

WSWS-SEP conference

On the US election: “The two-party system is a two-headed monster”

29 March 2004

Today, we continue publishing the remarks and written contributions of delegates attending 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 WSWS International Editorial Board Chairman and SEP (US) National Secretary David North was posted March 17. Presidential candidate Bill Van Auken’s remarks were posted March 18, and vice-presidential candidate Jim Lawrence’s remarks were posted March 19.

Ed (Michigan)

On page one of our election statement, we state: “The Bush administration is, in the final analysis, the political expression of the desperation, disorientation and recklessness of the American ruling elite as it confronts a systemic social and economic crisis for which it has no rational, let alone, progressive, solution.”

I believe the phrase “in the final analysis” should be stricken, since one can readily see this apt description in practice. One doesn’t have to probe very deep, and nowhere is this recklessness and disorientation more apparent than in education.

On page four of the document, we further state: “But the defense of democratic rights cannot be limited to the negative task of beating back attacks on civil liberties and constitutional norms. The very concept of democratic rights must be expanded beyond the narrow framework of equality before the law and due process. It must encompass the social realities of life for the broad mass of working people.”

I would like to address this issue of the expansion of democratic rights, with regard to education, where I believe we are in a position to advance a socialist, that is, a Marxist conception of the fundamental right of all people to the humanizing process of education. Specifically, I would like to focus on the piece of legislation with the unlikely title “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB). The Bush administration and Congress, master dialecticians that they are, have succeeded in fashioning a piece of legislation that will result in the exact opposite of what is implied in its title.

NCLB purports to close the “performance gap” between the “disadvantaged” children of the inner city and their presumably more advantaged counterparts in the rest of the country. It is now 20 years since the first salvo against public education was fired, in the form of “A Nation at Risk.” In the intervening two decades, funds have been cut, teachers vilified, and public education challenged by Charter Schools, vouchers, and faith-based institutions, all shielded under the slogan of “school choice,” actually very similar in function to the old right-wing catchphrase—“right to work.”

As the document correctly states, NCLB will undermine public education and force the closure of many schools. In actuality, NCLB goes

further than that. It is a reactionary piece of legislation that seeks to impose a brutal regimentation on both students and teachers alike. The Bush administration places blame for the ills of society on the schools, when, in fact, it is the exact opposite—the schools increasingly reflect the social and economic polarization and the continuing cultural decline.

Now the Bush administration wants to subject inner-city children to what well-known educator Jamie McKenzie calls an unwarranted, potentially damaging and scientifically unsound experimentation. On his web site, *Nochildleft.com*, he thoroughly exposes the so-called Texas “miracle” in student achievement, which is being used to bludgeon other state school districts into accepting the rigid curricula, narrow teaching methodologies and the improbable and impatient timeline for school improvement. According to McKenzie, while the state of Texas claimed a 1 percent dropout rate, as many as 138,514 students, part of an original freshman high school class of 364,270, were dropped from Texas schools.

He writes: “A destructive approach to schooling is spreading throughout the land with the stealth we have come to expect from a computer virus.... Posing behind the seemingly laudatory name, ‘No Child Left Behind,’ the current federal approach to school change is laced with punishment, bad education and unhealthy ways of managing schools and treating children. Borrowing techniques reminiscent of corporate friends and neighbors like Enron, WorldCom and Arthur Andersen, the architects of the Texas solution have made their way to Washington “ (McKenzie, 2003).

The NCLB is truly the corporate model of education come into its own. Children are supposed to learn with a “one size fits all” approach, with the appropriate materials peddled by Bush’s corporate cronies like SRA/McGraw-Hill. NCLB is in every respect anti-democratic and a-social, as this term applies to the real social interactions necessary for learning between the teacher and the student, and the students with one another. The great educator John Dewey would have characterized the Bush administration’s approach to education as reflective of what he called a “brutal and unreflective individualism pervading American life.”

I believe that our election campaign affords us a unique opportunity to broaden the parameters of the debate on the basic democratic right of all people to an education, the achievement of which is impossible under capitalism.

John Burton (California) SEP candidate in the recent California gubernatorial recall election

It is important to look back on the perspective that we waged in our recall campaign in California and see whether it has been confirmed by events that have occurred since then.

The essence of our perspective was that California represented a concentrated expression of the crisis in world capitalism, and regardless of which major party won control of the governorship the working class would be the same. The burden of the social crisis, which was not the fault

of the population as a whole, but rather the dynamics of the capitalist system, would be shifted onto the majority of the population. It would not affect the lavish lifestyle and profits of the very rich and the large corporations, of which California has perhaps more than its fair share.

The election result, as we know, saw the ascendancy of Arnold Schwarzenegger, the action star and former body builder. This really encapsulates more than anything else the degenerated state of capitalist politics. We've now had the first 100 days of this person.

No sooner had they finished counting the ballot than 70,000 grocery workers went on strike, and the issue was whether or not their private health plan, which was a fairly adequate one by California standards, would be maintained. The AFL-CIO and the union bureaucracy consciously let these people hang out to dry. The degree of public support these workers had was an amazing spectacle—the stores were absolutely dead. But scabs were put in place, and within several weeks Ralphs, one of the supermarket chains, was reopened. The union bureaucracy took down the pickets to try and diffuse this massive public support, but, in fact, people still didn't shop at Ralphs.

Schwarzenegger, who ran as the people's candidate, was embarrassed at one stage during the strike when he was asked why he wasn't doing anything. He said that nobody had asked him. From that point on, there would be weekly demonstrations at his church and outside his house, asking him to get involved.

The Democrats did absolutely nothing except participate in a few stunts with the bureaucracy. The end result was a concession-laden contract with new hires being kept off healthcare completely for one year and their families for two years. This is going to have the direct effect of shifting healthcare costs from the companies onto the public and then being eliminated.

The other issue in the first 100 days has been two propositions—57 and 58—which we have covered on the website. The first is a \$15 billion bond issue, while the second prohibits deficit spending and mandates the funding of a reserve fund.

We are not in principle against borrowing money, but this was sold to the people of California as if they were spendaholics who had maxed out their credit cards, had to refinance the house, consolidate their debts and watch out going to the department store in the future. This is a complete lie. Increased spending did not cause the deficit. Apart from increases to prison guards, there have been caps on government salaries and layoffs and cutbacks throughout the state. The deficit was caused by Bush's tax cuts, the bursting of the technology bubble, with \$15 billion of the deficit caused by the outright looting led by Enron, of the California government companies, which took place almost immediately after Bush was elected president.

Nothing like this was ever mentioned, and "We cannot raise taxes" became the official mantra. But there have been reactionary governors before. Ronald Reagan was one, and he raised taxes to fund social programs, and so did Pete Wilson. In fact, a poll showed that 63 percent of Californians were willing to see their taxes increased to fund social programs. Under Schwarzenegger, however, taxes are not going to be increased; instead, there is going to be what is essentially an IMF-style austerity program imposed. This will produce utter devastation. The court system is in crisis, there will be massive cuts to the health system and education, where tuition has been raised annually—it used to be free—all to make sure that this bond issue is repaid to Wall Street.

When the bond issue came out, there was massive opposition, but Schwarzenegger organized an election-style campaign to try and overcome this. He needed to raise money for this and went to Wall Street. There was one event held in an apartment overlooking Central Park where the minimum contribution to attend was \$50,000 and the maximum was \$500,000. Contributors got a dinner with Arnold overlooking the park.

This was where the money for the campaign came from. But even this

was not enough to move the polls enough. What was decisive for the passage of these measures was the intervention of the Democratic Party leadership.

Dianne Feinstein, a US Senator and always on the right wing of the California Democrats, came out in support of it, and so did Barbara Boxer, who is up for re-election. But what was interesting, for those who follow the California election scene more closely, was my namesake, Senator John Burton. He is a lame duck, but considered to be on the very left-liberal end of the Democratic Party and the conscience of the Democratic Party. He supported the austerity measures.

I don't think anything could illustrate more clearly that the two-party system is a two-headed monster. While we have a particularly ugly head in the person of the Bush administration, this could be lopped off and replaced with Kerry. But the organism or monster itself lives on. Of course, this is not a mythical monster but something that is strangling the US population and imposing its will on the world.

Our election campaign will bring this issue to the people and explain, as my campaign did, that what is necessary is the building of an independent working class political movement.

David (Ohio)

"The central historical problem of the American working class has been its inability to break from the bourgeois parties and establish its own mass independent party. The established two-party systems offer only the illusion of choice. Both the Democrats and Republicans, whatever their differences, accept and defend the social framework of American capitalism. The domination of all aspects of life by private wealth and production for profit."

This statement from the SEP's election campaign statement is a central task of party members. We must, as the most conscious members of the working class, illuminate the dead-end of official two-party politics.

The barriers that are erected through election rules and regulations are a graphic illustration of the two-parties' attempt to strangle any independent mobilization of the working class and middle class. The Democratic Party has played a most treacherous role in this process.

Long seen as the party of the "working man," the Democratic Party functionaries and officials at all levels, ranging from city and town commissioners to mayors, governors, and at the most prodigious level the federal government, have worked intransigently to erode the living standards of the working class. How many of these officials are conscious of their actions or simply historically ignorant can be debated. However, the end result of the rapid right-wing trajectory of the Democratic Party cannot. The social conditions for tens of millions in America and billions worldwide tell a very sordid narrative.

Reductions in health care spending with increases in premiums and co-pays, reduction in workplace protections with eliminations of workmen's compensation coverage and protection, reductions in real and per-capita spending on education with an increase in educational standards, increases in taxes on the working class/middle class combined with a decrease in services and a decrease in taxes on the wealthy, the subordination of all social programs to the "War on Terrorism." The mammoth Bush tax cut sets a new standard in "redistribution of wealth."

The illegal and criminal actions in Afghanistan and Iraq have now sent American working class youth to be killed (564 at last count) and injured (over 10,000) by many estimates. The Democratic Party was and is a chief conspirator.

During the conference, I had the opportunity to watch a CNN "special," as young men and women worked 16-hour days on the Howard Dean campaign. They spoke of changing the direction of America. It is worth noting that after being driven from the campaign, Howard Dean has pledged to support John Kerry, who has pledged to continue the war abroad and escalate the attack on democratic rights at home. I hope that is not the change of direction they were speaking of.

It could be said that “If you work for one of them (Democrats) you work for all.” In working in the Democratic Party, these youth are working for their own destruction.

There is a party that is committed to changing not simply the “direction,” but the existing predatory social order. That party is the Socialist Equality Party. I urge all readers, intellectuals, workers, and youth to join in the revolutionary struggle to emancipate the working class.

Hector (Oregon)

Oregon as well as Washington and Alaska all suffer from higher levels of unemployment than the national average. Last June and July, Oregon’s rate soared to 8.7 percent, over two points higher than the national average. Forty-five-thousand jobs have been wiped out in Oregon since the beginning of the recession, an additional 6,300 since the end of the recession.

Last week, the Oregon AFL-CIO staged a press conference to protest the loss of jobs due to outsourcing. This is the same AFL-CIO that never said a word during the 1980s when a member union, the UAW, gleefully participated in the “whip-sawing” of one auto plant against another to determine which set of workers would make more concessions to keep their plant open and thereby save their jobs.

The AFL-CIO accepts with equanimity the devastation wrought on the American working class by the “need” of the capitalist to downsize, and then turns against the foreign worker to denounce the outsourcing of jobs. In this instance, you have the unsavory spectacle of blatant cynicism racing neck and neck with latent xenophobia.

Nationally, the Bush administration has presided over the loss of 2.5 to 3 million jobs since taking office. Their response to this catastrophe has been to laud the benefits of offshoring to the economy. Greenspan was reported to have said in his testimony to the House of Representative Education Committee that the US model of flexible labor markets induces more hiring because it is easier to fire. Aside from shaking one’s head at this disconnect from reality, one can only recall Czar Alexander’s diary entry on the eve of the Bolshevik revolution, which noted the weather and what he had for breakfast.

Profiled at the AFL-CIO press conference were several workers who have lost their jobs to outsourcing. One, a 49-year-old software programmer laid off from Oracle, has been unable to find any employment in the last 26 months. She has gone from earning \$79,000 per year to receiving \$340 a week. Meanwhile, Oracle just reported an 11 percent increase in its profits for last quarter.

The entry of numbers of skilled, better-paid and highly educated older workers, with established careers, homes and families, into the ranks of the unemployed is a new phenomenon that, I believe, has to be looked at more closely by our movement. The expectations of this layer of workers are much higher than the many youth who also face unemployment.

I suggest that our perspective document elaborate on the socialist program for jobs and discuss the struggle of the American working class and the socialist movement during the 1930s for jobs; the unemployment clubs; and the demands for 30 hours of work for 40 hours of pay in order to create jobs.

To be continued



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