

Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Bill Van Auken addresses WSW-SEP conference

“A voice for the international working class in the 2004 US elections”

18 March 2004

Today we are publishing the remarks of SEP presidential candidate Bill Van Auken to the conference on “The 2004 US Election: the Case for a Socialist Alternative” held by the World Socialist Web Site and the Socialist Equality Party on March 13-14 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. A summary account of the event was published March 15, and the opening report to the conference by WSW-SEP International Editorial Board Chairman and SEP (US) National Secretary David North was posted March 17. In the coming days we will continue our coverage of this important political event, including the speech delivered by SEP vice presidential candidate, Jim Lawrence.

The Socialist Equality Party is intervening in the 2004 election in order to provide a political voice and program for the international working class. We will insist throughout this campaign that there are no solutions to the immense problems confronting working people in the US outside of a policy and program that begin from uniting their struggles with those of workers and oppressed all around the globe against the world capitalist system.

Our election platform makes the point that, given the impact of US policies on the world's 6.3 billion people, it would be entirely appropriate to propose that the election of the US president be opened up to working people all over the planet.

Millions upon millions of people around the globe find themselves subjected to dictates from Washington with no say in the matter. Decisions taken by the US government and by US-based banks and transnational corporations spell economic deprivation and hunger for masses of people in Latin America, Africa and Asia, while the Pentagon sets rules of engagement that mean death for men, women and children in Iraq, Afghanistan, Haiti and elsewhere.

Our party will place these issues at the center of our campaign. We are striving through this intervention to forge, together with our comrades organized in Socialist Equality parties in Europe, South Asia, Australia and Canada, a genuinely worldwide movement against imperialism, based upon the independent political mobilization of the working class.

This year's election takes places in the shadow of a global eruption of American militarism. Having waged two wars in two-and-a-half years, the Bush administration has now occupied Haiti, after carrying out a filthy coup d'état which in its cynicism and brutality can be compared only to the gangster methods employed by Hitler's regime in Europe.

A gang of gunmen led by well-known assassins and torturers from previous dictatorships was armed and financed by the CIA and unleashed upon the country. US officials threatened the country's elected president, Jean Bertrand Aristide, with being massacred by these thugs. He was then bundled into an airplane at gunpoint and flown to Africa, where he was kept under house arrest. This was all justified because, in the words of

Richard Cheney, Aristide had “worn out his welcome.”

This is the clearest manifestation of resurgent imperialism and colonialism on a world scale. Washington arrogates to itself the right to depose whomever it sees fit, occupy territory and install puppet regimes. Nothing could more clearly expose the farcical character of the Bush administration's claims that its interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan are part of some global crusade for democracy.

How is this resurgent imperialism to be combated? Those who are attempting to corral the movement in opposition to war within the confines of the Democratic Party are only helping to prepare the next bloody intervention.

There are those who claim that our participation in the election—and indeed that of any party other than the Democrats—is a diversion from the supposed task at hand, evicting George W. Bush from the White House. We answer without hesitation that, on the contrary, our campaign is the most decisive factor in this election and the only vehicle for waging a real struggle against the Bush administration. Those who are flogging votes for the Democrats as a supposed means of fighting war and repression are either wasting their time or are engaged in conscious deception. We are preparing the future, creating the political weapons that the working class will require no matter which of these two parties is victorious in November.

We reject the claim that all politics must be subordinated to the mantra of “Anybody but Bush” and insist that a Democratic victory in the presidential election will not shift the fundamental trajectory of American imperialism. That will be achieved only by means of a social revolution.

Let us pose some questions. Is the belligerent foreign policy pursued by Washington over the past three years merely the product of the White House having been seized by an unelected, criminal gang bent on war? Or is it to be explained as simply the carrying into practice of the pathological theories of a cabal known as the neo-conservatives, who have somehow latched onto the levers of power in Washington? In other words, is the violent eruption of American militarism, the embarking on wars of aggression and the conquest of what amounts to a colonial empire, an aberration that will be swept aside once these gangsters are defeated at the polls?

We reject such a thesis, which is embraced by not a few so-called leftists as a justification for lining up behind the Democratic presidential candidate Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts.

The rise of Bush—the semi-literate sadist—and the influence wielded by elements like Wolfowitz and Perle, who before championing the war on Iraq were advocates of nuclear war against the Soviet Union, is the symptom, not the cause, of a deep-going and systemic crisis of American imperialism.

The war and occupation in Iraq are not merely an isolated colonial episode. Nor is the so-called “war on terrorism” just the product of the fevered brains of Bush, Cheney and Ashcroft. Rather, the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, the global eruption of American militarism and the wholesale assault on basic liberties are manifestations of deep and virulent contradictions that are wracking American society and its political system.

War, in the final analysis, is the means by which capitalism attempts to resolve these insoluble contradictions—in particular, the conflict between the world economy and the nation-state system.

We are now approaching the first anniversary of the war with Iraq. The US ruling elite has exerted every effort to assure that the coming presidential election does not provide the American people with a means of exerting its will—nor for that matter, even expressing its opposition—in relation to this war.

Both sides are agreed that it must continue, that US interests demand an ongoing occupation and more deaths, both US and Iraqi. That the present administration carried out a criminal war and lied to the American people in order to drag them into it has become almost a moot point for both the Democrats and the media.

Indeed, US Secretary of State Colin Powell appealed last week for a halt to any debate during the election over whether the administration lied to the American people on the question of weapons of mass destruction. He argued that to state the obvious—that the Bush White House launched an illegal war on false pretenses—was bad for the morale of American occupation troops. Not that Powell is motivated by concern for the well-being of the American men and women dispatched to conquer Iraq, over 560 of whom have lost their lives, while many thousands more have been wounded, maimed or left with psychological scars that will last a lifetime.

As for the tens of thousands of Iraqi men, women and children who were killed in this war—now acknowledged by even some of the administration’s closest supporters as unnecessary from the standpoint of the weapons of mass destruction pretext—they merit not even a mention in the presidential debate of the two capitalist parties.

What separates the Democrats and Republicans on these questions are largely issues of tactics—how best to advance the interests of US imperialism on the world stage. On the most essential issue of US foreign policy—the use of overwhelming American military might to reorganize the world in the interests of US-based corporations and banks and to further the massive accumulation of wealth by the country’s super-rich—there is fundamental unity.

An exhaustive discussion of the history of US foreign policy in relation to Iraq would itself require an entire conference. But even a cursory review makes clear that the war launched a year ago was the culmination of a protracted policy pursued by both Democratic and Republican administrations for close to a quarter century.

Going back to the Carter administration at the end of the 1970s, the crisis of the US economy combined with the twin shocks of the 1973 Arab oil boycott and the 1979 Iranian revolution gave rise to a policy of military buildup, in general, and plans for direct US military intervention in the Persian Gulf region, in particular.

The ex-president, who is now portrayed as the peace-loving Christian advocate of human rights, proclaimed a doctrine that asserted US capitalism’s right to unrestricted access to the Persian Gulf’s oil resources, and set about building the rapid deployment forces to seize the oil fields as needed. Likewise, he oversaw the CIA-backed war in Afghanistan that was to claim over a million lives and leave that country devastated, arming and financing the same Islamic fundamentalist forces that are now cast as the principal enemies in the US “war on terror.”

The next Democratic administration, headed by Bill Clinton, stubbornly prevented the lifting of economic sanctions against Iraq that starved the country of food, medicine and essential supplies and resulted in an

estimated 1 million deaths, over half of them children. As with the subsequent war itself, the reason for the US insistence on sanctions was not weapons of mass destruction, but rather US profit interests. Washington was determined to prevent its European rivals from gaining a dominant position in relation to Iraq’s oil reserves. Instead, it sought to prepare for a military intervention that would establish US hegemony over the region.

It was under Clinton—facilitated by the Soviet Union’s dissolution—that the doctrine of “regime change” was initiated. Despite the Republicans’ vilification of Clinton, the Bush administration never tires of pointing out that its policies in Iraq are a continuation of those begun by its predecessor.

The policies of both parties reflect a political consensus within the American ruling elite that the use of military power is the primary instrument for enforcing US global dominance against its economic rivals, and that the control of the world’s oil supplies is a necessary means to that end.

A revealing glimpse into the policies that would be followed by an incoming Kerry administration can be obtained through a reading of a series of documents drafted by the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), with which Kerry is affiliated.

Kerry distinguished himself from the majority of his rivals for the Democratic nomination by adopting the DLC’s position that the Democratic Party could not win elections by concentrating solely on domestic economic and social issues, but had to attack the Bush administration on the issue of national security—from the right.

The main document, entitled “Progressive Internationalism: Democratic National Security Strategy,” embraces the framework set by the Bush administration of a never-ending “war on terrorism.” It states: “Like the Cold War, the struggle we face today is likely to last not years, but decades. Once again, the United States must rally the forces of freedom and democracy around the world to defeat this new menace and build a better world.”

The document explicitly embraces the Bush administration’s doctrine of preemptive war, declaring, “Democrats will maintain the world’s most technologically advanced military, and we will not flinch from using it to defend our interests anywhere in the world.” It goes further, declaring, “Instead of relying only on military preemption of the use of WMD, Democrats would focus on preventing the acquisition of WMD.”

On the issue of the military budget, the document affirms: “We reject the left’s perennial complaint that America spends too much on the military. This is no time to cut the Pentagon’s budget.” This under conditions in which the annual spending on the US war machine is approaching half a trillion dollars, exceeding that of the world’s next 25 largest military powers combined. As the *Washington Post* pointed out last week, even Republican lawmakers are concluding that the current levels of military spending—which exceed those reached during Reagan’s massive nuclear arms buildup against the Soviet Union in the 1980s—are economically unsustainable.

The document elaborates in chilling terms a military strategy for global imperialist intervention in a section entitled, “Transform the Military and Use it More Effectively:”

“The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have shown that we need to enhance our ability to project power with deadly accuracy over enormous distances.”

The document calls for investment in “the next generation of precision munitions; unmanned aircraft and long-range bombers; light, mobile and more lethal ground forces, especially special operations; and on a new generation of naval vessels that can bring greater and more accurate firepower to distant theaters of conflict.”

In addition to demanding expanded operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq, the document calls for US to threaten North Korea that if it “resumes

production of nuclear weapons, the United States would be prepared to use force to protect its interests.”

Finally, the document states, “Democrats will bring an overdue sense of urgency to defending our homeland. We will not let bureaucratic inertia and turf-consciousness prevent us from creating America’s first-ever domestic intelligence organization.”

Where does one begin with such a statement? Under conditions in which the Bush administration has relentlessly terrorized the US population for two-and-a-half years with alleged threats of a new terrorist attack, the call for an “overdue sense of urgency” is indeed frightening. As is the call for a “domestic intelligence organization,” otherwise known the political police.

What has thus far prevented the emergence of such a body is not “turf consciousness,” but legal barriers put in place in the wake of the Watergate-era revelations concerning CIA dirty tricks and political spying on the anti-war movement, of which Kerry himself was then a part. The Bush administration has largely dismantled these barriers; now the Democrats propose their elimination altogether.

What is the real source of this demand for increased domestic surveillance and unrestricted police powers? As in the use of September 11 to justify longstanding US aims of global hegemony, the threat of a new terrorist attack is invoked as the pretext for domestic repression that has its real source in the profound contradictions rending US society.

The United States is the most socially unequal of all the advanced capitalist countries. It is a nation in which the income of the richest 13,000 families exceeds that of the poorest 20 million. The unprecedented concentration of wealth has created a society best described as an oligarchy, and a two-party political establishment that is committed to defending the wealth and privileges of a tiny elite. The nature of this society and of this political system is wholly incompatible with democratic rights, and requires for its defense police state methods.

This, then, is the real content of the slogans advanced by so-called leftists and liberals of “anybody but Bush” or “defeat Bush at all costs.” The conception that a Democratic victory will inaugurate some new era of international peace and democracy is a manifest fraud. The Clinton administration itself, it should be recalled, carried out more military interventions in its eight years in office than had been conducted by US military forces over the entire preceding post-World War II era—sending troops into Somalia, Haiti and the former Yugoslavia, and conducting aerial bombardments against Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan.

Even the conception that the defeat of Bush would turn back the clock to the year 2000 is an illusion. US imperialism has, so to speak, established facts on the ground—or, to use the fashionable expression of the new American empire, boots on the ground—in the oil-rich Persian Gulf and Caspian basin, and is not about to turn back now.

The program of unbridled militarism outlined by Kerry’s Democratic Leadership Council can only provoke even greater conflicts between the US and its existing and potential rivals. The inevitable logic of such antagonisms leads—unless the international working class intervenes and puts an end to imperialism—to even bloodier wars, and ultimately a nuclear Armageddon.

The Socialist Equality Party has placed at the center of its program the demand for the immediate withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq, Afghanistan, the rest of the Middle East and Central Asia—and now Haiti as well. We insist that those responsible for conspiring to wage unprovoked wars and carry out illegal coups must be tried for war crimes. And we call for dismantling the Pentagon war machine, the elimination of its weapons of mass destruction and the diversion of the vast sums now spent on arms to solving the fundamental social problems of jobs for the unemployed, universal health care and education, and to ameliorating the conditions of life in those lands ravaged by US militarism.

We recognize that the defeat of US imperialism is a world problem that

can be resolved only through the unification of the workers of every country, based on a common program and coordinated strategy.

A little over a year ago, global antiwar demonstrations brought over 10 million people into the streets all around the globe. No such worldwide demonstrations had ever been seen before in history, in terms of their vast scale and their international unity. At the time, the *New York Times*, in a rare moment of clarity, acknowledged that this mass outpouring signaled the emergence of “two superpowers—the United States government and world public opinion,” which were diametrically opposed to one another.

That the invasion of Iraq was carried out despite this overwhelming popular opposition has demonstrated that protest in and of itself cannot stop war. A different perspective is clearly required. In the current US election campaign, there are two alternatives presented. First, there is the attempt to line up this mass movement behind the Democratic Party, and thereby eviscerate it.

Our party’s intervention in the election advances an opposed perspective, one that consciously expresses the objective forces within capitalist society that gave rise to the massive international protests. These are to be found in the intensifying global integration of capitalist production that has emerged over the past quarter century. While deepening social inequality, these processes have also strengthened the objective unity of the international working class.

This objective unity must be made politically conscious. Social equality cannot be achieved in the US so long as transnational corporations and banks oppress and exploit working people in Latin America, Africa and every other part of the world. Moreover, the liberation of the masses in the former colonial and oppressed countries from destitution and war can be achieved only in alliance with the American working class in a common struggle to put an end to imperialism.

The issues posed by the US elections are world issues and require a world solution. The election campaign waged by the SEP must become the means for the most conscious sections of the working class internationally to intervene in the political situation here at the very center of world imperialism, as part of a worldwide offensive against war and for the socialist reorganization of society.

I urge everyone who has come to this conference to join the Socialist Equality Party in seizing the opportunity that the 2004 elections afford us for building a new mass movement of working people based on the program of international socialism, and thereby changing the world.



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