California debate travesty shows need for socialist alternative

John Christopher Burton
27 September 2003

Socialist gubernatorial candidate John Christopher Burton issued the following statement September 26 on the final televised debate of so-called "major" candidates running to replace Governor Gray Davis in the October 7 California recall election. The debate took place September 24 in Sacramento, California.

Burton is a civil rights lawyer in Los Angeles and supporter of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). He is calling for a "no" vote on the recall while running as an independent replacement candidate. He is opposing the drive by right-wing Republicans, using vast financial resources and backed by powerful sections of the corporate elite, to bypass normal democratic procedures and unseat Davis, who was elected to a second term last November.

At the same time, Burton is giving no political support to Davis, Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Tom McClintock, or any of the other candidates associated with the two parties of big business who are running to replace Davis. Burton is advancing a socialist program to uphold the interests of the working class and provide an alternative, should the recall succeed, to the parties and politicians of the corporate elite. He has been endorsed by the Socialist Equality Party. (The election statement of the Socialist Equality Party is available at http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/aug2003/cali-a30.shtml*).*

The September 24 debate between the five so-called "major" candidates vying to replace Governor Gray Davis was a travesty. The ninety minutes of sound bites and mutual mud-slinging was an insult to the people of California and the nation, whose living standards are being devastated by the policies of war and social reaction pursued by Democrats and Republicans alike in Washington and Sacramento.

None of the candidates seriously addressed the real concerns of Californians—rising unemployment, growing poverty and homelessness, tuition increases for college students, decaying schools, lack of health care, and the worsening quagmire in Iraq that is consuming hundreds of American lives, thousands of Iraqi lives, and tens of billions of dollars.

The atmosphere of cynicism and unseriousness was so pervasive—with candidates calling one another by their first names and trading jokes and insults—that the moderator at one point reminded them they were not appearing on the Comedy Central network. The event did not even merit the term "debate," since the candidates had been supplied the questions in advance.

Who were the participants? Arnold Schwarzenegger, the body-builder-turned film star and multi-millionaire real estate investor, had boycotted every previous debate. He became not only a "legitimate" candidate, but the leading Republican aspirant the minute he obtained the backing of the most powerful corporate moguls in California. He has refused to go beyond the most banal sound bites because his task is to present a friendly face to California voters, while reassuring big business that he will carry out its agenda of deeper attacks on the jobs and social conditions of working people. In the debate, he displayed his backward and boorish character, talking over his rivals and attempting to bully them into silence.

Tom McClintock, the other Republican candidate, reiterated his agenda of social reaction, including thousands of state worker layoffs, sweeping privatization of government services, massive cuts in workers' compensation, and the elimination of government oversight and regulation of big business. He speaks most openly for the radical right that constitutes the active base of the Republican Party. There is no mass support for his program, which has been repudiated by California voters in a series of elections—which is why his Republican right allies financed and promoted the recall election in the first place.

Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante, a Democratic war horse long known for his close ties to agri-business interests, maintained his cynical pretense of concern and compassion for working people and immigrants. At the same time, he reiterated his policies of so-called "tough love" for California, including regressive taxes on alcohol and tobacco, a new round of unspecified budget cuts, and a timid increase in taxes for the rich.

© World Socialist Web Site

Green Party candidate Peter Camejo maintained his virtual silence on the imperialist war and occupation of Iraq, and promoted his so-called “fair tax” plan, which calls for small increases in income tax rates for the rich. Desperate to be recognized by the political and media establishment as “responsible” and “legitimate,” Camejo and the Greens have concentrated their political fire almost entirely on Davis, saying almost nothing about the policies of war, mass unemployment and tax cuts for the rich of Bush and the Republicans.

Liberal columnist Arianna Huffington continued to denounce “special interests,” without ever defining precisely what she meant by that all-purpose term. Both she and Camejo have insisted on presenting the crisis in California as though it were merely a local issue, having little to do with the economic, social and political crisis that is affecting the entire country and, indeed, the entire world.

The miserable level of the event, dominated as it was by mudslinging and demagogy, underscored a critical fact: it is no longer possible for the American political and media establishment to seriously discuss any important social questions. This is because any serious discussion of either foreign or domestic policy rapidly brings into question the most basic issues—first and foremost, the staggering concentration of wealth and growth of social inequality in America. This issue cannot be seriously discussed because it goes to the very foundations of the capitalist system: the subordination of all human and social needs to the accumulation of personal wealth and corporate profit.

The crisis in California is an acute expression of the failure of the profit system—not only in California and the US, but internationally.

The Democrats and Republicans, notwithstanding their at times heated differences, both defend the capitalist system and its oligarchic ruling elite. So-called independent and third-party politicians, like Camejo and Huffington, are tolerated and even promoted so long as they obscure the real source of the problems confronting working people. They serve as political lightning rods, appealing to popular discontent with the two big business parties while diverting it along harmless channels.

I am the only candidate in the recall election who is telling the truth to the working people. As Wednesday’s debate has confirmed, whether or not Davis is recalled on October 7, and whoever occupies the State House on October 8, the attacks on the working class will be intensified. There is no solution to the crisis in California that starts from an acceptance of the premises of the profit system and assumes the permanence of that system.

I am calling on voters in California to transform the recall into a political offensive against the Bush administration and its accomplices in the Democratic Party. I am placing at the center of my campaign the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan, Iraq and the entire Middle East. There is no way the deficits in California and dozens of other states—not to mention the half-trillion-dollar federal deficit—can be addressed while $500 billion is spent on the military and an additional $150 billion this year alone is squandered on an illegal and immoral imperialist war in Iraq.

I am calling as well for the repeal of the Patriot Act and all of the other police-state measures that have been instituted under the cynical pretense of protecting the American people from terrorism. The first genuine step in preventing another terrorist attack like September 11 is the carrying out of a serious investigation into the role of the Bush administration and other state agencies in allowing the attack to take place.

I am the only candidate who says frankly that there can be no progressive and just solution to the crisis in California outside of a program to restructure the economy in a revolutionary manner. To obtain the resources needed for jobs, schools, housing and health care, I call for a radical revamping of the tax system to significantly reduce the burden on workers and small- and medium-sized businesses, and sharply increase the tax rate for the very wealthy. To end the anarchy of the so-called “free market” and the looting of social wealth for the benefit of billionaire speculators and corporate CEOs, I call for the transformation of big corporations and banks into public utilities, under the democratic control of the working population.

I urge all Californians to vote “no” on the recall and vote for John Christopher Burton as the replacement candidate. I urge you to read the election statement issued by the Socialist Equality Party and make the decision to join and build the SEP as the mass independent party of the working class.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site