

The point is not just that Kennedy has feet of clay. The point is that the whole of liberal politics, including Kennedy, is moving to the right. It is moving to the right because liberalism, even if it wants to reform the system, is committed to making it work. It the system demands austerity, if it demands that reforms be postponed, then so be it.

I want to be clear. I am not saying that there is no difference between Kennedy and Reagan, or Kennedy and Carter. I am saying that liberalism is moving to the right, that it accepts capitalism and the need for austerity, and that Kennedy is part of that process. Just as Carter’s new health care plan resembles Nixon’s plan of 1971, Kennedy’s National Health bill of 1979 makes concessions to Carter’s plan of 1978. Even if he speaks out against some of its nastier aspects, Teddy Kennedy is part of the right wing drift. He is the left wing of austerity.

There is another reason why liberalism is moving right. The liberals are under no effective pressure from the left. Liberals are free to respond to corporate pressure, to move to the right, because (1) conservative voters have a place to go. They have another party, the Republicans, and (2) the liberals know that the potentially radical forces, labor and the oppressed, are inside the Democratic Party and have no place else to go. All a Kennedy has to be is one inch to the left of Carter on a few issues and most of the AFL-CIO, the UAW, NAACP, NOW, and DSOC are in his back pocket.

This brings us to the next point. Working within the lesser evil preserves the greater evil. DSOC must actively work against the creation of a new political alternative.

DSOC says that the Democratic Party is where working and oppressed people are. That’s not quite accurate. The people in the Democratic Party, the activists—besides the Dixiecrats, and the urban machines and big business—are labor’s bureaucrats and the liberal, middle class spokespersons of women and the minorities. Most working people, most Black people no longer even vote.

But if DSOC’s strategy has any chance of working it has to bring these people back into the party. How else are you going to elect good people in the primaries or as Convention delegates?

- What are you going to tell them to get them back? You have to tell them that this is a party through which they can make important gains. This is a party which can represent you. Its not so bad. Don’t leave!

This is the real danger. When workers not only begin to drop out of the political process but actually begin to break from the Democratic Party and to actively create their own alternative, DSOC will tell them: Don’t! The logic of DSOC’s strategy is that the socialists who act as the left wing of liberalism must become the Democratic Party’s left apologists.

In 1964, Mike Harrington said that socialists had to support Lyndon Baines Johnson, because he was for peace.

In 1968, Harrington told the peace movement that it had to support Humphrey, even though he was for war.

In 1976, Harrington argued that the victory of a millionaire businessman from Georgia would be a victory for the working class.

DSOC’s problem is not a lack of sincerity or even lack of intelligence. The problem is that DSOC’s strategy keeps the working class tied to a political dynamic which is fundamentally loyal not to social progress, but to the American ruling class. And that’s why socialists should not be Democrats.
Gay Semel (IS)

Mark has described, very convincingly I think, why the Democratic Party is a dead end for socialists. But then, what is the correct perspective toward electoral politics for socialists to pursue? The lack of a labor party, or a socialist party—today—has led many socialists to anti-electoralism or back into the Democratic Party. For, if a perspective toward the Democratic Party has one thing going for it, it is actionable. It may be wrong...but at least you can do it!

Before I go into posing an alternative, I want to go back to a few basics. As socialists, we do not decide our perspectives on the basis of the issues of the day alone. Program and winning are not our only criteria. They are criteria, not the only ones.

The questions we must address, as socialists, are not just the immediate issues like how to get an excess profits tax passed. That's Carter's problem. Our problem is how to do away with the profit system altogether, and how to build a movement that's capable of doing that.

As socialists, then, we see ourselves as leaders, people who can take "what is" and move it forward. When we develop perspectives for any area of work, we are not just concerned with what is popular; what will make us accepted; what will win; but how to build the movement. Finally, we have to teach people, not just to choose between the best capitalism has to offer, but to begin to create their own alternatives.

These criteria, how to go beyond the limits of what is and how to build the movement, must be part of a strategy toward the electoral arena as well.

We must ask: will the strategy we adopt help people understand the nature of capitalist society? That it is a class society; that it has two major classes, a ruling class, the capitalists, and those who are ruled, the workers; and that their interests are diametrically opposed? Or will it hide the fact and reinforce the notion of a pluralistic society, with common interests among various constituencies including bosses and workers?

As socialists, we are also interested in activity. Are we teaching people that politics is more than going to the ballot box every four years; that it is organizing, actively challenging "what is"? Or are we teaching people to rely on a savior on high?

As socialists, we are interested in organization. Are we teaching people basic political skills, like how to run a meeting, write a newsletter, make a speech? Or are we teaching them to look to the experts? In short, are we teaching people how to run their own lives? As Marxists, are we training a working class that will be able both to take over society and then run it democratically?

It is because socialists must answer all these questions that we are not only interested in the narrow issues of the day, or even what is possible—today; but also in what effect the work we do today will have on the political struggles of tomorrow. That is why Marxists—no matter what brand—have almost always traditionally been for working class independent political action.

Marx and Engels believed that the fundamental task for the working class of every country was to form a political party of its own, even if it were not socialist. Eugene Debs and the early Socialist Party held the same view. Debs repeatedly denounced the Democratic and Republican Parties as "the political wings of the capitalist system, and such differences as arise between them relate to spoils and not principles."

"Working people," Debs said, "must sever all relations with the capitalist parties. Those who vote for Democrats or Republicans are guilty, consciously or unconsciously, of treason to their class. They are voting into power the enemies of labor and are morally responsible for the crimes perpetrated on their fellow workers."

In other words, socialists have always been for working class independent political action because that step draws the class line.

"Okay," you say, "that makes a lot of sense—for them, or for tomorrow, or for somewhere else. But what about this country, now, in the 1980 elections here in the USA? This country is moving to the right. If we don't support the Democrats, the Republicans will win. Or if we don't work to draft Kennedy, Carter will get the nomination again. Or, if we stay out of the Democratic Party this time, it means to have no effect on the election...and to allow the country to continue to move to the right."

That kind of reasoning seems correct. It makes good "common sense." But it is profoundly politically wrong. Inside the Democratic Party, working people, minorities, women, other progressive forces lose their voice. They have nowhere else to go and the party is free to move to the right.

More than that, inside the Democratic Party people learn all the wrong political lessons. They learn that politics is voting every four years; getting the "right" people into office; it is lobbying; it is knowing who knows who; talking to important people. Basically, they learn that politics is beyond the scope of most of us.
Working inside the Democratic Party means telling movement activists to subordinate their demands to a broader consensus in order to win the vote. A strategy toward the Democratic Party means convincing activists to leave the streets and struggle through legitimate channels.

But there's a catch. \textit{Legitimate} channels are set up to maintain the status quo. So ultimately it means reinforcing people's sense of powerlessness. Many social movements have been set back that way. Let me give you a few examples.

In 1964, LBJ ran for President against Goldwater. Goldwater was the candidate of the extreme right and white "backlash." Everyone knew he would escalate the war in Vietnam, dismantle the liberal social legislation begun under Kennedy. Johnson was the peace candidate and the heir to the "New Frontier." Thus the 1964 election was a clear choice between good and evil...Democrat and Republican.

What happened in that election, in order for Johnson to win, the civil rights movement which was in the streets and shaking up American society more than any other movement in almost two decades, was asked to declare a moratorium on demonstrations. The argument went that white backlash was the result of Blacks in the streets and would only help Goldwater.

Bayard Rustin called on civil rights leaders "to observe a broad curtailment, if not a total moratorium on all mass marches, mass picketing and mass demonstrations until after Election Day, November 3." Many agreed, including Martin Luther King.

The moratorium was successful. Rustin proudly announced, "demonstrations are down 75 per cent over the same period last year." Johnson won and carried out Goldwater's program: he escalated the war in Vietnam and de-escalated the war against poverty.

By 1967, Martin Luther King had come to understand that Black people held power in their ability to take to the streets. He said: "The many white political leaders and well-meaning friends who ask Negro leadership to leave the streets may not realize that they are asking us effectively to silence ourselves."

Martin Luther King was right. Black people made more gains during the '60s when Blacks were challenging racism in the streets than at any time since. As H. Rap Brown said at the time, "They tell us not to riot—but every time we do they give us a poverty program."

Another example. In 1968 there was mass disenchantment with the war, tearing the country apart. LBJ, the peace candidate, turned out to be the war President. The peace movement was growing, sections of the civil rights movement had moved on to Black power. There was third party sentiment; the Peace and Freedom Party registered 200,000 in California.

This whole process created a certain amount of discontent among the powers that be.

Eugene McCarthy ran in the Democratic primaries to "Bring Our Children Home." He said he hoped his campaign would "counter the growing sense of alienation from politics which I think is currently reflected in a tendency to withdraw from political action, to talk of non-participation, to become cynical and to make threats of support for third or fourth parties or other irregular movements."

McCarty successfully brought the peace movement back into the Democratic Party. But Humphrey won the nomination; and McCarthy supported Humphrey, like all "good" Democrats. The anti-war movement had no place to go. McCarthy's campaign had successfully demoralized those who had attempted a third party. Most dropped out.

The election was now free to swing to the right. Humphrey was never even forced to come out against the war!

There are other examples. I could go on but I am running out of time. The question, then is what should socialists do?

I want to discuss 1968 in a different way. Because it was a time of crisis for this country, and it is in times of crisis that political strategies are tested. 1968 was a year when, as I said, there was massive outrage about the war, and a liberal President had sold out the program he was elected on. There also was an alternative to the Democratic Party: third party sentiment was strong, and the Peace and Freedom Party was a response to that sentiment.

What should socialists have done? The IS believes that the correct strategy for socialists at that time was to build that sentiment, to organize it, to help it break out of the stranglehold of the Democratic Party. The Peace and Freedom Party opened up new political possibilities for people...it \textit{stretched} what was possible.
Today, there are a few similarities with 1968. It is not
the same kind of period, but there are similarities. There is
a sense of crisis; there is an issue tearing the country
apart—energy. The Democratic President elected to carry
out a liberal program has betrayed it. There is also a cer-
tain amount of third party sentiment, for the first time in
twelve years.

Barry Commoner, the anti-nuclear activist and theoretician,
having gone around the country calling for a third
party, has been going among the Machinists
Union and a member of DSOC, has said that if Carter gets
the nomination he would consider supporting a third
party. At various union conferences people have gotten up
and said, why don’t we leave the Democratic Party?

Working people are beginning to talk about wanting
“Something of our own.” The IS wants to encourage that
sentiment; DSOC wants to stop it.

The IS is for building the movements of the day: the
rank and file movement that’s trying to turn the
unions back into democratic institutions; the Black,
women’s and gay movements; the anti-nuclear movement.
We are for building them independent of the Democratic
Party; we are for arguing against support to Democratic
Party candidates and explaining why.

We are also for these movements running independent
candidates where they can, attempting to form “third and
fourth parties and other irregular movements.”

It is not a strategy that will win many seats in the next
election. But it is a strategy that demystifies the
“two-party” system; that shows there are electoral alter-
natives to the Democratic Party; that gives impetus to
those in the labor movement and social movements who
talk about breaking with the Democratic Party; and it is a
strategy which, I believe, is also far more effective in ac-
tually affecting the politics of the so-called “possible” than
is a strategy toward staying in the Democratic Party.

And it is a strategy that serves to make far more clear
how this society is organized, where power lies and what
direction to go in. It encourages working people to rely on
themselves and it begins to give them the tools they need to
build their own movements. Ultimately, it is a process out
of which, I believe, many people will begin to draw
socialist and revolutionary conclusions.

Which is fundamentally what we are all about.

Roger Robinson (DSOC)

Sisters and brothers, comrades. I'd like to start out
by trying to clear some background about what
DSOC is, and whether it's an “irregular movement” or a
regular movement. DSOC was founded in 1973 of approxi-
ately 200 members, people who actually gave money for
this privilege.

Most of us came out of what was called the Coalition
Caucus of a “irregular political movement” which was at
that time called the Socialist Party of America. The leader
of the Coalition Caucus was Mike Harrington. He had
resigned as co-chair of the Socialist Party in 1972 in protest
against something that happened in the Democratic
Party—the failure of the Socialist Party to endorse the
McGovern campaign and candidacy.

Harrington himself and many of the Caucus
members—myself not included—had originally been
followers of Max Shachtman, an early communist, who
was a founder of the American Trotskyist movement. They
split from Trotsky in 1940 over a question of a workers'
state in Russia. A rather large group created what was call-
ed the Workers’ Party which in turn became in 1948 the
Independent Socialist League. Ten years later it merged
with the Socialist Party. A group of dissident
Shachtmanites went on later to form the International
Socialists...

The founding core of DSOC was determined that the
quarrels over tactics of the 60s, 50s, 40s, 30s, should be left
essentially in the past. In their founding statement, “We
Are Socialists of the Democratic Left,” they focused on
the question of democratic socialism as their goal and ad-
Another part of the document—we've been using this since we were founded, it hasn't been changed—"as socialists of the democratic left, we stand for fundamental change, for socialism, and for every immediate gain which can be achieved by the largely non-socialist mass movements in which we loyally and enthusiastically participate—the unions, minorities' and women's organizations, the student movement, the liberal wing of the Democratic Party among them."

"We do not compartmentalize the two aspects of our commitment, segregating vision and practical politics from one another. It is precisely because we are socialists that we feel that we have a unique contribution to make to the democratic left, showing how increments of change must be turned towards structural transformation of society itself."

Our principal gains have come through the strategy of coalition politics, and principally that strategy has manifested itself in terms of gains by activity in the Democratic Party.

There are two principal national coalitions that we've put together. In 1976 it was called Democracy '76, and we take credit and others have given us credit for that language which is in the Democratic National Platform which is legitimate, i.e. the question of full employment, income distribution, national planning.

Those issues were put forward by the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee through Democracy '76, which is a program which it initiated. It's very clear that Democratic Party politicians don't care too much about the platforms that they run on. But it was a fight where we did organize social forces that we considered in the left wing and in the mass movements of the society around these questions.

After that we put together a thing called Democratic Agenda. And by "put together" I mean that our National Board empowered us to contact the leaders of other national movements, trade unions, minority groups, and to convene a meeting and to see if something could be done. What was done was called the Democratic Agenda, this was in 1977.

The culmination of the Democratic Agenda was the opposition which was launched essentially against President Carter in Memphis. And this was a DSOC operation. There were other friends, but DSOC did operate as a socialist tendency, did put this together, and I think, received a lot of the credit.

As a matter of fact, some of the Carter functionaries indicated that at Memphis it wasn't a battle between Carter and Kennedy, it was a battle between the Administration and the Democratic Agenda.

We've identified this debate as one which deals with the Democratic Party. We are obviously active in other areas—labor, Hispanic, the women's movement. We have a youth section which is on approximately 30 campuses, which has in excess of 200 members. We have had some failures; one of our principal failures has been our inability to attract any kind of serious Black membership. Not that our Black members aren't serious, it's that there aren't many of them.

This is also part of our policy, we don't try to delude ourselves or others as to where we're successful and where
we’ve failed. And that has been a failure and something we hope will change in the future.

In terms of the tactics in the Democratic Party, To be very simple, or if you’re somewhat of a Left historian, DSOC’s tactics are very similar to the Communist Party’s tactics in the mass movements of the late 30s, early 40s. There’s a basic difference. We are not born from within, we are not going for the underbelly, we operate in the Democratic Party and the mass movements as socialists. We are very public about being socialists, we do not call ourselves “progressives” or something else, we don’t have eight different euphemisms, “economic democracy” and others to say what we’re doing. And it’s really that clear.

We also don’t take instructions from, I don’t know, Russia or Germany or Moscow or Albania, or wherever instructions come from. But when we operate in these mass movements or in coalitions we use tactics which we think were and are very successful. And I don’t think one can dismiss a political organization which at its peak had 100,000 members [the Communist Party].

I don’t know whether it’s true that people just passed through it or spent a little bit of time or were there for the long haul, but they had a lot of influence; in the CIO, in the organization of the working class. And the Socialist Party, during the same period, had a very honorable gentleman [Norman Thomas] who made speeches, and was applauded, and wasn’t terribly successful. And a lot of us examined why is it that the C.P. was successful in that period, and what were those tactics, and how do you deal with the mainstream of America?

One of the other things has to do with mathematics. In America we don’t have a Duma, we don’t have a Parliament, we have what’s called the Congress and the way you get there is called “leader take all.” That’s American politics.

Domhoff. I think, made an analysis of Upton Sinclair’s election, his campaigns in the thirties in California. In one election he ran for governor as a socialist. He got, I think, 50,000 votes. The next time he ran with the same political program and platform as a Democrat, he got 750,000 votes. Well, that has some meaning.

In Michigan, last year we had a similar kind of example. There was a person by the name of Zoltan Ferency. Running for the Human Rights Party in 1974, he got 23,000 votes, running for governor. It was a very small percentage of the total vote cast. In 1978, with a similar program and platform, running in a Democratic primary, Mr. Ferency carried the city of Detroit, lost Wayne County by 2000 votes, and received 25 per cent of the Democratic Party primary.

What that means to me, being a rather simplistic mathematician, is that somehow, for a very gradual, Bernsteinian program—it wasn’t a revolution program but it was one that talked about change, fundamental change—Ferency demonstrated strength for a position of socialism. He didn’t demonstrate weakness.

So the question of third parties is not that I don’t think they’re nice ideas, or that DSOC doesn’t think that it would be good to have a labor party. The question is, do you demonstrate weakness or do you demonstrate strength, and how do you build socialism in America? This is not a cavalier or a simple kind of question for us.

I think it’s absolutely clear that every kind of reformist gain that’s been accomplished in this society in my lifetime and in my parents’ lifetime, has been accomplished on the backs of communists, of socialists, of radicals, of workers, a lot of time the blood of workers. And the socialist legitimacy and credits that should have gone to radicals and socialists, went instead to liberals. And that’s because it’s almost as Rodney Dangerfield would say, we don’t get any respect. And I don’t think you can have socialism in America until the term, and the movement, is respected for what it does. And I think you have to go to mainstream institutions in order to do that.

Essentially, that’s why we’re in the Democratic Party. We see a constituency and a base that’s there: we are not wedded to it, we don’t have any religious commitment to it. Matter of fact, it may be that we have sort of a Bourbon southern attitude, which is in fact one where you don’t have to support every schlep that emerges in a primary. You can sit things out.

In Detroit in the Democratic election here [for U.S. Senator], we made a decision to support Carl Levin, the lesser evil against Griffin. Some of us actually thought it was positive. We also made a decision not to endorse or support or do anything in behalf of the top of the ticket, which was Fitzgerald for Governor.

We don’t have tremendous forces, we’re not huge, but those forces that we have, we think we can make decisions. And we’re not going to existentially dismiss the real world or politics, but we do think we can make judgements and
we can do those things which as socialists are in keeping with our vision and practice. In Detroit that's what our local did.

Essentially, I think, we're in the Democratic Party, we think socialists should be there, we think that the critical question that has to be dealt with is how do you get democratic control of investment decisions and how do you raise socialist ideas, so these can attain acceptance and become majority ideas.

We think we will, and in fact we have, raised some important socialist ideas by operating there and we think this strengthens and helps to build the socialist movement.

The democratic left and DSOC must and will go on the offensive against corporate power. We will advance programs which go beyond the New Deal. These anti-corporate programs will be taken to America by the left labor wing of the Democratic Party. We believe an anti-capitalist, and in the future a socialist, majority can be built by utilizing this approach. Thank you.

Paul Warehall (DSOC)

I think we're very lucky here tonight, because we have the benefit of hindsight and we can find all the errors in the past. But I think we have to humble ourselves a little bit, and realize what Marx and Engels were saying that in every new historical phase, old mistakes will appear momentarily.

We can't just dissolve the working class and reinvent a new one. What we must do is to posit ourselves as the most advanced and resolute members of the working class at that key point in the dialectics; that is, to work with the working class and not in opposition to it.

Therefore, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee is very relevant in its activities in trying to be involved in the mainstream of American life and American politics.

Now most Americans would find this a rather amusing meeting, "Should Socialists Be Democrats?" They would think it's a rather esoteric kind of topic, and most socialists have been waiting for years for Democrats to become socialists. And we don't realize that most Americans are into Love Boat, and Bowling for Dollars, and the Democratic Party. Maybe not in that order.

Like you, I've been trying to live the second and eleventh theories from the Theses on Feuerbach, not only to understand history, but to try to change it, and not only to try to develop theories, but to put those into practice.

I can tell you that I feel my efforts are not ill founded. Because, in attempting to bring socialism to the mainstream of American politics, I think we begin to not delude ourselves, but begin to put socialism on the political agenda.

Now the Democratic Party is not some monolithic, enormous machine that rolls over the working class. It may serve the interests of the capitalist class, we'll acknowledge that it is a capitalist political party, but the working class happens to be affected with it, though years of socialization, years of education.

We must ask ourselves, are we going to work with them, and help them transform their society, or are we going to counterpose ourselves to them? Are going to impose our conditions upon them? Or are we going to help them to take control of an institution, a political party that is rightfully theirs?

We must realize that what we have occurring in the Democratic Party is the emergence of a de facto social-democratic party based upon the unions and operating within the Democratic Party. This is the English model. Many of the elements of the left were waiting for the German model, but that never really occurred.

So we must realize where the working class is aligning itself and at attempt to affect that. We're involved with coalition politics, we're involved with organizing a majority, because we realize that we're at a juncture, a crisis, we're at a key point in our history.

I think we should not disparage those who are attempting to improve this world, but do what Lenin said and not limit our activities to only one front. We must be involved on a trade union front, and on a political level, and that's why our coalition politics are not necessarily evil.

Jimmy Carter.
DSOC Newsletter.

We’ve got to make the distinction now between liberals and socialists. This is an old question, it’s been talked about for years; it was talked about in 1910, 1919 and on and on and on and I imagine that historians will find this a rather amusing process.

You see, liberals are incrementalists, they don’t have the advantages of all of us in that they can’t lay bare the essential character of the society, they don’t have our cognitive advantages here and class consciousness and they are unable to realize the interconnection in issues.

Liberals are incrementalists and pluralists, and we’ve got to understand what they are. Now socialists, and this is what socialists are doing in the Democratic Party, are adopting a dialectical materialist view of history, realizing the nature of class conflict, recognizing the stratification in the society, not deluding ourselves in terms of the role that the state often plays. We’re attempting to make a distinction in this major junction, this major fork in the road, and begin to realize that any control of our society involves public control of capital.

For example, the recognition of oil and other resources as public resources, public control over the flow of capital in society, over the flow of capital by the NBD [National Bank of Detroit] and others out of the metropolitan Detroit area into the sunbelt and into the third world and into the development of multinationals. We want to affect that.

We support production for use, we don’t support pet rocks and electric toothbrushes and electric hairdryers with asbestos linings inside; you know, we realize that these things are against our wishes. And we wish to truncate stratification, we wish to help promote a more equal society.

If we’re not going to utilize political agitation, then I simply wish that we do not delude ourselves with revolutionary elite attitudes. Through political agitation we accelerate the process of the dialectics, we can affect the state of the working man, we can begin to use one of the few levers of power that we have. We can organize we can utilize mass movements, we can begin also to capture the state and take control of that and begin to confront capital in terms of power. We must not degenerate always into political sectarianism, but we must do now the politically expedient thing.

Marx, in the Factory Acts of England, said that victory was one of the greatest achievements in the history of the working class. The control on the amount of the working day affected the absolute surplus product of labor. And in the process the capitalist class must increase its relative surplus product of labor. It therefore automates, it therefore attempts to buy up the smaller firms or take over the small firms and control markets; the greater concentration of capital occurs, therefore increasing political agitation.

In other words, through political agitation we confront capital in a very significant way, and not in an irrelevant way. Marx recognized this political agitation as very significant, and he spent his life fighting people like Bakunin and Proudhon, over their sectarian attitudes.

If we do not become part of the mainstream political dialogue in America, we simply allow the fate to occur to us, we have no excuses. Fascism is the last bastion of capitalism, social control become the imperative of that class, and they know where their class interests lie. Therefore we must preclude that and do what Marx said was the first imperative: to win the battle of democracy.

So if I can conclude, I think that we must not counterpose ourselves to the working class, but we must work with it.

The most subversive idea you can have in this country now is that people should have control of their lives, that what they think, what they do, makes a difference. The most subversive idea in the country is that, from a positive state, the public goods, in terms of education, in terms of other positive things, are beneficial. The most subversive idea is that they have a right to have control over the uncertainty and insecurity imposed through an anarchy of production, through a cold war, through militarism.

Therefore, I wish you would not disparage DSOC’s efforts and its attempts to bring socialism to the mainstream of American politics. We’re trying to set a precedent in bringing socialism onto the political agenda. I think it’s about time, and I think that as leadership, as members of the most advanced and resolute sections of the working class, you have a responsibility to work with the working class, and to not be counterposed to it.
Excerpts from Rebuttals and Summaries

Roger Robinson (DSOC)

I think someone [in the discussion] suggested that if we support Democrats even if they're good guys they become bad guys because they change, there's some kind of process which takes place.

Now, there's a risk there. One of the ways we think that we're trying to head off that risk is that we operate in the Democratic Party publicly as socialists. We're not going in there as economic democrats, or populists or as some other life form. There are no guarantees that if we elect some of our people that they will not wind up being finks. We hope they won't. Those who are elected now we think are pretty honorable people. And there are some people elected, they actually hold office, they do things.

In terms of corporate control of the Democratic Party, yeah, they own it, and they own the Republican Party. And there's no guarantee that DSOC, or DSOC and its allies, or all the people in this room were they to accept that kind of concept of operating there, will be successful [in changing it].

But we think that you do have to draw lines. I think you can draw class lines in the Democratic Party. Lines can be drawn by the unions, working people can say if you vote this way on oil, if you vote this way on taxes, you've gone across a line, you don't get support, and you are an enemy. And I think you can do that in Democratic primaries.

I think one of our tactics is to try to draw those class lines inside that party. I think one of the things is not to support people that are in fact class enemies. And I think in the labor movement there are people who are starting to talk like that...

[In response to a comment from the floor that some participants at a UAW editors' conference had suggested the Progressive Alliance run its own candidates]:

On the Progressive Alliance. I was at that gathering, the first gathering. And I didn't hear all kinds of people standing up talking about a labor party. I remember one specific person who talked about the labor party, his name was Sol Stetin, he's the executive vice president of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers, former president of Textile, he's a DSOC member, and Sol also talked for the labor party.

Paul Warehall (DSOC)

Well, I agree that the ultimate question is the transition from one historical epoch to another. That the issue is the question of the transition from capitalism to socialism. I'm not saying that simple electoral politics and simple political agitation will fulfill that. However, I feel that we can be an integral part of that transition.

The real transition ultimately comes in affecting the relations of production and what those are, and that ultimately comes from affecting who control the surplus product of labor. That can be done to some degree through the instrument of the state.

I'm not deluding myself and thinking that that is easy, but I am trying to say that I believe that through political agitation we affect the capitalist class. And we in the process improve the condition of the working class.

Now, I think a major problem on the left, and it's probably a problem that the Christians had for many years, is that we utilize Marxism as a secular religion. And we utilize all the incantations, utilize the cognitive constraints that a normal religion imposes upon people, and we allow it to make us simple-minded people. And this Marxism as religion I don't think will help us decide what to do.

I think many of us develop an ideological arrogance. We have the way, we know where it's at, and we're going to tell the working class where its interests are.

I'll tell you, my friends, that the working class is more insecure and more uncertain about a post-capitalist future than you are. They don't have the assurances of belief in a socialist future. And you should begin to make them feel certain about that socialist future, about that transition, and not destroy what hope they do have.

So often we're very ready to propose a new world, we're so ready to offer a vision, this is all part of this revolutionary elite idea we have, and we're not ready to assume responsibility for what the world is going to be. I mean we're ready to say that we know this is what should be done and that should be done, but how quick are we to assume responsibility for the governance of that?

American capitalism drove working people into unions, then into political struggle, and finally to the organization of an independent, class-based, political involvement with a program for the democratization of the economy and the society.

In other words, the foundation of the Democratic Party, even if working people do not control it, is the labor movement. We either work with that or find our tactics and strategy irrelevant.
You know, I'm tired of socialist slogans and I'm ready for some socialist content, and I'm going to seek the politically most expedient means to achieve that. So I'm going to use, if I can, what lever or power or what institution we have at our disposal. If we don't use it, someone else will.

I see a bumper sticker, "I buy what I build." I mean, how absurd that we have to buy the right to live, we have to buy what we build. This should be a community of needs, and not a community of its greeds.

I think a lever to change that is utilization of the state. I'm trying to say that perhaps if we seriously confront the capitalist class on its own terms, if we begin to use political agitation, in a significant way, we will not be ignored, and we will not allow a political party that is rightfully ours to be monopolized and controlled by capitalists...

Whether we realize it or not, our decisions for transforming the century will not be one time, all at once. Maybe, down the road, you won't have to call working people out into the streets, they'll be there. But what do we do in the interim? That's what we're talking about.

What I'm saying is that we've got to stop using Marxism as a religion and begin to realize its democratic essence without deluding ourselves. We want to effect structural changes, and we don't want to reproduce liberal errors.

I applaud you for your consciousness, and I would hope you do not disparage others who are sincere in their efforts. Thank you.

Mark Levitan (IS)

America is in political crisis, working people are trying to think through where their political future lies, and we have a responsibility to offer a direction. That's why the question of the Democratic Party which we're discussing here tonight is a damn important question, and I think we ought to be focussing on it.

There's a questioning in the working class about whether the Democratic Party is really the poor man's party, the party of the people. That's why this discussion is happening here tonight.

We made the case in our presentation that you can't reform the Democratic Party, and we indicated that the Democratic Party is moving right because it responds, and is responsible to, the needs of the ruling class. If you're in the Democratic Party, you are a captive of that process. If you want to move politics to the left, you have to get outside of it.

That's the case we have made—that the Democratic Party is moving to the right, and why—and that's what I would like to see DSOC respond to.

The one thing that people from DSOC have said that I think needs to be addressed is the question of not counterposing yourself to the working class. The speaker kept talking about the working class, the working class, the working class, as if the working class were this big block of granite downstairs. It's not quite true. There are working class people in the Democratic Party, but as I indicated, most working class people no longer even vote.

The question is, can socialists help them develop an alternative and draw the class line in American politics?
Gay Semel (IS)

In 1968—and 1968 had a lot of problems, but it was a very exciting period—the left was much bigger than it is today. The last ten years have been disastrous for the entire left. What we have to begin on the left is a process of dialogue and discussion, not throw at each other liturgies and paper programs, and that’s why we set up this debate. I believe we have to have a lot more discussion on the left, and one of those discussions is the Democratic Party.

The problem with DSOC’s position was best stated, I believe, by Vicky [a DSOC member in the discussion period]. In order to win acceptance in the Democratic Party, they don’t win it as socialists, or for socialist ideas or politics, but on their ability to organize and get out the votes, “working hard.” It’s understandable, you produce something and so the Democratic Party says DSOC’s not so bad, let them stay in.

But the question is, what are you organizing the votes for? What happens is that once you’re inside the Democratic Party, you wind up organizing people to vote for the “lesser evil.” That’s a trap that a good many people on the left have been falling into for a good many years, over and over.

There have been attempts on the left to re-align the Democratic Party for many decades. It hasn’t happened, it isn’t going to happen, because the Democratic Party is a capitalist party. Even when you make inroads, as happened in a certain sense in 1972—there were actually changes in the Party structure and McGovern got the nomination—a lot of people just sat it out. Not DSOC, they didn’t sit it out, but sections of the ruling class sat it out. Sections of the labor bureaucracy sat it out. McGovern wasn’t their candidate, and they weren’t buying in. McGovern lost by a bigger amount than any other Democratic candidate.

With all the attempts to re-align the Democratic Party, it is more right-wing today than it was ten years ago. That’s the political climate in this country—all politics (the Democratic Party along with it) will be moved to the left by mass movements.

We are for everything which builds those movements and helps break them out of the stranglehold of the Democratic Party. That’s our basic problem. We are for breaking out of “what’s possible,” for extending what’s possible. That’s what Independent Political Action means. Rick [a speaker in the discussion] asked, why can’t we do both? (That is, work inside and outside the Democratic Party simultaneously). I believe it’s simple: you can’t argue two contradictory positions at the same time.

In the last election a majority of the potential voting population didn’t vote. Why not? Because they were disgusted. Do you go to them and say, “Vote for the Democrats, they’re really not as bad as you think?” Or do you say, “You’re right, they really are as bad as you think, and we should do something about it”? I don’t see how you can argue both.

I’m for arguing one alternative over the other. I am for arguing that working people should have their own party, a separate party, a party that will fight for their interests. DSOC ends up having to apologize for a party that works in the interests of the ruling class, because they have no choice.