

Why the SEP is opposing the California recall

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The *World Socialist Web Site* has received several letters criticizing the Socialist Equality Party's call for a "no" vote on the recall of California Governor Gray Davis. These letters raise fundamental political issues that need to be discussed and clarified.

BM, for example, writes: "It's clear that many in the labor movement interpret a 'no' vote on the recall, as a vote for Governor Davis. Art Pulaski, head of the state AFL-CIO, according to press reports, recently and repeatedly called Davis 'the best governor in 100 years.' Partly for that reason, I plan to vote 'yes' on the recall. I certainly, to paraphrase Eugene Debs, don't want to vote for what I don't want and wind up getting it."

In a similar vein, TL writes that our opposition to the recall provides "support" to the Democratic governor and undermines the SEP's fight to break the working class from the Democrats. He states: "While the SEP believes, as its program states, that the Democrats are equally responsible for the hegemonic designs of the US at an international level and the suppression of working people's rights within the US, there is no point supporting a wrong against a wrong."

As in the case of any other political phenomenon, we must concretely examine the political forces and interests involved in the recall campaign and define an independent standpoint for the working class. It is true that there may be some who interpret a "no" vote as a political endorsement of Davis, but the SEP is opposing the recall not as allies of Davis, but as socialists mobilizing the working class against an attempt by right-wing forces to use the recall to nullify an election and impose a political agenda that goes considerably further than the reactionary policies of the Davis administration.

We would urge both readers to examine our election statement much more carefully. In it we state explicitly that the SEP offers no political support to Davis, Lt. Governor Bustamante or any other representative of the Democratic Party. We are running our own candidate—John Christopher Burton—in the event the recall is successful, to provide a socialist alternative to both big business parties.

Another reader, DF, writes: "Gray Davis has been a complete vegetable in managing the state of California. That has been the sole reason why the voters have been given the opportunity to vote Davis out of office. Although Republican leaders are credited for initiating the recall, the fact is that the majority of California voters want Davis removed."

This version of events is simply not accurate. The Republican right and the media have fostered the claim that Davis, due to his malice or incompetence, has single-handedly produced the economic and social crisis in California. While he no doubt bears some responsibility, one cannot separate the situation in California from the profound crisis facing the federal government, virtually all of the US states and the world economy in general. The Bush White House has pursued a deliberate policy of bankrupting the public treasury in order to finance tax breaks for the rich and the exploding military costs of the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, the primary actors in California's economic meltdown include the closest corporate allies of Bush and Cheney, such as Enron.

The letter writer is also mistaken when she asserts that Davis's

mismanagement of the state "is the sole reason why the voters have been given the opportunity to vote Davis out of office." The recall campaign is not the outgrowth of a popular movement from below seeking to replace Davis with a progressive alternative. On the contrary, it was organized by extreme right-wing enemies of the working class to reverse the outcome of the November 2002 election and impose a political agenda—aimed at lifting virtually all restrictions on the accumulation of personal wealth—that the voters had repudiated at the polls.

The initial recall effort, begun within weeks of the election, failed to garner public support. It only gained momentum once multimillionaire Republican Congressman Darrell Issa began to finance the effort, which ultimately cost \$3 million.

As we say in our election statement, "The recall is the latest in a series of efforts by the far right to force through their political agenda against widespread public opposition, using methods of backroom conspiracy and employing huge financial resources." These include the shutdown of the federal government in 1996, the impeachment campaign against Clinton, the theft of the 2000 election and the ongoing redistricting efforts by the Republicans in Texas and Colorado.

When Gray Davis denounced the recall as a "right-wing power grab" he was stating a well-known political fact. While forced to lift the lid about this conspiracy because of his immediate electoral problems, Davis refuses to draw any further conclusions about the character of the Republican Party and the right-wing and fascistic forces that dominate it.

Davis will not say that the Bush administration is an illegitimate government installed on the basis of unconstitutional and illegal methods, nor will he bluntly warn the population about the dire threat that the Republican right poses to democratic rights. The governor and the Democratic Party as a whole are incapable of waging any serious struggle in defense of democratic rights because that could bring broad masses of working people into political struggle—a prospect that the Democrats fear far more than the conspiracies of the right.

In many respects, a letter from PR in Berkeley, California most fully articulates the general standpoint of the "left" supporters of the recall.

His letter begins, "Since you are the most qualified candidate on the ballot, why do you call for a 'no' vote on the recall? Get Davis out and you in!"

For PR, the threat to democratic rights is not even a consideration. Instead he outlines an essentially opportunist approach to the recall, one that begins with the possible electoral gains the SEP might make if it supported the removal of Davis.

He writes: "Since you cannot win the election for governor (if you could you should be for the recall), you should at least have a 'defeatist' stand towards the two parties of American capitalism and have NO position on the recall."

These same arguments were heard during the impeachment drive against Clinton; i.e., that it was simply a dispute within the ruling class and of no concern to working people. Indeed the impeachment drive—like the present recall campaign—expresses the intense political warfare going on within the ruling elite, but the working class cannot afford to be indifferent to the outcome of this struggle.

Before he attacks the SEP, PR should look at the record of those on the so-called left who support the recall, beginning with their reaction to the impeachment campaign against Clinton.

The Green Party's 2000 presidential candidate, Ralph Nader, supported the campaign to remove Clinton from office, saying that if he had been a senator at the time he would have voted to impeach the president. Insofar as the Greens' presidential candidate publicly defended the impeachment it helped provide a cover of legitimacy to the political conspiracy by Christian fundamentalists, right-wing multimillionaires and fascistic elements.

The impeachment turned out to be the preface to the theft of the 2000 election. During the disputed vote count in Florida, Nader—who received 97,000 out of his 2.7 million votes in the state—remained silent as the Republicans blocked the counting of votes and the right-wing majority on the Supreme Court handed the election to Bush.

In the Bush administration—the most right-wing government in US history—we see what the proponents of Clinton's impeachment were seeking to achieve. Those on the so-called left who provided legitimacy to this political conspiracy, including the Greens, cannot avoid taking responsibility for the outcome.

In California, the Greens are once again in a de facto political bloc with the Republican right, with Peter Camejo, their candidate for governor, calling for a “yes” vote on the recall of Davis. What is the calculation of the Greens? They have embraced the recall at least in part to intervene and increase public exposure of their party in the hopes of gaining respect as a “legitimate” party in the eyes of the media and the powers-that-be. Lacking any genuine political independence, the Greens vacillate between the Democrats and Republicans according to what is politically expedient. Their concern is not developing an independent and anti-capitalist movement of the working class, but gaining influence in order to exert pressure on the two parties of big business.

A genuine socialist party, however, cannot be indifferent to the fate of the democratic rights of the working class. Part of the struggle to develop the political consciousness of working people is teaching them to defend their previous gains, including the right to vote and to have their votes counted, against the threats of the extreme right.

The Socialist Equality Party's struggle against the Democratic Party is a principled political struggle. It is aimed at educating the working class about the capitalist nature of the party and dispelling any illusions that the Democrats speak for working people or are capable of defending their most basic necessities.

We are not seeking to build the SEP on the basis of exploiting confused opposition to the Democrats—including chauvinist, anti-immigrant and anti-tax sentiments promoted by the right wing—but through winning working people to our socialist and internationalist program.

Behind PR's positions lies the deepest skepticism about the revolutionary potential of the working class and its ability to resolve the crisis of capitalism in a progressive manner.

He is almost in awe of the supposed power of the Bush administration and the Republican right. The Republicans, PR writes, are “by far the more dynamic and astute in dealing with the decay of the system; it is why they have become the majority party among the less than 50 percent of the population that votes ... and control all three branches of the federal government.”

This inflated conception of the strength of the Republicans is indicative of the despair of many ex-radicals and their prostration before political reaction. Seeing no possibility for the independent revolutionary mobilization of the working class (which they write off as hopelessly backward) these elements hope desperately that if the Democrats are “punished” at the polls, they may put up some resistance to the Republicans. Indeed, the major constituencies of the recall campaign are ultra-right Republicans and disappointed Democrats, who have not broken

with capitalist politics.

PR also makes the assertion: “Your NO on the recall puts you in the same camp as social democrats and the Stalinist CP [Communist Party] in giving back-handed support to the Democrats—a bourgeois party of war and racism just like the Republicans. This not a Trotskyist position but a reformist one. It is no different than that of the Democrat Bustamante except you call for a vote for yourself and not the lieutenant governor.”

We have already dealt with the question of “back-handed support” for the Democrats. As for the “minor” difference with Bustamante, which PM refers to, this makes all the difference in the world. The SEP is running John Christopher Burton to mobilize the working class against both big business parties and resolve the economic and social crisis in California in the interest of working people.

There is one other question that arises from PR's letter. In it he poses the question: “If the SEP was a mass workers party, would your line be different (that is, if you had a chance of winning)?”

The short answer is no. Even if the SEP enjoyed a mass following we would oppose such a conspiracy and expose it ruthlessly before the public. Historical experience has demonstrated the disastrous consequences of a mass workers party making the fatal decision to support the effort of the extreme right to overthrow a more moderate capitalist party.

PR says our position on the recall is not “Trotskyist” but “reformist.” Rather than bandying about radical phrases, he would be better off to actually study the political struggle waged by Trotsky, the co-leader of the Russian Revolution who led the socialist opposition to the Stalinist bureaucracy in the former USSR.

One such struggle, which is germane to the discussion on the California recall, is the fight that Trotsky took up against the ultra-leftism of the German Communist Party (KPD), which in 1931 decided to join hands with the Nazis to remove the Social Democratic Party (SPD) from power.

Having failed to force the calling of new national elections, the Nazi Party launched a referendum in July-August 1931 to take over the state legislature of Prussia—the largest state in Germany—by removing the Social Democratic-led coalition government.

Under the influence of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow, the KPD—a party of hundreds of thousands of workers, which garnered millions of votes—supported Hitler's referendum, which it dubbed the “Red Referendum,” on the grounds that the Social Democrats defended capitalism and were therefore no different than the fascists.

In his essay, “Against National Communism: Lessons of the ‘Red Referendum,’” Trotsky denounced the KPD's policy, writing, “We have not the slightest ground for supporting [Prussian SPD Prime Minister] Braun's government, for taking even a shadow of responsibility for it before the masses.... But we have still less ground for helping the fascists to replace the government.... For, if we quite justly accuse the Social Democracy of paving the road for fascism, then our own task can least of all consist of *shortening* this road for fascism.”

He also explicitly answered those who said opposition to the Red Referendum meant giving a vote of confidence to the Social Democrats. “When one of my enemies sets before me small daily portions of poison and the second, on the other hand, is about to shoot straight at me, then I will first knock the revolver out of the hand of my second enemy, for this gives me an opportunity to get rid of my first enemy. But that does not at all mean that the poison is a ‘lesser evil’ in comparison with the revolver” (*Germany: Key to the international situation*).

Although the Prussian referendum failed, the joint campaign by the KPD and fascists against the SPD demoralized and split the working class, opening the door for Hitler to take power less than two years later and crush the proletariat.

Historical analogies are of course limited, but there is more than an echo of the radical phrase-mongering of the Stalinists and their prostration before the Nazis in the support for the recall by the Greens and various

middle class radical groups today.

Marxist politics are drawn from a class analysis of events, including the strategic experiences of the international working class. Our attitude to any given set of events is not based on expediency but a worked-out conception of elevating the consciousness of the working class to the level of its historical tasks. This is the aim of the SEP and its candidate for California governor, John Christopher Burton.



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