

Speech to SEP meeting in Los Angeles

“The answer to the crisis is a socialist political movement to fight for power”

John Christopher Burton
7 October 2003

We are publishing here the speech given by Socialist Equality Party gubernatorial candidate John Christopher Burton to a public meeting of the SEP held in Los Angeles on Sunday, October 5. Burton, a civil rights attorney in LA, is running as a replacement candidate in the October 7 California recall election. The meeting was entitled “The Crisis in California: a Socialist Policy for Working People.” For a report on the meeting, see “SEP meeting addresses political issues facing workers in California recall election”.

I would like to highlight some of the more important political issues that arose and some of the experiences we had during our campaign.

The Socialist Equality Party, through the *World Socialist Web Site* and our branch here in Los Angeles, has been following the development of California’s political and economic crisis, so we were neither surprised nor unprepared for the special election on the recall of Governor Gray Davis. We recognized that the unusual rules that pertain to a recall election presented us with an unprecedented opportunity to intervene. But for our intervention to be politically meaningful, rather than simply empty activism, we had to proceed from the outset on the basis of a historically grounded analysis of the crisis in California and a thoroughly worked out perspective for resolving the crisis in the interests of the working class.

California is the most populous and wealthiest state in the country. It has the world’s fifth largest economy. Perhaps nowhere else in the world are the contradictions of world capitalism more sharp. Next to huge personal fortunes we have widespread unemployment, homelessness and despair. While giants of entertainment, finance, trade and technology rake in billions, both the state and local governments are bankrupt. The existing tax structure, which bears down most heavily on working families, can no longer support basic social services such as education and health care.

It is absurd to ascribe the situation in California solely to mismanagement by Gray Davis. The social and political crisis in California is a concentrated expression of a deepening crisis of the capitalist system both in the United States and internationally. This is the point of departure for our campaign.

California boomed during the years following World War II, when it epitomized what some called “the American Century.” Illusions cultivated by the rapid growth of manufacturing jobs, suburbs, and freeways were exposed in the 1960s by the Watts riot and the catastrophic imperialist war in Vietnam. By the 1970s, the tightening economic noose and exodus of manufacturing jobs increased pressure on working class and middle-class families, who at the time funded local social services largely through a regressive property tax on their homes.

In 1978, reactionary politicians tapped the anger and concern over property taxes to enact Proposition 13, which placed severe limits on the ability of state and local governments to raise revenue for funding social programs.

Over the next 25 years, California’s public education system, once among the best in the nation, degenerated into one of the worst. Students seeking higher education have seen their fees increased time and again, while the programs offered are reduced. Life-saving health care has become inaccessible for more and more people, as budget shortfalls force the closures of facilities on which many depend.

To a certain extent, during the 1990s the growth of the technology industry, particularly in the Silicon Valley, offset the slump by increasing the productivity of labor and generating huge profits which created a temporary budget surplus. But that was not to last.

After California voters rejected George Bush in the 2000 presidential election by a large margin, Texas-based energy traders, in particular Enron, manufactured an energy crisis to loot the state treasury of billions and drastically increase energy costs throughout California. With the accompanying deflation of the dot.com bubble and Republicans using Proposition 13 to block all tax increases, the state quickly developed a huge deficit. This was not a local phenomenon, however. There are 36 other states with similar shortfalls, and in Washington the Bush administration is recklessly generating record deficits to fund its militarism abroad and tax cuts for the rich at home.

Right-wing Republicans used concerns over the budget crisis as well as widespread confusion over its origins and significance to engineer the recall election. Their aim is to undo the results of the 2002 gubernatorial election, in which the voters rejected the pro-big business nostrums of Bill Simon, the California politician whose policies are most closely associated with those of the Bush administration. Using California’s liberal recall provisions, they collected over a million signatures, primarily with professional signature gatherers paid by Republican multi-millionaire Darrell Issa.

The Socialist Equality Party recognized the need to run a candidate both to oppose the recall and to provide a socialist alternative for the voters, should the recall succeed. Abstention was never an option.

I am proud that the Socialist Equality Party endorsed my candidacy, and I am honored that I have been able to participate in its campaign as the candidate.

We began in early August with extraordinary efforts by comrades and supporters throughout the state to collect signatures for the nominating papers. Within the space of only a few days, we collected almost twice the number of signatures required, turning them into registrars of voters in seven different counties.

At the same time, we established our campaign committee for fund-raising, and produced a candidate’s statement that has been mailed to each of the 12.5 million voters in the state. This brief document expressed in a nutshell the essence of our campaign.

First, despite our fundamental differences with Davis and the

Democrats, we unequivocally called for a “no” vote on the recall, correctly denouncing it as a right-wing effort to subvert democratic processes in order to install an administration in Sacramento even more willing than Davis to slash social programs and cut taxes for the wealthy.

Our principled opposition to the recall set us apart from the two so-called “major” candidates running against the Democrats and Republicans. The Green Party’s Peter Camejo supported the recall while the petitioning was still ongoing. Camejo cynically used the recall to establish himself and the Greens as an electoral fixture. Posturing as being slightly to the left of the Democrats, Camejo aided the right wing by blaming the deficit entirely on Davis’ mismanagement. Then, last weekend, when opinion polls showed the Republican front-runner Arnold Schwarzenegger ousting the Democrats and capturing the state house, Camejo told his supporters that he would “understand” their voting for the leading Democratic replacement candidate, Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante.

Arianna Huffington tacitly supported the recall until last weekend, when she withdrew from the race, announced her opposition to the recall and openly allied herself with Davis, whom she had up to then repeatedly denounced as a captive of “special interests.”

In opposing the recall, we offer no support to the Democrats who, in the final analysis, represent the interests of the same ruling elite as the Republicans. This bipartisan conspiracy leaves the vast majority of people with no political voice outside of the Socialist Equality Party.

Its pitiful response to the recall election itself demonstrates that the Democratic Party cannot offer the working class any sort of meaningful alternative. The power of the Republican right is due far more to the collapse of liberalism and the Democrats than to any popular support for the reactionary policies of the Republicans.

The ballot statement elaborates a central theme of our campaign: that the current crisis is the result of policies that serve the interests of multi-billion dollar corporations and the very wealthy, and that we oppose all proposals to solve the crisis by imposing new burdens on working people, students and small business owners.

Ours was the only ballot statement to draw the connection between the crisis in California and the criminal intervention of the Bush administration in Iraq. I made a special point throughout the campaign, during every media and speaking appearance, to explicitly place the demand for the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan at the center of the campaign. That, more than anything else I said, generated enthusiastic applause.

Ours was the only campaign to issue a comprehensive analysis of the crisis in California along with specific proposals for resolving the crisis in the interests of the working class. Proceeding from the acute contradiction between the accumulation of private wealth by an increasingly isolated oligarchy and the needs of the broad public, the Socialist Equality Party issued a detailed statement on the California recall election, which explained the origins of the crisis and outlined a program for its resolution based on social need, not profit.

Early in the campaign, I received my invitation as a candidate to attend the *Tonight Show* with Jay Leno. The TV personality had allowed Arnold Schwarzenegger to announce his candidacy on his show.

Leno’s invitation stated that we candidates would be “recognized as a group.” I responded with an open letter denouncing this effort to depict the election as a circus. This is precisely what happened, as Leno used the show to belittle the 90 candidates who did choose to appear.

Leno’s antics were symptomatic of a determined media effort to shore up the disintegrating two-party system by ridiculing and ignoring the other candidates in this election. Thus, we were largely excluded from coverage by the big business media. I was, however, interviewed by KABC, and appeared on the local Fox affiliate, KTTV, where, surprisingly, I was treated with respect. I also appeared on radio shows and cable-access

television stations throughout the state.

In addition to media appearances, I spoke regularly to college students, including a very successful appearance at Santa Monica Community College which was reported on the *World Socialist Web Site*. I spoke once to a rather raucous, but enthusiastic, assembly of high school students in Reseda.

Because we are still a relatively small party in terms of numbers, it is sometimes difficult to appreciate the impact our perspective has on people. Everywhere I appeared during the campaign, including on panels with other candidates, our party’s policies immediately became the focus of attention, including among our enemies. Camera operators, technicians, teachers and students all approached me after appearances to express how grateful they were for our campaign, many pointing out that we were articulating their own thoughts. Of course, there were different views as well. One right-wing Republican candidate, during a taping for Adelphia last week, offered to punch me in the nose.

We have a receptive audience among California’s students and workers. There is a great deal of political confusion, but they are angry about the war, the budget cuts and the incessant immigrant-bashing. They are deeply concerned about their future. It is up to us in this room to clear up the confusion and channel their anger into the building of the Socialist Equality Party.

One interesting appearance I made was at a debate sponsored by the Peace and Freedom Party in Oakland. It was located in a messy, dilapidated hall—not a nice hotel conference room such as this—which in itself demonstrates how unserious these people are in developing a meaningful political relationship with the working class.

The only other candidate at the debate was C.T. Weber, the nominee of the Peace and Freedom Party. Camejo was slated to attend, but sent a representative instead. Joel Britton of the Socialist Workers Party refused to attend. In any event, this debate highlighted the differences between us and all others who claim to represent socialism or the working class.

The representative from the Greens was pathetic. He repeatedly distanced himself from positions publicly taken by Camejo and conceded that the Greens were so loosely knit and heterogeneous that they could not reach decisions on important issues, such as whether to oppose the recall. Offering no policies or program, Camejo’s representative said that the Greens deserved support solely because Camejo had been invited to participate in the major candidates’ debates and had become the most visible “third party” candidate.

Weber described the Peace and Freedom Party as a “multi-tendency” amalgamation of different left groups. It embraces organizations with Stalinist roots, others that are reformist, and others that are based on identity politics. When he listed matters the Peace and Freedom Party supports, he included socialism about three-fourths of the way down his list, as something equivalent to the others—feminism, gay rights, environmentalism—not as the foundation of the political program for the working class to take power.

Weber displayed an unserious attitude toward questions of history and principle. Admitting that the groups within the Peace and Freedom Party could not agree on a program, he invited us to join, solely on the pragmatic basis that their party had ballot status in California. Needless to say, we declined.

The debate followed an all-day conference that the organizers had held on democratizing the unions. Weber himself is an official with the California State Employees Association. Ultimately, the perspective of radical and ex-radical groups for “democratizing” the unions through some form of rank-and-file syndicalism boils down to entering into unprincipled alliances with left-talking union bureaucrats who, in the final analysis, support the Democrats. It has nothing in common with a fight for the political independence of the working class.

My opening statement in the debate took on the fetishistic attitude

toward the unions so prevalent in the milieu of the Peace and Freedom Party and similar organizations. I pointed to the role of the AFL-CIO unions in California in blocking any serious struggle by the workers against the budget cuts and layoffs carried out by the Davis administration. By allying themselves with a right-wing Democratic administration, the unions had given the Republican right a free hand to exploit the anger and frustration of millions of people and channel it in a reactionary direction, through the recall drive.

I explained that these organizations had long ago repudiated the militant traditions associated with the birth of the industrial unions in the US. They had embraced corporatism, an ideology of unlimited class collaboration that transformed the unions into appendages of corporate management and the state. This relationship was fostered by the trade union bureaucracy, which benefits financially from its partnership with big business.

The failure of the official trade unions is not simply an American fact. It is a world-wide reality. Its roots are objective: the inability of organizations predicated on a national program to respond to the challenges of an increasingly globalized capitalist economy.

One member of the Oakland audience asserted that unions were the only place in contemporary America where workers are organized as a class. This is an utterly false and reactionary perspective. How can workers be organized “as a class” through the unions when the unions are allied with the political representatives of the capitalist class that exploits the workers?

As far as the speaker was concerned, the organization of workers “as a class” had nothing to do with the level of political consciousness of the workers. In reality, the unions function to reinforce anti-socialist and anti-revolutionary conceptions—such as individualism, nationalism and opportunism—among the workers.

This assertion of trade unionism as the embodiment of class consciousness is foreign to Marxism and the political and theoretical traditions of the socialist workers’ movement. It betrays a contemptuous attitude to the critical struggle to bring socialist consciousness into the working class.

We conceive of the organization of workers “as a class” in a fundamentally different way. For us, this phrase means the emergence of the working class as a politically independent and self-conscious actor on the stage of history. This can be achieved only through the building of a mass socialist political party of the working people.

Thus, throughout my campaign, I maintained that the answer for the working class to the crisis, not only in California, but nationally and internationally, is the development of an independent and socialist *political* movement to fight for power.

I’d like to take a moment to discuss some of the opportunities which arose during the campaign for us to intervene in unfolding events.

Just as we were beginning the campaign, the huge power blackout hit the Northeast and Midwest. We alone issued a comprehensive statement, drawing the connection between the systematic deregulation of energy which led to California’s 2001 energy crisis and the disintegrating infrastructure responsible for the 2003 outage.

In response to Bush’s request for \$87 billion to fund the colonial-style occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, we demanded a halt to the slaughter in Iraq and the looting of America. This stood in sharp contrast to Bustamante, Huffington and Camejo, who scrupulously avoided mentioning Iraq throughout their campaigns.

When the three-judge panel of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ordered that the election could not take place until voting equipment was updated, we supported the decision’s defense of the democratic right of people to cast ballots that will in fact be counted. But we were able to draw a more profound lesson—that the class tensions underlying contemporary American life have become so intense that the very ability of the state to hold elections is becoming increasingly tenuous.

We issued an important statement on last month’s bipartisan attack on people suffering from work-related injuries. The Democratic and Republican leaderships in Sacramento spent months at loggerheads over the budget, with the Republicans’ vicious recall campaign looming in the background. Yet when Costco and Boeing threatened to move their operations out of state if workers’ compensation insurance premiums were not reduced, both the Democratic and Republican leadership joined forces to slash benefits for the most seriously injured workers.

Just last week, we issued a statement calling for a “no” vote on Proposition 54, the so-called racial privacy initiative. I announced our statement and explained our position at a meeting of the Chapman University multi-cultural club in Orange County. After denouncing the initiative, a know-nothing measure which prohibits compiling racial and ethnic data to study the existence and effects of discrimination, I criticized affirmative action for accepting limits dictated by the corporate elite on the availability of jobs and education. I received a huge ovation when I called for taking some of the billions earmarked for Iraq and pouring them into the state’s school system.

Our program is not to integrate the privileged elite. It is to transfer the political power from that elite to the already integrated California working class.

This campaign has generated a very powerful response from good, intelligent working people of all ages and from all walks of life, people who are genuinely horrified by the explosion of US militarism, threatened by corporate downsizing and the loss of social services, and concerned with the deepening assault on democratic rights. Many are in this room right now. You prove that the basis is now emerging for a mass socialist movement of the working class.

While we are not indifferent to the results of Tuesday’s election, we know that whatever happens, the crisis will deepen, as Davis, Schwarzenegger or Bustamante leads more attacks against the working class. The inevitable result of Tuesday’s election will be even more favorable conditions for the development of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*. I urge everyone in this room to join this struggle which, in the long run, will free all of humanity from the crushing burdens of imperialism and oligarchy, and will allow all human beings to live comfortable and fulfilling lives.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact