

An inside look at the US presidential campaign: Gore's town meeting in Detroit

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On March 8 this reporter covered Vice President Al Gore's appearance in Detroit in order to provide *WSWS* readers with an inside look at a typical presidential campaign event.

The Detroit stop was the first for Gore after his victory in the Super Tuesday primaries that assured his nomination over former Senator Bill Bradley. What might have taken the form, 25 or 30 years ago, of a Democratic Party rally before thousands of working-class and middle-class supporters, had the character of a contrived and entirely stage-managed media show.

There was a large element of outright fraud. The event was advertised in the press as a town meeting with "undecided voters." In fact, attendance was by invitation only. The meeting was packed with Gore supporters hand-picked by the Democratic Party and its allies in the trade union bureaucracy, the local church establishment, the NAACP and other organizations.

Having previously covered similar "town hall" meetings, I wasn't surprised to learn this. It seems that, if anything, the Democratic Party has tightened control over such events since the nationally televised town meeting at Ohio State University in February 1998, when a number of people in the audience were able to ask serious questions and expose the hypocrisy behind the Clinton administration's official rationale for bombing Iraq.

Nonetheless, the shamelessness of the public deception was remarkable. The news media was a willing accessory to the fraud, continuing to refer to the event as a give-and-take with "undecided voters" in the following day's dispatches.

The meeting, held at an athletic facility at Detroit's Wayne State University, turned out to be two meetings. The first was an invitation-only banquet for Gore with Detroit's business and political elite. The media was not invited, so I asked a campaign spokesperson for a list of the invitees. I never got one.

It was obvious, however, that the audience consisted of Democratic officeholders and local power brokers, including Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer, the Michigan Congressional delegation and former Governor James Blanchard. Also reportedly present were auto executives and Detroit-area businessmen, including the black cable television millionaire Don Barden, as well as scores of union officials from the United Auto Workers and the AFL-CIO.

While this first meeting was warming up, a crowd of some 150 people began to take their seats and wait for the "open meeting" in a second gymnasium. I took the opportunity to find out who some of these people were and how they were chosen to be part of the

audience.

The first person I spoke with was an older woman who said she was a Democratic Party precinct captain in Detroit and had been asked to attend by her state representative. Another worked for the Wayne County Sheriff's office, and another was an academic from Wayne State University's Walter Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs. She said she was personally phoned by the university president and asked to attend, adding, "When you get a call from the president, you don't put him on hold."

Other members of the audience included Gore's backers in the trade union bureaucracy, including lower-level officials from the Detroit Federation of Teachers, Service Employees International Union and United Auto Workers. There were also school board members, an assistant prosecutor from Macomb County, and a select group of college and high school students, including the president of the citywide student council, who later posed for photographs with Gore.

Detroit is the poorest big city in America, something one would never have guessed from the relatively affluent and complacent group gathered to meet the vice president. Where were the young workers struggling to make ends meet in low-wage jobs, students facing deteriorating public schools or teachers who went on strike last fall to fight for smaller classes? Where was a representative of the growing homeless population in the city, or an auto worker juggling between the demands of raising a family and working ever longer hours?

Obviously, they had not been invited. But even had they been given the opportunity, it is doubtful that they would have bothered to show up. They are part of a world quite different and apart from the privileged world of the political and media establishment, and its acolytes in the trade union bureaucracy.

In the back row I spotted two workers who seemed out of place. I approached them and after striking up a conversation found out that they were maintenance workers at the gymnasium where the event was being held. They said their employer had asked for volunteers to attend the rally in return for overtime pay.

After I explained how the rest of the audience members had been vetted, one of the workers said, "I guess they needed to have a few of the little people present. It looks like they've filled the audience with Gore's friends."

I began discussing the contradictions in Gore's claims. On the one hand, Democrats and Republicans had justified social spending cuts for years by pointing to the budget deficit. Now

there was a record surplus, huge corporate profits and massive fortunes being racked up on the stock market. Gore doesn't explain, I said, why he wasn't proposing to use the surplus to narrow social inequality, provide health care to the tens of millions who were uninsured or provide child care to working families who need it so desperately.

One of the workers responded, "Yes, there should be child care and a health care system, at least where everyone can get access like in Canada. That's a good question. Are you going to ask it?"

At that moment I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and saw a rather tall Secret Service agent. He asked me to step over and told me that for "security reasons" the press could not mingle with the audience. Looking around I noticed a dozen or more of these young men with plugs in their ears and wires disappearing inside their suit jackets. The problem was you couldn't tell who was from the Secret Service, who was from Gore's campaign team, and who was from CNN.

At 7 p.m. cheers erupted from behind the gymnasium divider as Gore began his rally with the select crowd of Democratic bigwigs, businessmen and union officials. About a half hour later Gore walked into our meeting hall and was greeted with overwhelming applause ... right on cue for the cameras.

Dressed in a polo shirt and casual slacks, Gore began his well-rehearsed routine of taking the microphone and walking into the middle of the audience. He announced that this was an open meeting and that he was willing to take any question. He emphasized that he wanted to hear from undecided voters, saying they would have priority over the many people he saw wearing Gore 2000 buttons and shirts.

Then Gore, who was born just a dozen blocks from the White House and was reared in a hotel on embassy row while his father sat in the US Senate, introduced himself as the son of a poor Tennessee farmer and waitress, and said he decided to enter politics because wanted to help hard-working people. One of his proudest achievements was that he and Clinton "took over the White House after the Republicans had driven up the budget deficit and turned the economy around, creating a budget surplus."

When the discussion began, the audience lobbed Gore a series of "softball" questions. He spoke about school vouchers after a question from a teachers union official. Following a friendly question from an Albanian student, he reasserted the claim that the war in the Balkans was for humanitarian purposes. An Iraqi student, whose parents were suffering under US-led sanctions back home, blamed the situation on Saddam Hussein and let Gore posture as a friend of the Iraqi people.

Without fear of opposition from the audience, Gore outlined a right-wing social agenda, hardly distinguishable from that of his Republican opponent George W. Bush. When it came to cutting social spending, Gore said, he was far more responsible than the Republicans. This was made clear when one questioner asked, "What do I tell my Republican friends who say that in your 16 years in Congress there was never a spending program that you voted against?"

Gore declared, "That's simply not true." He insisted that he and the president had proven to be more "fiscally responsible" than their Republican predecessors in the White House. "We cleaned

up the mess left by Bush-Quayle, who quadrupled the national debt," he said. "We turned it around and paid down the debt." The Republicans, he said, had a "philosophy of borrow and spend." He boasted of his "Reinventing Government" program, which had eliminated 350,000 federal jobs, and added, "I want to eliminate all debt by 2015."

Shortly after these remarks the official portion of the meeting ended. The audience members gathered around Gore to get autographs, pose for pictures and ask further questions. At this point I accompanied the news photographers into the area that had previously been cordoned off to the media and positioned myself to question the vice president.

Gore turned around when I called to him. As I was about to ask my question, he interrupted, saying, "You're from the news media. I'm not taking any questions from you." He quickly turned away and continued signing autographs. A few seconds later, I felt another tap on the shoulder, only to see another Secret Service agent asking me to leave the area.

This event was typical of the presidential campaigns of both parties. What does it show? The false, cynical and manipulative methods of the election process reveal the hollowness of its content. Neither party has the ability or desire to make a genuine appeal to the masses. They have nothing to say about the conditions facing working people, let alone serious proposals to address the social crisis. They operate in an insulated world of media pundits, campaign advisers, focus groups, political power brokers and wealthy contributors.

Not that there ever was some golden age of American electoral politics. The two-party system has always defended the interests of the capitalist class, a fact which has been obscured by double-talk, demagoguery and lies. But in an earlier period, when the parties were able to appeal to broader layers of the population for political support, presidential campaigns generated a significant degree of mass participation, and the candidates had to take into consideration the feelings and desires of many social layers.

Today, it is left to the media to generate an image of "democracy at work" because, in reality, the election process effectively excludes the masses and is devoid of any genuine democratic content.



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