

Presidential hopeful Howard Dean speaks in Detroit: reformism without reforms

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Howard Dean, the leading contender for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, made a campaign stop in Detroit December 29 to outline his proposals to address the social crisis in America's cities. The event, billed by the Dean campaign as a major policy initiative, received considerable local and national media attention, including coverage by the *Washington Post*.

Politically telling was the presence of certain people at the event and the absence of others. The bitter divisions within the Democratic Party over Dean's candidacy—and in particular his criticism of Bush's launching of the war in Iraq—were reflected in the virtual boycott of the event by the local Democratic establishment. Noticeably absent were Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, members of the city council and other local Democratic insiders and powerbrokers, including officials from the Detroit-based United Auto Workers union.

The only prominent Democrat present was Congressman John Conyers, a longtime leader of the Congressional Black Caucus, who officially endorsed Dean's bid for the nomination at the end of the meeting. In an oblique reference to the venomous attacks against Dean launched by Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry and his other rivals, Conyers appealed for a "fair exchange of views" among the candidates who, he said, represented "every viewpoint in the Democratic compass."

The meeting was primarily a stage-managed media event. Little was done to attract ordinary working people from Detroit—one of the poorest urban centers in America—or even college students, despite the widespread antiwar sentiment on the campuses. No questions were permitted from the audience and once Dean's speech was finished he posed for a series of photographs with Conyers and other supporters and then was whisked away by his campaign handlers.

The bulk of those in attendance—the crowd numbered no more than 200 people—were low-level officials from trade unions such as the Service Employees International Union that have endorsed Dean, small business types, particularly black entrepreneurs from the Detroit area, and campaign insiders. Members of the media made up almost 20 percent of those present.

Twenty-five or thirty years ago the appearance in Detroit of

the leading Democratic candidate for the party's presidential nomination would have drawn large crowds of working class and middle class supporters. The decades-long shift to the right by the Democrats, however, has drastically undermined the base of support the party once enjoyed in the working class.

In his speech the former Vermont governor criticized Bush's tax policy and other pro-business measures, such as Medicare "reform," for polarizing American society. He pointed to the escalating social crisis in urban America since Bush had come to office, citing the loss of 2.9 million private sector jobs in US, including 83,000 in the Detroit area alone. Last year, he said, more than 1.7 million Americans were added to the poverty rolls and in the state of Michigan alone more than a million people were living below the poverty line.

The impact on minorities was particularly acute, he said, citing the fact that nearly one out of three young African Americans were unemployed and that more than a quarter million additional African Americans of all ages were without jobs since 2001. In addition, Dean said, the unemployment rate among Latinos had jumped 27 percent since January 2001.

Dean's prescription to address this social catastrophe, however, was a series of timid proposals that decades ago would have been advanced by the conservative wing of the Democratic Party. Much of his program is a rehash of measures taken by the Clinton administration to provide capital, tax credits and Affirmative Action set-asides to minority-owned businesses. Dean also said he would revive Clinton's New Market Tax Credit, an incentive aimed at attracting investors to inner-city "empowerment zones" featuring low-wages and few taxes and regulations.

One of Dean's major proposals is raising the minimum wage to \$7 an hour, a level it will reach in his home state of Vermont in January 2005. But such an increase—from the present \$5.15 an hour—would provide workers with an annual wage of well below \$15,260, the US government's own poverty threshold for a family of three.

Dean made a point of hailing former president Clinton's record, saying, "In the 1990s, under Clinton and Gore America cities and inner cities made significant and powerful strides in housing, jobs and safety. There was a lot more to do, and it wasn't the right time, but unfortunately the Supreme Court

chose to change our course for us.”

In fact, until the Bush administration, the Clinton years saw the greatest growth in social inequality in American history. According to an analysis of Internal Revenue Service data, the average income for the bottom 90 percent of the population rose only 1.6 percent during the 1990s, compared to an 89 percent increase for the top 1 percent. At the same time the most privileged layers of the minority population enriched themselves during the stock market boom while the vast majority of blacks and Hispanics suffered from stagnant wages and the destruction of social programs such as welfare.

During the Detroit meeting Dean proposed a “\$100 billion fund to Restore America” to create 1 million jobs in the first two years. The focus of this program, he said, was “small business” because, he said, “they create 70 percent of the new jobs and they don’t move their jobs out of their communities.” He also said he would set up a “small business capital corporation” to provide “\$1 billion in new loans, especially for urban startups, to create 100,000 small business jobs in the first three years.” In particular, he said, he wanted to help minority business owners “get capital and reduce paperwork,” noting that the highest percentage of people who own their own small businesses and who work for them were African Americans and Latinos.

While Dean’s proposals might provide a windfall for a thin layer of the middle class, they would do little or nothing to improve the conditions of the working class. The idea that the economic fortunes of America’s cities and the decades-long decline of workers’ living standards can be reversed by opening up a few minority-owned gas stations, restaurants, retail stores and others businesses providing low-paying service jobs is absurd on its face. Cities like Detroit, Chicago, New York and Los Angeles have been decimated by the destruction of hundreds of thousands of industrial and other jobs, while their social services have been slashed due to two decades of tax breaks and other pro-business measures carried out by Democratic and Republican administrations alike.

Any serious program to defend jobs and living standards would require asserting the social interests of the working class against the profit interests of big business. Moreover, a vast investment of public funds would be needed to overcome homelessness, poverty, chronic unemployment, and the decaying schools and urban infrastructure.

But Dean rejects out of hand any serious inroads into private wealth in the US through instituting a genuinely progressive income tax, let alone threatening the economic monopoly enjoyed by the wealthy elite. Rather than substantially increasing taxes on the rich he simply calls for a rollback of Bush’s tax breaks. This, he does, not from the standpoint of significantly increasing public spending for social programs, but to the balance the federal budget, saying, “People won’t invest in countries with big deficits because they can’t make any money.”

Significantly, although Dean became the Democratic frontrunner chiefly by opposing the launching of the war in Iraq, at the Detroit meeting he said nothing about Iraq. But how can any one seriously address the massive social crisis in America without stopping the squandering of tens of billions of dollars to maintain the illegal occupation of Iraq? The reason for Dean’s silence on this question is obvious. Although he opposed the launching of the war he has repeatedly said that the maintenance of the US occupation is critical for national security. In doing so he expresses the general consensus among the Democratic politicians, who all defend the interest of American imperialism.

In addition to minority businessmen, the other major constituency to which the Dean campaign appeals in Michigan is the bureaucracy of the AFL-CIO trade unions. During the Detroit meeting Dean turned to the union officials in the audience and said his administration would guarantee projects for construction unions and facilitate union organizing drives by backing such measures as card check-offs, which allow unionization of private employers without a formal vote. Such measures have nothing to do with improving the lot of ordinary workers. On the contrary, they are a perk for the union bureaucracy aimed at offsetting the massive loss of union membership—caused by the AFL-CIO’s treacherous policies and collaboration with the employers—and guarantee a continued flow of dues income to the union officialdom.

Dean’s criticisms of Bush have generated some support, particularly from Democrats who have become disaffected with the party’s accommodation to Bush’s right-wing agenda. Dean and the major Democrats who have backed him, including 2000 presidential candidate Al Gore, recognize that this lack of opposition threatens to render the party useless as a means of directing opposition to the status quo into harmless channels.

But Dean’s program of so-called reforms demonstrates that every wing of the Democratic Party is wedded to big business and the profit system and is incapable of offering any serious alternative to the Bush administration’s policies of war and social reaction. In the end, Dean and his Democratic Party supporters are motivated by a fear that the social and political polarization created by Bush’s agenda will provoke a social movement that will bypass the Democrats and threaten the economic and political domination of the wealthy elite.



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