

Metro Atlanta DSA – Minutes: January 27, 2007

The meeting was called to order at the Friends Meeting House in Decatur, with a record 35 people in attendance. Milt Tambor briefly reviewed the history of Metro Atlanta DSA for the newcomers, including our plans to host the national convention in November.

PANEL DISCUSSION: “What is Democratic Socialism.” Ian Fletcher made opening comments and moderated and Jeff Bragg, Norm Markel and Bob Wohlheuter made 10-minute presentations, followed by questions and comments from the audience. Adam Shapiro recorded the initial presentations for use by DSA (the discussion that followed was not recorded). Milt introduced the panelists; the following summaries include some of their background info.

Ian Fletcher (history professor at Ga. State. U.) was a member of the New American Movement before it merged with the Democratic Socialists of American.

He stressed the need to create a culture of dialogue and learning if we are to create the “next left.” He discussed the historical significance of the South – site of the greatest struggles for democracy in this country, starting with the efforts of the freedmen during Reconstruction and continuing through the union movement and the civil rights movement. He commented that “Democracy is a terrain of struggle, through which the road to socialism runs. . . . We need to re-embed economics in politics “ and recognize that currently democratic processes are being used to limit the rights of immigrants, gays etc.

Jeff Bragg has been a transit worker and a union organizer, now teaching public school and a founder of the chapter.

Jeff recalled joining SDS 42 years ago and his trajectory through a number of Leninist political groups during the ‘60’s before joining DSA in the 1980s. He concluded that he still finds inspiration in the Marxist emphasis on class relationships that are so often obscured now, especially in the South, but finds Marx inadequate because of a failure to recognize factors such as race, gender, religion etc..

Norm Markel, membership secretary and a founder of the chapter, is a retired professor of psychology and communications, former president of the U. of Florida faculty union, and member of the social justice committee of Bet Havarim.

He handed out and explained “A Paradigm for Progressives” (see attached), including quotes from historical sources on civil rights (preface to U.S. Constitution), human rights (Declaration of Independence), and economic rights (FDR) and cited Thomas Paine’s concept of the state as an agent of social welfare. This also presented “a class-conscious microscope,” including definitions of “corporate elites,” “corporate professionals,” “small business owners” and “working class professionals” and their relationship to corporate capitalism. He stressed that each of these groups has a class perspective, and that many people have a strong emotional investment in explaining their position as “human nature,” common knowledge or supported by the Bible. We need to apply a class perspective to understand societal problems by asking “Who benefits?”

Bob Wolheuter, a farmer’s son, is a biochemist, has retired from the CDC after 16 years as chief of biotechnology and will be working in China this year.

He described his own political development, from Christianity through science to democratic socialism. He finds tolerance essential (vs. Leninism); as well as pluralism, solidarity, and the evolving efforts of all people to make sense out of their world (mythopoesis). He found DSA to be the only attractive alternative to the Democratic Party and the authoritarian left.

The discussion that followed was wide-ranging, touching on disability issues, how race interacts with class, how to talk to people about socialism, the implications of the electronics revolution, power and social control, false consciousness, the legacy of the Second International, workers’ democracy vs. bourgeois democracy, workers’ solidarity, why isn’t DSA a political

party?, scarcity of people of color in the Metro Atlanta DSA, and practicing solidarity with people we may see as “other,” among other topics.

Austin Wattles announced that on Feb. 24 the Friends’ meeting is hosting a political discussion right after the next DSA meeting at 1 pm with speaker Jeff Folger, in the same building (suggestion: bring a sandwich if you want to attend both).