

What's behind In These Times' Jackson stance?

I AM HAPPY TO REPORT THAT YOU ARE VERY MISINFORMED when you editorialize (*ITT*, Feb. 3) that "DSA [s endorsement] brings nothing to [presidential candidate Jesse] Jackson except its name, which he can do without."

In Baltimore, as in many other cities throughout the country, support from predominantly white DSA adds substance to the image of Jackson's appeal as multiracial. DSA brings candidates for election to the Democratic party convention to the Jackson campaign, helping to round out several of the full slates offered in Maryland's eight congressional districts. DSA brings into the Jackson camp a well-maintained mailing list, phone volunteers, voter registration activists, door-to-door canvassers and many people skilled in local political activity—and all at a critical time, pre-Super Tuesday, rather than after the fact. It is through strengthening the Jackson campaign now, rather than endorsing him or anyone else later, that DSA may best "influence other candidates."

I frankly suspect that you are simply one of those "many...close to [DSA who] cannot stomach" this candidate, possibly because of "Jackson's anti-Semitism." I am sorry you remain fixated with remarks made in 1984, rather than any more current, as the basis for your pigeon-holing; can it be that he has reformed his thinking since then, leaving you with nothing fresher on which to base your analysis?

Louis Brendan Curran, Esq.
Baltimore

RECENT LETTERS TO *ITT* ON DEMOCRATIC socialism and the Nicaraguan revolution have tended to forsake serious analysis for tendentious shouting. The resulting clamor has lent little grace or cogency to an important debate. In your editorial on Jesse Jackson (*ITT*, Feb. 3) you make a commendable attempt at defending the positions originally advanced by John Judis, but your argument still lacks reason.

Since the death of Eugene Debs, socialists have not managed to recreate a credible third party. We have been stuck in the frustrating position of trying, without great success, to do several things at once: remain true to our socialist and democratic principles with hopes of seeing them realized in a future society, appeal to citizens who have been led by the capitalist media to equate socialism with despotism, and exercise whatever influence for progressive social policies we can muster within the Democratic Party and the government. The tensions that crop up between these aims stimulate healthy debates in groups like Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

In disputing DSA's vote to endorse Jackson, you lose sight of the compelling claims made by each of those traditional socialist aims. You even seem, in certain watery passages, to sacrifice the hope of socialism for an awkward progressive liberalism.

You claim that an endorsement makes DSA "a captive of the Jackson campaign," while a calmer look would surely find that it actually does nothing so drastic. You worry about "eliminating any chance to influence other candidates," without giving us cause to lay aside our suspicions that no other candidate would likely grant DSA even a momentary audience. You fret that the endorsement might alienate some possible or actual DSA members, like yourselves. Overlooked is the equal possibility that others, like myself, might gain greater respect for the group because of its decision.

You also shy from Jackson himself. You admit that Jackson has helped the left, but are quick to clarify that he is "not of the left." No kidding. Who leans further left? Presumably, we should turn from Jackson to the plethora of available left candidates, like Gephardt and Dukakis.

Christopher Phelps
Portland, Ore.

YOUR EDITORIAL ON THE DEMOCRATIC Socialists of America's (DSA) endorsement of Jesse Jackson is a welcome contribution to the debate, but we disagree totally with your analysis.

Jackson represents an important social democratic campaign. A social democratic position leads in the direction of socialism. DSA has long described itself as the left wing of the possible. We have long said that we would be a socialist presence within a broad social democratic left. Why then should we not support Jackson?

It is simply not accurate to state that DSA brings nothing to the Jackson campaign. DSA brings to the Jackson campaign a network of experienced political activists in cities around the country, a very valuable commodity. Similar to our efforts in Chicago in the Washington campaign, DSA brings a substantial white presence to the Rainbow an important contribution. We have already brought a network of DSA labor activists to form Labor for Jackson groups around the country. The DSA's Latino commission has contributed to the broadening of the Rainbow in the Latino community. The DSA newsletter *Our Struggle/Nuestra Lucha* has provided a critical bridge to a campaign short on literature. DSA's presence in the feminist communities provides an important opening to this vital movement.

Participation in the Jackson campaign also brings many things to DSA. First it is an opportunity to practice the politics we have been talking about for five years. Second: DSA, like much of the left and *In These Times*, suffers from a dominance of the white left. It is unlikely that a socialist organization will become a serious contender in the U.S. without the working class, and the U.S. working class is multi-ethnic. DSA activists need experience working within such coalitions. A broad social democratic electoral coalition is being developed; we should not avoid the coalition because it is primarily led by blacks. DSA remains a socialist presence within the coalition, hopefully drawing several black, Latino and Asian activists to a democratic socialist organization.

As to allegations that we will push some away from DSA, the resolution was careful to respect those within DSA who would prefer another candidate. Among the others

who you describe as "close to the organization," we suspect you include yourselves. Well, as Michael Harrington has said at least a thousand times, if you are a socialist then you need to belong to and build a socialist organization.

We lose little in our "chance to influence other candidates." Our influence with the yuppie candidates is non-existent. Our influence with the liberals comes from our positions in our unions which we retain and will use to advance the democratic aspirations of our union members. As DSA co-chair Barbara Ehrenreich said so well at the convention, one of the great things about the end of Reaganism is that we can return to advocating socialism. We have been doing the liberals' work for them, defending liberals' agenda while they hid.

Duane E. Campbell
Chair, Anti-Racism Commission
Democratic Socialists of America

Dolores Delgado Campbell
West Coast Co-Chair, Latino Commission
DSA
Sacramento, Calif.

Missing the point

FIRST, A MEA CULPA. SAYING THAT JESSE Jackson was not of the left was a mistake, and a particularly unfortunate one for us because we define the American left broadly and inclusively. What I meant to write was that although "Jackson has appealed to the left"—in order to create an electoral base—and in the process "has helped strengthen the left," he is not committed to building the left except insofar as it helps him immediately. This was clear in his campaign's obvious discomfort at the prospect of a DSA endorsement.

We were critical of Jackson in some respects, but we wrote that "in most respects he is much better than his rivals," and that he has played a progressive role in "raising and taking good positions on issues other candidates shy away from." Furthermore, as anyone who reads *In These Times* regularly surely knows, we have as a matter of policy given Jackson a good deal more coverage than the other Democrats. We do not consider this "opposition to Jackson," as Michael Urban would have it.

Indeed, we have seen Jackson as a godsend for the left. His campaign has provided it with a way to be involved in presidential politics without taking any initiative of its own. And he has opened many leftists' eyes to the possibilities of a meaningful mainstream politics.

Glasnost: Here's our full disclosure statement: We are not against Jackson, though we think it important to recognize his shortcomings—including his anti-Semitism, which was recently expressed in his reference to "Jewish support" of South Africa, when he meant Israeli support. And we think the left should understand its true relationship to him. Beyond that, we have no agenda, secret or otherwise. What you read is all there is.

But none of this changes our view about the appropriateness of DSA as a national organization endorsing Jackson, or anyone else, at this point.

This does not mean that we believe local chapters of DSA—those, like the Baltimore chapter, that do have local constituencies

YOU HAVE PROCLAIMED YOUR SUPPORT FOR GLASNOST in the Soviet Union. Will you do the same for glasnost at *ITT*?

How can your readers accept at face value your editorial (*ITT*, Feb. 3) criticizing DSA's endorsement of Jesse Jackson? Surely your position was not adopted because of the reasons you purport: the "personalized" (to use your word) views of one of Jackson's former speechwriters (two paragraphs to say that she believes Jackson to be a headline-chasing self-promoter); Jackson's "Hymietown" remarks of 1984; the assertion that Jackson "has helped strengthen the left. But he is not of the left."

Did you expect your readers not to notice the quick shuffle that followed this, specifically the attempt to shift attention from your opposition to Jackson to your self-professed concern for the members and future of DSA?

Assumedly, some reason moved you to come out against Jackson. *Glasnost* requires that you share them with us.

Michael Urban
Auburn, Ala.

and can participate in local coalitions as equals—should not endorse him. They should, if so inclined. This, however, does not require a national endorsement. Chapters that want to work for Jackson would do so whether the national DSA took a position or not—just as those locals who don't want to support him won't, despite the convention's decision.

It's good to hear about Baltimore, but the Chicago story was something else. Yes, the DSA local mobilized some 250 people to canvass for Harold Washington's election as mayor. This helped Washington marginally, and was all to the good from that point of view. But the people mobilized were not used to create a DSA constituency in Chicago. Out of a lack of either imagination or boldness, DSA did not run a candidate of its own for alderman in 1983. When the election was over Washington had no reason to deal with DSA as he did with other groups having constituencies of their own. One result was that DSA had no influence in his administration, even though Washington was more clearly a person of the left than Jackson. Another was that after the election the people mobilized were left with nothing to do, and the chapter disintegrated.

The issue of endorsement is not Jackson. It is that an endorsement brings little or nothing to Jackson and does little or nothing to help DSA. That is our concern.

If DSA is going to be an organization whose primary function is to organize activities like the Democratic Agenda conferences, then identification with one candidate is a hindrance. If it is to be an organization that mobilizes relatively small numbers of people in a few cities to canvass, telephone or register voters, then, in the long run, it is superfluous. A national organization of socialists, if it is to play any role in American politics, must develop a program to accommodate the nation to the profound changes taking place in our economy, and then begin building a constituency—through nationally coordinated local campaigns. Only when it has local constituencies loyal to a meaningful program will it gain the attention and respect of presidential candidates. ■

—James Weinstein

By Michael Harrington

IS SOCIALISM RELEVANT TO THE LATE 20th and 21st centuries? And if so what does one mean by "socialism"? In any case, why identify as a socialist in the U.S. where the very word invites misunderstanding at best, and a frantic, ignorant rejection at worst? Given all of these problems what is the point of a socialist organization in this country?

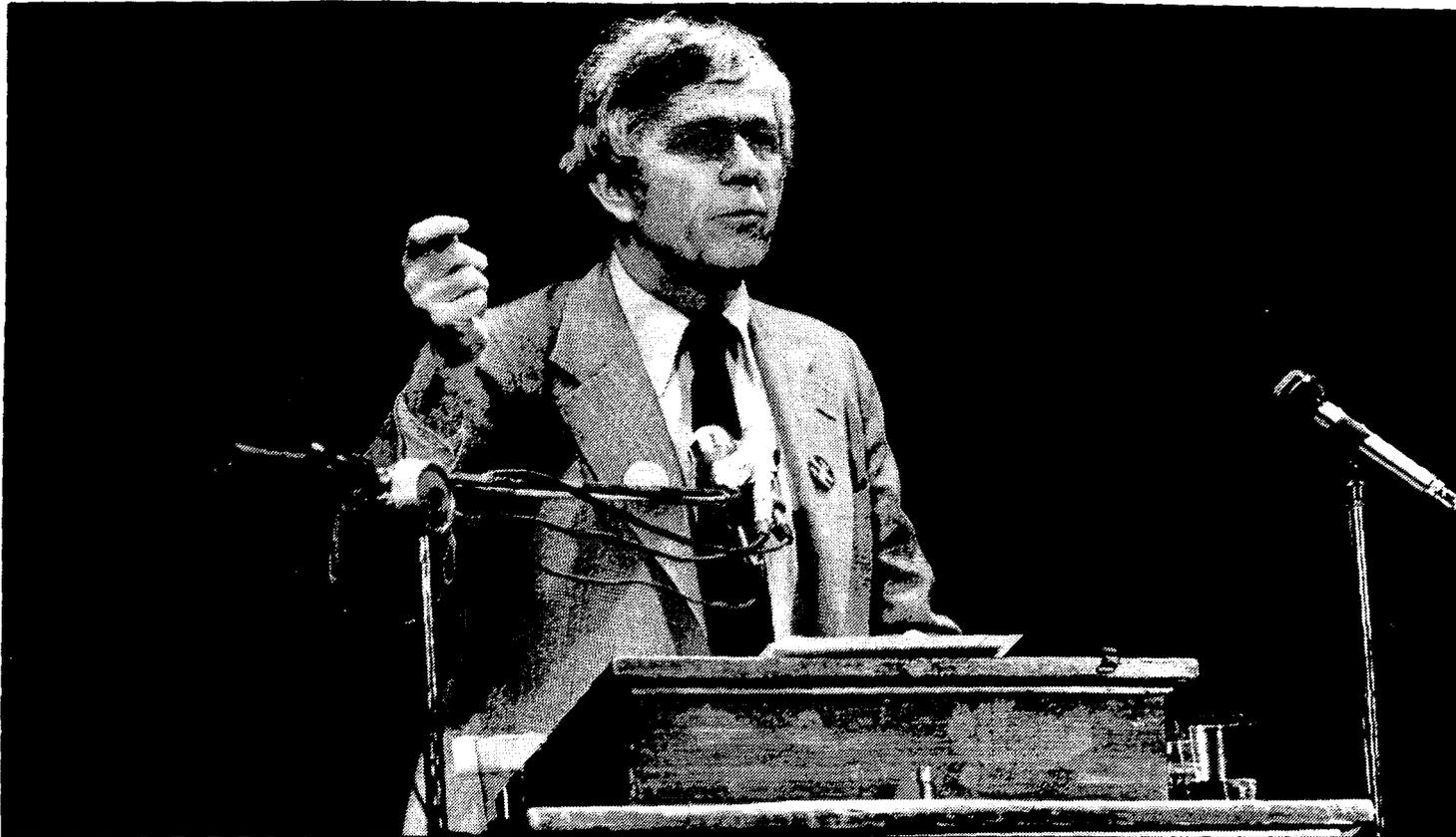
These issues were raised in one way or another in the *In These Times* discussion of the recent Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) convention. But rather than respond to individual points, articles or letters, I will explore these underlying questions. First, the socialist critique of power under both capitalism and communism is not only substantial in and of itself; it also makes a significant contribution to the cause of incremental reform as well as to a radical restructuring of society.

Power, that critique argues, is systemic, North, South, East and West, and reproduces itself along with its mutually reinforcing social evils. In the various systems of power in the world today, the control of investment, of basic economic allocations, is not the only source of domination—racism and sexism persist in all systems—but it is the single most important constituent. Those in charge of investment, be they corporate executives or commissars, will claim and get unequal treatment for themselves on the grounds that they act in the interest of the future of the entire society and must therefore have the resources to do their job. And those who are excluded from the function will be forced to pay all the social costs of decisions made on high.

The example of homelessness: In a superficial analysis, the tremendous growth of homelessness in the late '70s and '80s is simply a result of the deinstitutionalization of mental patients in the '60s. But that analysis contradicts the data, which increasingly shows that the homeless are families and that two-thirds of them do not have histories of mental and emotional problems; it also fails to explain why the deinstitutionalization of the '60s did not lead to a dramatic rise in homelessness until the late '70s.

A more serious—liberal—analysis would recognize that this homelessness is a function of decreased real income and increased poverty among the working poor and a decline in the supply of private and government-sponsored affordable housing. From this point of view, one would quite rightly attack New York Mayor Ed Koch for providing tax incentives for the destruction of single-room-occupancy hotels (SROs)—but note that the SROs themselves were utterly inadequate even if they were better than the streets.

A socialist analysis would deepen those liberal insights. It would see Koch's action as one more example of the system at work: of government policy subsidizing private, profit-making and often anti-social priorities, usually on the grounds of a "trickle-down." It would understand the decline in the real wage and the increase in the poverty of working people as a systemic response to the crisis of profitability and productivity in the mid-'70s. And it would stress not simply a program for decent "shelter," but the necessity of democratizing the entire process of investment in this,



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Socialists help shape the best in our politics

and other, basic needs of life. It would also show that, had the community health centers projected in the '60s been built—or more broadly, if America finally got national health care—then the problem of the deinstitutionalized mental patients would never have become the outrage it now is.

That socialist conception of a housing program would not, however, simply specify so many "units." It would urge a planned development of racially and socially integrated communities with public spaces and facilities for new institutions of neighborhood democracy and control. And it would try to reach out to build political support for such an undertaking by uniting the homeless in a coalition with young families from the working class and middle class as well as with those seniors who do not want to be segregated on the basis of age.

The socialist point is that these reforms, which many liberals would support on an ad hoc basis, must be as coherent as the structures they oppose, that what is needed is not simply a new housing bill but a new way of making and designing social investments in areas of critical need. And even if one has to settle politically for something less than that, a proposal designed on the basis of this principle will be different from the product of liberal concern with a single issue. Rep. Ron Dellums' (D-CA) national health bill gives people at the base a say in non-technical medical decisions; it is not just a matter of "health insurance." And indeed, every socialist program is about changing the distribution of power in the way decisions are made.

The Soviet Union and Third World: Similarly, a socialist response to what is happening under Mikhail Gorbachov in the Soviet Union would not simply stress the importance of pursuing peace negotiations even more vigorously in order to encourage

glasnost and *perestroika*. It would put Gorbachov's progressive, but technocratic, reforms in the context of an analysis that sees bureaucratic resistance to change in the Soviet Union as a function of an anti-democratic system of power in which even positive initiatives are initiated behind the backs of the people. And it would argue that American unilateral peace initiatives toward verifiable Big Power agreements may well—and hopefully will—create the long-run conditions for a democratization of Soviet society that goes beyond the current agenda in Moscow.

In the case of the Third World, one can be even more specific. The response to the international debt crisis—and the global structure of inequality that undergirds it—of the Socialist International, under the leadership of Michael Manley and Willy Brandt (and, until his death, Olof Palme), is a perfect example of what is needed. A major transfer of funds from North to South, the International has shown, could create jobs in the First World as well as the Third. International justice could be an engine of growth for U.S. workers, could provide an alternative to the chauvinist attitudes that sometimes accompany the justified anger of people under advanced capitalism with the systemic irresponsibility of multinational corporations.

Yes, but: All these negatives and criticisms are well and good, someone might say. But isn't the socialist movement itself in a profound crisis even in those countries where it has a mass base? What about the spectacular failure of the French Socialists when they had an absolute parliamentary majority and control of the presidency as well?

There is no doubt that the "Keynesian" version of social democracy, which dominated the European movement from 1950 to about 1975, is in a profound crisis. The

French Socialists were subjected to the brutal discipline of the world's banks because their socially based Keynesian programs generated more jobs in Japan and Germany than in France. Even as one searches for a new response to this reality, it should be at least noted that it is one more example of how elite corporate power—in this case exercised by multinational banks and corporations—systematically subverts the decisions of democratic electorates. That explains, but does not change, the fact: socialism today is in a deep crisis.

For those who think of socialism as a recipe, as some kind of Platonic idea to be implemented in reality, that crisis might seem terminal, particularly if they had equated Keynesian social democracy with socialism. But if one puts this development in historic perspective it becomes clear that new departures are now required, not fatalistic surrender.

At the very origins of the modern socialist movement in the 19th century, there was a basic insight that will be even truer in the 21st century than when it was first formulated. Capitalism was understood as a system of private socialization, creating a genuine world market for the first time in human history, applying science to production, linking people together in an unprecedented interdependence. But because that socialization was private, it was pursued at the expense of society. Socialism was conceived of as a purpose of democratic socialization from below, as a movement to put the people in control of the economic conditions that determine so much about their lives.

That basic goal has been understood over the past century and a half in many, many ways, some of them wrong, some leading to partial victories, none even beginning to achieve the fullness of the original vision. And matters were complicated when a system of anti-democratic socialization emerged in which the party-state carried out the brutal process of accumulation that was the work of capitalism in the West, and used the rhetoric of socialism to rationalize new forms of class rule.