

WSWS-SEP conference

Discussion on the arts, democratic rights and Nader

31 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. This concludes our coverage of the conference.

Joanne Laurier, WSWS editorial board

As has been stressed by numerous speakers, the purpose of our election campaign is to raise the level of political debate—to raise the level of political consciousness of the working class. Our election statement emphasizes that our intervention is not about votes, but about ideas and policies.

In this light, I would like to speak in support of the section of the election statement that addresses the state of the arts in the US and the need for their defense.

In the section "A Socialist Program to Defend the Working Class," the statement outlines the systematic slashing of funding for arts programs, education, libraries and so forth. It continues:

"The damage to the intellectual and moral fabric of society resulting from such a mercenary and philistine approach is impossible to quantify. There is, however, an indisputable link between the glorification of militarism, brutality and egotism and hostility to the artistic and cultural heritage of previous generations."

This is a critical point. Art is an indispensable means by which human beings gain their bearings in the world and come to grasp its essential character. Artistic effort humanizes, sensitizes and makes human beings more flexible. It deepens our understanding of the human personality, in all its complexity, strangeness and beauty.

Serious art is the enemy of the stereotype, the panacea or the quick fix. It requires thought and feeling to create, and thought and feeling to assimilate. Serious art is the enemy of brutality, indifference and complacency. It teaches the most acute awareness of the other's feelings and desires. It brings out universal concerns, crossing, or rather ignoring, national boundaries and ethnic differences. Serious art is incompatible with chauvinism, racial hatred and prejudices of all types.

Through imagery art grapples with life. Truthful images in art are as true as axioms and laws in science. And they have as much impact. They alter human beings and human relationships, subterraneously for the most part, sometimes quite openly and directly. Through the significant artist's grasping of essential features of life, expressed in whatever form, they become an acquisition of humankind as a whole. The world is never the same again. People did not see their world in the same fashion after

Darwin's discoveries, or Marx's. Tolstoy or Van Gogh or Mozart also shattered old conceptions, old perceptions in a decisive manner.

The origins of the socialist movement and modern culture are inseparably linked. Not that every major artist agreed with the principles and goals of socialism. Not at all. But the insights of the Marxist movement led the way for all forms of criticism of existing reality, and every serious art work is an act of criticism and protest.

The assault on art, on the artistic personality itself, by the American political establishment flows from its crisis and its predatory aims. The ruling elite is frightened by everything it cannot control, cannot understand, everything that does not serve the interests of the market. It is instinctively hostile in the US at present to truthful and penetrating depictions of life. Such depictions must show it up for the anti-democratic, authoritarian, rotten husk that it is.

The ruling elite knows as well that it cannot inspire serious art. In the honest and forthright, it only inspires disgust and loathing. Endless war, a policy of everything for the rich, continuous attacks on the rights of the people—under these conditions only the most miserable toady and the opportunist gravitate toward the powers that be. The artist, particularly the young artist, must find a new orientation, based on opposition to the status quo in every one of its aspects.

When we speak of massive funding for the arts we are not speaking about the renovation of the National Endowment for the Arts and similar bodies. If they have not been entirely gutted financially, they have been gutted morally, attempting to appease their right-wing critics at every turn.

The right-wing populist, so-called libertarian argument, that government should not be in the business of supporting the arts is spurious, particularly under conditions where the absence of subsidized art means the wholesale domination of commercial market products, the homogenized, conformist products of the "entertainment industry."

We are speaking about the creation of new institutions, democratically organized and operated by committees of the most dedicated, self-sacrificing artists, with the funds and knowledge at their disposal to sustain and nurture creativity and imagination in all its artistic forms. The raising of the cultural level of the population through arts education, the introduction of working class audiences to the cultural heritage of the past through the creation of local museums and arts centers, the exposure of the youth to something other than the mainly degrading products of contemporary popular culture—these are all tasks our movement takes upon itself to campaign for, patiently and consistently.

To the extent that present society is not held up to criticism in art, to that extent is the population more susceptible to the manipulation and lies of the ruling elite. To take a fairly limited example: We live in a country where a Bush, or for that matter the cynical, infinitely corrupt leadership of the Democratic Party, a charlatan like Al Sharpton, the corporate thieves—where none of these figures are regularly held up to ridicule.

What would a Daumier, a Balzac, a Mencken make of the current gang of criminal conspirators in the White House and their supporters in big business. None of this goes satirized or scrutinized at present by the artist.

We are convinced that we live on the eve of great upheavals that will leave no aspect of life untouched, including the cultural sphere. Our party makes an appeal to the innovative artist to direct his or her attention to the human condition, to make the necessary intellectual sacrifices to penetrate to the truth about modern life in every way. We pledge to support every honest effort and to help create the conditions for a cultural revival, an indispensable element in the development of a revolutionary movement in this country and internationally.

Alden (Pennsylvania)

Two of the main pillars that support the Democratic Party in the US today are the trade union bureaucracy, which just pledged \$44 million from their Bal Harbor meeting, and the Association of Trial Lawyers of America (ATLA).

John Edwards, the last mainstream rival to John Kerry for the presidential nomination, was a trial lawyer. The ATLA has donated large sums of money to the Democratic Party. In the American legal system, trial lawyers are the advocates for the rights of workers, consumers, small investors and small business in the field of civil law. In tort law, as well as in numerous other civil law fields, trial lawyers sue big business and the banks representing the interest of individuals and groups they have injured. Trial lawyers representing plaintiff rights can sue and win compensation and punitive money damages to redress the wrongs done to their clients.

Similar to what is happening to the democratic rights of ordinary people, all the law civil rights of workers, consumers, small investors and small business to sue big business and win fully adequate awards, are under attack. This attack has been given the innocuous, progressive sounding title of "Tort Reform." It is the opposite. It is very dangerous and reactionary. Tort reform was a major plank in Newt Gingrich's contract with America in 1994 and it has been pursued by big business at the state and federal level, in the legislatures and in the courts.

These civil rights now under attack include the right to sue the giant corporations in class actions, the right to sue for compensation for injuries due to medical malpractice or hospital negligence, and the right to hire a lawyer on a contingency fee basis where the worker or consumer doesn't have to pay up-front or hourly legal fees, but can wait and pay their lawyers when and if they win with a percentage of the settlement award. There are many other procedural barriers the tort reformers are pushing for enactment.

Along with reversing tobacco death and addiction verdicts last year, one of the biggest victories of the tort reform forces was imposing a cap on punitive damages across the board. It resulted from the reactionary Supreme Court decision in *State Farm Insurance v. Campbell*.

The civil law rights of workers, consumers, small investors and small business need to be defended and strengthened against the predations of big business, and Tort Reform must be completely repudiated and rolled back.

Jerry Isaacs, WSWS editorial board

Since the issuing of our election platform Ralph Nader has announced his plans to run for president of the US. The Socialist Equality Party opposes those who attack Nader because his campaign may take votes away from a Democratic nominee running against Bush. These right-wing attacks on Nader, which include threats from the Democratic Party establishment to take legal measures to deny him ballot access, are reactionary and undemocratic.

Our opposition to Nader is from the left; that is from the standpoint that he does not represent a genuine alternative to the economic and political domination of capitalist class. Notwithstanding his criticisms of the two-party system, Nader serves to bolster illusions in the Democratic Party in

particular by suggesting that this long-standing party of the bourgeoisie can be pressured into representing those exploited and oppressed by the profit system. In the final analysis his policies and program are not only incapable of stopping or reversing the depredations of the capitalism, they serve to block the emergence of a politically independent and anti-capitalist movement of the working class.

An objective assessment of any political figure or party must be based on its history and understanding of what social and class interests they serve. Nader got his political start in 1963 working for then-assistant secretary of labor Daniel Moynihan during the Johnson administration's Great Society program. During this period, when American capitalism still enjoyed unchallenged economic dominance, both political parties adhered to a liberal policy of regulating the capitalist market and carrying out limited social reforms.

The world economic crisis, beginning in the 1970s, led to a sea change in class policy in every country. Class compromise was replaced with class war: union-busting, slashing of social benefits, deregulation and the process of globalization and the shifting of production to low-wage countries. This change meant that such advocates of reformism as Nader no longer had access to the halls of capitalist power.

Nader articulates the grievances and frustration of layers of the middle class—small shopkeepers, family farmers, small investor, professionals and low-level managers who have been buffeted by global capitalism and the concentration of massive wealth and power in the hands of the transnational corporations.

His aim, however, is not the socialist reorganization of the world economy by the working class, but turning back of the historical clock to a time before the emergence of vast corporations and the global economy—when the weight of the middle class on economic and political life was far more influential.

Nader presents the emergence of trusts and monopolies and the domination of the government by corporate interests as a detour from the normal and progressive course of capitalist development. In a July 2002 article on criminality at Enron and other corporations, entitled "Corporate Socialism," he says, the problem is that the state is dominated by big business and acts contrary to the supposed natural laws of the profit system. According to him, under capitalism shareholders "control what they own," "enterprises compete on an even playing field" and failing large corporations go bankrupt just like non-competitive small businesses.

"Civic and political movements," he says, "must call for a decent separation of corporation and state." If this occurs, Nader insists, "an adaptable capitalism, served by equal justice under the law," will deliver "higher standards of living and enlarge its absorptive capacity for broader community and environmental values."

This view ignores two essential economic and political truths. First, the consolidation of wealth and power in the hands of vast industrial and financial giants has been a fact of economic life since the late 1800s, not only in America, but throughout the world. Moreover, monopolization was the result of the organic development of the free competition itself, which first gave rise to the concentration of production and then to monopolies—a process intensified by catastrophic economic crises.

Over the last quarter of a century the form this has taken has been the greater integration of world economy. Nader's opposition to globalization is also a reactionary utopia—the dragging of the world economy back within the confines of the nation state, where, according to him, corporations will be more responsive to the needs of people in their own countries. On the basis of this program Nader has joined forces with the nationalist reactionaries of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and ultra-right politicians such as Pat Buchanan in their protectionist campaigns against China, Mexico and other countries.

Nader's call for the "decent separation of the corporation and the state" denies the class character of the capitalist state. The government is not a

neutral body whose class content can be determined by whatever social force exerts more pressure on it. It is, as Marx explained, “an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another.” The whole historical experience of last century, in America and throughout the world, has demonstrated that when the most essential interests of the ruling class are threatened by the working and oppressed masses the capitalist state will not hesitate to use the most brutal forms of repression to defend the property and wealth of the financial elite.

Nader’s denial of the class nature of the state is of a piece with his rejection of the class struggle in general. According to him, the essential divisions in society are not between the working class and the capitalist class but between powerful corporations and “consumers.” The working class, he insists, should not advance its own alternative to capitalism, but rely on consumer advocates, “peoples’ lawyers” and other middle class elements to arbitrate between the two conflicting classes in society and pressure the state for reforms.

Nader opposes any struggle by the working class to carry out a radical redistribution of wealth. Instead, he suggests the bourgeoisie voluntarily part with some of its riches. His election platform asks “wealthy Americans” to support increased taxes on their dividends, interest, capital gains and estates, suggesting that even a “very low rate” of tax on wealth would “raise significant revenues.”

Such pathetic appeals are incapable of addressing the monstrous social inequality in America and entrenched wealth of the ruling elite, let alone the explosion of imperialism and militarism that threaten the world’s people. The task of the working class is not pressuring the capitalist state in some vain hope of reconciling its interests with those of the wealthy few, but in carrying through the revolutionary transformation of society to guarantee genuine social equality and democracy.

Concluded



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