

COUNTERPUNCH ≡

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“The Palestine Wave” at Socialism 2024

BY JOE ALLEN



Joshua Frank, Janene Yazzie, and Ray Acheson at Socialism 2024.

The recent Socialism 2024 conference in Chicago was by all measures a great success. The three-day conference was sponsored by Haymarket Books, and it was the largest Socialism conference in its history with over 2,300 people attending from across the country, along with a small contingent of international visitors and speakers. There were ninety co-sponsoring organizations, including the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and many journals, magazines, and book publishers on the left. Noticeably absent was *Jacobin*, the largest circulating left magazine in the U.S., who had previously co-sponsored Socialism conferences.

The conference had a vitality that radiated from the resurgence of a global solidarity campaign with Palestine

against Israel's genocidal war in Gaza that has radicalized millions. Gaza has given life to a whole host of political questions from the nature of Zionism, U.S. imperialism, Palestinian liberation, Israel and U.S. politics, along with practical questions on organizing and solidarity. There were over 130 scheduled meetings, meet-ups, and panels. Palestine was simply everywhere at the conference and has in general widened the horizons of radical organizers on many fronts in the United States that would have seemed impossible just a few years ago.

For Bill Mullen, a longtime Palestine solidarity activist and author of many important books, Gaza has an even greater potential. "Palestine has helped return anti-imperialism to the center of Left politics," he recently told me. "It has also generated new coalitions that were on full display at Socialism. Bringing those coalitions into a more unified Left that can revive revolutionary socialism in the U.S. seems more possible and necessary than ever."

As Sherena Razek in the From the River to the Sea: UAW Labor for Palestine panel put it, "We were told for years that Palestine hindered our organizing, but we have learned that it has actually enhanced our organizing in the workplace." I would even extend that more broadly.

The "Uncommitted" primary campaigns, for example, sent pro-Palestine delegates to the Democratic National Convention, who protested U.S. arms sales to Israel on the floor of the convention, a possibility that would have been dismissed as impossible a year ago. For far too long Palestine was the third rail of U.S. left-liberal politics.

The Socialism 2024 conference represented a better part of the international solidarity campaign, where discussions could take place on the limited successes, difficulties, and future of Palestinian solidarity. Michael Letwin, former president of the Association of Legal Aid Attorneys-UAW 2235, a co-founder of Labor for Palestine, told me:

"Labor for Palestine members from across the U.S. gathered at Socialism 2024 to uplift the Palestinian trade union picket

line and stop Israeli genocide. That means going beyond words by organizing workers to stop all arms and other aid to Israel, divest unions from Israel bonds and other complicit investments, break union ties with the racist Histadrut and Jewish Labor Committee, and end union support for Harris, Trump, and all other genocidal candidates.”

The Palestine wave of solidarity, I also believe, was primarily responsible for the most racially diverse Socialism conference that I’ve ever witnessed, with especially a large number of women of color attending and leading workshops. The conference and workshop organizers must be credited with making this happen. The Socialism 2024 conference demonstrated the promise of what the U.S. Left could be, but the shortcomings of the conference were also quite visible just beneath the surface, if you were looking for them.



Youtube screenshot.

Socialism 2024 vs. the DNC

Washington Post columnist Perry Bacon, Jr. picked up on some of this in a largely positive recent column about the conference. He first compared and contrasted the Socialism 2024 conference with the recent Democratic National Convention (DNC). He wrote:

Less than two weeks later, over Labor Day weekend, there was another political conference in the Windy City. And at Socialism 2024, this year's edition of the annual gathering of socialists and other leftists that is always held in Chicago, there was considerably less enthusiasm for the Democratic Party.

Democratic convention organizers did not give a major speaking slot to a Palestinian, angering progressives and Arab American Democrats in particular. In contrast, on the opening night of the Socialism conference, the dais included several Palestinian speakers. The word "genocide" was used repeatedly.

"We are here, nearly a year after this total evisceration, destruction, genocide that is unfolding in Gaza by the Israeli state. Our government has the power to stop this. And they aren't," Palestinian writer Sumaya Awad said, as many in the crowd of several hundred shouted "Shame."

Bacon was particularly keen to find out what the left thought of the Harris/Walz campaign meant for the conference attendees. He attended the Tempest sponsored workshop *The Genocidal Returns of Lesser Evilism: the U.S. Elections and Left Strategy*, where he quoted Kristen Godfrey and Natalia Tylim, who effectively demolished the "lesser evil" strategy. "Presidential elections, the Democrats specifically, have a way of sucking all life out of any movement," said Godfrey.

"We are not the first people to try to break this impasse [the two party duopoly]," Natalia Tylim said. "In U.S. history, there have always been people who have organized and tried absolutely everything they can to build representation for working-class people and the oppressed. We have to have a little bit of patience with each other and ourselves given the fact that this isn't going to be solved right now." Yet, audience members were left hanging on what socialists should actually do in the November election and beyond.

Bacon rightly saw that, “Although there was a lot of agreement on policy issues at the socialism conference, attendees diverged in terms of what to do in November. Some emphasized that Harris would be much better than Trump on most issues. Others rejected what they called “lesser evilism,” arguing that backing Democrats in major elections without demanding changes in policies does more long-term harm than good. Still others voters urged a focus on down-ballot races.” Diversity of opinions is not the issue, but the lack of a concrete perspective to lead the left is, especially when it comes to the Democratic Party.

This was glaringly obvious in the final rally of the Socialism 2024 conference *Through Steadfast Movement to Liberation* there was virtually no discussion of the upcoming November election, except for a small hint from Navajo activist Janene Yazzie that “we have been here before.” Yet, nothing was put forward about how the left should deal with pressure to campaign for Kamala Harris and Tim Walz or how to deal with the real threat of authoritarianism from Trump. One of the final rally speakers was Rossana Rodriguez-Sanchez, the popular alderwoman for Chicago’s 33rd ward. But she is also chair of the ward’s Democratic committee, which muddies the relationship of the left to the Democratic Party.*

At the same time, *The Movement Mayor? A Critical Assessment of Brandon Johnson’s First Year* workshop was a welcome surprise. Speakers Jason Perez and Rosemary Vega put forward a very critical analysis of Brandon Johnson, that was taken up enthusiastically by the audience, many of whom devoted much time and energy, to elect Brandon Johnson, a former Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) organizer, Mayor in 2023. It was a dramatic change from the uncritical, all-for-Brandon atmosphere surrounding the mayoral campaign last year. It was even acknowledged that the United Working Families (UWF) that many people on the Chicago left are members of and played an important in mobilizing support for Johnson, had withered on the vine since his election.

The UWF has not been the organizing center to keep Johnson accountable that many people had hoped for, more than a year and a half after being in office. It was even acknowledged that the Chicago left needs to be independent of the Johnson administration, which I wholeheartedly agree with. I would even add that the Chicago left needs to be independent of the CTU, which largely dominates the left and other progressive campaigns with its funding and staff, including the UWF. It is Brandon Johnson's most important financial and union supporter. But, even though the question of the Democrats was still left hanging in the air, it was a big step forward.

The Socialism conference in Chicago is no longer anchored in the project of building a revolutionary socialist alternative. For nearly twenty five years, the Socialism conference was organized by the International Socialist Organization (ISO), and it took clear and concise positions on the crucial question before the U.S. Left, especially on the Democratic Party. That came to an abrupt end in 2019 with the collapse of the ISO. Many of the pre-2019 workshops are still available, here. If we can combine the best of what the Socialism conference today with that of the past, I think we can build a much stronger, clearer, and resilient left in the United States.

All Eyes on Palestine: Solidarity, Liberation, In...



*[Editor's note: the final plenary at Socialism 2024 was primarily dedicated to the ongoing Palestinian and

Indigenous liberation struggle, with several notes of Democratic complicity. It was not dedicated to electoral politics. -JF]

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