

Gore's newfound populism: an ossified establishment confronts the class chasm in America

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In his speech last Thursday to the Democratic National Convention, Vice President Al Gore, the party's presidential candidate, struck a populist tone, presenting himself as a champion of working people and battler against “powerful forces and powerful interests.”

While reassuring the banking elite that he would maintain the Clinton administration's course of fiscal conservatism—denouncing Republican candidate George W. Bush's proposal for a \$1.3 trillion tax cut and promising to use projected budget surpluses to pay down the national debt—Gore focused his appeal on what he called “working families.”

There was an unmistakable shift in emphasis from the speech delivered three nights previously by President Clinton. That address was a defense of Clinton's record. It painted a picture of a contented country enjoying unprecedented prosperity.

Gore, on the other hand, briefly read off the Democrats' official litany of “success”—record budget surpluses, low inflation, 22 million new jobs—and took pains to praise “the private sector, the engine that drives our economic growth,” but spent the rest of his speech identifying himself with the “struggle” of working families, and portraying himself as an agent of “change,” a fighter against an “old guard” of wealth and privilege.

The immediate response of the Bush campaign was to denounce Gore for inciting “class warfare.” But on his first day on the campaign stump following the convention, Gore escalated his populist rhetoric, denouncing “wealthy and powerful special interests,” and telling crowds in Wisconsin that the purpose of his campaign was “to say the people of the United States of America have had enough. We want these changes, and we're going to the ballot box to get these changes.”

While some commentators predicted Gore's populist gamble would flop, arguing that prosperity and social contentment had rendered appeals to social struggle obsolete, the initial poll results, showing Gore pulling ahead of Bush or in a dead heat, indicated that Gore's talk of a struggle against power and privilege had struck a chord.

In his convention address, Gore denounced Bush and the Republicans for “giving in to the big drug companies,” and said, “They're for the powerful. We're for the people.” He targeted specific sections of big business: “Big tobacco, big oil, the big polluters, the pharmaceutical companies, the HMOs, sometimes you have to be willing to stand up and say no, so families can have a better life.” Toward the conclusion of the speech, Gore invoked John Kennedy's “New Frontier” address at the 1960 Democratic convention and appealed to young people to “make a new life of our world.”

Gore denounced such Republican planks as school vouchers, partial privatization of Social Security, opposition to campaign finance reform and gun control, and hostility to abortion rights. He spoke of “crumbling schools,” the plight of senior citizens forced to choose between food and

prescription drugs, and the refusal of HMOs to sanction needed medical procedures.

He advanced a series of modest reforms, to be financed by a portion of the projected budget surpluses: middle-class tax cuts, a prescription drug benefit for retirees, more federal aid to the public schools, a “patients' bill of rights” to limit the power of the HMOs, universal health coverage for children, universal pre-school for children, expanded child care, expanded family leave and medical leave, and a rise in the minimum wage.

Interwoven with these social reform measures were invocations of “family values” and “faith,” reflecting the Democrats' embrace of the political nostrums of the Republican right, and proposals to increase the police powers of the state. Gore pledged to add 50,000 new police and repeated his call for a constitutional amendment on so-called “victims' rights.” He seconded the efforts of the Republicans and his own running mate, Senator Lieberman, to undermine First Amendment rights to speech and artistic expression in the name of opposing sex and violence in the entertainment industry.

While opposing the Republican plan to eliminate the estate tax outright, he called for reform of the measure, i.e., a tax windfall for the wealthiest US households.

For all his talk about the evil influence of “powerful forces,” Gore never mentioned the role of the Christian right, sections of the federal judiciary and the Republican congressional leadership in the impeachment conspiracy that nearly toppled the Clinton White House. Consistent with his selection of Lieberman for vice president, he demonstratively distanced himself from Clinton in order to appease those who promoted the Paula Jones suit and Monica Lewinsky scandal in an attempt to carry through a political coup.

As for Gore's reform proposals, while they would, if implemented, benefit at least a fraction of working class families, they are a far cry from a “war on poverty,” or any comprehensive attempt to address the crisis in education, health care and housing, reverse the protracted decay of the cities, or tackle chronic poverty, homelessness and malnutrition.

The contradiction between Gore's rhetoric and the puny scale of his reform proposals is underscored by the substantial size of the projected budget surplus (leaving aside for the moment the reliability of the official estimates)—\$4.6 trillion over the next 10 years. Gore would allocate more than half of this sum to paying down the national debt, and eliminating it altogether by the year 2012. None of his proposals involve an increase in taxes for the rich, or any other form of wealth redistribution from the top to the lower rungs of the economic ladder. For all his populist phrasemongering, Gore would not challenge the grossly unequal distribution of the benefits of economic growth, the vast bulk of which has gone to the top 10 percent of the population.

Both Gore and the delegates on the convention floor ignored the

incongruity of the vice president, a product of the Washington establishment with close family ties to Occidental Petroleum, speaking as the tribune of the working man, in a hall emblazoned with the logos of corporate sponsors who paid millions to insure that their interests would be protected by a Gore administration.

After the speech convention delegates joined corporate lobbyists, Hollywood moguls and the upper crust of Los Angeles society at a fundraising concert at the Shrine Auditorium that raised \$5.2 million, the largest "hard money" event in Democratic Party history.

But despite its hypocrisy, Gore's populist turn represents a politically significant shift in campaign strategy, the consequences of which could extend far beyond his short-term electoral calculations. Throughout the period of the primary elections, Gore vacillated between issuing occasional populist slogans and appealing to the better-off social layers that have profited from the fiscal conservatism and budget-cutting of the Clinton years. For the most part he attacked his primary opponent, former New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley, from the right, denouncing Bradley's proposal for sweeping health care reform as fiscally irresponsible.

However, trailing in the polls and facing a Republican campaign that carefully packaged its right-wing agenda in the more moderate garb of "compassionate conservatism," Gore and his advisers concluded that their only chance for winning in November was to appeal to broad layers of the working population, and tap into their pent-up frustration and discontent.

This, however, is a dangerous tactic with potentially explosive implications for the bourgeois political establishment, which has spent the past 20 years and more ignoring the growing social distress of working people and openly subordinating its policies to the interests of big business and the most privileged economic strata. The Democratic Party, in particular, has demonstratively abandoned the social reformism with which it had been associated since Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal.

Within the corporate ruling elite and both of its political parties there is a palpable fear that any appeal to the social grievances of the working class risks bringing forward a movement of protest and struggle that they will be unable to control. The negative reaction to Gore's speech was not limited to the Republicans. His populist turn has fueled tensions within the Democratic Party, as indicated by the remarks of a "political strategist close to Clinton," who, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, "despaired over the contrast between Gore's populist tone and the more inclusive note that Clinton struck in his address to the convention."

The unnamed Clinton aide praised Clinton's speech for reaching "across all income lines, all parties, certainly all classes." Gore, on the other hand, "gambled on the old Democratic rhetoric and coalition, as opposed to making a straight-out appeal to the new prosperity voters that Clinton and Gore have been more responsible than anyone else for creating."

The Democratic candidate's appeal to the grievances of working class voters can only sharpen the divisions within the ruling elite, which have not abated with the conclusion of the impeachment episode. This was brought home by the news, leaked to the press on the day of Gore's speech, that Kenneth Starr's replacement as independent counsel had impaneled a new grand jury to investigate Clinton, a step toward indicting the president after he leaves office.

Among the differences being fought out at the highest levels is a dispute over economic policy, centering on the projected budget surpluses. Leading representatives of finance capital, including the Republican chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, Alan Greenspan, have publicly opposed Bush's plan to spend \$1.3 trillion, nearly 60 percent of the estimated 10-year, non-Social Security surplus, in across-the-board cuts in income tax rates. Instead, they favor Gore's pledge to use more than half of the projected surplus to pay down the national debt.

Greenspan and company consider Bush's proposal reckless and short-sighted. They are well aware that the budget projections are largely unreal, since they are based on the far-fetched assumption that the business boom

will continue without any significant contraction. Moreover, they see the reduction of the national debt as a requirement for freeing up capital for private investment and keeping interest rates low, something essential to their hopes of maintaining the flow of capital into the stock exchange and keeping the bull market going.

Other sections of big business see no reason to forgo a massive windfall, which will have the added benefit of further crippling the ability of the federal government to fund social programs, and support Bush's tax cut plan.

Beyond immediate electoral calculations, Gore's populist turn is an expression of more basic considerations. The Democratic Party, by virtue of its reformist past and its long history of containing class conflict, is more sensitive than the Republicans to the danger of social unrest. Gore's decision to make a broad appeal to working people represents an attempt by a section of the political establishment to adapt itself to the growth of social anger over stagnating living standards and economic inequality, in order to channel and contain class tensions.

By raising popular expectations, however, the Democrats are playing a risky game. Once the deeply felt indignation and sense of oppression of the masses are articulated, even in the cynical manner of Gore, a process is set in motion that has its own logic and its own dynamic. Similarly, an appeal to the idealism of the youth can contribute to a process of political radicalization that rebounds against the political establishment as a whole. These dangers for the ruling elite are all the greater in a society that is far more polarized along class lines than at the time of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.

The Clinton administration itself came to power by appealing to popular hostility to the Republicans after 12 years of social reaction under Reagan and Bush. Clinton raised the expectations of working people, above all with his pledge to enact universal health coverage. When the Democrats abandoned health care reform in the face of corporate resistance and Republican opposition, even though they controlled the White House and both houses of Congress, the public repudiation took the form of a collapse of voter turnout in many working class areas and a Republican landslide in the 1994 congressional elections. Clinton's capitulation on health care and his subsequent embrace of Republican social policies played an enormous role in fueling the alienation of broad sections of the population from the two-party system.

Should Gore get elected on the basis of a populist appeal, his inevitable failure to satisfy the expectations raised in the course of the campaign would create the conditions for a wave of social unrest and a rapid political radicalization within wide sections of the working class. Indeed, for all the talk of endless prosperity, the storm clouds of crisis are looming over the 2000 elections, in part in the form of staggering trade deficits and the resulting threat of a dollar crisis. The inevitable bursting of the speculative bubble on Wall Street and turn to recession will suddenly reveal the objective deterioration of the social position of the working class, which has to some extent been obscured by the boom.

Historically, the most dangerous periods for entrenched ruling elites occur when circumstances demand they change and adapt themselves to new social conditions. Neither of the two parties of American capitalism is well positioned to make such an adjustment at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The Democratic Party, in particular, is a very different organization from the party of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, or even Kennedy and Johnson. More than two decades of adaptation to the increasingly right-wing economic and social policies of big business have eroded the mass base it once had in the working class and middle class. It has become the party of sections of finance capital and other parts of the business elite, as well as privileged upper-middle-class layers—Hollywood, the trade union bureaucracy and civil rights establishment, and the most privileged layers of blacks and other minorities.

Such an organization is far less able to contain the class struggle by convincing the masses that it represents their interests than the Democratic Party of old. It is already clear from the initial reactions to Gore's speech that any attempt to carry out serious policies of social reform would intensify the divisions within the party to the point of a split.

It is impossible to predict whether Gore will retain his newfound populism, or jettison the pose in the face of pressure from both inside and outside the Democratic Party. Such a turn of events would be nothing new for a man who has made a career by trimming his political sails in accordance with expediency and pressure from the powers that be. Nor is it possible to predict the outcome of the November election.

However, the very fact that Gore has felt compelled to make an appeal to the social anger of working people indicates that vast changes long in the making are leading to a new period of social struggle and political radicalization, which will create the objective conditions for the development of a mass, independent political party of the working class.



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