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

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BERKELEY

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. While over 500 people gathered under the sponsorship of this trend's largest political organizing entity, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and its most influential theoretical journal, Socialist Review (SR), the lack 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 in 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 dilemma 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 Blairite elected officials, sees the road to a socialist majority in a revival of New Deal style work programs to rebuild industry and provide jobs for all. The other, identified with socialists-feminists and environmentalists, expects the demand for jobs as the central focus; it holds that the stress should be placed on "expanding and defending of the welfare state." More specifically, this latter tendency sees the core of a new socialist movement in a coalition of women unified on the basis of the "feminization of poverty" line.

In this soon to be dialectic who will ultimately get the upper hand in this contention. But, in this particular gathering, socialists see both the anti-capitalist co-chair Barbara Ehrenreich, came to play policy 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 unrealism about them. For here was a gathering discussing a socialist future for the U.S. that consistently overlooked the centrality of reaching out to the minority sector of the U.S. working class and leaned ever backwards to distance itself from anywhere that socialism actually exists in the world.

The most glaring weakness was on the question of race: amidst the greatest upsurge in black community politics since the 1960s (represented by the Jesse Jackson campaign), the conference had a mere handful of minority participants and didn't even seem to think it was a problem.

Out of 14 workshops on the relevant themes 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 strata of the working class has completely 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 met with unenthusiastic and highly cynical indifference.

The reason was stated by DSA member and New York region coordinator of the National Education Association Skip Roberts: "The math of American politics is such that it was necessary to "expand the franchise at the bottom levels." (A clear reference to the Jackson campaign), but "this alone can't do it." Roberts' declaration that "we have to bring back the middle class" may have some truth but others would have put it, but he was expressing the common wisdom of the uninitiated. The uninitiated assumption was that too much of an emphasis on challenging white supremacy or American patriotism by urging "massively 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 debate. At Harrington, DSA co-chair, stamped hard for placing the jobs demand and traditional trade union movements at the center of any serious program. He emphasized the need to build a base among "white male workers" and "broadened to include" and advocated a mild anti-corporal populism that would "generate the challenge...back up these workers might hold. "We should say to them, 'You are paying too much,'" but if the rich are going to avoid taxes," he stressed. In Roberts' words, the left must "recall American sympathy" and continue to insist that socialists are the true representatives of "American values.

FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

For the socialist-feminists and environmentalists, this battle is backwards: its demands were out-of-date and it targeted the wrong constituency to anchor the socialists. As Sociologist Fred Block, belittling the prospects for a "new industrial policy," put it quite simply: "we have no left to face reality. We are living in a world where more and more people are going to be forced out of the workplace" as production is" feminized.

This focus on jobs for this, in context, amounts to an ineffective rehash of the "Purish" war.

Ehrenreich, an articulate and effective speaker, elaborated this tendency's position fully. Full employment, she argued, does not result in social equality; the key is social welfare programs. It is not enough to "fight for the jobs", both at the workplace and in the home. And the constituency must also be broadened to include a new majority socialist movement—was a broad, cross-class coalition of women.

Ehrenreich based her position on the "feminization of poverty" argument: almost all the poor are women and almost all women are in imminent danger of becoming poor. Based on this argument, it was contended that class and racial distinctions among women can be easily over-ridden and given a crucial role. 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. But one would expect that between this trend and sympathizers. But it was the inevitable result of a clash between two tendencies that have coalesced over this trend within this very short since its re-emergence in the U.S. as a distinct political force in the late 1960s.

One tendency, represented 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 many to the U.S. imperialist's genocidal war in Vietnam. The interweaving of these strands has produced a brand of socialist democracy with some accountability to the fight against racism, support for national liberation movements, and a distinct anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, anti-Soviet "socialist" tradition. But the inherent political weaknesses in their outlook are always apparent when questions of strategy and program are on the table.

The 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. The enduring of many black and Hispanic and 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.

And even in a very minor devoted to the "Daughters" line, left social democrats could not resist an assertion of its anti-Soviet credentials. The example took place when Barry Commoner

At this year's national DSA convention, co-chair Michael Harrington issued a mild challenge to wishy-washy formulations on the "wastefulness" of the defense budget and urged people to join Jesse Jackson's campaign. Harrington quickly 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 wake up to that proposition."

To be sure, such conciliation of backlash ideas among the U.S. populace is put forward as the quintessence of handshake, handshake political realism, just as noting about "rebelling from industry with democratic planning" or the "feminization of poverty" are promoted as the heart of inner-democratic 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 formulations and lack of perception into the cumulative effect of such U.S. politics could well leave social democrats on the sidelines of the present-day class struggles. With Jackson's campaign, Commoner warned, "Don't sleep through this historic moment." But it appeared the participants found their own idealist dreams too engrossing to wake up.

Washington... continued from p. 3

Washington's announcement has also had a decisive impact on the campaign. Chicago's Chicago local political alignment. According to the Chicago Defender and Metro News, several black aldermen, ward committee members 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 undisclosed) threat. Although some of the officials in the room, upset at the lack of individual spoils from the White House, feared they might not be possible there were no mounting support for Jackson throughout the Black community. Washington's public preference for Jackson—along with Jackson's public repudiation of a challenge to Washington's favorite son state—quickly resulted in a move could have developed into a serious split in Chicago's Black-community based re- form coalition.

Any serious split would have been a real problem because, like the Jackson bid nationally, this local progressive coalition also has a serious split. On 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 parallelism between the national and the local struggle is striking. One of Vrdolyak's recent moves was to engineer a county convention in his home base against Jackson in last year's Demo- cratic mayoral primary.

In Washington's public preference for Jackson—and the unity and momentum that flow from it—strengths both the anti-racist and pro-ressive movement nationally and the challenge to the corrupt machine that is blocking implementation of Washing- ton's reform program in Chicago.