Interview with Mimi Soltysik, Candidate for the Socialist Party Nomination for President

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The following is an email interview with Mimi Soltysik, a member of the Los Angeles chapter of the Party USA. He is currently seeking the Socialist Party's nomination for the 2016 US Presidential election. This interview was originally published by The Hampton Institute.

Tell us about yourself and your politics.

Here's the statement I made when I announced my intent to run for the Socialist Party USA's POTUS nomination. I think it fairly well captures who I am and where I stand politically:

¨The campaign I will be running will not be about votes, will not be about ballot status, and will not be about revenue raised. It will primarily focus on the unique media opportunities that are presented during a general election. Given the Bernie Sanders candidacy, it may be reasonable to expect that any candidate from a democratic socialist organization might see enhanced opportunities to discuss socialism from an explicitly anti-capitalist perspective. Failure to take advantage of those opportunities in this general election would be a crucial mistake, in my opinion.

"I am not a fan of respectability politics. It doesn't resonate with me others I have spoken with throughout my time as an organizer. Frankly, in a fairy-tale situation where a democratic socialist would actually take the White House, my belief is that the candidate would have to need to fire herself or himself the moment victory was declared. Why? In this electoral system, a democratic socialist would have to so thoroughly compromise or concede her or his beliefs, beliefs that inspired the votes leading to victory, and would be so incredibly beholden to corporate interests, that she or he would be completely unfit to govern once taking office.

"I am not here to play nice with those who support our money-driven electoral system. I also believe this is an opportunity to take a few dramatic shots at capitalism and our current electoral system, to convey a radical message, and to stress revolution from below. Much of the messaging will focus on what folks throughout the country can do to speed up the revolutionary pace, helping in any way possible to connect the people to existing social movements. Finally, I believe that the campaign can be a unifier, offering support to local socialist campaigns throughout the country. This is an opportunity to smash sectarian walls where they exist while still maintaining a democratic socialist identity.¨

How did you come to socialism? How do you define socialism?

To be completely honest, the roots of my socialist evolution lie in behaviors perhaps highly antithetical to a socialist perspective. For years, there was little that I cared about. I was incredibly self destructive, self absorbed, and almost entirely focused on instant gratification. By the time I reached my early 30s, I felt as if I had bottomed out. Substance abuse had taken a heavy toll on my health, both physically and mentally, and I found myself in a position where I was essentially starting from scratch. In the process of rebuilding, I started to become acutely aware of how my past

behaviors had a direct impact on the suffering of others – my consumption, care for others (or the lack thereof), self-care (or the lack thereof), willful ignorance, etc. I came to the conclusion that, if the first half of my life was spent tearing humanity down, the second half of my life would be dedicated to making a substantive difference. When I say ¨making a difference,¨ I didn't want to help apply band-aid solutions to a cancer. I wanted to attack the cancer directly.

While I understand that socialism is a contested term, the following portion of the Socialist Party USA'sStatement of Principles offers, in my opinion, a wonderful articulation of the term: ¨Socialism is a new social and economic order in which workers and consumers control production and community residents control their neighborhoods, homes, and schools. The production of society is used for the benefit of all humanity, not for the private profit of a few. Socialism produces a constantly renewed future by not plundering the resources of the earth."

How do you differ from Bernie Sanders? Do you see him as an actual socialist?

Well, for starters, I am not running for the Democratic Party nomination whereas Sanders is. From what I see of Bernie Sanders, he appears to be delivering a social-democratic message. That's not where I am coming from. I do not see solutions existing within the capitalist system. Capitalism cannot be reformed. Capitalism is inherently classist, racist and sexist. Do we want kinder and gentler classism, racism and sexism? Kinder oppression? I know that I don't.

I may have seen Sanders define himself as a democratic socialist. I suppose he can define himself however he chooses. What I see is something of a reformist, and as I mentioned, a social democrat. I think what's important at the moment is developing some sort of dialogue with those who are supporting Sanders. Regardless of what Sanders is or isn't, I think dismissing or shaming Sanders supporters is a bad move. If Sanders loses in the primaries, where do his supporters turn? If we can establish a dialogue, can that dialogue grow into something meaningful for the U.S. Left? I think it can.

Do you think that the American people are ready for socialism? There still seems to be a lot of stigma surrounding the very term.

I do believe that the people of the U.S. are ready for socialism. For whatever it's worth, a 2010 Pew poll revealed that those between the ages of 18 and 29 had a more favorable view of socialism versus those who held a negative view. I think as we get some distance from the Cold War, we're seeing less use of the term in the pejorative. That doesn't mean that there aren't still many out there who use the term to slander or who to imply a negative connotation, but many now have quick access to information, so it's a bit easier to fact check and discredit bunk information.

Where I live in Los Angeles, I rarely come across folks who give me flak when they found out that I am a radical. In my experience, people generally tend to be interested and curious. I completely understand that my experience might be different if I lived in another area of the country, but I've also had some pretty positive experiences in other areas that may be perceived as highly conservative. For example, a few years ago I was with some of my Socialist Party buds at a student center at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, and one of the students behind the main desk noticed an SPUSA button on my jacket and mentioned that she follows our posts on Facebook. It led to a broader discussion with some of the students there, and all were quite receptive.

What would your response be to mainstream Democrats who accuse you and other third parties of splitting the vote?

With the number of votes we tend to get in the general election, I'd say the Democrats have real

problems if they are concerned about our impact on their battles with the GOP. I'd also ask how a party labeled ¨Democratic¨ finds the idea of choice beyond two parties in a country of 318,000,000 to be problematic? I am hopeful that we will soon see the day where framing the inclusion of third parties in the electoral arena as being ¨bad¨ ceases to carry any currency.

What would you say is the purpose of third parties? Do you think they will have more of a chance in the future?

I can't necessarily say what the purpose of other third parties are, although I think having a range of choices is key to democracy. I can say what the Socialist Party USA's purpose is, and that is to overthrow capitalism and ¨establish a radical democracy that places people's lives under their own control — a non-racist, classless, feminist, socialist society in which people cooperate at work, at home, and in the community,¨ which we highlight in our Statement of Principles. We organize at the community level, focusing on a bottom-up approach, identifying pressure points, organizing around those pressure points, and working on campaigns to overthrow the systemic oppression of capitalism.

If we're talking electoral politics, I think that there are incredible chances at the local level. Look at Kshama Sawant in Seattle. Look at Pat Noble in Red Bank, N.J. I think we're going to be seeing more and more radical candidates at the local level.

Why do you think that third parties throw their hats in for the presidential race rather than slowly building up momentum on the local and state levels?

My personal strategy with this campaign might differ a bit from some of the other third-party candidates running for POTUS. Much of my focus will be on the local and state levels. How can this campaign help connect others at the local level? How can the campaign help support the work of folks at the local level? Can it help to increase capacity at the local level? Can it make a contribution toward highlighting much of the great work being done at the local level? What can it do to help swiften the revolutionary pace in the U.S.? I think that by using a POTUS campaign to support efforts at the community/local level, we can make a valuable contribution towards building up the kind of momentum you mention.

In 1970, Huey P. Newton penned an essay entitled, " We Must Survive Until We Can Transform Society." In it, he referred to the Black Panther Party's Ten-Point Program as neither revolutionary nor reformist, but rather survivalist. Some argue that, until we can develop the impetus for revolutionary change, part of this "survivalist mode" includes participating in electoral politics, and even possibly supporting Democratic candidates from time to time.

Do you think there is a place in for revolutionaries in mainstream, electoral politics?

Do you think revolutionaries should support welfare (survivalist) legislation like food stamps, public housing, and unemployment, even if it means supporting a Democrat?

Do I think there is a place for revolutionaries in mainstream, electoral politics? I'd say there is. I mentioned Kshama Sawant and Pat Noble earlier. I think that the folks who have supported and continue to support their efforts feel there is a place for revolutionaries in mainstream, electoral politics. We live in this country and we demand a right to be heard in this country. If that means running electoral campaigns, so be it.

Supporting a Democrat? That's not me. Supporting welfare legislation, like food stamps, public

housing, and unemployment? Sure. I don't personally know a revolutionary fighting against unemployment benefits or food stamps. But I think that, given current capacity, we have to define our goals and strategically choose where and how we fight. Do we throw all of our resources into supporting welfare legislation? We don't in the Socialist Party Los Angeles Local, where I do most of my work. We're pragmatic, but our eye is on revolution.

When it comes to electoral politics, some on the Left view the campaign process as much more important than the actual election (which becomes sort of an afterthought). Do you see election campaigns as an opportunity to network and build coalitions?

I think that electoral campaigns can be an opportunity to network and build coalitions. As I mentioned earlier in the interview, votes are not much of a consideration for my campaign. I think much of our work, whether it be through an electoral campaign or a community project, can help to build and strengthen working relationships. In L.A., we tend to focus heavily on establishing relationships with others throughout the Left in the city. Every few months, we host what we call a ¨Radical Ruckus¨ where we invite folks from all over the Left to join us in a relaxed environment where we can get to know another, share some laughs, and enjoy each other's company. To date, in addition to folks from both the Socialist Party Los Angeles Local and the Socialist Party Ventura Local, folks from Solidarity, Socialist Alternative, the IWW, the DSA, LRNA, the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, the Converging Storms Action, Network, the L.A. Red Guards, etc. have joined these events.

Is it a worthy endeavor for leftists to participate in mainstream campaigns and attempt to pull liberals, progressives and Democratic loyalists to the Left?

If by mainstream campaigns you are referring to campaigns like ¨Fight for $15,¨ I definitely think its a worthy endeavor. The ¨Fight for $15¨ campaign, like the Sanders campaign, is a great opportunity to have a dialogue. While it appears that there is much progress being made with the ¨Fight for $15¨ campaign, is that an end? Does it go far enough? In Los Angeles, if you are an adult with one child, a living wage is actually over $25 an hour. By participating in a mainstream campaign like ¨Fight for $15,¨ a campaign where we might find progressives, liberals, etc., we can have a deeper discussion about the broader issues and figure out how we can get to where we need to be. And in my opinion, ¨where we need to be¨ is a classless society.

There are numerous, small socialist parties active in the US, including the International Socialist Organization (ISO), The Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL), The Socialist Party (SPUSA), The Communist Party (CPUSA), Socialist Alternative (SA), Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), among others. There have been attempts to create a Left Unity project. Considering the various approaches and ideologies, do you think this is viable?

This is an interesting question, and as I'm sure you are well aware, is a pretty hot topic. I mentioned earlier the approach we take with the Socialist Party Los Angeles Local. We maintain a keen eye toward establishing cooperative and productive working relationships with much of the Left in the city. We have members who frequently work on projects with other organizations and we often see members from other organizations attend our events. It can be a bit surreal to hear some of the stories about inter-organizational hostility and sectarianism. I appreciate the differences between the organizations on the U.S. Left, and I don't see those differences as necessarily prohibitive of cooperation, friendship, and ultimately, some sort of sustained unity.

What's your take on anarchism? Do you think attempts at Left Unity can and should include anarchist organizations?

I have some very close friends who identify as anarchists, and over the years. I have highly valued their insight and perspective. I have worked with some of them on projects, conferences, etc., and expect to continue to work with anarchists in the future. Should some type of Left Unity project include anarchist organizations? I certainly hope so! Much of who I am and where I stand is informed by anarchism, and I don't think I'd like to be excluded from a dialogue because of my perspective.