

Democratic Party platform caters to Wall Street

Shannon Jones
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The 2000 election platform set for adoption at the Democrats' national convention in Los Angeles this week marks a further shift by the Democratic Party to the right. On fundamental issues the platform does not differ significantly from the right-wing policies of the Republicans.

The Democrats have chosen to make the presidency of John F. Kennedy, who was nominated in Los Angeles in 1960, a theme of their convention. While serving the interests of big business, Kennedy and the Democratic Party of that time talked of eradicating poverty and attempted to appeal to idealistic and egalitarian sentiments.

By contrast the 2000 Democratic platform is pitched directly to the corporate elite and wealthy sections of the middle class who have prospered during the stock market boom of the past decade. Unlike the 1992 and 1996 elections, when Bill Clinton paid lip service to evils such as stagnating wages and lack of access to health care, the 2000 platform hardly acknowledges the existence of social problems. Instead it presents the US as a country in the midst of "prosperity, progress and peace." Social ills like economic inequality and poverty are relegated to the distant past of the Bush-Quayle years.

The Democratic platform is above all aimed at reassuring big business that a Gore administration will continue the economic policies that have fueled the profit boom on Wall Street. It states in categorical terms that the Democrats have no intention of reviving, even in a limited way, past policies of social reform.

Under conditions of huge budget surpluses, the platform does not call for any significant increase in public expenditure to tackle problems such as the lack of health insurance for 40 million American workers, the lack of affordable child care, or the decayed state of public education. The first plank in the platform is entitled "Fiscal Discipline." It declares: "First we must continue the fiscal discipline that has been the hall mark of the past eight years." The platform goes on to state: "Democrats vow to wipe out the publicly held debt in 12 years."

The proposal to eliminate US government debt has ominous implications for the working class. To achieve this goal without raising taxes on the wealthy or slashing the military budget—measures both parties adamantly oppose—would require further deep cuts in spending on the few remaining social programs. In addition to providing a rationale for cutting expenditures on social services, the proposal for paying off the federal debt serves another purpose. The elimination of borrowing by the federal government would tend to drive down interest rates and free up billions of dollars for private investment, thus providing additional fuel for the stock market boom.

The 2000 platform reiterates the reactionary themes of the 1996 platform—calls for "personal responsibility," "law and order" demagoguery, and glorification of the capitalist market—and is laced to an even greater extent with the references to God, morals, values and the family. In a number of areas the platform goes further than the 1996 platform in co-opting positions of the extreme right. This is seen most clearly in relation to public education.

On page nine of the draft platform, under the subhead "A Revolution in American Education," the following appears: "Consistently bad schools should be shut down. No excuses. No exceptions." The platform proposes that teachers and administrators in such schools be summarily fired. The document also calls for mandatory federal testing of public school teachers.

Scapegoating teachers and administrators for the crisis in education is a way of diverting attention from years of tax breaks for the wealthy, declining federal support and a general decline in social conditions in the inner-cities that have undermined the public schools. Those schools facing the most difficult educational challenges are located in working class neighborhoods.

However, the platform does not even hint that inadequate funding or substandard facilities are major factors in the crisis in education. Nor does it suggest that poor student performance may be linked to socioeconomic factors such as poverty.

The proposed measures will only serve to widen the divide between rich and poor school districts. They will give schools an incentive to drive out students who are more difficult to educate and focus efforts on the more successful, ensuring that wider layers of working class youth grow up functionally illiterate.

The platform pledges to continue building up the police and court system, calling for the hiring of 50,000 more cops and 10,000 additional prosecutors. The Democrats reiterate their support for the death penalty and embrace the “victim's rights” demagoguery of the Republicans. The platform declares that Democrats will not go back “to the old approach which was tough on the causes of crime, but not on crime itself.”

In the section of the platform entitled “Peace” the document proposes an expansion of US militarism. Under the subhead “Neutralizing the forces that cause chaos and instability” it advances a policy of “Forward Engagement.” As was seen with the unilateral decision of the Clinton administration to launch cruise missiles against Sudan and Afghanistan under the guise of fighting the “terrorist” Osama Bin Ladin, this policy signifies the unrestricted right of US imperialism to attack small nations at will.

The platform pledges no let-up in the US persecution of Iraq, which has already brought death and suffering to hundreds of thousands of Iraqi men, women and children. It declares, “Al Gore will not hesitate to use US military might against Iraq, when and where necessary.”

The platform reiterates the call for the construction of an anti-missile defense system. This proposal, first advanced by the Republicans and later adopted by Clinton, has already created tensions with Russia and China and sparked concerns in Europe about the eruption of a new arms race. Despite attempts at denial by the Clinton administration, the deployment of such a system would mean the scrapping of the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty. The project, however, is backed by the Pentagon and defense contractors such as Boeing and Lockheed Martin, which stand to gain billions from the development and deployment of such a system.

Insofar as the platform does acknowledge social problems such as access to higher education and health care, the proposals it advances are extremely limited. Calls for aid are advanced largely in the form of tax credits, not cash payments or subsidies, making them available mainly to better-off sections of the middle class.

To the extent that the platform takes note of the demands of the working class, it is almost as an afterthought. More precisely, the platform addresses not so much the needs of the working class, as the interests of the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy and the upper-middle-class elements that control the official civil rights movement.

The section dealing with the labor movement, historically

one of the main constituencies of the Democratic Party, takes up less than one page of the fifty-page draft platform. The proposals are primarily aimed at shoring up the labor bureaucracy, which has seen a drastic decline in its dues base. Under the subhead “Valuing Work” the platform calls for a law banning the permanent replacement of strikers and contains vague talk of promoting a more level playing field between labor and management. While calling for a rise in the minimum wage, the platform demurs from stipulating a dollar amount.

The only substantive civil rights issue raised is the policy of racial profiling by the police. The widespread targeting of immigrant and minority workers and youth is attributed to a handful of “rogue cops.” The platform maintains a cowardly silence on the connections between the Republican leadership and extreme right-wing and racist forces, illustrated by the speech given by George Bush at Bob Jones University in South Carolina. Likewise, the Democrats have nothing to say about recent police atrocities against minority and immigrant workers such as the torture of Abner Louima or the shooting of Amadou Diallo in New York City.

The Democrats' support for the right to abortion is couched in defensive, almost apologetic language. Given the virtually identical positions of the Republicans and Democrats on the vast majority of substantive questions, the differences between the two parties on this issue have been presented as a focal point of the election. In a crude attempt to capitalize on the majority public sentiment in favor of the right to abortion, the platform points out, “This year's Supreme Court rulings show to us all that eliminating a woman's right to choose is only one justice away.”

Workers would be naive to believe that the Democrats will in the long-run defend abortion or any other democratic right. As demonstrated by its paralysis during the impeachment drive against Clinton, the Democratic Party is incapable of mounting a serious defense of civil liberties against the assault of the extreme right, even when the target is its own chief executive.

The 2000 Democratic platform is yet a further indication of the deep chasm between the US political establishment and the needs and sentiments of the broad masses of working people. Not a single critical issue faced by working people is seriously addressed by either of the capitalist parties.



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