John Christopher Burton, socialist candidate in California recall election, declares solidarity with supermarket and transit strikers

John Christopher Burton
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The following statement on the strike/lockout of Southern California supermarket workers and the strike by Los Angeles transit workers was issued October 16, 2003, by John Christopher Burton, a civil rights lawyer in LA and supporter of the Socialist Equality Party who ran as an independent candidate for governor in the California recall election. Burton campaigned for a "no" vote on the recall of Governor Gray Davis in order to oppose the drive, financed and led by right-wing Republicans and their corporate backers, to circumvent democratic processes and overturn the results of last November's gubernatorial election, which returned Davis for a second term.

At the same time, Burton gave no political support to Davis or any of the replacement candidates associated with the Democratic and Republican parties. He ran on the basis of a socialist program to present an alternative for working people to the two parties of big business. Burton finished 14th out of 135 candidates, with more than 6,200 votes.

Some 70,000 supermarket workers are involved in the strike/lockout that began on Saturday, October 11. The United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) called its members at Vons and Pavilions markets out on strike, and two other major chains involved in the contract negotiations, Ralph's and Albertson's, immediately locked out their UFCW employees.

The 2,500 mechanics employed by the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), struck the region's bus and subway system at 12:01 a.m., Tuesday, October 14.

I fully support the supermarket and transit workers in their struggles against wage-cutting and cutbacks in pensions and health benefits. I condemn the strikebreaking operation being mounted by the supermarket chains and the attempt by the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to impose the crisis in the transit system on the backs of its employees.

At stake in both struggles is the funding of workers' health care benefits, a massive social question that transcends the important labor contracts involved. In the face of soaring costs fueled largely by the profit drive of health care providers and the insurance industry, public health facilities are cutting back or closing altogether. Medicare has announced a 13.5 percent premium increase for next year. There are already at least 43 million people in the United States with no health insurance, more than 6 million in California alone. It is no secret that employers across the country are watching events in Southern California to see whether they too will be able to strip their employees of essential health care benefits.

In addition, the supermarkets are demanding that grocery workers, already among the lowest paid unionized workers in California, accept drastic cuts in compensation and pensions, as well as a permanent two-tier wage and benefit structure for new-hires.

The solidarity of the supermarket workers and the impact of the MTA mechanics' walkout demonstrate the fighting capacity of the working class and point to the enormous social force that working people are in a position to wield against ruthless corporations and their political spokesmen in both the Republican and Democratic parties.

I call for this power to be brought to bear on the present struggles. I urge that the entire labor movement be mobilized to stop the strikebreaking and shut down the supermarkets. The corporate establishment and its political representatives must not be allowed to isolate the grocery workers and transit workers and take them on one at a time. Mass demonstrations should be called to bring hundreds of thousands of working people and youth into the streets behind the striking workers. Preparations should begin to widen the industrial action until all of the employers' demands for give-backs and concessions are dropped.

The provocative actions of the supermarket chains and the MTA expose the real agenda of those forces, such as multimillionaire congressman Darrell Issa, who financed and spearheaded the recall drive. Behind the phony populist slogans of Arnold Schwarzenegger stand the corporate CEOs who are determined to place the full burden of the crisis not only of California, but the entire profit system, on the backs of the working people. For them, even the pliant tool of big business, Gray Davis, was insufficiently bloodthirsty.

They want nothing less than the destruction of all that remains of

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the gains won by working people in decades of struggle. In their boardrooms and exclusive clubs, they hark back to the 1920s and 1930s, when workers had no rights and labor was disorganized and dirt cheap. Their political spokesmen take their lead from the reactionaries in the Bush White House.

For their part, Davis, Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante, senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, and the rest of the Democratic politicians demonstrate by their silence their subordination to the same corporate oligarchy. They and their party represent but another section of the corporate elite, together with the privileged and pampered upper crust of Hollywood, Malibu and similar pockets of affluence.

These, together with the corporate-controlled media, are the forces arrayed against the striking workers. The workers' struggles are, at heart, political, because the issues at stake are universal and go to the central question facing all working people: Are they to sacrifice their basic interests—secure and decent-paying jobs, health care, housing, education, pensions—to satisfy the requirements of a system that subordinates all human needs to the accumulation of personal wealth and corporate profit?

Are they to sacrifice their living standards and democratic rights—and the lives and limbs of their sons and daughters—to sustain an illegal and imperialist war in Iraq and the future wars being planned by the Republican and Democratic representatives of the oil bosses, bankers and stock market speculators?

I say the answer is "no!" That is why, in my campaign for governor of California in the recall election, I called for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq.

I placed at the center of my campaign the fight for a break with the Democratic and Republican parties and the building of the Socialist Equality Party as the independent political party of the working class.

The resources exist to provide secure jobs, good pay and guaranteed health care for all. I advanced the demand for a radical restructuring of tax policy to reduce the burden on workers and small and medium-sized businesses, and sharply increase taxes on the large corporations and the very wealthy.

I put forward a Bill of Social Rights for the working class that called for the guaranteed right of workers to join a union and control the union democratically, and the outlawing of union-busting tactics and wage-cutting.

I further called for the transformation of big corporations—such as the energy monopolies, insurance giants, and major computer and telecommunications firms—into publicly owned and democratically controlled utilities, so that the social wealth produced by the working class can be used for the benefit of the masses of people, instead of the privileged few.

The fight for these policies is a political fight. Their implementation requires the unification of the working people in their own party to fight for political power.

It is necessary to issue a blunt warning: the unions, including the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), and the AFL-CIO as a whole, are opposed to such a struggle. They have collaborated with the employers to impose one concession after another on their own members, and in the current struggles are once again seeking to isolate the striking workers. The leaders of both the UFCW and the ATU have declared their readiness to accept new contract concessions.

The union officials are prepared to stand by while the supermarket chains hire new strikebreakers every day and gradually build up their consumer traffic and revenues—this despite the existence of broad public sympathy for the grocery workers.

The treachery of the trade union leadership flows from its policy of support for the Democratic Party and opposition to the building of an independent political movement of the working class. This policy—as was once again demonstrated in the debacle of the unions' campaign for Davis and Bustamante in the recall election—leaves the working people without an effective means of resisting the attacks of the employers and the most right-wing forces within the political establishment.

I urge rank-and-file workers to oppose the capitulatory policy of their leaders. Organize democratically controlled committees of the members to fight for the mobilization of the working class public behind the transit and supermarket struggles. Fight for rank-and-file negotiating teams, fully accountable to the membership.

Above all, fight for a new strategy: the political independence of the working class from the parties of big business, and a socialist program to meet the needs of workers and their families.

The current labor struggles vindicate the analysis made by the Socialist Equality Party during the course of my campaign. The SEP issued a statement explaining that behind the fiscal crisis and recall drive were mounting social and class tensions. The supermarket and transit battles are a foretaste of broader social struggles to come under the Schwarzenegger administration.

The capitalist profit system is demonstrating once again that it cannot provide for the basic needs of the vast majority of the people. The answer to this crisis is the building of the Socialist Equality Party as the mass party of the working class. I urge all striking and locked-out grocery and transit workers, and their supporters among California's working families and students, to consider carefully the program I advanced in my campaign and make the decision to join the SEP.

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