

"Growth Pains" Conference Left Social Democracy Searches for a Program



At the "Growth Pains" conference, DSA co-chair Michael Harrington.

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The "Growth Pains" conference held in Berkeley over the February 18 weekend served as a teach-in on the various political visions vying to shape the programmatic direction of U.S. left social democracy in the 1980s.

With over 500 people gathered under the sponsorship of this trend's largest political organization, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and its most influential theoretical journal, *Socialist Review* (SR), the leading lights of self-proclaimed "democratic socialism" took up the task now on top of their political agenda. Unity has already been achieved on a conception of socialism as the extension of bourgeois democracy to the economic arena won through a gradual series of reforms and electoral victories. The challenge now is to translate that broad ideological vision into a concrete program that can attract and harmoniously unite the "majority of the American people."

In pursuit of that goal, two distinct approaches have emerged. The drama underlying the "Growth Pains" conference was the conflict—no less sharp because it was polite—between them.

The first approach, advocated by old line socialists rooted in the trade unions and allied with certain Black elected officials, sees the road to a socialist major-

ity in a revival of New Deal style work programs to rebuild industry and provide jobs for all. The other, identified with socialist-feminists and environmentalists, rejects the demand for jobs as the central focus; it holds that the stress should be placed on "expanding and democratizing the welfare state." More specifically, this latter tendency sees the core of a new socialist consensus in a cross-class alliance of women united on the basis of the "feminization of poverty" line.

It is too soon to predict who will ultimately get the upper hand in this contention. But, in this particular gathering at least, the socialist-feminists, led by DSA co-chair Barbara Ehrenreich, came to play political hard ball and had the main initiative.

POLITICAL UNREALITY

On one level the whole series of panels and workshops on everything from national politics to "alternative futures" had an air of unreality about them. For here was a gathering discussing a socialist future for the U.S. that consistently ignored the centrality of reaching out to the minority sector of the U.S. working class and leaned over backwards to distance itself from anywhere that socialism actually exists in the world.

The most glaring weakness was on the question of race: amid the greatest upsurge in Black community politics since the 1960s (represented by the Jesse Jackson campaign), the conference had a mere

in Chicago's Black-community based reform coalition.

Any serious split would have been a real problem because, like the Jackson bid nationally, this local progressive coalition also has a serious fight on its hands. In the March 20 primary, it is making a bid to undermine the authority of Edward "Fast Eddie" Vrdolyak, leader of the racist old guard that still controls the Cook County Democratic Party structure. And the parallels with the national battle in the Democratic Party is striking. One of Vrdolyak's recent moves was to engineer a county central committee endorsement of Mondale against the wishes of every Black committeeman; Mondale, interestingly enough, had backed Richard Daley against Washington in last year's Democratic mayoral primary.

In this context, Washington's public preference for Jackson—and the unity and momentum that flow from it—strengthens both the anti-racist and progressive movement nationally and the challenge to the corrupt machine that is blocking implementation of Washington's reform program in Chicago. □

handful of minority participants and didn't even seem to think it was a problem. Of 14 workshops on the relevant theme of social equality, for example, only one dealt explicitly with racial conflicts, and the centrality of minorities to the class struggle as the heart of the lower stratum of the working class was constantly glossed over. The urgings of such figures as Black California Assemblywoman Maxine Waters or one-time Citizen's Party leader Barry Commoner to get solidly behind Jackson were met with unmistakable and highly conscious indifference.

The reason was stated by DSA member and Western regional coordinator of the National Education Association Skip Roberts: "The math of American politics." Roberts argued that it was necessary to "expand the franchise at the bottom levels" (a clear reference to the Jackson campaign), but "that alone can't do it." Roberts' declaration that "we have to bring back the term middle class" may have been phrased a bit more crudely than others would have put it, but he was expressing the common wisdom of the gathering that winning the hearts and minds of "Middle America" is the key to successful politics. The unstated but universal assumption was that too much of an emphasis on challenging white supremacy or American patriotism—the implication of aggressively joining the Jackson campaign—would make success too difficult and should be avoided at all costs.

JOBS DEMAND

The conference debate took place completely inside this dubious framework—but within that it was real enough. Michael Harrington, DSA co-chair, stumped hard for placing the jobs demand and traditional trade union movement at the heart of any serious program. He emphasized the need to build a base among "white male union workers who do not like poor people," and advocated a mild anti-corporate populism that would avoid any challenge to the backward prejudices these workers might hold. "We should say to them, 'You are paying too much taxes,' but target the rich who are avoiding taxes," he stressed. In Roberts' words, the left must "reclaim American symbols" and convince this constituency that socialists are the true representatives of "American values."

FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

For the socialist-feminists and environmentalists, this approach was a step backwards: its demands were out-of-date and it targeted the wrong constituency to anchor the socialist movement. Sociologist Fred Block, belittling the prospects for a "new industrial policy," put it quite bluntly: the left had to "face reality . . . more and more people are going to be forced out of the workplace" as productivity increases. A central emphasis on demands for jobs, in this context, amounts to an ineffective rehash of the old "Puritan work ethic."

Ehrenreich, an articulate and effective speaker, elaborated this tendency's fuller strategic vision: full employment, she argued, does not result in social equity; the key is social welfare programs that free people from the labor process, both at the workplace and in the home. And the constituency most likely to be attracted to such an approach—and serve as the core of a new majority socialist movement—was a broad, cross-class coalition of women.

Ehrenreich based her position on the "feminization of poverty" argument that almost all poor people are women and almost all women are in imminent danger of becoming poor. Based on this assumption, Ehrenreich argues that class and racial distinctions among women can be easily over-ridden, thus giving women as women the strongest basis to stand at the center of a broad mass movement against an archaic male-dominated division of labor and corporate structure.

DEBATE TO COME

The emergence of two such distinct approaches at the programmatic level

could signal some serious debates to come among DSA members and sympathizers. But it was the inevitable result of a clash between two tendencies that have co-existed within this trend ever since its re-emergence in the U.S. as a distinct political force in the late 1960s.

One tendency, reflected in the positions taken by today's socialist-feminists, harks back to the New Left challenge to social democratic (as well as Marxist-Leninist) orthodoxies; the other tendency finds its roots in those more traditional social democrats who were uncomfortable with the knee-jerk anticommunism that led mainstream social democracy to back U.S. imperialism's genocidal war in Vietnam. The interweaving of these strands has produced a brand of social democracy with some accountability to the fight against racism, support for national liberation struggles and rethinking the blind anti-Sovietism of the social democratic tradition. But the inherent political weaknesses in their outlook are always apparent when questions of strategy and program are on the table.

Both Harrington's emphasis on the traditional trade union movement, for example, as well as Ehrenreich's "feminization of poverty" concept gloss over the racial polarization that pervades all other economic and social divisions in this country. According to either vision, minorities are expected to stay in the back seat to make sure more privileged and influential sectors (whether "ordinary Americans" or middle class women "a husband away from poverty") do not get alienated from the progressive cause. In effect, leadership in the progressive movement is reserved for the (white) labor aristocracy or (white) petit-bourgeois women.

And even in a gathering mainly devoted to "domestic" issues, left social democracy could not resist an assertion of its anti-Soviet credentials. This conference's example took place when Barry Commoner



At this year's DSA national convention, co-chair Barbara Ehrenreich.

issued a mild challenge to wishy-washy formulations on the "wastefulness" of the defense budget and urged people to join Jesse Jackson in asking the "uncomfortable questions," including "why do we think we have to be an enemy of the Soviet Union?" Harrington concisely replied that "we don't have to be friends with the Soviet Union. I'm not going to hold my breath for the American people to warm up to that proposition."

To be sure, such conciliation of backward ideas among the U.S. populace is put forward as the quintessence of hard-headed political realism, just as notions about "rebuilding industry with democratic planning" or the "feminization of poverty" are promoted as the height of innovative theoretical work. Left wing social democracy prides itself on these qualities—which it believes the rest of the left lacks. The irony, of course, is that their own attachment to old formulas and lack of perception into the current dynamic shaping U.S. politics could well leave left social democrats on the sidelines of the present-day class struggle in this country.

Speaking of Jesse Jackson's campaign, Commoner warned, "Don't sleep through this historic moment." But it appeared that far too many of the participants found their own idealist dreams too engrossing to wake up. □

Washington . . .

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Washington's announcement has also had a decisive impact on the contours of Chicago's complex local political alignment. According to the *Chicago Defender* and *Metro News*, several Black aldermen, ward committeemen and community activists met secretly in early February in the offices of Johnson Products, the second-largest Black-owned business in Chicago, to organize support for Jackson in defiance of the (then uncommitted) mayor. Although some of the politicians in the room, upset at the lack of individual spoils from the Washington administration, mainly saw an opportunity to play on the Washington-Jackson rift for their own benefit, the meeting would not have been possible were there not mounting support for Jackson throughout the Black community. Washington's preference for Jackson—along with Jackson's public repudiation of a challenge to Washington's favorite son slate—quickly stifled what could have developed into a serious split