Nader speaks in Detroit: Green Party presidential candidate keeps silent on Bush

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One of the most remarkable phenomena of recent months has been the political amnesty granted President George W. Bush by former Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader. Since Bush's inauguration, Nader, who campaigned as an opponent of corporate domination of the two major US parties, has remained mute about one of the most right-wing and openly pro-business governments in US history.

Judging from recent articles in the press and public appearances around the country, Nader is going out of his way to provide political cover for Bush and the Republicans. Last month, he co-authored an op-ed column in the *Wall Street Journal* that gave a positive appraisal of the new administration. The March 7 article, entitled, "Ending Corporate Welfare as We Know It," praised Bush for proposing a reduction in funding for three federal programs that provide government subsidies to corporations. (See "Ralph Nader's political olive branch to Bush," http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/mar2001/nad-m30.shtml)

On April 2, following speaking engagements in Los Angeles and other cities, Nader spoke at Detroit's Wayne State University. The most notable fact about his appearance, billed as a discussion on "Breaking the Two-Party Duopoly," was the absence, in the course of a one-hour speech, of any mention of Bush or the right-wing policies of the new administration.

Instead, Nader made a series of general statements about the dominant influence of corporations over the American political system. He said nothing about the manner in which the 2000 election was resolved and the Bush administration installed, i.e., through a Republican-led campaign to suppress the counting of votes in Florida, culminating in a partisan and deeply anti-democratic ruling by the US Supreme Court.

Nader mentioned Bush only in reply to questions from the audience. At one point he acknowledged that Bush was overturning standards to protect workers from on-the-job injuries and restrict arsenic levels in drinking water. But he chose his words in such a way as to deflect the blame from Bush and shift the onus onto former President Clinton: "All those things that Bush is eliminating—ergonomics and environmental protections—Clinton set a trap for him and he fell right into it."

In another reply Nader downplayed Bush's threat to the environment. The Republican president, Nader said, might damage the national forests with logging, but he would not be able to open up the Alaska wildlife areas to oil drilling, or lower arsenic standards. This was so because there was a "consensus in this country for clean air, clean water" that included conservatives, he said.

Nader's complacent remarks betray his rather chronic lack of political judgment and foresight. Why should anyone think an administration that assumed power by running roughshod over the will of the majority of voters would bow before public opinion and abandon its right-wing agenda?

But Nader's remarks raise another, even more fundamental, issue. They show the lack of seriousness that he and the Greens have about building a genuine alternative to the two capitalist parties. The real perspective of the Green Party is to become an effective pressure group on the existing parties. If popular consensus in the end determines the policies of the government—it remains a mystery how exactly this happens in a political system monopolized by two parties which, by Nader's own admission, are controlled by big business—then the appropriate strategy is to shape the popular consensus, including that of "the conservatives," by applying mass pressure, making speeches, etc.

The Green Party is seen by Nader and company as a lever for influencing the policies of the ruling elite and its existing parties or, as he says, to "push" and "challenge" them. It is not seen as an independent instrument of the masses of people for taking control of the government and of society as a whole. Nader underscored the banal reformist notions that underlie his politics when he asked the audience in Detroit, "What will it take for people to be the dominant power over government?" He then answered, "If people paid what they spent on soft drinks and set up congressional watch committees to monitor legislators and follow their voting records, just one office and one full-time staff for each congressman. Is that one of history's great exertions?"

Addressing another question from the audience Nader said, "Clinton and Gore did nothing to protect the environment," and proceeded to ask the audience, "How much are you losing?" with Bush in the White House. Here Nader was repeating his line during the election that since both parties are controlled by corporate interests, there are no significant differences between them. This radical-sounding position is, in fact, a form of adaptation to the most right-wing sections of the political establishment, represented by the Republicans. It ignores the fact that the Clinton years witnessed a level of political warfare in Washington unprecedented since the period leading up to the Civil War, culminating in 1998 in the first-ever impeachment of an elected president. The Republican impeachment coup, which

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ultimately failed in the Senate acquittal of Clinton, was continued in a different form in the successful Republican drive to hijack the 2000 election.

For socialists, opposition to the Republicans and the reactionary forces behind them in no way implies political support for the Democratic Party. As the events of the recent years have demonstrated, working people cannot rely on the Democrats and the liberals to defend their democratic rights—including the right to vote—from the attacks of the most right-wing sections of the ruling class. Democratic rights can be defended only through the building of a socialist political movement of the working class.

Our opposition to the Democrats and Republicans is based—not on a failure to recognize their obvious differences—but on fundamental questions of political principle and class interests. Socialists uphold the interests of the working class and explain that these interests are irreconcilably in conflict with the existing capitalist order, which both big business parties defend. We fight for the construction of an independent political party of the working class based on a socialist program that strives for the abolition of all forms of class exploitation.

Nader's indifference to the attack on democratic rights is bound up with his unwillingness or inability to make any distinction between the policies of the two bourgeois parties. In fact, Nader supported the impeachment campaign, saying that if he had been a Senator at the time he would have voted to impeach the president.

Throughout the election crisis, the Green presidential candidate was silent on the trampling of voting rights in Florida and the Supreme Court's intervention to halt the counting of votes. In response to a question from this reporter, Nader reiterated his position that the election dispute was nothing more than a partisan squabble, which had no intrinsic significance for the democratic rights of the American people. “Both parties steal elections,” he said. “Who stole the election from Nixon in 1960? The Democrats do it when they can get away with it and the Republicans do the same. I say pox on both their houses.”

Nader's conciliatory attitude to the Republican right betrays his own rightward political trajectory. Significantly, in the course of his comments on the election dispute, he referred to the Florida Supreme Court, whose order to continue the vote recount was reversed by the US Supreme Court, as “Democratic-friendly,” echoing the line of the Bush camp and the media and implying that no issue of voting rights or popular sovereignty was involved in these court rulings, but only the small change of partisan politics.

Precisely because socialists fight for the independent interests of the working class, we are the most uncompromising opponents of all attacks on democratic rights, and expose all attempts by any section of the ruling elite, or either of its parties, to erode those rights.

Nader and the Greens, on the other hand, oppose the struggle for the political independence of the working class, and obscure the basic class divisions within society. They oppose a revolutionary struggle against the capitalist system, and instead promote the notion that the system can be reformed through various forms of pressure on the ruling elite. For this reason Nader and the Greens have no real independence from the ruling class and its political parties. Their denunciations of the two parties are hollow and hypocritical. In the end, they adapt themselves to one or another faction of the ruling elite, and to one or another of its political parties.

Because Nader's opposition to the two parties is not based on political principle, he is obliged to deny the existence of even relative differences between the parties. For if he admits that differences exist, that the Republicans are generally even further to the right than the Democrats, then the rationale for his independent campaign is undermined. Since he is not an opponent of capitalism, and not in favor of an independent socialist party of the working class, he lacks any solid basis for opposing the politics of “lesser evilism” and refusing to support the Democrats. A slight, even cosmetic shift of the Democrats to the left—a bow to their former policies of social reform—would lead to a mass desertion from the Greens back into the Democratic fold. In fact, the Greens hope for nothing other than a return by the Democratic Party to the (very limited) liberal reform policies of the New Deal and the Great Society.

Thus while Nader downplays any criticism of Bush in hopes of currying influence with the Republican administration, he is also engaged in political maneuvers with the Democrats. According to a recent article in the *Nation* magazine, Democratic House minority leader Richard Gephardt met with Nader in February to discuss the Green Party's electoral plans. Nader said he reminded Gephardt that “The Greens actually have a more legitimate platform for the old Democratic Party than the Democratic Party does.” Nader told the magazine that he hoped the Greens would be an “electoral leverage from the left” on the Democrats, and if Green electoral candidates cost Democrats a few seats it would be worth it, because “Sometimes you've got to prune a tree to make it grow healthy.”

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