Clinton, Starr and Libertarianism: An exchange

15 June 1998

To the Editor:

I completely agree with your analysis regarding Clinton's politics and political base and think it is a brilliant description of what he is all about and what Congress is all about.

Where I disagree is on your basic philosophy of socialism. The underlying problem of the polarization of society created by the politicians is the high tax, high corporate welfare, high management of the economy by the government; therefore, in my opinion, the Libertarian Party is the best hope of restoring true democracy in this country and "level the playing field" within capitalism which is not as a system, the true enemy.

JK
12 June 1998

Thank you for your letter. But we are somewhat surprised that you, as a Libertarian, would appreciate our analysis of the Clinton crisis. As socialists, we take as our point of departure the objective division of society into classes. In the United States, despite the lip service paid to democracy, real political power is wielded by those who own and control the means of production. Libertarianism evades or totally ignores this socio-economic fact. In its glorification of the rights of the individual, it considers the "individual" in a manner that is entirely abstract — that is, outside of the social and economic context within which real individuals exist. Thus, the Libertarian program of complete freedom for the individual generally turns out to mean — within the framework of capitalist society — the removal of all restrictions on the ability of those who own the means of production to exploit those who don't. For the capitalists — who possess by virtue of their economic dominance an immensely powerful position within society — the doctrine of unfettered individualism is very attractive. It simply means that the state should do nothing that places limits on their ability to accumulate wealth. The owners of the means of production declare: Don't tell us what to do on our property! The owners of the mass media declare: Don't tell us what to say in our newspapers or on our networks. Or to sum it all up, the rich declare: don't tell us what to do with our money! This, as we see it, is the essential outlook of Libertarianism.

But for the working class, the situation is very different: its interests can only be secured through collective struggle against the power of capital. All such struggles — for the right to form unions, for safety laws, for public education, for a progressive income tax, etc. — are seen by the owners of capital as oppressive restrictions of their "individual" rights. Of course, not all those who subscribe to Libertarian conceptions are themselves wealthy capitalists. Particularly in a country like the United States where class consciousness and knowledge of history are rather low, the nostrum of unfettered "rugged individualism" exercises a considerable appeal. But that does not change the fact that the realization of the Libertarian program would require the destruction of all social advances achieved by the working class in the course of the last century. Paradoxically, this means that the Libertarian program could be achieved only on the basis of a rather ruthless political dictatorship. This does not mean that such a dictatorship is what all those who consider themselves Libertarians want. But political ideas and programs have a certain logic.

Yours sincerely,
J. Elton for the WSWS editorial board
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