

“Independent” candidate Ralph Nader offers alliance with Democrat Kerry

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Just five weeks after announcing he would run as an independent candidate for president in the November US election, consumer advocate and 2000 Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader has all but dropped the pretence of opposing the Democratic nominee, John Kerry.

Speaking Sunday in Atlanta, Georgia, Nader said he would meet with Kerry next month to discuss their “common objective” of defeating President George W. Bush. “I’m going to say, ‘Look, let’s collaborate to defeat George Bush, even though we’re competitors,’” he told the CNN cable news network. He said his campaign would serve as a “second front against Bush, however small.”

Nader reiterated his previous assertions that his candidacy would help rather than harm Kerry’s electoral prospects. He went even further in attempting to placate Democratic leaders and Kerry supporters within liberal and “radical” circles who have denounced him as a “spoiler”, and demanded that he withdraw from the campaign. Speaking of disaffected “conservatives, liberals, Republicans and independents who are furious with George W. Bush,” Nader said, “Those are the people I’m going to try to appeal to.”

In listing the issues he intended to emphasize, including budget deficits and “the sovereignty-shredding effect of the WTO (World Trade Organization) and NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement),” Nader made the significant omission of the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

When he announced his campaign on February 22, Nader said he was running in opposition to the “two-party duopoly” and described the US political system as “two parties ... ferociously competing to see who’s going to go to the White House and take orders from their corporate paymasters.” He stressed his opposition

to the US occupation of Iraq and called Bush’s use of lies about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction to justify the invasion an impeachable offense. He also said he believed the Democratic candidate in 2000, Al Gore, would likewise have gone to war with Iraq had he, rather than Bush, been declared the winner of the contested election in Florida.

Nader’s current downgrading of the war question is not a mere oversight. He can hardly continue to appeal to popular sentiment against the Iraq war and simultaneously promote the candidacy of Kerry, who voted to authorize the invasion and adamantly supports the US occupation.

Since Nader announced his candidacy at the end of February, the political crisis of the Bush administration has visibly intensified and indications have mounted that significant sections of the American ruling elite are considering a change of personnel in the White House. Kerry has wrapped up the Democratic nomination and moved rapidly to assure the corporate and political establishment that he would be a “responsible” head of state.

Kerry has complied with demands in the establishment press that he disassociate himself from antiwar sentiment and take the issue of Iraq off of the election agenda. He has reaffirmed his support for the US occupation, identified himself with the doctrine of pre-emptive war, and presented himself as a stronger and more effective commander in the “war on terror” than Bush.

For the Democratic Party establishment, Nader’s candidacy has continued to be a cause of concern, not only because his poll numbers—between 5 percent and 7 percent according to recent polls—suggest his candidacy could make the difference in what is expected to be a close election, but also because his presence cuts across

a Democratic campaign strategy aimed at preempting any serious mobilization of popular anger against Bush's foreign and domestic policies. The Democrats would like to gain the White House by winning the imprimatur of the ruling elite, and avoid needlessly raising popular expectations as to what a Democratic administration would do on issues such as war, jobs, health care, education and democratic rights.

Only last week, former president Jimmy Carter, speaking at a Democratic unity dinner in Washington, urged Nader to pull out of the presidential campaign and "not risk costing the Democrats the White House."

This is the political context in which Nader has made a direct overture to Kerry. In doing so, he has exposed an essential feature of his political outlook and activities—one that he generally obscures with anti-establishment and populist slogans: Nader remains, notwithstanding his criticisms, entirely within the framework of American bourgeois politics. Far from seeking to lead a movement to break with the two-party system and build a genuinely independent party, his orientation continues to be to the Democratic Party.

He promotes the illusion that the Democratic Party is somehow a party of the people, which can be compelled, through popular pressure from below, to implement serious social reforms and uphold the interests of the common people against the demands of big business. This perspective flies in the face not only of political facts and historical experience, it ignores the essential reality of the Democratic Party as a party of American imperialism, and an integral part of a two-party system that has, for more than a century, blocked any effective challenge from the working class and defended the interests of a small ruling elite.

In the crisis election of 2004, the stage-managed and manipulated character of the electoral process within the two-party framework has reached the point of all but excluding any discussion of the most burning issues of the day—war, jobs, social inequality, corporate corruption, democratic rights. Nader's role will be to shore up the calcified and anti-democratic two-party system. He will seek, whether he officially ends his campaign before voting day or continues until November, to channel those disaffected with Kerry and the Democrats back into the fold.

He has not spelled out the specific issues he plans to discuss with Kerry, but they could well include an

agreement not to seriously campaign, or even seek ballot status, in pivotal and closely contested states. Nader has already endorsed the practice of "vote swapping", a process whereby Nader supporters, via the Internet, match up with Democratic voters, agreeing to vote for the Democratic presidential candidate in close races if their Democratic counterparts agree to vote for Nader in states where the outcome will not be affected.

Such a campaign makes a mockery of the claim to be independent of the Democratic Party. Nader's latest maneuver shows that his differences with Dennis Kucinich and Al Sharpton, both of whom ran in the Democratic presidential primaries, are essentially of a tactical, rather than principled, character. While Kucinich and Sharpton maintain that the Democratic Party can be shifted to the left from within, Nader offers the equally futile perspective of doing so from without.

The *World Socialist Web Site* defended Nader's right to run for president and explained the political motivations and anti-democratic character of the attacks made against him by the media and various supporters of the Democratic Party. Unlike these defenders of the two-party system, who have attacked Nader from the right, our criticisms of Nader, which are of a fundamental and principled character, are from the left. (See: "Why are the Democrats so incensed at Ralph Nader?", 26 February 2004).

Nader's announcement that he wants to serve as an adjunct to the Kerry campaign underscores the impotency of all forms of middle-class protest and reformist politics. The only campaign fighting for the political independence of the working class from the two-party system is that of the Socialist Equality Party and its presidential and vice-presidential candidates, Bill Van Auken and Jim Lawrence.



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