

Report from the World Socialist Web Site /Socialist Equality Party conference: "Socialism and the Struggle Against Imperialism and War"

The historic background and content of the struggle for the political independence of the working class

23 April 2003

Below we are publishing the remarks of Barry Grey to the conference held by the WSWS and the SEP in Ann Arbor, Michigan March 29-30, 2003 entitled "Socialism and the Struggle Against Imperialism and War: the Strategy and Program of a New International Working Class Movement."

Grey, a member of the WSWS International Editorial Board, introduced the third of six resolutions discussed and adopted by the conference: "For the Political Independence of the Working Class."

On April 1 the WSWS published a summary account of the conference ["World Socialist Web Site holds international conference on socialism and the struggle against war"] as well as the opening report given by David North, chairman of the WSWS International Editorial Board and national secretary of the SEP in the US ["Into the maelstrom: the crisis of American imperialism and the war against Iraq"].

The texts of the six resolutions unanimously adopted by the conference were published April 2 through April 4 ["Resolutions condemn war in Iraq, call for international unity of working class", "Resolutions call for political independence of working class, oppose attacks on democratic rights", "Resolutions on war and the US social crisis, development of the World Socialist Web Site"]

On April 22 the WSWS published the remarks of Patrick Martin and Ulrich Rippert, who introduced the first and second conference resolutions, respectively [See "Contradictions and lies in the US case for war against Iraq", "Internationalism stands at the center of the history of the working class"]

In the coming days we will publish the remarks made by the presenters of the remaining resolutions, as well as greetings brought by international delegates to the conference.

What animates this resolution and, indeed, this conference and all of the work of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International, is a perspective not of protest, but of the preparation of the international working class, and the working class in the United States, to take political power.

This is a very complex, difficult struggle requiring the highest development of intellectual, theoretical and political work—a patient and determined struggle and dialogue with working people, young people and students all over the world.

I would like to focus on two basic aspects of the resolution on the political independence of the working class. The resolution states:

"The political subordination of American labor to the Democratic Party is a central historical problem in the development the working class. It is a problem that cannot be evaded."

The bulk of this resolution deals with the miserable and reactionary record of the Democratic Party and its full complicity with the Bush administration in the current attack on Iraq. That is entirely fitting. There is, as we know, growing disillusionment and revulsion with the Democratic Party and a sense among broad layers that this party does not represent the interests of the working class.

Having said that, it is necessary in conducting a struggle for the political independence of the working class in the United States, to have a familiarity with the history of this particular problem—the problem of the Democratic Party. This is, again, a very complex historical question that demands a great deal of research and theoretical work. One of the projects before the *World Socialist Web Site* is to develop our analysis of this question. But, within the limited time we have at this conference, certain things should be pointed out.

The Democratic Party has long performed a particular function for American capitalism. This is a bourgeois party that defends the interests of the capitalist ruling class, while at the same time presenting itself as in some way the champion of the average man, the working man. This specific role of the Democratic Party has a long history in the United States. Its distinctive function for a long time has been to channel social discontent into political avenues that are essentially harmless for the ruling class, and thereby lead social opposition into defeat.

This goes back to the nineteenth century. The Democratic Party, certainly by the period of Andrew Jackson in the 1820s, had become the party, above all, of the slave-owning plantation class in the South. It had alliances with sections of commercial interests in the North, but the slaveocracy was its essential base.

Peculiarly, the very fact that this party stood in opposition to the emergence of industrial capitalism, which was in its infancy in the North, and based itself on chattel slavery enabled it to make a certain appeal to the grievances of working people in the North, presenting itself as some kind of alternative to wage slavery. This extremely reactionary political formation was able, in one of the great ironies of history, to make an appeal to the oppressed working population in the North.

This took a particularly odious form in the Civil War, and I would recommend that everyone re-read the excellent review by David Walsh of

the film *Gangs of New York*, which we posted in January [Misanthropy and contemporary American filmmaking]. The film dealt in part with the 1863 anti-draft riots in New York City.

Dominant sections of the Democratic Party in the North, including New York, were known at the time as “Copperheads.” They were sympathizers of the Southern slaveocracy. The Democratic Party in New York exploited justified feelings of oppression among the working class, particularly the Irish immigrants, and channeled them in a reactionary way against the draft and against the Union cause as a whole. They set out to mobilize the most oppressed sections of workers in New York in opposition to the struggle being waged by Lincoln against the Southern rebellion and the slave system.

They did so, it should be noted, in collusion with trade union officials of that period. Even the reactionary alliance of the labor bureaucracy with the Democrats has its roots in the nineteenth century.

Again and again, social movements of a progressive character, movements in opposition to the status quo—in the post-Civil War period, in opposition to the consolidation of monopoly capital, the rise of the robber barons and the emergence of the United States as an imperialist power—such movements were channeled into the Democratic Party and strangled.

One notable example is the Populist movement that developed after the Civil War. This was essentially an agrarian movement of protest. Its death knell was signaled by its subordination to the Democratic Party in the first years of the twentieth century.

The Socialist Party emerged as a powerful movement on the eve of the First World War. It split after the October Revolution. The right wing allied itself with the Democratic Party, the left wing became a component part of the new Communist Party.

Then came the CIO movement of the 1930s—an explosive development of working class struggle against the horrors of the Depression, which took the form of mass industrial unions, born in pitched strike and sit-down battles against the might of corporate power.

At that time Trotsky was following very carefully the development of the class struggle in the United States. In discussions within the Trotskyist movement in the United States, Trotsky raised the urgent necessity for the Socialist Workers Party to put before this new, explosive and potentially revolutionary movement—the CIO—the need for a political break with the Democratic Party.

Trotsky raised as a central tactic the demand for the CIO to break with the Democrats and establish a labor party based on a socialist program. This demand was taken up by our movement at that time, not only against the anticommunist trade union bureaucrats who headed the CIO movement, such as John L. Lewis and others, but also in opposition to the Communist Party, which was fighting assiduously to keep the CIO movement tied to Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. It was used as a lever to politically educate the working class, wrest the leadership of the class from those who advocated a policy of class collaboration with the bourgeoisie, and build our own party as the new leadership of the working class.

In 1938, within months of the apogee of the sit-down strikes that produced the CIO, Trotsky was already saying the following: “If the class struggle is not to be crushed, replaced by demoralization, then the movement must find a new channel, and this channel is political. That is the fundamental argument in favor of this slogan.”

As we know, the movement did not break with the Democratic Party, and that in a fundamental sense sealed its fate. At the end of the Second World War, the consolidation of the trade union bureaucracy took the form of an anticommunist purge, in which the most militant and socialist-minded workers, indeed, the very elements who had led the struggle for the formation of the industrial unions, were driven out of the unions. This created the preconditions for the degeneration that rapidly developed

within the American trade union movement.

Our movement continued to raise the demand for the building of a labor party for more than four decades. The trade unions, despite their reactionary leadership and growing bureaucratization, still retained a large and active base, and some connection to the militant traditions of the past. Under these conditions, the labor party demand retained its utility as a means of posing in a popular way the need for a political break with the Democrats and the building of an independent working class party on the basis of a socialist program. It was a powerful lever for raising the political consciousness of workers and exposing the treachery of the trade union bureaucracy and its “left” apologists in the Communist Party and other political organizations.

However, the 1980s marked the completion of the process of degeneration of the unions. By the early 1990s the AFL-CIO had carried out a series of historic betrayals of bitter struggles against union-busting, strike-breaking and wage-cutting. It had embraced the corporatist policy of union-management partnership and repudiated any connection to the class-struggle traditions of the past.

The tactic of demanding that the AFL-CIO break with the Democrats and build a labor party had exhausted its progressive content. The official unions had been transformed into de facto arms of the corporations. It was necessary to tell the working class the truth and discourage any illusions in the viability of these moribund organizations.

With the transformation of our movement from the Workers League into the Socialist Equality Party in the mid-1990s, the question became the direct posing of the building of our movement as the medium for the political independence of the working class. That had always been the essence of our demand for the building of a labor party, but vast changes, both internationally and in the US, had rendered the old labor party demand counterproductive.

Today the Democratic Party has been widely discredited. We often refer to it, justifiably, as the stinking corpse of American liberalism. But there are political tendencies that are dedicated to somehow rehabilitating this party in the eyes of the working class.

Everyone here has been at rallies where the platform includes various speakers and political organizations, some claiming to be socialist, which place before the demonstrators Democratic Party officials, or assiduously refrain from criticizing the Democratic Party. All this is aimed at preventing the emergence of an independent political party of the working class.

This brings us to a second critical issue raised in the resolution, where it states:

“What is required, however, is not a new or ‘third’ capitalist party, such as the Greens and other reformist parties. The political independence of the working class can be achieved only through the building of a party that attacks the economic foundations of the capitalist system—private ownership of the means of production and production for profit. It must be a party that opposes the monopolization of society’s wealth by an elite and advances a program for the democratic control of economic life by the working people and the achievement of social equality—that is, a socialist program.”

This passage goes to the question: what is the content of the political independence of the working class? It is not simply an organizational issue; it is not simply a question of an organizational break from the Democratic Party, as important as that is.

It is not a matter of forming a so-called third party, some reformist party, or one that plays hide and seek with principles—whether it’s the Green Party, the Citizens Party, the Reform Party, or the Progressive Party. There has been a long experience with such parties in the United States. They in no way represent the political independence of the working class, but, on the contrary, new traps laid precisely to prevent the emergence of the working class as a conscious, independent political

force.

In regard to the present political situation, one fact worth noting is the deafening silence of the candidate for president of the Green Party in 2000, Ralph Nader, concerning the Iraq war. Nader, by the way, has made a point of announcing that he is not even a member of the Green Party.

No, that's not what we're talking about. Because the content of the struggle for the political independence of the working class is the heightening of the consciousness of the working class to the level of the tasks imposed upon it by history. Or, as Comrade North put it in his opening report, making a social process, which is largely unconscious, a conscious political process.

This requires a party that is firmly grounded in the scientific, historical principles of Marxism, a party that has distilled through decades of struggle the essential lessons of the experiences of the working class, particularly in the twentieth century—the October Revolution, the struggle against opportunism, the struggle against Stalinism, the struggle against bourgeois nationalism, the significance of internationalism.

All of these lessons are embodied in the International Committee of the Fourth International, which is why only this movement is capable of developing an analysis of political events and advancing a perspective for the struggle for the working class, not just in this country, but all over the world.

I would like to conclude by quoting the final passage of this resolution:

“It calls for a break with the Democrats and all parties that stand with one or both feet in the camp of capitalism. We undertake the task of building the Socialist Equality Party as the mass political party of the working class which, on the basis of an internationalist and socialist program, will fight for power.”

I urge everyone to vote for this resolution.



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