# The working class and the 2000 US elections

## Part 1: The shifting grounds of American politics

**Socialist Equality Party United States**
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As it enters its final phase, the US presidential campaign has once again exposed the chasm that exists between the two parties of the political establishment and the broad mass of the American electorate. Notwithstanding the expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars to promote Republican Governor George W. Bush and Democratic Vice President Al Gore, neither candidate can seriously claim that he enjoys broad popular support. The voters trust neither the candidates nor their parties.

Even more than is usually the case in American politics, the electoral process is an exercise in evasion, deception and outright deceit. For all their appeals for popular support, both candidates do their best to conceal the real political and economic interests that their parties serve. Neither Gore nor Bush can openly state the basic political reality that underlies the campaign: what will determine the policies of the government in the aftermath of the November 7 vote is not the election promises made to the voters, but the needs of the corporations that have financed the Democratic and Republican candidates.

Even as the election approaches, the signs of economic crisis are mounting, with spiraling oil prices, spreading job cuts and indices of world economic slowdown heralding an end to a boom that has been fueled by massive and unsustainable spending by venture capitalists. The more farsighted economic analysts are warning that international economic tensions may be the catalyst for a severe recession—even depression—within the United States. Despite the appearance of prosperity, warned *BusinessWeek* in its October 2 issue, “vulnerabilities lurk in every corner of world economy.... The question now is whether the world economy is exposed to stresses that have the potential to erupt into real problems.”

Whether or not the much-vaunted prosperity turns to slump in the months immediately following the November election, it is already universally acknowledged that the benefits of the past decade's business expansion have overwhelmingly gone to the wealthiest 5 or 10 percent of the population. Social contradictions and problems that have accumulated in the course of 20 years of political reaction are asserting themselves and altering the landscape of American politics.

The election will be followed by a period of deepening social tension and class conflict. Whether the next administration is led by a President Gore or a President Bush, it will attempt to place the burden of the crisis on the backs of the working class.

Nor would the election of the candidates of the two minor parties represent a genuine alternative to the Democrats and Republicans. Reform Party candidate Patrick Buchanan is a right-wing nationalist who seeks to develop the political basis for a fascistic movement akin to the racist and anti-immigrant parties of the extreme right in Europe. Ralph Nader of the Green Party promotes the illusion that the liberal reform policies repudiated by the Democrats can be revived by placing pressure on the American corporate establishment. At the same time he appeals to the same nationalist sentiments that are the bread and butter of the Buchanan campaign.

All of these candidates seek to conceal the fundamental truth that the source of the social chasm between the privileged elite and the broad masses of working people is the profit system itself.

Inevitably, as Election Day approaches, workers will come under increasing pressure to vote for “the lesser evil”—according to the trade union bureaucracy, the Democrat Gore. The Socialist Equality Party rejects this false perspective. The main task facing working people is to begin to draw the lessons of decades of political subordination to the Democratic Party.

The past eight years of Democratic rule under Bill Clinton have underscored the futility of all attempts to find a progressive answer to social inequality, militarism and the erosion of democratic rights within the framework of the capitalist two-party system.

The Socialist Equality Party, through its international organ of political analysis, the *World Socialist Web Site*, is dedicated to constructing a genuine alternative for working people. The decisive issue posed by the 2000 election is the independent political organization of the working class on the basis of an egalitarian, democratic and socialist program.

**An undercurrent of social crisis**

The most striking characteristic of the 2000 US election campaign is the apparent discovery by the Democratic and Republican parties, much to their own surprise, that the vast majority of the American population consists of working people who have gained little if any benefit from the stock market boom of the past decade.

After 20 years in which both parties pursued a policy of tax breaks for the wealthy, budget cuts in programs for workers and the poor, and a general redistribution of wealth from the working people to the rich, all in the name of the hegemony of the capitalist market, Democrat Al Gore and Republican George W. Bush are furiously competing to present themselves to the voters as champions of the people “who work hard and pay the bills.”

Hour after hour, especially in the key states in the industrial Midwest, the media is saturated with advertisements proclaiming the Democratic and Republican parties, financed and effectively controlled by the moneyed elite in American society, as tribunes of the people.

Vice President Gore moved into a lead in the polls after the Democratic convention, where he adopted the posture of a populist opponent of powerful corporate interests. The Democratic candidate lashed Republican tax cut plans as a bonanza for the rich, while proclaiming himself a fighter for “working families.”

Gore devoted an entire week in September to a day-by-day excoriation of the most unpopular industries: HMOs, the drug companies, the tobacco industry—culminating in his call for the release of oil from federal stockpiles to counter price-gouging by the big oil companies.

Texas Governor Bush based his campaign for the Republican nomination on the slogan of “compassionate conservatism”—suggesting

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that, unlike the Republican Congressional leadership, he was not indifferent to those in need. He has sought to compete with the Democrats with proposals on education, prescription benefits for the elderly and Social Security.

As he fell back in the polls, Bush sought to repackage his tax plan, a brazen handout to the wealthy, as the centerpiece of a "Blueprint for the Middle Class." Republican campaign rallies and advertisements regularly feature families in the $40,000 income bracket telling how they will benefit from the Bush plan.

Similar appeals are being made at the congressional level, as Democrats and Republicans line up to denounce corporate greed at the Firestone hearings—although these same politicians supported the deregulation measures of the 1980s and 1990s which made the tire disaster possible.

In races for the House of Representatives and the Senate, candidates of both parties have downplayed their usual law-and-order demagogy, patriotic flag-waving and bashing of welfare recipients, and reinvented themselves as advocates of affordable health care and more spending for education, the environment and the social infrastructure.

There is an obvious element of farce in the spectacle of two millionaire scions of the ruling class, one the son of a senator, the other the son of a president, seeking to present themselves as champions of the working class. But this sudden shift in the focus of American politics should not be dismissed merely as a cynical election gimmick.

The effort by both parties to make an appeal to working people on economic and social issues reveals a deep-going nervousness within the political establishment. It is a response to shifts in popular moods which are developing beneath the surface of official political life, and which the two parties of big business have begun to sense, and fear.

The shift to the right over the previous two decades was so pronounced that liberalism, the dominant political philosophy of the bourgeois establishment since the days of Franklin Roosevelt, became a term of abuse in official politics, while any criticism of the gulf between rich and poor was treated as near-treason.

The populist trappings of the 2000 campaign have considerable objective significance. In a political system which has long been the most insulated in the world from class issues, where vast sums are expended on media campaigns to disorient and manipulate public opinion, it has become impossible to conceal the chasm between the official portrait of general prosperity and the realities of life for the vast majority.

As a result, the election campaign has been imparted with a degree of tension, even crisis. The old right-wing nostrums which befuddled public opinion in the 1980s and 1990s no longer have the same impact. Republican candidates and right-wing talk show hosts alike bemoan the fact that, as one put it, "No one is interested in tax cuts anymore."

The real economic and class tensions are coming to the surface of American political life. The United States is by far the most socially polarized of the major industrialized countries, with the widest gap between rich and poor—or more precisely, between the rich and everyone else.

Despite the longest economic boom in American history, the living standards of the overwhelming majority of the population have either stagnated or fallen. Since the 1970s, real wages for both hourly and salaried workers have declined steadily, while US economic output has more than tripled. Working people are producing more and more wealth, but getting less and less in return. For the majority of families, this means working longer hours and simultaneously sinking further into debt just to pay the bills. For the most vulnerable in society the consequences are even worse: poverty, homelessness, hunger, functional illiteracy.

It is not simply a question of a relative, or even absolute, decline in the income level of millions of American families, but a palpable decay in the social infrastructure and day-to-day functioning of society: the crisis in public education, the increasing unavailability and skyrocketing cost of medical care, the erosion of transportation systems—crumbling roads, tires that explode, an air traffic system at the point of gridlock.

Nearly every day new reports are issued by social service agencies and private charities that document the social crisis:

* A study released September 10 found that in the richest country in the world 30 percent of children in single-parent families are at risk of hunger.

* A report in the September 17 *New York Times*, based on Internal Revenue Service data, noted that average income for the bottom 90 percent of the population rose only 1.6 percent in a decade, compared to an 89 percent increase for the top 1 percent.

* A study issued September 20 by a housing advocacy group found that a worker earning the federal minimum wage could not afford to rent a "modest" two-bedroom apartment in any county in the United States.

* The release September 22 of the annual *Forbes* 400 list, a roll call of America's wealthiest individuals, most of them billionaires, underscores the stark contrast between the accumulation of wealth at the top and the deterioration of conditions for the vast majority of the population.

One recent press account of the social divisions in America cited tax return data to demonstrate that "the rising tide of bits and bytes is lifting the yachts much more than the rowboats." But such reports omit one basic question. What kind of economic "boom" benefits only a relative few and leaves so many behind? In what sense can one even speak of economic progress when the workers, those who produce the wealth, face an increasingly difficult struggle to survive?

Neither Gore nor Bush wants such questions discussed. Both are fervent, life-long defenders of the profit system. If the issue of social inequality has been thrust into center stage in the 2000 campaign, it is not because of the desires of the Democratic and Republican politicians, but because of the accumulation of objective contradictions within American society. Regardless of which candidate wins the election, the stage has been set for the emergence of explosive political and social conflicts under the next administration.

**A quarter century of attacks on workers**

There is a fundamental contradiction in the bipartisan posture of sympathy for working people. The 2000 campaign comes after a quarter century of unrelenting assault by both parties on the working class. The Democrats and Republicans make reference to increasingly difficult social conditions, without mentioning that these conditions are the byproduct of policies pursued by successive Democratic and Republican administrations going back to the 1970s. They seem to be counting on a form of political amnesia on the part of the American people.

Bush bemoans the state of education, although the Republican Party has deepened the crisis of the public schools with budget cuts in federal and state spending and its alliance with extreme right-wing and fundamentalist groups which aim to dismantle public education altogether. Gore professes concern for the millions without health insurance, while leaving out the record of the Clinton-Gore administration, which has overseen an increase in the number of uninsured from 38 million to 44 million.

The demagogic finger-pointing of the two major parties cannot disguise their shared responsibility for the conditions facing working people. Since Democrat Jimmy Carter was elected president in 1976, the Democrats and Republicans have each controlled the White House for 12 years. For 18 of the last 20 years, one party has held the presidency while the other controlled one or both houses of Congress. For all their internecine conflicts, the Democrats and Republicans have carried out a common agenda: enriching a wealthy elite, which comprises a small percentage of the population, at the expense of everyone else.

This process began during Carter's presidency, as big business sought to reshape class relations after the social explosions and political turmoil of the 1960s and early 1970s. Faced with intensifying international competition, corporate America demanded a free hand to restructure the workplace and impose speedup and other productivity measures. The key

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weapon against the working class was the deliberate creation of mass unemployment, to weaken workers' resistance to greater exploitation.

Carter appointed Wall Street banker Paul Volcker to head the Federal Reserve Board, with a mandate to impose a tight-money regime culminating in interest rates topping 20 percent. Volcker's measures produced their intended effect, a deep recession and sharp rise in joblessness.

Carter presided over the Chrysler bailout, in which for the first time a major union, the United Auto Workers, negotiated wage cuts and speedup under threat of plant closures and massive job cuts. His administration also ushered in the deregulation of the airline industry—spearheaded by liberal Democrat Edward Kennedy—the first in a series of measures aimed at imposing labor "flexibility" and slashing corporate outlays for occupational health and safety, environmental safeguards and consumer protection.

In 1980 came the election of Ronald Reagan and the launching of a frontal assault on the working class both at home and abroad. Reagan pushed through the biggest tax cut for the rich in history, while initiating a huge military buildup which had two goals: to bankrupt the Soviet Union, Washington's rival in the Cold War; and to deplete the resources of the American government so that it would no longer be able to sustain any significant level of spending on social services.

The Reagan administration staged a major confrontation with the unions, deliberately provoking a strike by the PATCO air traffic controllers union, firing all the strikers, jailing strike leaders and bankrupting the union. The goal was to achieve a major, visible defeat of labor by means of which the federal government would legitimize an unrestrained assault on strikers in all sectors of the economy through firings, jailings and the bankrupting of their organizations with fines. PATCO gave the signal for a wave of union-busting and wage-cutting, unprecedented for half a century, by powerful corporations like Phelps Dodge, Greyhound, Continental Airlines, Hormel and dozens of others.

These attacks were sanctioned by the AFL-CIO itself, which collaborated with employers to isolate workers involved in strikes or lockouts, sabotaging their struggles in order to demoralize the workers and weaken the influence of the rank and file inside the unions. While union membership, the frequency of strikes, and the level of real wages all declined, the income and entrenched power of the union bureaucracy increased.

The political shifts of the early 1980s not only ended the decades-long social consensus against union-busting, but the presumption that government policies would mitigate the worst features of capitalism by regulating corporate behavior and providing at least minimal social benefits. The Reagan administration, with the support of the Democratic-controlled Congress, enacted a record cut in corporate and income taxes which largely benefited the wealthy, deregulated large sections of American industry and began slashing spending on social welfare programs for the poor. The result was an explosive growth in the wealth and income of the top layer of American society, and a steady deterioration in the conditions of life for millions of working people.

The enrichment of the wealthy at the expense of everyone else in American society was not an accident, or the unintended result of global forces operating beyond the control of government officials and corporate executives. The conscious goal of those at the highest level of the state was the removal of all obstacles to corporate profit and personal enrichment. Subjective policy combined with objective processes, above all the revolution in computerization and telecommunications, to produce growing social polarization.

**From Reagan to Clinton**

Clinton's election in 1992 was in part due to popular reaction against more than a decade of budget-cutting, wage-cutting and other attacks on the working class. But the Democratic Party that came to power in 1992 had a much different relation with corporate America than the Democratic administrations of the New Deal and Great Society era.

Clinton himself relied heavily on Wall Street money to win the Democratic presidential nomination. He was a co-founder of the Democratic Leadership Council, a group of office holders formed to impose a more right-wing program on the Democratic Party, ending promises of significant social reform and renouncing any goal of a more equal distribution of wealth, while aping Republican demagogy on issues such as welfare, crime and a strong military.

The eight years of the Clinton administration—six of them a political condominium with the congressional Republicans—have been devoted to an orgy of wealth accumulation that dwarfs the "decade of greed" of the 1980s. After Clinton abandoned his sole significant reformist initiative, universal health care, his administration was paralyzed by the election in 1994 of a Republican Congress and the array of trumped-up investigations that followed.

In one field of government policy, Clinton has been even more aggressive than his Republican predecessors. The Clinton administration has marked a major escalation in the use of military force to support the economic and strategic interests of American capitalism around the world. Under Clinton, American troops have been dispatched to dozens of global hot spots and US missiles have rained down on so-called rogue nations from Iraq to Sudan, Afghanistan and Yugoslavia. Clinton has bequeathed to his successor a policy of intensified militarism, underscored by major increases in Pentagon spending in his final two budgets.

While ruthlessly pursuing the interests of American big business abroad, Clinton bowed to the dictates of the ruling elite on questions of social policy at home, declaring in his 1995 State of the Union speech that "the era of big government is over." He signed into law the 1996 legislation eliminating the federal welfare program for single mothers, the cruelest single social measure of the last two decades. His Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin worked closely with Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan to fuel the bull market of 1995-99, during which stock prices tripled and enormous fortunes were created almost overnight.

Far from representing a negation of the policies of Reagan and Bush, the Clinton-Gore administration has presided over an ever more extreme concentration of wealth in the hands of a financial elite. According to the Congressional Budget Office—controlled by the Republican leadership and hardly a bastion of egalitarianism—nine-tenths of the growth in national wealth over the last 25 years has gone to benefit the richest one percent of the American population.

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