

John Christopher Burton: “Transform the recall into a referendum on Bush’s policies of war and social reaction”

20 September 2003



John Christopher Burton speaking at Santa Monica College

Below is the text of the speech delivered Sept. 18 by John Christopher Burton to an assembly of students at Santa Monica College in Southern California. Burton, a civil rights lawyer, has been endorsed by the Socialist Equality Party as a candidate for governor in California’s recall election. The speech was repeatedly interrupted by applause from the audience of some 300 students, who have faced an increasing financial burden as a result of the recent budget implemented by the Democrats and Republicans in the California state government.

I am speaking here today to help “Rock the Vote”—that is, to encourage you young people to get involved in politics. I do not agree, however, that voting is enough. Political involvement means much more than casting a ballot. It requires above all thorough political understanding, not just familiarity with the issues of the day that float around on the top of public discourse, but a deeper, more profound appreciation of the underlying tendencies that, in the final analysis, determine the trajectory of our society, and its impact—not only on our lives, but on the lives of billions around the world.

I’m not going to try to crack jokes, push emotional buttons, or make demagogic appeals. Instead, I’m going to try to use my brief time here today to scratch a bit beneath the surface of what you have been learning from the corporate-controlled mass media and hearing from the so-called major candidates.

The first question on the ballot is whether Gray Davis should be recalled as governor. Even though I am on the ballot as a replacement candidate, I am urging you to vote “no” on the recall of Davis. While I oppose Davis and his colleagues in the Democratic Party, it is important to understand that this particular recall is not rooted in any popular uprising against Davis, however warranted such an uprising might be. The signatures were purchased by right-wing Republican multimillionaires who reject the results of the last election to replace Davis with a governor even more willing to limit or dismantle entirely the state’s social programs on which masses of people depend.

These forces act on behalf of the large corporations and the relatively

few people accumulating huge personal fortunes, while the standard of living for most California working families either stagnates or declines. This unprecedented social polarization is leading to the emergence in US politics of an outright political oligarchy, a formation of the extremely wealthy and their accomplices that dominates political discourse through the big business-controlled media and the stranglehold of the two-party system.

It is important that you understand what each of the two major parties represents today. The Republican Party is dominated by political reactionaries and represents the most rapacious and unrestrained sections of the corporate elite. It is epitomized by the crimes of the Bush administration, which is led by a very stupid and petty man, who owes his office to the outright theft of the 2000 election.

The Democrats, on the other hand, constitute the semi-corpse of liberalism, no longer able to offer any sort of meaningful alternative. The power of the Republicans is due far more to the collapse of liberalism than to any popular support for their policies.

In the end, both political parties represent the interests of the same ruling elite, leaving the vast majority of people with no political voice. The political consequences are brutal colonial-style wars abroad and the massive misallocation of resources and increased repression at home.

Any candidate who tells you that the crisis in California can be solved without challenging the Bush administration’s so-called “preemptive” wars of aggression and its huge tax cuts for the rich is lying to you. I am the only candidate who is campaigning in opposition to US militarism. I am the only candidate calling on the masses of Californians to transform the recall election into a referendum against the Bush administration and the policies of war and social reaction of both the Republicans and Democrats.

No one is going to solve California’s crisis while the federal government spends \$500 billion a year on the military plus another \$150 billion on the occupation of Iraq. Our young people should not be sent to Iraq to kill people, and to be killed and maimed themselves, solely to promote the interests of Big Oil.

As the most populous state, California sends more of its youth than any other to be human fodder for the Bush administration’s criminal adventures in the Middle East. How many of you read the moving commentary in yesterday’s *Los Angeles Times* by Tim Predmore, a soldier with the 101st Airborne Division stationed near Mosul, Iraq?

This actual soldier—not some phony prancing around on the deck of an aircraft carrier in a flight suit—calls “Operation Iraqi Freedom” “the great modern lie,” and “an act not of justice but of hypocrisy.” Labeling the war “a crusade to control another nation’s natural resource,” he said, “I can no longer justify my service for what I believe to be half-truths and bold lies.”

“How many more must die?” this soldier asks, “before Americans

awake and demand the return of the men and women whose job it is to protect them rather than their leader's interest?"

Who asked the United States to invade and occupy Iraq? Who? Certainly not the Iraqi people, who demand that the troops leave. And today, after no weapons of mass destruction have been found and Bush himself has been forced to concede that Iraq had no involvement with the atrocities of September 11, no one can dispute that the political support for the invasion was whipped up by lies and propaganda on a scale not seen since Hitler's Third Reich.

I call for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. I am the only candidate placing this demand at the center of the campaign.

Just as the issue of slavery divided this nation before the Civil War, this accelerating growth of militarism, social inequality and oligarchy is tearing the fabric of our society. This recall is only one of its manifestations. As proved by the impeachment conspiracy against Clinton, who was twice elected, the Bush administration's theft of the 2000 presidential election, the redistricting battles in Colorado and Texas, and even the flurry of controversy over this week's correct decision by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals panel to postpone the recall election a few months to eliminate the obsolete punch-card voting machines, social tensions are so intense that it is becoming impossible to hold elections with results recognized as binding by the losers. It may soon become impossible to hold elections altogether.

While Davis has correctly alluded to the recall as part of this right-wing power grab, he has failed to draw the obvious and necessary conclusions. It is part of an ongoing drive by well-financed and conspiratorial fascistic elements who will stop at nothing to eliminate the ability of the working masses to express their political will.

The working class cannot defend itself against this attack through the Democratic Party. It must assert its political independence of big business by building the Socialist Equality Party.

Thus, I oppose the recall not as an ally of Davis or the Democrats, with whom I have no sympathy whatsoever, but as a socialist seeking to mobilize the working class and you young people against this effort by right-wing forces to nullify an election and impose a political agenda that goes considerably further than the pro-big business policies of the Davis administration.

This Republican right wing wields political power far beyond its popular support. It now controls all three branches of government in Washington and is attempting to seize power in Sacramento behind the facade of a popular, albeit second-rate, actor and multimillionaire capable of speaking only in banal and dishonest generalities on entertainment talk shows. Regardless of who serves as governor after the recall election, however, the result for the working class will be the same: the gutting of education, health care, housing, environmental protection, employment and rehabilitation programs, to insure that the full burden of California's economic and budget crisis will be borne by working families, students and small businesses.

The technique of the "Big Lie" has become more and more prominent in American political life, as the policies of the two major big business parties diverge more and more from the interests and concerns of the working families who form the great majority of California's population. The big lie in this election is the claim that California's budget crisis and its underlying economic difficulties are local phenomena that can be explained simply as mismanagement on the part of the Davis administration.

While Davis shares responsibility, more than two-thirds of the states, including such conservative bastions as Alabama, are facing insolvency. The war and favor-the-rich tax policies of the Bush administration starve local governments and are creating record federal deficits that threaten to bankrupt such essential social programs as Social Security and Medicare.

Countries around the world are mired in protracted economic crises, with some, such as Argentina, defaulting on huge foreign debts.

Wars overseas and social polarization at home inevitably lead to political repression and attacks on democratic rights. I have spent the last 25 years as a civil rights lawyer fighting to defend and expand democratic rights. Unlike Davis, I oppose the barbaric death penalty and California's three-strikes law, which can result in the imposition of draconian sentences, up to and including life imprisonment, for minor theft and drug offenses. I condemn Davis's heartless and opportunistic policy of denying parole to people who clearly have been reformed and have earned the right to re-enter society, as well as his corrupt relationship with the correctional officers' organizations and his expansion of the state prison system.

But again, Davis's hostility to democratic rights is simply a local reflection of the determined national assault spearheaded by the Bush administration and its reactionary attorney general, John Ashcroft. I advocate the repeal of the Patriot Act and the dismantling of the Homeland Security Department. I demand that the Bush administration cease its abhorrent practice of incarcerating citizens and non-citizens alike, indefinitely, without charges, lawyers, or access to courts.

Behind the crisis in California lies not simply, or even primarily, the malfeasance of the Davis administration but the failure of the capitalist profit system itself, a system that subordinates all social questions to the accumulation of personal wealth. This is the root problem—not the lack of wealth itself.

As we know, California is a land of incredible wealth and resources, both human and natural. But how can one explain such vast wealth side by side with such vast poverty, decaying infrastructure and crumbling schools? How can one explain millions living without health coverage, jobs or adequate housing in the midst of such plenty?

Why are you facing steep increases in your student fees even as the services available to students are being reduced?

As a socialist, I would resolve California's crisis in the interests of working families, small business owners, students and professionals. The satisfaction of human needs, not the amassing of corporate profit, would be the basis of California's economy if I were governor.

I would expose the cruel and vicious national chauvinists and racists who scapegoat impoverished immigrant workers for the crisis in California, and who make direct appeals to the darkest and most backward emotions in the population.

I would enact a bill of social rights for the working class, including each of the following:

- * Jobs for everyone able to work.
- * A minimum wage of \$15 an hour.
- * A shift in the burden of taxation from the working people to the very wealthy and the big corporations.
- * Free, high-quality K-12 public education; free access to higher education through professional schools.
- * Universal, comprehensive medical coverage for all.
- * State-subsidized housing construction for millions of homes that working people can afford.
- * Protection of the environment from the ravages of profit-driven exploitation by big business.
- * A guaranteed right of workers to join a union and control the union democratically; the outlawing of union-busting tactics and wage-cutting.
- * Full democratic rights, including citizenship, for immigrant workers, whether legal or so-called "illegal"; the removal of all restrictions on their access to education, medical care and other services.
- * Retirement security at a decent income for all working people.
- * Government support for small and medium-sized businesses.

To obtain the resources for this program, I advocate a steeply graduated income tax and the transformation of large corporations and banks into

publicly owned and democratically controlled utilities.

There is more than enough wealth in California to support these policies. It is a matter of reallocating our resources to achieve them.

The reaction I get after I explain this part of my program is “How will you keep businesses from leaving California?” The short answer is that this program cannot be implemented without the support of the vast majority of working families, but with that support behind me, I wouldn’t let them leave. The overpaid CEOs can leave, but the assets are staying here.

The major parties say that the crisis in California can be resolved by making the state “business-friendly” to “save jobs.” An example of this bipartisan big business policy happened last week when Democratic and Republican leaders slashed workers’ compensation benefits for people injured and disabled at their jobs. The only difference between the two parties is that the Republicans wanted even bigger cuts. The immediate reason for this attack on the right of people with work-related injuries or illnesses was to lower insurance premiums in response to threats by Costco and Boeing to leave the state.

The unstated premise behind the policy of “saving jobs” is the complete subordination of human needs and the social good to corporate profit, the logic of which produces a never-ending decline in the standard of living of working families, the view that workers have no legitimate interests or needs that are in conflict with, or in any way independent of, the profit requirements of the bosses. In other words: “What’s good for the master is good for the slave!”

Wage cuts, speedup, the gutting of working conditions and health and safety rules, abolition of the eight-hour day and the 40-hour week, an end to restrictions on child labor, elimination of environmental regulations—surely these measures would create an even more “business-friendly” environment to “save jobs” in California!

And if California implements cuts in workers’ compensation to reduce business costs, what is to stop Arizona, New Mexico or Texas, or any other state, from following suit, thus setting in motion yet another round of cuts in workers’ benefits?

This identification of the interests of workers with those of big business is the road to disaster for the working class. Instead of lowering the living standards in California to that in other states or countries, I advocate policies to raise the standard of living of workers everywhere. The basic purpose of my campaign is to advocate for working people and students a new and fundamentally different strategy—the unification of the working class across state and national boundaries in a political struggle against the corporate oligarchy, and both of its parties, to defend and extend workers’ rights and living standards.

I am the only candidate connecting the resolution of the crisis to a fundamental reorganization of society. All the other candidates, including Peter Camejo of the Greens and Arriana Huffington, the leading independent in the race, accept the existing social relationships that lie at the core of the current crisis. They say that the system can be patched up, that political progress can be achieved by increasing the pressure on the Democrats to move left. These are illusions.

The only way forward is for working people, students and small business people to declare their political independence from the two big business parties and to exercise their considerable political power in defense of their own interests. I am calling on each of you in this audience to help build the Socialist Equality Party as the party expressing the political independence of the working class and as the vehicle for carrying this fight forward.





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