

# SEP meeting addresses political issues facing workers in California recall election

David Walsh  
7 October 2003

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a highly successful meeting in downtown Los Angeles on October 5, “The Crisis in California: A Socialist Policy for Working People.” The meeting was the culmination of the SEP’s two-month campaign for a “no” vote in the October 7 recall election—organized by right-wing Republicans and aimed at ousting Democratic Governor Gray Davis—and in support of John Christopher Burton, a civil rights lawyer and SEP supporter running as a replacement candidate for governor.

While opposing the recall, Burton has given no support to Davis or any of the Democratic or Republican candidates running to replace him. He has advanced a socialist alternative to all of the parties and candidates that defend the profit system.

Participants at the meeting came from Los Angeles, Pomona and Irvine in southern California and Palo Alto, Santa Cruz and Sacramento in the northern part of state. There were also attendees from Portland, Oregon and Las Vegas, Nevada. Supporters of the SEP from the East Coast and Midwest were also in attendance. Addressing the gathering were Burton, Barry Grey, who is a member of the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board, and WSWs International Editorial Board Chairman David North.

Burton began by explaining that the SEP campaign against the recall and for a socialist alternative to Davis was already a success, regardless of the outcome October 7. “We don’t measure our success by the number of votes,” he said, “but by the impact that our campaign has had on the most politically conscious and selfless layers of the population. Your attendance here today amply demonstrates the degree of this impact, and I applaud you.”

Burton reiterated the SEP’s view of the source of the California crisis, noting that it was absurd to ascribe the disastrous situation in the state simply to the mismanagement of the Davis administration. “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,” he told the audience.

The socialist candidate for governor added forcefully, “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.”

(Burton’s speech is published in full on the WSWs. See “The answer to the crisis is a socialist political movement to fight for power”.)

Barry Grey of the WSWs described the California recall as an “important episode in American politics and a significant political experience for the working class, not only in California, but nationally, and indeed internationally.” He explained that the California events had revealed “the depth of the crisis of the American political system and the

socio-economic order which it serves.”

Grey commented that the SEP from the outset was determined, in opposition to every other political party and tendency running in the recall election, to place the California vote in its proper international and historical context, as well as to conduct a campaign on the highest political and theoretical level. It was the only campaign, he observed, that “appealed to people’s capacity to think.”

Grey proceeded to discuss some of the critical political events that had occurred during the recall campaign. First, he analyzed the growing crisis of the Bush administration as it becomes more and more deeply embroiled in a quagmire in Iraq, under conditions of a massive budget deficit and slumping popular support. He pointed to the crisis surrounding the outing of the CIA agent wife of Ambassador Joseph Wilson by Bush officials as a symptom of the “ferocious conflict” erupting within the state apparatus itself.

Referring to the 135 candidates who achieved ballot status in the recall election, the WSWs commentator noted that this fact “in its own way ... reflected the weakening of the grip of the two-party system.” He explained how the media had attempted to belittle the recall election in an effort to ridicule the so-called “minor” candidates and steer the election back into the safe channels of the existing political set-up.

Grey spent some time discussing the controversy surrounding the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals decisions as to whether the recall election should go ahead October 7, in light of the existence of outdated voting machines that would discount the votes of thousands of working class voters. First, a three-judge panel ordered a delay until more accurate balloting systems were in place; then this decision was overruled by a vote of 11-0 in the same court.

The experience demonstrated once again, he said, that the working class “cannot in the end rely on the courts to defend democratic rights.” The crisis surrounding the court rulings revealed, moreover, that political and social divisions were reaching such a level of intensity in the US that they could no longer be contained within the bounds of bourgeois democracy. The storm of controversy over the initial ruling delaying the election, and the rapid reversal of that ruling, highlighted the fact that the very holding of elections in the US had become problematical.

The recall election as a whole had underscored the decay of democratic institutions and the debased state of politics in the US, Grey declared. That a backward, reactionary individual like Arnold Schwarzenegger, “whose only firm view is the worship of power and wealth,” could be considered as a serious candidate to become governor of California “speaks volumes about the degradation of the American political system,” he said.

Grey concluded that a social explosion was inevitable and that a new road of struggle, represented by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*, had to be opened up for workers and youth.

WSWs Editorial Board Chairman David North began his remarks by observing that everyone in attendance knew that the SEP campaign was

fundamentally different from those conducted by other parties and individuals. What was not immediately apparent was why this is so, he said.

North noted the extraordinary power and range of the WSWS, which addressed central political, social and cultural questions every day in a variety of languages. “How is it possible? What lies behind this phenomenon?”

He said that it was not access to vast financial or human resources that made the WSWS possible. Rather, the international movement that published the socialist web site was “the product of the conscious assimilation of an historical experience that spans at least the twentieth century.”

North proceeded to discuss some of the critical strategic experiences of the international working class on which the SEP and WSWS base themselves.

He noted the 1903 split in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party that led to the emergence of the Bolshevik and Menshevik tendencies. This split brought to the fore the significance of the struggle for socialist consciousness in the working class and against opportunism in the workers’ movement.

October 1923, 80 years ago, was “another landmark date” in the history of the socialist movement: the publication of Leon Trotsky’s *The New Course* and the opening of the struggle against the growth of bureaucratism in the USSR.

Fifteen years later, in September 1938, Trotsky and his supporters established the Fourth International. One of the central theses of its founders was that the terrible defeats inflicted on the working class in Germany, France, Spain and elsewhere did not demonstrate the incapacity of the working class to perform its historic mission, but rather the worthlessness of the bureaucratic leaderships of the workers’ movement. Trotsky summed up the crisis of humanity as the crisis of revolutionary leadership in the working class.

Fifty years ago, North continued, the principled Trotskyists had been obliged to form the International Committee of the Fourth International after a considerable section of the movement had succumbed to “new illusions” in the supposedly revolutionary character of Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism.

In 1963, four decades ago, the ICFI had undergone a crisis when the American Socialist Workers Party broke with Trotskyism, arguing that figures like Fidel Castro in Cuba proved that “independent revolutionary parties of the working class were not necessary.”

This history, North suggested, might appear “interesting, but esoteric” to the audience. However, he noted that the present Green candidate for governor, Peter Camejo, was very much part of this history. Camejo became a leading member of the SWP’s Young Socialist Alliance (YSA) in the early 1960s after the Marxist tendency led at the time by Tim Wohlforth, to which the present SEP in the US traces its origins, was driven out of the YSA-SWP.

“When we trace back our struggle against opportunism, we find that we crossed swords many years ago” with Camejo, North said. The SEP was based on this entire political history of the struggle for the political independence of the working class. Some of those against whom we fought, he added, are now directly in “alliance with the bourgeois parties.”

Without an understanding of this complex history, there were those who succumbed to “pessimism, cynicism, despair.” North said, “We reject such pessimism, and those who believe in the innate incapacity of the working class and the invincibility of capitalism.”

Social being, North remarked, is the ultimate source of social consciousness. The emerging conditions would inevitably generate the possibility of a new mass movement. “There will be no shortage of possibilities,” he said. Our movement has to be prepared for the political,

intellectual and moral demands that the crisis will place on it.

The WSWS editorial board chairman pointed to the horrifying conditions in post-Stalinist Russia as one expression of an international trend: the attempt on the part of international capital to “erase the consequences of the twentieth century.” This, he argued, would lead to mass struggles.

In the question period a host of issues were raised. One questioner indicated he wanted to “learn more about the process of revolution in today’s society.” A second asked about the decline of the trade unions, and why the speakers had insisted on the objective character of this degeneration. Other questions included: What was the underlying cause of social inequality? Why was the nation-state unviable? Why were lasting social reforms impossible?

North addressed a number of these interrelated questions. He pointed out that the process of revolution in today’s society was related to the nature of world capitalism. He explained that revolution was an objective process in the sense that its emergence was not contingent, in the first place, on human consciousness. World capitalism had become increasingly global, making all national programs obsolete, as wages were no longer established on a national basis, but on a global scale. Insofar as workers based themselves on a national strategy, they were unable to respond to the evolution of global capitalism.

North suggested that the failure of trade unionism had to be sought in something beside the subjective perfidy of its leadership. Trade unions were based on an acceptance of the wage relationship, i.e., on an acceptance of exploitation, and trade union “success” on the existence of protected national markets. The global character of world economy had undermined the “defensive role” of the old trade unions.

In response to a question about the character of post-revolutionary society, North replied that the problem could only be discussed in general terms. The first priority, he suggested, would be the struggle to eliminate poverty and the most degrading forms of human misery, and this could be done “relatively quickly.” In general, economic life would have to be oriented to the satisfaction of broad social needs. We will witness, he remarked, the “flowering of genuine popular democracy.”

The reports and discussion were treated with considerable seriousness by those in attendance, who contributed generously to the WSWS fund and purchased \$325 in literature. The work of the SEP and the WSWS on the West Coast has been immensely strengthened by the campaign of John Christopher Burton and the meeting with which it concluded.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**