

Statement on Social Democrats of America

By George Fish, Indianapolis, IN



SDA, as a democratic socialist organization, is resolutely “social-democratic.” It accepts openly that “Politics is the art of the possible,” as leavened by DSA founder Michael Harrington’s concept of socialism as “the left wing of the feasible.” It thus resolutely works in the electoral process, and supports, advances wherever possible, reforms that enhance the lives of ordinary working people, women, people of color, minorities, LBGQT+ people, in ways that are democratic, inclusive, and benefit them materially and psychologically.

SDA is hearty in this support—it does not half-heartedly support “reform” measures to demonstrate that “reformism” cannot solve the contradictions of capitalism, and that only “revolution” can solve them! In this it is firmly of the opposite stance of the “far left,” particularly those who turn to Bolshevik-legacy socialism for their ideal of a socialist society. The Bolshevik-legacy left had over a hundred years to prove itself both “necessary” and “fully feasible,” and failed on both counts. What resulted from Bolshevik-legacy socialism of any and all types—be they the rule of Lenin and Trotsky, or of Stalinism, Maoism, Castroism, or Marxism-Leninism of various stripes, as well as all forms of Leninism-Trotskyism, was not a democratic, liberating socialism as it was a form (whatever the state structure) of “bureaucratic collectivism” or “state capitalism.”

Furthermore, Bolshevik-legacy socialism in the advanced capitalist world never redeemed itself as a mass workers’ movement, but only deteriorated into warring Marxist-Leninist and Leninist-Trotskyist sects with little, if any positive influence, even in places where mass Communist Parties existed, such as France, Italy, or post-World War I Germany.

Donald Sassoon’s *One Hundred Years of Socialism* (New York: New Press, 1996) gives an excellent history of the positive successes achieved in Western Europe under the reigns of “mere reformist social-democracy.” Such “mere reformism” established universal health care, advanced the welfare state, and broke decisively the link between poverty and being working-class. SDA recommends this book to all members.

Socialism, to be truly liberating, must mean more than simply the state ownership of the means of production, for, as the legacy of Bolshevik-inspired socialism shows, that begs the question: Who controls the state that “rules” in the name of the working class? The stock Bolshevik-legacy answer was that the “vanguard Communist Party” represented the working class; but it represented them in name only, setting itself up, instead, as a New Class that transmogrified the “dictatorship of the proletariat” into a “dictatorship *over* the proletariat.” Socialism is more than collective ownership vs. strictly private ownership; at its core, a truly liberating socialism is also democratic, transparent, and accountable—for when it isn’t, it’s mere “bureaucratic collectivism” or “state capitalism” that mirrors the same lack of transparency and accountability that prevails under capitalism. Thus, socialists are resolute democrats, extending democracy from the strictly political realm as achieved under liberalism into the social and economic realms as well.

For SDA, liberalism is not so much pernicious as it is incomplete, a “near left” that we of SDA can successfully work with and form coalitions with; as many liberals, instead of being studied “centrists,” or wedded to mere “diversity” and “equitableness” under neoliberal economics, are honest grassroots progressives who do, in fact, agree with much of what DSA calls for, says, and advocates. We of SDA proudly march with such “mere” liberals!

Further, while SDA’s socialism goes beyond the capitalist welfare state, at this point in time, with the massive onslaught by the right against the capitalist welfare state having successfully prevailed since at least the Reagan-Thatcher years, a return to the “limited” achievements of the New Deal or under the Labour government of Britain in the immediate post-World War II years would be a magnificent political achievement that would give back to the working classes what neoliberalism, under the guise of “freedom,” has stolen from them!

SDA also upholds its principled ban on democratic-centralist organizations and individuals from membership; and extends that ban to caucuses within SDA. Marxism-Leninism and Leninism-Trotskyism, both of which rely on democratic centralism to impose “discipline” on their adherents, are actively contrary to SDA’s democratic socialist norms, principles, objectives, and practices. SDA respects individual autonomy and the ability of SDAers to think for themselves, without direction from self-appointed “vanguards” that demand robotic allegiance and “unity of action” from its adherents. **The right to dissent or abstain is *always* an inalienable right within SDA.**

Moreover, while SDA is a democratic socialist, i.e., social democratic, “big tent,” that does not mean it is a promiscuous gathering-place for all who call themselves “leftists.”

Sadly, many present members of **DSA are not committed to democratic socialism as such, but, instead, embrace such “far left” nostrums as authoritarianism, Marxism-Leninism, Leninism-Trotskyism, and uncompromising “revolutionism.”** Such DSA comrades need to be educated within DSA on democratic socialist norms and practices; and informed that much about the “far left” SDA rejects in fundamental principle. Unfortunately, the sectarian hash that Marxist-Leninists and Leninist-Trotskyists have made particularly of the U.S. left over the last over one hundred years has made DSA attractive to them as a new “port of political entry.” It is also the same with anarchists. While certainly not wishing to engage in mass expulsions, the leadership, leading bodies, and active members of DSA should inform such “far left” comrades that perhaps they should find another political home elsewhere, or “settle” for being “mere” left social-democrats!

Last, while SDA is an activist organization, it looks beyond activism as such, and recognizes the need for thoughtful expression of socialist theory, principles, strategy and tactics through open and serious debate and discussion within not only SDA, but throughout the public intellectual sphere as well. SDA calls for the return of the esteemed “public intellectual” of the left, as evinced through such people as C. Wright Mills, Irving Howe (another DSA founder), and Michael Harington—all of them learned, erudite persons who were concerned with not talking only to their fellow adherents and academics (for both Mills and Howe were university professors), but reaching beyond the ivory towers and intellectual walls to the broader public. In other words, intellectual accessibility and thoughtfulness are also hallmarks of socialist practice, as is a healthy skepticism that sees nothing as just “written in stone” but, rather, understands that “all that is solid melts in air,” as the *Communist Manifesto* put it memorably.