

Opening report to WSWS-Socialist Equality Party conference

The political strategy of the SEP in the 2004 US elections

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We are publishing here the opening report 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. The report was given by David North, the chairman of the WSWS International Editorial Board and national secretary of the SEP in the US.

The publication of this report is part of our comprehensive coverage of this significant political event. A summary report of the conference was posted on March 15. In the coming days we will continue our coverage, including the speeches delivered by the SEP presidential and vice presidential candidates, Bill Van Auken and Jim Lawrence.

In opening this conference, which has been called to discuss the program and perspectives of the election campaign of the Socialist Equality Party in 2004, it is appropriate to note that the first anniversary of the beginning of the United States’ invasion and occupation of Iraq is only one week away. During the course of the past year the criminal character of the war has been exposed. The post-invasion search for Saddam Hussein’s supposedly vast cache of toxic armaments produced absolutely nothing.

The entire propaganda campaign that had been mounted by the United States over Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction” was nothing less than a state-sponsored exercise in mass deception. All the arguments made by the Bush administration to justify its decision to invade Iraq have been exposed as lies. But the political establishment insists on characterizing the contradiction between reality and the government’s sensationalist claims about WMD in Iraq as a mere “intelligence failure.” This soporific euphemism facilitates the evasion of all the really serious political issues posed by the war.

What actually occurred last year? The president and vice president of the United States lied systematically and brazenly to the American people and to the world. These lies went unchallenged within Congress, which passed a critical resolution, with the support of both John Edwards and John Kerry, that, for all intents and purposes, cleared the way for war.

The mass media, overwhelmingly pro-war, made no effort whatever to subject the claims of the Bush administration to any critical examination. Rather, it functioned as an amplifier for the dissemination of government lies and misinformation. The creation of a new title for reporters covering the war—“embedded” journalists—captured, no doubt unintentionally, the almost universal prostitution of the broadcast and print media in the United States.

No, the war was not the product of a “failure of intelligence”—not even that of the intellectually handicapped president. Rather, the war was the product, in a political sense, of a historic failure, to the point of breakdown, of the institutions of American democracy.

Of course, the claim that the government was misled by faulty

intelligence, rather than that the official intelligence was rigged to produce the results required by the Bush administration to justify the war it had decided to launch, is completely inconsistent with facts that were widely known by the time the invasion of Iraq began. Although its intelligence-gathering network is far less extensive than that of the corporate media, the facts available to the Socialist Equality Party were sufficient for us to draw the following conclusion on March 21, 2003:

“All the justifications given by the Bush administration and its accomplices in London are based on half-truths, falsifications and outright lies. At this point, it should hardly be necessary to reply yet again to the claims that the purpose of this war is to destroy Iraq’s so-called ‘weapons of mass destruction.’ After weeks of the most intrusive inspections to which any country has ever been subjected, nothing of material significance was discovered. The latest reports of the leaders of the United Nations’ inspection team, Hans Blix and Mohammed ElBaradei, specifically refute statements made by US Secretary of State Colin Powell during his notorious UN speech on February 5, 2003. ElBaradei exposed that allegations trumpeted by the United States about Iraqi efforts to import uranium from Niger were based on forged documents provided by British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s intelligence services. Other major allegations, relating to the use of aluminium tubes for nuclear purposes and the existence of mobile laboratories producing chemical-biological weapons, were also shown to be baseless. As one lie is exposed, the Bush administration concocts another. So great is its contempt for public opinion that little concern is shown for the consistency of its own arguments.”

Despite massive popular opposition, expressed in huge demonstrations within the United States and throughout the world, the war began with the aerial bombardment of Iraq on March 19, 2003. As was explained in the statement from which I have already quoted:

“A small cabal of political conspirators—working with a hidden agenda and having come to power on the basis of fraud—has taken the American people into a war that they neither understand nor want. But there exists absolutely no political mechanism through which the opposition to the policies of the Bush administration—to the war, to the attacks on democratic rights, the destruction of social services, the relentless assault on the living standards of the working class—can find expression. The Democratic Party—the stinking corpse of bourgeois liberalism—is deeply discredited. Masses of working people find themselves utterly disenfranchised.”

Though it encountered far greater opposition than it had expected, the overwhelming technical superiority of the American military resulted in the swift destruction of the Ba’athist regime and the occupation of Iraq. Intoxicated by its own propaganda, the Bush administration and the media were utterly unprepared for the chaos that followed the entry of American

forces into Baghdad and, somewhat later, by the outbreak of guerilla warfare against the occupation forces and their collaborators.

The Howard Dean campaign

The media was no less surprised by the persistence and depth of hostility within the United States to the Bush administration. Projecting its own deeply-held class prejudices and illusions upon the general population, it assumed that the conquest of Iraq would more or less silence opposition to the war and guarantee the re-election of Bush. It therefore failed, along with the bulk of the Democratic Party leadership, to anticipate the wave of popular opposition that found expression during the summer and autumn of 2003 in the presidential campaign of Howard Dean.

The Vermont governor was an unlikely leader of an insurgent movement. Dean did not create this movement; he sort of bumped into it as he groped about in the dark, like most conventional bourgeois politicians, looking for one or another issue that might distinguish him from his competitors. He sensed—and for this he must be given some credit—that there was an audience that would respond to attacks on the Bush administration, the war in Iraq, and the groveling cowardice that characterized the Democrats. Dean became a pole of attraction for the vast and untapped anti-war sentiment and hatred of Bush that had gone largely ignored by the Democratic Party. Money poured into the coffers of the Dean campaign; polls indicated that the governor enjoyed massive leads in Iowa and New Hampshire, and, by the end of 2003, the media began to consider seriously the possibility that Dean might actually win the presidential nomination.

This unexpected turn of events came as a wake-up call to the most politically astute sections of the ruling elite. It suddenly had become clear that popular opposition to the Bush administration was far deeper than they had previously believed. It was no longer inconceivable that Bush might actually fail to win re-election. Moreover, in addition to popular discontent, there had already begun to develop, within sections of the ruling elite itself, doubts and even anxiety about the policies, direction, consequences and even competence of the Bush administration. Not only issues related to the war in Iraq but, even more serious, the increasingly precarious state of the debt-ridden American economy began to set off alarms among those elements of the ruling class that have not completely lost their ability to think. By the beginning of the New Year, the possibility that Bush might just lose the 2004 election combined with a sense among significant layers of the ruling class that, perhaps, he *should* lose the election. The publication of former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill's memoirs, with its depiction of the president as an incompetent bully, was an expression of the changing mood within the bourgeois political establishment.

This shift in the political climate affected the coverage of the Democratic primary campaign. As long as 1) opposition within the ruling elite to the Bush administration remained politically negligible; and 2) Bush's re-election was taken for granted, the media covered the competition among Democrats with an air of bemused detachment. The prospect of Dean's nomination, followed inevitably by a devastating defeat, would not be entirely unwelcome. A Bush landslide might even serve to clean up the stench left by the 2000 election and, in addition, permit the government to claim that the invasion of Iraq had received popular ratification.

However, the new circumstances required a different and more intrusive approach to the Democratic primaries. Once again, the significance of the *bourgeois* two-party system—the historically tested instrument through which the capitalist class resolves its internal disputes, deflects mass

opposition to the rule of the corporate oligarchy, and preserves its unchallenged monopoly of political power—was to be demonstrated.

Once the ruling elite concluded that the Democratic primaries might have something to do with selecting a replacement for the incumbent president, matters were quickly taken in hand. If Bush were to go, as a result of a combination of popular opposition and political dissatisfaction within the ruling elite, then the selection of the Democratic Party nominee would have to proceed with care.

The new orientation brought Dean's presidential aspirations to a rapid conclusion. Though he himself was a thoroughly conservative man who represented no political threat to the system, his candidacy held open the possibility that the election might be seen throughout the world as a referendum on the war in Iraq, with far-reaching and dangerous implications for the interests of American imperialism. So the media decided, as the saying goes, to clean out Governor Dean's clock. And this conventional, though somewhat irascible, bourgeois from Vermont was entirely unprepared, intellectually and politically, for the assault that was launched early in the New Year.

Dean's efforts to reassure the media that he had no intention, despite his criticism of Bush's decision to launch the war, of withdrawing US forces from Iraq anytime in the near future was of no avail. The problem was not Dean's intentions, but rather the danger that his candidacy might legitimize and encourage, within the United States and internationally, opposition to the American occupation of Iraq.

In this context, permit me to cite a passage from a new document that has been prepared by the bi-partisan Independent Task Force on Post-Conflict Iraq, sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations. Entitled *Iraq: One Year After*, the document expresses concern that popular support within the United States for the long-term presence of troops in Iraq is fragile and must be buttressed.

“The Task Force believes that sustaining this public consensus is essential, especially as the political will of the United States will continue to be tested in the months and years to come in Iraq. These tests, which could include more high-profile attacks on US troops, could come at a time of heightened political debate in the United States, as we enter the final phase of the 2004 election campaign.

“Iraq will unavoidably be a subject of debate during the US presidential campaign. The debate will almost certainly encompass the original decision to go to war as well as postwar political transition and reconstruction efforts in Iraq. Nevertheless, Task Force members, who represent a broad diversity of political perspectives, are united in their position that the United States has a critical interest in a stable Iraq whose leadership represents the will of the people. Civil conflict in Iraq, the alternative to peaceful political competition [sic], would risk intervention by and competition among Iraq's neighbors, long-term instability in the production and supply of oil, and the emergence of a failed state that could offer a haven to terrorists. It would also represent a monumental policy failure for the United States, with an attendant loss of power and influence in the region.” [1]

In other words, the election must not be allowed to become a forum for a political debate that calls into question the legitimacy and undermines public acceptance of the United States' occupation. From this point of view, which sums up the bi-partisan consensus among the leaders of the bourgeois two-party system, Dean's nomination was unacceptable.

The attacks on Dean in the weeks leading up to the Iowa caucus, by both the media and his Democratic rivals, were effective not so much because the voting public rejected Dean's policy. In fact, most polls showed that opposition to the war among Democratic voters in Iowa was overwhelming. Rather, the attacks exposed what Democratic voters perceived to be the weakness of Dean as a candidate in a national election. The attacks resonated not only with those who already disliked him, but also with many who agreed with what they believed to be his anti-war

positions—that is, with those who liked him, but who feared Dean would prove vulnerable to Republican attacks in the national election. In a peculiar way, the attacks on Dean successfully exploited the elemental desire of broad sections of the Democratic electorate to find a candidate who could defeat Bush.

With the unraveling of Dean's candidacy in the aftermath of the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary, the tone and character of the Democratic campaign rapidly changed. From that point on, the campaign was dominated by candidates who had voted for the Senate resolution that set the stage for the US invasion of Iraq. The eventual selection of Kerry as the nominee (though it might just as well have been John Edwards) guaranteed that the official election debate would proceed within parameters acceptable to the ruling elite.

The problem of the Democratic Party

One must say that this entire operation was carried out with extraordinary skill. The anti-war sentiment that had fueled Dean's campaign was rapidly deflated, and the nomination process has ended up with the selection of a candidate whose differences with Bush on Iraq, as well as all other critical questions, are of an essentially tactical, rather than principled, character.

How could this happen? It is not enough to speak of the role of the media. Its manipulation of public opinion is successful to the extent that the political thinking of the working class remains within the confines of the bourgeois two-party system. The only means by which the broad mass of workers can express their latent discontent with bourgeois politics is by abstaining entirely from the electoral process—which is precisely what half to two-thirds of the voting population does in every election. This extraordinary level of political abstention can only be understood as a manifestation of the deep alienation of tens of millions of Americans, probably a majority, from the entire political set-up. They do not participate in the electoral process because they do not see in it a means of improving their own lives.

At the same time, alongside of indifference there are to be found illusions, of which the most debilitating and ultimately demoralizing is the belief that somehow the Democratic Party represents, in some vague sort of way, a genuine alternative to the Republican Party. This illusion is essential to the durability of the bourgeois two-party system in the United States.

Where there are illusions, there are usually illusion-makers—that is, individuals, organizations and political tendencies that devote themselves to shoring up confidence in the two-party system, especially the Democratic Party. By way of example, one of the more intriguing aspects of the Democratic primaries was the enormous publicity that was given to the candidacies of Congressman Dennis Kucinich and the most pious reverend Al Sharpton.

Week after week, in one debate after another, these two worthies were allowed a platform alongside the other candidates. The fact that their votes in the various primary states generally were below three percent did not result in a revocation of their invitations to the debates. They were afforded the opportunity to make their criticisms of the corporations and mouth all sorts of left phrases. But in return, they proclaimed their faith in the Democratic Party as the sole legitimate agency of political progress in the United States.

In the end, their participation served to nourish the illusion that the Democratic Party is a genuine “people's” party, fundamentally opposed to the Republican Party, susceptible to mass pressure, and capable of carrying out significant, if not radical, reforms of American society in the

interests of working people.

Howard Dean did exactly the same upon announcing the conclusion of his campaign for the presidency. He urged his supporters to avoid any involvement in third-party politics, and to continue working for change in the Democratic Party.

Of greater political significance than the statements of Kucinich, Sharpton and Dean—who, after all, have lived their political lives within the Democratic Party and have no direct association with anti-capitalist politics—has been the stance of the *Nation*. This voice of American middle-class radicalism—whose record of political foulness stretches all the way back to the 1930s, when it supported Stalin's extermination of Marxist revolutionaries in the Soviet Union—is now supporting the candidacy of John Kerry.

Its most detailed exposition of its position in support of the Democratic candidate came in an open letter to Ralph Nader, published in the *Nation* of February 16, in which it urged him not to declare himself a presidential candidate in 2004. “Ralph,” it wrote, “this is the wrong year to run: 2004 is not 2000.”

What is the difference?

“George W. Bush has led us into an illegal pre-emptive war, and his defeat is critical. ... The overwhelming mass of voters with progressive values—who are essential to all efforts to build a force that can change the direction of the country—have only one focus this year: to beat Bush. Any candidacy seen as distracting from that goal will be excoriated by the entire spectrum of potentially progressive voters. If you run, you will separate yourself, probably irrevocably, from any ongoing relationship with this energized mass of activists.”

Thus writeth the *Nation*!

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* have fundamental and irreconcilable differences with the politics of Ralph Nader. But those differences do not include opposition to his decision to run for president. He has every right to do so, even if his campaign subtracts from the votes of the Democratic candidate and costs Senator Kerry the election.

The arguments made by the *Nation* are politically and intellectually bankrupt. Its basic argument is that the difference between 2004 and 2000 is that the defeat of Bush's re-election must be the overriding political goal of all “progressives.” But if that is true, does it not follow that everything should have been done in 2000 to prevent Bush from getting elected in the first place? This would mean, of course, that Nader's decision to contest the presidency four years ago, which the *Nation* supported, was a disastrous mistake.

The *Nation* makes no effort to resolve this glaring contradiction in its argument. Rather, it attempts, in a manner that is both absurd and contemptible, to glorify Senator Kerry. It now writes of his “courage, devotion to justice and commitment to honesty, open government and principles-over-politics. There are few senators of whom that can be said.”

That such nonsense can be written in 2004 testifies to the impoverished state of what is called radical politics in the United States. After all, Mr. Kerry is hardly an unusual political specimen. No special powers of political analysis must be brought to bear to understand that he is a determined and unwavering defender of the social interests of the ruling elite and the capitalist system as a whole.

Moreover, the specific features of Kerry's personality are of negligible political significance. In the elaboration of a principled position in this election campaign—that is, one that upholds the interests of the working class—it is necessary to proceed from an historical evaluation of the bourgeois two-party system and, in particular, the class character of the Democratic Party.

The problem of the Democratic Party has bedeviled the socialist movement in the United States since its earliest days. The most significant

feature of the American labor movement—noted by socialist theorists since the days of Marx and Engels—has been its failure to establish itself as a politically independent force.

The working class in the United States has, in the course of its history, engaged in struggles that not infrequently assumed truly explosive dimensions. Its strikes were often accompanied by a level of violence unknown in European countries, except during periods of outright civil war. And yet, in contrast to its class brothers and sisters in Europe, the American working class never succeeded in freeing itself from the domination of the political parties of the bosses whom it was fighting bitterly in the factories and the streets.

Every generation of socialists in the United States has confronted this problem and sought to resolve it, first and foremost, through the development of a mass, politically conscious, anti-capitalist, socialist political party. There have been periods of intense class struggle when it appeared that a breakthrough was both possible and in the offing—during the pre-World War I upsurge of the working class, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, in the immediate aftermath of World War II and, finally, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In each instance, however, a combination of objective and subjective factors aborted these promising movements by the working class toward political independence.

An examination of this critical problem of the organization of the working class as an independent political force raises the issue of the Democratic Party. This has been the principal instrument employed by the American bourgeoisie for more than a century to block the development of an independent working class party, preserve the hegemony of the bourgeois two-party system, and maintain the capitalist class' monopoly of political power.

This is not the place to attempt a substantial review of the history of the Democratic Party. The content of such an examination would consist, more or less, of the entire political history of the United States. After all, according to some accounts, the origins of the Democratic Party are to be found in political factions that arose during the Washington administration in the 1790s.

However, there is one persistent feature of the Democratic Party that must be noted. From the time that it first emerged in its quasi-modern form, that is, in the 1830s, the Democratic Party sought to cast itself as the defender of the common workingman against business interests. This characteristic was celebrated by historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, in his book *The Age of Jackson*. Seeking to counter socialist influence in the working class, Schlesinger argued that Jackson's administration, in its use of state power to curb powerful financial interests, provided the model for liberal democratic rule that found its apotheosis in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

What Schlesinger conveniently glossed over was that Jackson's hostility to Northern business interests stemmed not from genuinely progressive sentiments, but rather reflected the reactionary outlook of the Southern slave-owning class. The susceptibility of sections of urban workers to Jackson's cynical exploitation of their grievances for the purpose of luring them into an alliance with the slave-owning class was an early symptom of what was to prove a fundamental weakness of the workers' movement in the United States: its attempt to find short-term solutions to profound social problems on the basis of corrupt political alliances with representatives of another, reactionary class.

Schlesinger's *Age of Jackson* was published in 1944, near the end of Roosevelt's long tenure as president of the United States. Though several generations separate us from the era of Roosevelt, and his memory has largely faded from the consciousness of broad masses of the American people, his four terms in office were critical in burnishing the popular credentials of the Democratic Party. Roosevelt's New Deal, as it entered into political folklore, retold again and again by the trade union bureaucracy, marked the phoenix-like rebirth of social justice in America.

It was, supposedly, an era of unprecedented social progress, the result of Roosevelt's radical restructuring of American capitalism.

The reality was quite different. Roosevelt certainly displayed extraordinary political acumen in adapting his administration to the deep popular hostility to capitalism engendered by the Depression. But his policies were, for the most part, palliatives that hardly came to grips with the deeper causes—rooted in the contradictions of the world capitalist system—of the devastating economic crisis. The most important gains made by the working class were those it achieved in the course of direct struggles, usually in the face of opposition from the Roosevelt administration. The second economic collapse of 1937 exposed the failure of the New Deal, and unemployment remained at nearly 25 percent until the entry of the United States into World War II in December 1941.

The labor party demand

By the mid-1930s, the eruption of mass working class struggles—such as the Toledo Auto-Lite strike, the Minneapolis general strike, the San Francisco general strike, and, somewhat later, the Flint sit-down strike—brought to the fore the issue of independent political action by the working class. The newly-formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) began to confront more and more the limitations of militant trade unionism. Strike action alone could not solve the issues of industrial democracy, social equality, and the dangers posed by fascism and imperialist militarism.

Especially as workers began to confront ever more bitter resistance from the employers—exemplified by the massacre of Chicago workers on strike against Republic Steel on Memorial Day 1937—trade union militancy appeared increasingly as a blind alley. Moreover, the escalating hostility of the Roosevelt administration to workers' struggles for unionization—Roosevelt had infuriated unionists by responding to the Memorial Day massacre by denouncing *both* strikers and employers (“A plague on both your houses,” declared the president, quoting Shakespeare)—called into question the legitimacy and viability of the CIO's de facto alliance with the Roosevelt administration and the Democratic Party. The CIO was little more than two years old, but it had already arrived at an impasse.

This was the situation that formed the background for a series of extraordinary discussions held in Coyacán, Mexico, in May 1938 between leaders of the Socialist Workers Party—at that time, the Trotskyist movement in the US—and Leon Trotsky, the exiled leader of the 1917 October Revolution and founder of the Fourth International. The problems of the CIO, he argued, required a turn toward political struggle. He urged the Socialist Workers Party to initiate a campaign within the new trade union movement for the formation of a labor party.

“It is an objective fact,” Trotsky argued, “that the new trade unions created by the workers came to an impasse—a blind alley—and the only way for the workers already organized in trade unions is to join their forces in order to influence legislation, to influence the class struggle. The working class stands before an alternative. Either the trade unions will be dissolved or they will join for political action.”

As Trotsky emphasized in the course of these discussions, he was not advocating the formation of a reformist party such as the British Labour Party. Rather, the fight for a labor party was indissolubly connected with the raising of transitional demands that directed workers toward a struggle for power. The labor party demand was aimed against the political subordination of the working class to the Democrats by the trade union bureaucracy and the Stalinists of the Communist Party.

The introduction of the labor party demand into the program of the

Socialist Workers Party marked a critical advance in the development of a revolutionary strategy for the American working class. It identified the central problem of the labor movement in the United States—its subordination to the political parties of the bourgeoisie—and showed a way forward. The fight for the formation of a labor party brought the Trotskyist movement into ever more intense conflict with the trade union bureaucracy of both the AFL and CIO which, whatever their differences, were determined to maintain the subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the living standards of the working class improved dramatically. These gains were taken by the labor bureaucracy as a vindication of their political alliance with the Democratic Party. But these gains were not so much a product of the alliance with the Democratic Party as they were the results of the vast post-war expansion of the world economy. Far more significant than what the American workers won was what they lost—that is, the opportunity to fundamentally transform the social and economic structure of American society in the interest of the working class.

From the beginning, in the period of Roosevelt, the alliance with the Democratic Party meant, above all, the repudiation by the trade unions of any radical-democratic, let alone revolutionary socialist, aspirations. All talk within the trade union movement of a radical redistribution of wealth within the United States, of the democratization of the work place, of the right of workers to inspect corporate finances, and of the establishment of state control over industry—which all had been popular demands in the 1930s—had to be stopped. This necessarily entailed the suppression of dissent within the trade unions, which was generally achieved through the use of goon squad violence and political purges.

The historian Alan Brinkley has summed up very well the political implications of the labor movement's subordination to Roosevelt and the Democratic Party:

“[In] its new partnership with democrats, liberals, and the state, trade unions were destined to be a subordinate force, incapable of shaping the liberal agenda in more than marginal ways.” [2]

There were other consequences of the alliance with the Democrats for which the working class was to pay a devastating price. The United States had emerged from World War II as the principal imperialist power. Its far-flung interests made it uncompromisingly hostile to any restraint on the ability of American corporations to exploit the resources of the globe. In the name of defending liberal democracy, the American labor movement not only fell into line behind the Cold War launched by the United States in 1946, it provided the most fervent warriors in the global crusade against communism and every manifestation of anti-imperialist struggle. The activities of the international department of the AFL-CIO became largely embedded in the work of the CIA itself. Without the anti-communism legitimized by the AFL-CIO, McCarthyism would have never been able to get off the ground within the United States.

There is yet another significant aspect of the post-war alliance with the Democratic Party that was to have far-reaching consequences. As the power structure of the post-war Democratic Party in the 1940s and 50s was still based partially on the Jim Crow apartheid system that prevailed in the “Solid South,” the labor bureaucracy politely refrained from any determined effort to unionize workers in that part of the country. Thus, the great civil rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s developed independently of the labor movement.

The AFL-CIO's reactionary abstention from and hostility to the struggle against Jim Crow in the South and the democratic and social aspirations of African-American workers in the North ceded leadership of the civil rights movement to various sections of the black middle class. Rather than developing as part of a powerful class struggle for democratic rights and social equality, the civil rights movement ultimately degenerated into a striving for privileges among a small section of the black middle class,

within the framework of capitalism.

By the 1960s, both the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO had entered into crisis and decline. The eruption of the civil rights movement destroyed the equilibrium between the liberal wing of the Democratic Party in the North and its segregationist wing in the South. The gradual end of the post-war boom and the deterioration of the United States' unchallenged economic supremacy began to expose the limitations of the Keynesian policies upon which the reformist programs of the post-war period had been based. And finally, the catastrophe of the Vietnam War—which was itself the product of the Cold War strategy devised principally by the Democratic Party—left American liberalism divided, morally compromised, and discredited.

The trade union bureaucracy, tied to the Democratic Party, had always assumed that the resources of American capitalism were inexhaustible, and that the never-ending expansion of the national economy would provide an enduring foundation for reformist policies.

But as that perspective was shattered by the economic crises of the 1970s—by the simultaneous eruption of recession and inflation, or “stagflation,” as it was known at that time—the AFL-CIO had no alternative to the class war policies introduced by the Federal Reserve chairman, Paul Volcker, who had been appointed by the Democratic president, Jimmy Carter, in 1979. The AFL-CIO was unprepared for the political and social consequences of the collapse of American liberalism, the resurgence of the Republican Party, and the onslaught against the trade unions that was unleashed in 1981 with the firing of 11,000 members of PATCO, the air traffic controllers' union. It accepted the massive restructuring of American industry that was to cost the jobs of millions of industrial workers over the next two decades.

The labor bureaucracy sabotaged every attempt by workers to defend their jobs. The list of strikes betrayed by the AFL-CIO in the 1980s encompassed virtually every section of the organized working class. By 1990, it became increasingly clear that the AFL-CIO was, in fact, the apparatus of a section of the middle class that served as a secondary agency for the exploitation of the working class. It could no longer be described in any realistic sense as an organization of the working class.

Just 55 years had passed since the formation of the CIO. Only 35 years had passed since the consolidation of the AFL and CIO into a single trade union federation that was the largest and richest in the world. But within that very short period of time, its policy of class collaboration, its political alliance with the Democratic Party, its furious war against any semblance of socialist ideology in the working class had resulted in the complete shipwreck of the American labor movement. It was once said that without Marxism there is no workers movement. This was proven by the AFL-CIO.

The Workers League, predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, made a necessary adjustment in its political program. The call for a labor party based on the trade unions had been superseded by events.

The political basis of the SEP campaign

However, and more significant, the underlying principle—that the working class must establish its political independence from the bourgeois political parties, that it must develop its own political program, of an uncompromisingly democratic and socialist character, that it must fight for political power in its own right—remains fully valid, and is the basis of the work of the Socialist Equality Party.

Based on all the lessons of the history of the American working class, the Socialist Equality Party completely rejects the claim that the most burning task in 2004, to which all other concerns and considerations must

be subordinated, is the defeat of President Bush.

No, the most pressing and urgent task is to fight for the political independence of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. The problem of Bush must be solved by the working class itself. It must advance its own solution and not farm this out to various sections of the ruling elite.

In insisting upon this principle, we do not minimize the reactionary and criminal character of the Bush administration. Unlike the *Nation*, we understood very well the new quality represented by the assault on democratic procedures, first in the impeachment campaign and then after the 2000 election. But that does not change our principled outlook as to how such dangers and developments are to be fought.

The Socialist Equality Party recognizes that the policies of the Bush administration arise from a crisis of the entire world capitalist system that will deepen and become still more dangerous, regardless of who wins the next election. For the SEP, the election campaign is not simply about what to do in November. It is about the political preparation that is necessary for what will follow the election.

Those who tell the working class today that it should give its vote to the Democratic Party and John Kerry must accept responsibility for the consequences of that political advice. What will they say to workers if Kerry should happen to win the election? What political credibility will they have when that administration, acting beneath the pressure of the class interests it represents, undertakes further military action in the pursuit of the imperialist interests of the United States? Or when it attacks the working class?

What changes will follow from the election of Kerry? Will there be any basic change in the strategic orientation of American imperialism? Will the election of Kerry change the fact that the policies of the US are driven by certain global imperatives? Will it remove the objective geo-strategic imperative, which underlies the present policies of the Bush administration, to secure control of Middle Eastern and Central Asian oil and other critical and scarce natural resources? Will the election of Kerry produce a withdrawal of American troops from the Middle East or Central Asia?

As for American economic policy, how would it be altered in any fundamental sense by the election of John Kerry? The destruction of jobs, the decline in living standards, will continue. Is it conceivable that the Kerry administration would dare to initiate an assault on the bastions of wealth that are so fundamental to the social structure of the United States and the social policy that prevails?

Over the past 20 years, there has been an unprecedented concentration of wealth within the top one percent of society. No serious change in social conditions within the United States is possible without a direct assault on accumulated private wealth in America. That will not be undertaken by a Democratic administration, nor will the Democrats begin a struggle against the great corporations that rule this country.

As in every election year, the Democratic candidates posture as “friends” of the working people. But the demagogic character of these professions of concern is most clearly exposed when they are compared to promises made decades ago. Almost exactly 40 years ago, on May 12, 1964, here at the University of Michigan, Lyndon Johnson unveiled his Great Society. He stated:

“The challenge of the next half century is whether we will have the wisdom to use [America’s] wealth to enrich and elevate our national life, and to advance the quality of our American civilization. ... For in your time we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society. ...

“The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. But that is just the beginning.”

That is what Lyndon Johnson said here at the University of Michigan 40

years ago. How has the promise to eliminate poverty been realized? When Johnson gave this speech, with perhaps a certain element of sincerity, the entire liberal agenda was about to disintegrate at the very apex of the post-war expansion of capitalism.

But Johnson, seeing nothing but rainbows as he approached the abyss, considered the elimination of poverty to be “just the beginning” of the Great Society. The “Great Society” predicted by Johnson never got started. The conditions that exist today make a mockery of his illusions in the future of a capitalist America.

Just a few days ago, the *Detroit Free Press* published statistics on the income of residents of the city’s midtown area. According to the *Free Press*, 39.1 percent of the residents of midtown Detroit earn less than \$10,000, and 21 percent earn between \$10,000 and \$19,999—that is, 60 percent of these residents are living at or below the official poverty line. Another 14 percent have an annual income of between \$20,000 and \$29,999. This means that nearly 75 percent of the population of midtown Detroit is earning less than \$30,000 per year.

Another report on poverty in New York City was released by the Community Service Society last September. It cited data from the US Bureau of the Census indicating that 12.1 percent of Americans live in poverty—that is, more than 30 million people. In New York City, the poverty rate is over 20 percent. Still another report, by the same organization, summarized data on unemployment among black males in New York. It found that 48.2 percent of black men of working age were unemployed.

None of these deep problems can be addressed by capitalism. What is required is a revolutionary restructuring of the American and world economy.

Forty years ago, socialists might have criticized, with full justice, the Great Society program as mere palliatives. But there is no place for such palliatives in the agenda of modern day capitalism. In fact, there has not been a significant piece of reform legislation passed in the American Congress since the 1960s.

At the same, there has been a massive growth in the apparatus of state repression. Some 43 years ago, in January 1961, President Eisenhower warned about the intrusion of the military industrial complex. But what he called the military industrial complex in 1961 would look like a toy army of tin soldiers from today’s perspective.

The fight for democracy is impossible without the independent political mobilization of the working class. Even the achievement of such essential and necessary reforms—which are not even socialistic—as the abolition of the Electoral College and the establishment of a new voting system based on the principle of proportional representation—are unthinkable without a mass movement in opposition to the principal beneficiaries of the capitalistic two-party system, the Democrats and Republicans.

The fundamental task to which we address ourselves this year is the fight for the building of a genuine workers movement, which is possible only on the basis of a socialist program. We aim to utilize our election campaign to initiate a discussion within the most advanced sections of the working class, the most socially conscious sections of professional workers and students, for an understanding of the necessity of this development. We will strive to build a movement from below—intervening in congressional races and seeking to place our candidates on state ballots wherever possible. But, above all, this discussion is oriented towards winning new recruits, new members, and building up this conscious force within the American working class.

The most critical issue is the raising of political consciousness. There are no shortcuts. We are not pretending or suggesting that we expect to win thousands and thousands of votes, or that we will be able to place our candidates on the ballot in every state. This is not possible. But we are seeking through our campaign this year to create the conditions where this can become possible.

We say to those, like the liberals or the radicals of the *Nation*, that they are doing something “real” in 2004, that they are, rather, wasting time, misleading the working class, and postponing the task that should begin now.

Whatever the outcome of this election, the ability of the working class to defend its rights and defeat the preparations for further wars depends on the development of a new perspective and a much higher level of political class consciousness. This is what we will be fighting to achieve during the next eight months.

Notes:

1 P. 13

2 The End of Reform: New deal Liberalism in Recession and War (New York, 1995), p. 224.

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