

Once again, on the New York Times and the Nader campaign

Kate Randall
11 October 2000

The *New York Times* has chosen not to make any editorial comment on the exclusion of US Green Party candidate Ralph Nader from the venue of the presidential debate held October 3 in Boston. The *Times* ran only a three-paragraph news brief on the incident.

Nader, who along with other third-party candidates was excluded from participating in the televised debate between Democrat Al Gore and Republican George W. Bush, was turned away at the door of the debate venue by an official of the Commission on Presidential Debates, a corporate-financed body staffed by Democratic and Republican officials. The debate commission representative was accompanied by three state troopers.

Nader was forced to leave the premises even though he had an admission ticket, which had been given to him by a local college student. The debate official told the Green Party candidate, who is on the ballot in almost all 50 states: "It's already been decided that whether or not you have a ticket you are not welcome in the debate." Nader was not even trying to enter the main debate hall, but rather an adjoining room where the proceedings were being broadcast on video.

The *Times*' silence on the debate commission's decision to bar Nader from the event is by no means unique. With only a few exceptions, including the *Denver Post* and *Providence Journal*, none of the major daily newspapers published editorials protesting the action taken against the Green Party candidate.

The *Times*' silence is particularly noteworthy, however, given that newspaper's record in relationship to the 2000 election campaign, the TV debates and the status of third-party candidates. On August 22 the *Times* published an editorial calling for the exclusion of Nader and Reform Party candidate Patrick Buchanan from the debates. Its justification was that neither "has yet reached the status of a candidate with demonstrated national support."

An earlier *Times* editorial, published June 30 under the

headline "Mr. Nader's Misguided Crusade," condemned Nader's campaign altogether, describing it as "a self-indulgent exercise that will distract voters from the clear-cut choice represented by the major party candidates." The newspaper complained that Nader's presence on the ballot was a nuisance that spoiled what would otherwise be an "uncluttered playing field" in the presidential race.

The *Times* cannot be faulted for inconsistency. Its position is clear: Nader should be excluded from participating in the debates and the debate commission's police action blocking him from even participating as a spectator is no cause for concern or protest. As the *World Socialist Web Site* stated in an earlier commentary, *New York Times* calls for exclusion of Green candidate Ralph Nader from presidential debates, the logical implication of the *Times*' position is that candidates outside the Democratic and Republican parties should be banned from the elections altogether.

By making no comment on Nader's exclusion from the October 3 debate, the *Times* has gone a step further, giving tacit support to an assault on Nader's rights not only as a candidate, but as a voter. The *Times*' attitude towards Nader and other third-party candidates reveals its contempt for basic democratic principles. The newspaper has no regard for the right of organizations or individuals outside the two corporate-backed official parties to intervene in the elections, or for voters to hear their views.

Aside from a general indifference to democratic rights, the *Times*' hostility to Nader reflects more immediate political considerations. While the newspaper chose not to comment on Nader's exclusion from the debate hall, it did publish a commentary by David E. Rosenbaum on October 5 entitled "Defining Themselves, Gore and Bush Drew Traditional Portraits."

In this "news analysis," readers were told the October 3 debate presented "a clear choice between a traditional Democrat and a traditional Republican," and that Gore

and Bush “are standing fast on the principles and policies that have divided their parties for generations....” The author went on to take the following gratuitous swipe at Nader: “So much for Ralph Nader's view that they [Gore and Bush] are Tweedledum and Tweedledee.”

This article was a continuation of a line of argument the *Times* has pursued for months in relation to the elections. The newspaper has been at pains to insist that the contest between Gore and Bush represents a dramatic conflict between starkly opposed policies, so much so that alternative candidates are superfluous. The *Times* was making this claim, not only in editorials, but in news articles as well, long before Gore's speech at the Democratic National Convention, when the Democratic candidate adopted a populist stance and declared himself the champion of “working families.”

In presenting this distorted picture of the presidential campaign, the *Times* is promoting a definite political line: namely, that democracy is alive and well in the US, notwithstanding the fact two corporate-controlled parties exercise a monopoly of power.

The *Times*' spin on the October 3 debate was belied by the response of tens of millions of voters. While the media built up the initial debate as the most dramatic squaring off of candidates since John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, with many pundits predicting a national television audience as high as 90 million, the reaction among American voters was lack-luster at best. One of the smallest audiences in recent history—estimated at 46 million viewers—tuned in to the event. Post-debate opinion polls indicated that the contest had a minimal impact on the candidates' standings.

In stark contrast to the *Times*, the mood among broad sections of voters is one of alienation from the two-party system and distrust of both candidates. On important issues affecting the majority of Americans—such as education, health care, economic security—broad sections of the population sense little difference between Bush and Gore. What predominates is disaffection from an electoral process in which the expenditure of vast sums by corporate donors stands in inverse relation to the actual involvement of the masses. There is no indication that this election will, in a significant way, reverse the steady decline over the past two decades in voter turnout.

The *Times*' heavy-handed attempt to inflate the differences between the two candidates, and its hostility to the Nader campaign, must both be understood as a politically motivated response to the obvious decline in mass support for the two-party system. The newspaper's

editors seem intent on applying the dictum that a lie, if big enough and repeated often enough, will be accepted by the public.

It is not difficult to puncture the basic pretense of the *Times*' reportage and editorial commentary. One need only ask the question: If the differences between the two parties are so clear and so profound, and the American people can be secure in the certainty that their interests are bound to be represented by one or the other candidate, why the fuss and bother over the inclusion of Nader or other third-party candidates in the debates? If the two-party system is as healthy as the *Times* suggests, why do its defenders react with semi-hysteria to a challenge from outsiders?

The *Times* knows full well that the two-party system is in deep crisis, and its efforts to paint a rosy picture are prompted by the fear that a political structure that has served the ruling elite in America so well for so long could very well break up. That is why the newspaper wants to exclude any alternative viewpoint that might expose, even in a limited way, the degree to which both parties serve the interests of the most privileged social layers, and how far to the right they both have moved.

In fact, Nader and the Green Party do not in any fundamental sense pose a challenge to the status quo. Combining certain reformist demands with economic nationalism, Nader's campaign exists largely for the purpose of pushing the Democratic Party to the left. But in the present crisis-ridden state of American politics, the *Times* would prefer to bar him and other critics of the two-party system from access to a mass audience. After all, if third party liberals are given a chance to speak to the people today, what's to prevent socialists from presenting a genuine alternative to the working class tomorrow?



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact