WSWS-SEP conference remarks

“Reality will dawn on masses of people with American speed and ferocity”—David Walsh

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Today, we are publishing the remarks of WSWS Arts Editor David Walsh and other delegates 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 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. We will continue our coverage of this important political event in the coming days with additional remarks from the conference floor as well as written contributions by others in attendance.*

David Walsh

I’d like to discuss the struggle for the political independence of the working class, which lies at the center of our election campaign in 2004.

The election statement reads:

“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.” A bit farther down: “The central weakness of previous mass social movements in the United States...is that they never succeeded in freeing working people from the political domination of the Democratic Party. Consequently, the working class was limited to fighting for the mitigation of this or that social evil. It could not place on the political agenda the systematic reorganization of American society to serve the needs of the people, as opposed to the corporate establishment.”

These issues have a long history in the Marxist movement.

In the late nineteenth century, various opportunist tendencies arose in the international socialist movement that declared that since at the heart of the plight of the working class lay an economic condition, the remedy also lay in a purely economic struggle. In practice, of course, politics was not denied, politics was left to the intellectuals; workers were not to be confused with political problems. The Russian Marxist pioneer Plekhanov answered some of these points in 1883 in his work *Socialism and the Political Struggle*. He insisted that the working class was fully capable of becoming conscious, and indeed had to become conscious of its own historic role and pursue its own political struggle for liberation. He wrote:

“What does history teach us in this respect? It shows that whenever and wherever the process of economic development gave rise to a splitting of society into classes, the contradictions between the interests of those classes invariably led them to struggle for political domination.... Always and everywhere, political power has been the lever by which a class, having achieved domination, has carried out the social upheaval necessary for its welfare and development.”

In other words, the working class has to conquer political power to carry out “the systematic reorganization of American society” that our election statement speaks of.

We insist, against the skeptics and idle dreamers, that the ability of the working class to achieve political independence is objectively determined, it is the political expression of the economic antagonism between the exploited and exploiters. It is not something we conjure up or bring about through the strength of our will. All classes that wage a “conscious struggle against their opponents begin at a definite stage in their development to strive to ensure for themselves political influence and later domination.”

Establishing the political independence of the working class means arriving at a point at which the actual state of affairs in society finds expression in political life. For workers to declare political independence from the bourgeoisie means that they understand the truth about their economic condition, with all its inevitably revolutionary implications.

Plekhanov wrote 120 years ago: “In all the advanced states of the civilized world, in Europe as well as America, the working class is entering the arena of political struggle, and the more it is conscious of its economic tasks, the more resolutely it separates into a political party of its own.”

For definite historical reasons, the American working class did not enter the arena of independent political struggle at this time or in the stormiest decades of the twentieth century. In the final analysis, the considerable industrial and natural resources of American imperialism, its ability to use much of the world as its colonial empire, explain this fact. Trotsky attributed the lack of “social thinking” in the American working class to “the country’s whole history—the Far West with the perspective of unlimited possibilities for everyone to become rich, etc.” As a result, Trotsky suggested, the American working class missed the spirit of generalization, failed to grasp his or her class position in society as a whole, considered everything on an individual basis.

Hence the pragmatic, short-term thinking, the “lesser of two evils” argument, because political parties are not seen as the expression of distinct social interests, but as vehicles for the implementation of this or that policy. The policies and their impact on social life are not seen in their historical context. This, however, is a relative phenomenon, not an absolute historical barrier.

One must add to the general considerations about the reserves of American imperialism in the twentieth century, the part played by specific political tendencies, in particular the Communist Party of the United States. The Stalinists, with great influence in the working class and among intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s, based on the false identification of the Communist Party with the October Revolution in Russia, used their considerable stature to block a movement out of the Democratic Party. They eulogized the Democrats as a progressive people’s party and remain its the most unwavering supporters today.

Such an historically irrational and untenable situation, in which the exploited support one of the parties of their exploiters, can only exist

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temporarily and under conditions in which there is sufficient insulated national wealth to buy off the upper layer of the working class, in the union bureaucracy, and at least neutralize wider layers of the population.

If a relationship or institution lasts long enough, it may appear inevitable or eternal. The crisis-ridden, morally and intellectually moribund Democratic Party staggers on as a political relationship between layers of the population and a bourgeois clique rooted in conditions—the global economic hegemony of the US, the ability of the American ruling elite to conduct an imperialist policy abroad while maintaining relatively high living standards and social programs at home—that no longer have a basis in fact. Thinking has not yet caught up to the reality.

It will catch up to this reality, however, in an explosive manner.

We seek support for our ideas and program in the objective conditions of social life. Investment guru Warren Buffett, the second richest man in the world, recently commenting on the Bush administration's handouts to the rich, said, "If class warfare is being waged in America, my class is clearly winning." What Mr. Buffett recognizes, that the working class is under the gun in every aspect of its life, will be recognized by millions. Reality will dawn on masses of people with American speed and ferocity.

The historical belatedness of the American working class in attaining political maturity, freeing itself from bourgeois prejudices and becoming able to analyze critically its own circumstances, gives this development its inevitable explosiveness.

That the working class separates itself from the influence of bourgeois politics is an imperative set by history and the nature of the class struggle. The Democratic Party hovers over the abyss, although, like a cartoon character, it doesn't know it yet, it hasn't looked down.

Our task is to adapt, to align the mentality of broad layers of the population to these objective facts and processes. Not a small matter, but again an undertaking whose possibilities are objectively, historically determined. Capitalism does the lion's share of the work.

And what we bring to bear on this struggle as a party, as a social, intellectual and moral force, is not insignificant. Nearly a dozen years ago to the day, David North addressed a meeting of the leadership of our international movement, in the wake of the collapse of the USSR. He pointed out that the Russian Revolution in 1917 had been the result of a protracted struggle over many decades for the political independence of the working class, a struggle that had produced a profound revolutionary and socialist culture within the Russian and European working class.

We are fully cognizant of the devastating blows inflicted by Stalinism on that culture. We still live with the consequences of those blows in many respects.

But this meeting and the growing influence of the WSWS, the impact we are convinced that our election campaign will have, indicate that the tide is turning in our favor. Increasingly, the ruling classes are unable to rule in the old way and the populations unable to live in the old way, sure signs that social revolution is on the agenda.

And, as I suggested, who undertakes the struggle for the political independence of the working class and by what means is not insignificant. We speak in the election statement of the traditions of the international and American socialist movement. The Trotskyist movement is uniquely positioned. We don't enter into the next stage of our work armed with a few demagogic slogans, but with an international socialist strategy and program, a consciously worked-out perspective and a great deal of history, and bring to this effort the results of the determined struggle to revive the socialist and revolutionary culture.

The response we receive indicates a growing questioning and disquiet. Tens of thousands recognize the seriousness of this movement through the WSWS. To advance beyond this point, to win the conscious allegiance of significant and healthy social elements, the most determined, the most passionate about equality and justice, is one of the tasks of this election campaign.

Steve (Pittsburgh)

I'd like to address the questions of art and culture, but first want to make some points about this book—*The Corporation*—which was put out by US Steel to celebrate its centenary. This is a difficult book to read and doesn't mention anything positive about the workers and what they contributed to the steel industry. The industry's success was simply achieved through the shrewdness of men like Carnegie and J.P. Morgan.

Here is what it says about the 1919 steel strike and Bolshevism, which they were very afraid of.

"America bore a very weary and swollen mood at this time. This frustration and anger boiled over that year, one famous for strikes. They had just fought the biggest and most death-dealing war imaginable. The strikes started amongst people they didn't understand but many of those people seemed to have a taste for revolution. Look at what was going in Russia with the Bolshevik takeover...many of their relatives and sympathizers were here and were spreading their brand of poison.... Business and government were sure they knew who was behind the wave of anarchy—the Bolsheviks.... How many of the workers' minds and souls the Reds really possessed is hard to say."

While this was 1919, they feared the same thing during the 1985 strike in the Mon Valley. I still owe comrade North and Larry an apology. They arrived during the strike in Pittsburgh, and we had a discussion and I took them to the picket line. No sooner had we arrived than we were arrested and taken downtown to jail. They put us on trial on some trumped-up charge, but we were providing an alternative to the union bureaucracy and calling for a nationwide steel strike.

Outside the court, the union bureaucracy mobilized somewhere between 30 and 50 people, and they were calling us communists and trying to intimidate us. They were working hand in glove with the police, the state and the company to smash the strike and prevent it coming under our control.

Our election campaign has extremely important significance. It is based on the highest principles of internationalism and the political independence of the working class. Its aim is to raise the consciousness of the workers to their historic task—abolition of the capitalist profit system and the implementation of socialist, scientific world planned economy. Mankind has no way forward other than this.

I want to refer to the section on arts and culture in the statement. It says: "Popular culture has suffered under the impact of funding cuts for the arts and a right-wing ideological assault on artistic expression. Government subsidies to museums, orchestras, theaters, and public television and radio have been gutted."

This is very important because without access to culture, workers can't know their own history or communities. If they understood the real history of their own organizations, they would rebel. This is primarily why the capitalist class doesn't want workers knowing this, and particularly the history of the AFL-CIO, which is a degenerated organization and a prison camp for workers.

Terry (Michigan)

One of my concerns is the cause-and-effect relationship between the increasing polarization of wealth in the United States and the diminution of democratic rights. As the conference statement clearly states, "[t]he defense of democratic rights is inseparable from a struggle against the concentration of private wealth. There is a fundamental hypocrisy in the conception of equal rights before the law in a society permeated with economic and social inequality." Furthermore, the statement demands "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."

Among these realities is the increase in tuition rates for higher education while financial aid is being cut. The conference statement's call for "access to free higher education for all" is directed toward resolving this

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contradiction. It is for this reason that we must educate the working class regarding the forces threatening the community college's unique role in providing a higher education for all. At the same time, we should recognize these same two-year institutions as sites for organizing the working class.

Community colleges have attempted to offer a higher education to all, and, within the limits of a capitalist system, have done a commendable job. If one goes back only to the Vietnam War era, tens of thousands of veterans, a great majority of them working-class men and women, used the G.I. Bill of Rights to begin their higher education at community colleges. Thousands of these veterans went on to professional careers as well as positions in the skilled trades, not to mention those working-class students who didn't fight in Vietnam but who were able to attain a higher education only because they could begin at far less expensive and more democratic community colleges.

With the ongoing crisis in capitalism and the Bush administration's extreme right-wing response to it, tuition for colleges and university continues to rise at historically unheard of rates; predictions of 10-20 percent for the coming year, on top of the large increases during the previous decade, are common. As a result, more students, particularly members of the working class, will be attending community colleges for their higher education. What will they find there?

For one, they won't find a reversal of policies that have resulted in fewer full-time faculty members being hired. Due to cutbacks in federal and state funding, the replacement of full-time faculty with their part-time counterparts has become a fact of life at community colleges, resulting in exhausted instructors who sometimes teach six to seven courses at two to three different colleges. In many instances, these instructors are not provided with the office space necessary for meeting students and preparing for classes, and both the instructors and students suffer.

While the Bush administration has stated that some of the monies for the president's "Jobs for the 21st Century" program will be allocated to community colleges for the hiring of more faculty, Gay Gilbert, director of the business-relations group in the Department of Labor, admits in a recent article that most of the funds "will go toward helping two-year institutions foster relationships with industry, which the institutions will be expected to work with to determine which types of training programs are necessary and to design curriculums".

As one might expect, many community college spokespeople are less than thrilled about this. In addition to removing control over curriculum decisions from educators, the announced cuts to federal grant funds do not consider the non-traditional (i.e., "displaced," and/or older workers returning to school) student. Steve Ovel, executive director of government relations at Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, points out that for many dislocated workers in rural areas, physically attending a community college is not an option; the only means of completing their training is through distance-education, but such courses do not count for Pell Grant eligibility (financial grants to mostly low-income students).

Second, incoming community college students will find far less financial aid than the Bush administration has led them to expect. Bush's announcement that he will increase Pell Grants by $250 million is disingenuous. His administration has already cut nearly $1 billion from Labor Department job-training for adults, including $300 million from the Carl D. Perkins program, which gives money to community colleges for training low-income students for jobs, and $64 million from the Workforce Investment Act, which funds training for displaced workers.

Finally, and even more devastating for working class students, is Bush's proposal for community colleges to create more job-training centers, including Homeland Security departments. As Bush recently told Owens Community College in northwest Ohio, "federal funding can help [the community college's funding crisis], particularly when it comes to job training." The message to community college administrators is clear: to the degree that you turn your facilities into job-training centers instead of centers of higher education, you will receive more federal funding.

Setting aside the fact that Bush's proposal will not create jobs for the working class, job training, by definition, guarantees limited possibilities for its students. If the particular job or field being trained for collapses, as happened to the computer boom at the end of the '90s, those who have been trained instead of educated will be out of luck.

The Bush administration's proposal will guarantee a greater polarization of wealth and its consequence, fewer democratic rights for the working class. To achieve its goal of expanding the definition of democratic rights, the Socialist Equality Party and the WSWS must frame the Bush administration's proposal for community colleges as an attack on the working class. Furthermore, as community colleges now serve the younger members of the working class as well as their older brothers and sisters who have been "downsized," the SEP should view community colleges as sites where the message of the working class organizing internationally will find receptive ears.

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