

The John Christopher Burton campaign and the fight for socialist policies

3 October 2003

We reprint below several letters received by the campaign of John Christopher Burton, the candidate supported by the Socialist Equality Party in the California recall election, followed by a reply by Jerry Isaacs (SEP).

Hello,

If John Christopher Burton were elected, he would be a governor of one state, surrounded by opposition on the federal level and on the legislative level in his own state. How can a party whose principles rest on an international workers' revolution advance socialist policies in a bourgeois political system? Since American politics run mostly on corporate money and special interest groups, I don't understand how someone with a revolutionary socialist outlook can make significant changes. This is not to say I don't support John Christopher Burton's candidacy, but I sincerely wonder what sort of socialist policies can realistically be instituted in the current system.

NR

Dear Mr. Burton,

As a Californian, I am very enthusiastic about your campaign for governor. I would like to ask one question of your platform so that I may totally understand your goals.

If you were elected, you would use the progressive income tax to mold California into a socialist economy, correct?

I believe that if you were elected, in an instance similar to Philadelphia's "white flight," the rich of California would take their money, and their means of production, out of the state, rather than lose them. And therefore the state would be without funds.

The only way to prevent this would be to secede from the Union. This would economically isolate the Californian Workers' State, at its worst cause civil war within the United States, and either way we would follow the route of either the Paris Commune or Russia—crushed, or permanently deformed (although not necessarily with any guns involved).

With revolutionary (or reformist!) tidings,

A comrade in California

Hello,

I believe socialism is the solution for California and the world for that matter, but I do not think you can create a socialist state in a capitalist country. Take, for instance, when other countries attempt to nationalize their industries and banks as the first steps on the road to socialism—they are subject to hideous punishment in the form of economic embargoes and slander campaigns, if not straight-out assassinations. Capitalism will not take lightly any attempt to socialize the state of California. I would love to be convinced otherwise.

Thanks,

BL

The Socialist Equality Party has received several letters asking how John Christopher Burton would implement his program of socialist policies if he were elected.

The letter writers are correct in pointing out that the democratic and socialist program outlined in the election statement issued by Burton and

the Socialist Equality Party could not be fully implemented in one isolated state out of the 50 states in the US. The election statement does not suggest otherwise. It explains that the policies outlined in the Bill of Social Rights for the working class—for jobs, education, health care, housing, immigrants' rights, etc.—require for their realization a revolutionary restructuring of the American economy, and that this can only be achieved as part of a strategy of socialist transformation internationally.

At the same time, a program that articulates the needs and interests of working people must advance these demands and the party of the working class must fight for their realization. What the Socialist Equality Party and John Christopher Burton reject is the perspective—shared by the trade union bureaucracy and reformist organizations—that working people must limit their demands to what is consistent with the existing economic order and poses no challenge to the private ownership of the means of production and the subordination of social needs to the accumulation of personal wealth and corporate profit.

The central purpose of Burton's campaign is to bring before as many people as possible the socialist alternative to the policies of the big business parties and raise the level of political understanding among working people, thereby advancing the struggle to build the Socialist Equality Party as the mass independent party of the working class.

What a socialist governor would be able to accomplish can only be determined by the state of class relations, i.e., the relationship of forces between the working people and the financial elite that currently controls the levers of power. The election of John Christopher Burton would itself signify a powerful political awakening of the working class and the assertion of its own class interests. His ability to carry out policies that make inroads against the entrenched power of the wealthy elite would depend on drawing ever larger layers of the working class, young people and intellectuals into active political life. Only in this way would it be possible to drive back the inevitable resistance of big business and its political agents.

If John Christopher Burton were elected, he would use his office as a powerful platform to educate and mobilize the working class. Governor Burton would open the state government's accounting books and other records kept secret from the people to show who really bankrupted California. This would include revealing the tax concessions, loopholes and outright graft through which public funds were squandered to subsidize big business and the rich.

In particular, he would launch an investigation into the systematic looting of the state by Enron, Duke Energy and other energy speculators during the blackouts of 2001, and demand full compensation. He would include as a central part of such a probe a thorough investigation into the connections between the Bush White House and Enron CEO Kenneth Lay, and the role of the Bush administration in facilitating Enron's criminal activities. He would, moreover, seek the repeal of energy deregulation and call for public ownership of the utility industries, under the democratic control of the working people.

He would launch investigations into the speculative activities of the 1990s, including the dot.com bubble and the looting of corporate resources by CEOs at the expense of the workers and small shareholders. On this basis, he would seek to mobilize the working class to recapture this stolen wealth and use it to improve social services and living standards.

A socialist governor would use whatever powers his office had to implement practical measures to defend the working class. For example, he would declare that all Californians, regardless of their immigration status, enjoy the rights of US citizens. He would forbid the use of California National Guard troops for the Bush administration's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and actively campaign for other states to follow suit. Governor Burton would also defy Attorney General John Ashcroft's anti-democratic "Patriot Act," overturn the death penalty, and redirect state funding from prison construction to the building of public schools, hospitals and affordable housing.

As the correspondents note, such a program would generate determined opposition from big business, the Bush administration and the Democrats and Republicans on the state and national level. In the impeachment campaign against Clinton, the theft of the 2000 election and the California recall campaign the Republican right repeatedly demonstrated its readiness to defy the will of the majority in order to impose its agenda. How much more ruthless would the ruling elite's response be to a politically conscious challenge by the working class to its wealth and power?

The measures proposed in the SEP election statement will not be realized simply through gubernatorial proclamations, but rather by educating and mobilizing the broad masses of working people against the resistance of the financial elite and its political representatives. Crucial in this regard is winning the active support and sympathy of wide layers of small businessmen and professionals, by advancing a program that guarantees their economic security and democratic rights. This would include measures to relieve the tax burden on small businesses by sharply increasing taxes on the largest corporations and the wealthiest individuals.

If the SEP carried out such progressive taxation measures "wouldn't the rich of California take their money and their means of production out of the state—and therefore wouldn't the state be without funds?" one correspondent writes.

There is no doubt that corporations would make every effort to shift production and assets from California, just as they have done for the last quarter century to escape higher wages, tax obligations and environmental regulations. But as John Christopher Burton explained September 18 at an election forum at Santa Monica College, "The overpaid CEOs can leave, but the assets are staying here."

With the support of workers in California, a socialist governor would prevent the movement of plants and raw materials out of the state. He would answer the claim that these assets were the private property of the capitalists, to do with what they will, by explaining that this wealth was created by the working class and belongs to society as a whole. The facilities would be transformed into public enterprises run by the workers themselves according to the social needs of the people.

At the same time, the threat to bankrupt the state could not be defeated solely within the confines of California. Workers in the state would have to appeal to workers throughout the US to defend their jobs and living standards. Governor Burton would call on the workers whose own states have been devastated by Bush's tax breaks for the rich and the cost of the colonial occupation of Iraq to join in a common struggle against the large corporations and the two big business parties.

Such an appeal could not be limited to the US. Governor Burton would appeal to workers internationally to block the shifting of production and assets from California. This would not just be a moral appeal for solidarity. The problems facing workers all over the world are the same.

The only way to stop the constant driving down of wages and living conditions by the transnational corporations seeking ever greater profits is to coordinate the struggles of the working class in the US with workers in Mexico, Asia and throughout the world to defend all jobs and lift living standards.

In the final letter, BL writes: "I believe socialism is the solution for California and the world for that matter, but I don't think you can create a socialist state in a capitalist country. Take for instance, when other countries attempt to nationalize their industries and banks as the first steps on the road to socialism, they are subject to hideous punishment in the form of economic embargoes and slander campaigns, if not straight-out assassinations. Capitalism will not take lightly any attempt to socialize the state of California."

Our perspective is not the creation of a socialist state in California, isolated from the rest of the US and world economy. The tragic experience of the Soviet Union, where the nationalist program of the Stalinist bureaucracy, summed up in its slogan of "socialism in one country," led to the betrayal of the October 1917 revolution and the eventual restoration of capitalism, demonstrates that social equality and human liberation cannot be achieved on the basis of the resources of one country, let alone one state.

Addressing the complex needs of a modern mass society requires utilizing all of the economic advances developed under capitalism—including global economic integration, the international division of labor, and the highest achievements of science and technology. Mankind's productive forces, however, must be freed from the stranglehold of an economic system that subordinates social needs to the private accumulation of wealth and divides the world into competing nation states.

The capitalist class in the US and internationally will not welcome the coming to power of a socialist governor in California. Given its bloody history of intrigues and CIA coups, the American ruling class will do everything it can to destabilize such a government. The ability of the working class to prevent this and extend the struggle for socialism throughout the US and internationally will depend on its level of political consciousness and solidarity and its determination to take political power into its own hands. The campaign of John Christopher Burton and the SEP is an important step in bringing that understanding to an ever wider audience of working people.

Jerry Isaacs, for the Socialist Equality Party



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