

Socialist Equality Party vice-presidential candidate Jim Lawrence addresses WSWs-SEP conference

“The working class must develop a political strategy to defend jobs and living standards”

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Today, we are publishing the remarks of SEP vice-presidential candidate Jim Lawrence 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. In the coming days, we will continue our coverage of this important political event, including remarks by international delegates and contributions from the conference floor.

Nothing demonstrates more forcefully the need for a political struggle against the profit system and its two political parties than the continuous destruction of jobs in the US, which are stripping millions of workers and their families of the right to a decent standard of living.

Over the last three years, as Bush’s policies have boosted the fortunes of the corporate CEOs and big Wall Street investors, more than 3 million jobs have been destroyed, including more than 300,000 in Michigan and Ohio alone. Young people are working for wages where they can’t begin to think about buying a home or raising a family. Older workers are forced to labor longer and longer hours to try to hold on to a standard of living they attained nearly two decades ago, while trying to help their children and grandchildren cope with the skyrocketing costs of education, health care and housing. At the same time, the destruction of pensions and 401(k)s and the threat to privatize Social Security raise the specter—not seen since the 1930s—that many older workers will have to labor until they die to survive.

The destruction of jobs is not a new phenomenon. Tens of millions of jobs in auto, mining, steel, textiles and other basic industries have been wiped out by corporate America since the mid-1970s. This has devastated industrial towns, including Dayton, Detroit, Flint, Pittsburgh and other cities in America’s so-called Rust Belt.

Over the last 15 years, corporate downsizing has extended from manufacturing workers to millions of white-collar and professional workers as transnational companies cut costs and search the globe for the cheapest labor, lowest tax rates and highest profits. There are now predictions that by 2015, more than 3 million IT [information technology], finance and other white-collar jobs will be “offshored” to India, China, the Philippines and other countries, where US companies pay \$6 an hour to a software developer for the equivalent work done by his American counterpart for \$60 an hour.

Both Bush and John Kerry are thoroughly beholden to big business and the wealthy elite who run America. Rather than stem the destruction of jobs and living standards, whoever wins the election will intensify the

attacks on working people. This was made clear when Kerry visited Dayton last month and offered no answer to the jobs crisis. Instead, he suggested the government should give US companies incentives to keep production in the US rather than shifting to lower-wage countries. This can only mean further tax cuts and other deregulation measures that workers will pay for.

The working class must develop a political strategy to defend its jobs and living standards. Such a strategy, however, must be based on an understanding of the objective economic changes of the last quarter century and include a critical appraisal of the record and policies of all those who have claimed to speak in the interests of working people.

I began working for General Motors in 1966, when I was hired at the Delco Chassis plant in Dayton, Ohio, and became a member of the United Auto Workers union. While I quickly came into conflict with the union leadership, like tens of millions of other workers I saw the unions as organizations through which the working class could fight to improve its position. I was part of a generation of workers radicalized by the Vietnam War, the civil rights struggles and the deterioration of living standards due to the crisis of the US and world economy. In 1970, 350,000 workers walked out against GM in a strike that lasted two months.

That strike mobilized the support of other working people and small business people as well throughout Dayton. While that strike represented a powerful movement of the working class, the UAW today cannot mobilize its own members, much less wider layers of workers.

This was part of a massive wave of militant strikes involving Teamster truck drivers, workers at General Electric, longshoremens, telephone and construction workers, and others. These industrial struggles were combined with a growing disgust with the Democratic Party, which had instigated the war in Vietnam and had joined the Nixon administration in demanding the working class pay for the war and the economic crisis at home.

My break with the Democrats came in 1972, when former Alabama governor George Wallace ran for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party and got significant support, winning the Michigan primary. I still remember the pamphlet issued by the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, at the time, which asked how a party claiming to represent the working class could have in it a Wallace, a racist segregationist who obviously opposed the working class.

Shortly afterwards, I joined the Workers League. I was attracted to the party’s fight for the unions to build a labor party to defeat the two existing parties and bring the working class to power. This demand won widespread support; and even sections of the union bureaucracy, well aware of the hatred in the working class for the Democrats, said they supported the idea of a labor party but argued that the time was not ripe

for it.

In reality, the UAW and the AFL-CIO officialdom were opposed to any break with the Democrats. Why was this? The union establishment defended capitalism, and its alliance with the Democratic Party blocked the working class from advancing a program that would radically reorganize economic life in the interests of the working class, not the wealthy few.

Hostility to socialism has been the guiding principle of the American labor bureaucracy ever since the 1940s, when the AFL and CIO leaders conducted their own anticommunist witch-hunts inside the unions. Not only did this leave the labor movement unarmed in the US, but on the basis of anticommunism the AFL-CIO supported the Vietnam War and collaborated with the CIA to subvert the left-wing unions and resistance movements in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. One undeniable legacy of this policy was the creation of cheap labor havens to which US corporations are offshoring jobs today.

The alliance with the Democrats was the chief means through which the labor bureaucracy strangled the struggles of the working class and subordinated it to the needs of American capitalism. During the 1980s—a decade of violent class struggle—the AFL-CIO deliberately betrayed the one strike after another in order to crush the resistance of the working class and assist management in driving down labor costs.

The UAW and the AFL-CIO officially adopted the position of corporatism in the 1980s, rejecting the very concept that workers had any interests separate and apart from the corporate bosses. Union officials were put on the board of directors of corporations like Chrysler, and a myriad of labor-management structures were put in place, allowing the companies to use labor officials to impose speed-up and various cost-cutting measures to improve “competitiveness.”

Hand in hand with management, the UAW and other unions promoted the most poisonous national chauvinism and racism, aimed at convincing American workers that their enemy was not big business but Japanese and European workers who were supposedly “stealing” American jobs.

What has the promotion of economic nationalism produced? When I first joined the UAW, the union had 2.25 million workers in basic industry. Today it has 638,000 members. Throughout the US, just 8.2 percent of private-sector workers belong to unions and just 2.2 million factory workers belong, down 60 percent from two decades ago.

The country is littered with closed factories. Despite their demagoguery about “saving American jobs,” the UAW and AFL-CIO officials were unable to defend a single job. No serious struggle was waged to stop plant closings or mass layoffs.

As our election statement says: “The orientation of the old labor organizations—the protection of national industry and the national labor market—is undermined by globally integrated production and the unprecedented mobility of capital. The role of these bureaucratic apparatuses, including the AFL-CIO in the US, has been transformed from pressuring the employers and the government for concessions to the workers, to pressuring the workers for concessions to the employers so as to attract capital. These organizations, which are wedded to a national program, can play only a fundamentally reactionary role.”

The union officials and others who promote economic nationalism, most notably figures such as Dennis Kucinich and Ralph Nader, criticize one aspect of capitalism, while defending the profit system as a whole. But the very nature of capitalism is the exploitation of the working class. As early as the 1950s, the Big Three auto companies in Detroit began to shift operations from areas with high concentrations of unionization to the Southern states, where labor costs were cheaper. The advances in technology and transportation today, however, allow the corporations to extend their search for cheap labor throughout the world.

The source of job destruction is not trade per se or even globalization. It is an economic system that subordinates human needs to the private

accumulation of wealth. A system that allows 587 people to control \$1.9 trillion, while one half of the world’s population subsists on less than two dollars a day, is historically doomed.

To talk about rolling back world trade or reversing the tendency of production to break through the boundaries of the nation state is utopian and reactionary. Furthermore, it promotes the illusion that you can attack the problem of outsourcing to lower-wage countries without addressing the central issue: the incompatibility of the profit system with the social needs of the masses.

Workers must change their way of thinking and see themselves as part of an international class. Just as corporations organize their operations globally, workers must organize our struggles on an international scale. Protectionism and nationalism cut across this fight and force workers into a race to the bottom to see who will accept the worst wages and conditions.

Such a stand by American workers will strengthen the fight of workers in Mexico, India, China and other low-paying countries to improve their wages and conditions. We must reject the “us against them” mentality promoted by the corporations and union bureaucracies and coordinate the struggles of workers in every part of the world for a secure job and decent standard of living.

What can we learn from the history of the American working class? It is not possible to win a single gain without establishing the fighting unity of the working class across religious, ethnic and racial boundaries. The socialist-minded workers who organized the sit-down strikes and organizing drives of the 1930s rejected the efforts of the corporations to use racism to divide the working class and fought to unite black and white workers, as well as immigrants from Italy and Eastern Europe who spoke several languages.

My own uncles were recruited by the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and taken up to the Ford Rouge plant in Dearborn, Michigan, in 1941 as part of an attempt to break a strike by autoworkers, who were mostly white. Once they found out what was going on, instead of becoming scabs they came out and joined the struggle, and the workers were able to prevail against Ford.

In the same sense, today, workers in the US must stand with workers throughout the world against our common enemy—the global profit system.

Global production must be reorganized in the interests of the working class; and the technological, scientific and cultural achievements of society used to dramatically raise the living standards and eliminate social inequality within every country and between the rich and poor countries. This is the perspective of world socialism as fought for by our party.

The enormous challenges working people face demand they rethink their political views and reject timeworn prejudices against socialism promoted by the big business politicians and union bureaucrats. Is it any coincidence that in the one country where anticommunism has reached the level of a semi-official religion, social inequality is the worst of any advanced country?

The crisis of capitalism, however, provides the strongest argument for socialism. Whether Bush or his Democratic contender sits in the White House after the election, ever wider layers of workers and students will be driven into political struggle. The campaign that Bill Van Auken and I are waging is aimed at preparing for the future by advancing a socialist alternative to the impasse the profit system has created for mankind.



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