

Letters and a reply on “Professor Chomsky comes in from the cold”

David Walsh
17 April 2004

A number of readers have sent in comments on an article by David Walsh, “Professor Chomsky comes in from the cold,” posted April 5, 2004. Below we publish the author’s reply, followed by the letters.

The WSWS has received numerous letters in response to the article on Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Professor Noam Chomsky’s decision to support the candidacy of Democratic Party’s presumptive candidate for president, John Kerry, albeit while “holding one’s nose.”

We reprint below a sample of the letters criticizing our position and, in one fashion or another, upholding Chomsky’s views.

By and large, it must be said, the letters do not much concern themselves with the issues raised by Chomsky’s history and outlook. They constitute instead a rather pragmatic and, in our view, short-sighted defense of an orientation to the Democratic Party. Indeed the various comments do not, for the most part, even engage the arguments advanced in the original critique of Chomsky.

We argued that the tactic of supporting the “lesser of two evils” had failed miserably, that one of the chief reasons American workers had been dealt such serious blows over the last several decades had been precisely their continuing subordination to the Democrats, a party representing the social interests of big business. Given that Chomsky acknowledged the Democratic Party is one of “the two factions of the business party,” how could he justify supporting one of its leading representatives?

We pointed out that Kerry is a veteran bourgeois politician, with a track record of loyal service to American capitalism. The Massachusetts senator voted for the Iraq war and the Patriot Act. By no stretch of the imagination is Kerry an “antiwar candidate.” He has vowed to keep US troops in Iraq and “stay the course.” To call for a vote for Kerry is to support a man who is a proponent of the current war in Iraq and imperialist war in general. It is also to accept a certain share of responsibility for the actions, including new or continued colonial-style interventions overseas, of a Democratic administration.

Kerry’s economic policies offer nothing to the unemployed, the poor and those barely keeping their heads above water. He promises austerity, deficit reduction and further tax breaks for the corporations. For these reasons and others the media and the political establishment maneuvered Kerry to the head of the pack of Democratic candidates. They wanted to make certain that the war in Iraq in particular would be “taken off the table.”

The original article suggested that Chomsky’s evolution reflected a more general tendency of erstwhile “leftists” and “radicals” under the pressure of events to make their way into the orbit of bourgeois politics. We mentioned the example of the French “far left,” which managed to endorse the candidacy of right-wing incumbent Jacques Chirac in the second round of the French presidential elections in 2002.

Furthermore, we suggested a connection between Chomsky’s lifeless and threadbare arguments in support of the Democrats and his refusal to work through the great political issues of the twentieth century, in particular the Russian Revolution, the rise of Stalinism and the struggle of

Trotsky and the Left Opposition against the degeneration of the revolution and the betrayal of the cause of international socialism. Chomsky uncritically defends the role of Spanish anarchism, whose leadership played a part in the suppression of the Spanish Revolution in the 1930s.

To repeat, none of these questions were truly taken up by our critics. Their arguments boil down to these: Chomsky’s position is “realistic,” while the WSWS-Socialist Equality Party’s is not. What is Chomsky (and anyone else) to do, faced with the choice of Bush and Kerry? Bush is so dangerous, that the top priority must be removing him from office. In any event, even if Chomsky is wrong in this one instance, his well-known opposition to US foreign policy should render him immune from criticism.

None of these arguments seems convincing to us. On the contrary, they sound like the proverbial broken record of the American middle class liberal-left.

What is “political realism”? In general, our critics define “realism” in the narrowest possible manner, i.e., which candidate has the possibility of defeating George W. Bush on November 2, 2004? Any other considerations are largely excluded.

In the first place, there is nothing “realistic” in the positive sense about backing a candidate like Kerry, whose election will mean no improvement in the lives of masses of people; an individual who, in fact, will pursue—albeit with certain different tactics—the consensus policy of the entire American ruling elite: the drive for US global domination, at the expense of the population at home and abroad.

But “realism,” in any event, must involve more than the most superficial interpretation of immediate facts. A “realism” of that sort rejects drawing out the historical and social implications of these facts and therefore engages reality at a terribly low level.

For the socialist, genuine political realism means grasping the totality of the political situation in its various sides and dimensions, including one’s own activity as an objective element. It requires determining how the overall interests of the working class—above all, how its consciousness as an independent political and social force—can be advanced.

We do not underestimate the reactionary character of the Bush administration. On the contrary, we have been issuing warnings on the WSWS since its launch in February 1998 about the grave dangers represented by the Republican right and the lurch rightward by the entire US political and media establishment. But these dangers (nor much of anything else) do not spring full-grown from the forehead of George W. Bush. They are inextricably bound up with the deepening crisis of American capitalism. These dangers will grow *whichever* of the two major candidates is elected. The top priority, in our opinion, is not “getting Bush out” and therefore Kerry “in,” but the fight to separate the working class politically from its oppressors on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

The present sclerotic political set-up in America—the domination of the two big business parties with its depressing prospect of a Kerry-Bush race, the intensely narrow range of debate, the attempted smothering of

criticism and opposition by the corporate media—is increasingly at odds with the complex and volatile social reality of American life. This reality, concentrated in the extraordinary aggravation of social polarization, must find expression and burst to the surface, disrupting and shattering longstanding political relationships. The independent interests of the broad layers of the working population will assert themselves politically, against the entire existing set-up. The SEP bases itself on this perspective.

Frederick Engels pointed out that Hegel's proposition "All that is real is rational; and all that is rational is real" had earned the gratitude of reactionary political forces. But Engels noted as well the proposition's subversive dialectical content, because it also insisted that "in the course of development, all that was previously real becomes unreal, loses its necessity, its right of existence, its rationality. And in the place of moribund reality comes a new, viable reality—peacefully if the old has enough intelligence to go to its death without a struggle; forcibly if it resists this necessity." Nothing is more futile and "unrealistic" than trying to revive a corpse.

The two-party system in America has lost whatever rationality it ever had, and certainly its right to exist. The Socialist Equality Party's campaign bases itself on a more profound reading of historical and social reality. As we explained in our initial election statement:

"In launching this campaign, the Socialist Equality Party is completely realistic. We understand very well that our candidates will, in the present situation, win only a limited number of votes. But the purpose of our campaign is to raise the level of political debate within the United States and internationally, to break out of the straitjacket of right-wing bourgeois politics and present a socialist alternative to the demagoguery and lies of the establishment parties and the mass media. Our campaign is not about votes. It is about ideas and policies."

One letter writer asks, "What do you expect him [Chomsky] to do, support the Socialist candidate? That would be great, but, considering the fact that he does not have a snowball's chance of winning, what would be the point?" Another asks what we think "workers should do between today and the 2004 election which would entail the principled rejection of both Bush and Kerry at the polls.... Who should workers vote for? Or should workers vote at all? If workers should vote for the Socialist Equality Party's candidate, how is that not tantamount to political complacency?" A third writes, "In a perfect world, one would be inclined to possibly vote for Bill Van Auken, yet Mr. Van Auken has nearly no political base and is running on a platform so demonized by the establishment that to vote for him is nearly to cast no vote at all."

We take our campaign and candidates seriously. If we thought there were candidates apart from ours who represented in some fashion the interests of the working class, we would support them, critically or otherwise. There are not. Certainly we call for active support for our campaign between now and November 2004. We are urging our readers and supporters to help place us on the ballot in as many states as possible, and we are calling on people to vote for our candidates.

For the SEP, as our election statement declares, the 2004 elections are "an opportunity to develop a serious discussion on the social and political crisis, and lay down the programmatic foundations for the building of a mass movement for a revolutionary transformation of American society." For the pragmatist, this is not sufficiently "real." It is, however, the only means by which the present untenable political situation will be transcended in a progressive fashion. It is the precise opposite of complacency or inaction.

All great movements begin with limited numbers. If these movements express historically and socially progressive interests, they attract many adherents. More conventional souls, as Trotsky once noted, are inclined to see the pioneers as mere "splinters." This only indicates that these conventional souls do not grasp the inner logic of social life and the latter "passes them by."

Certain letter writers seem to treat any criticism of Chomsky as inadmissible on its face, on the basis of his previous anti-imperialist pronouncements. Notwithstanding his sometimes scathing criticism of US foreign policy, the MIT linguistics professor indicates by his present positions that he has never gone beyond the framework of American bourgeois politics, despite his phrases about constructing or reconstructing the "basic culture and institutions of a democratic society." Such a project is utterly incompatible with support, even of the most hesitant and "nose-holding" variety, for the Democratic Party candidate for president.

And Chomsky's endorsement of Kerry—for that's what it is—is no small matter, a blemish on an otherwise smooth surface. At a critical juncture in American political history, when everything in fact depends on the masses segregating themselves from the parties of imperialism and oppression, Chomsky comes out openly in opposition to a break with the Democrats. He indicates by that his essential worthlessness as a political leader.

Letters from readers

To the editor,

I think you were a little hard on Chomsky. Your article posed the question, "If Chomsky admits that Kerry and Bush are merely two representatives of the same imperialist elite, how can he possibly justify support to either one?"

What do you expect him to do, support the Socialist candidate? That would be great, but, considering the fact that he does not have a snowball's chance of winning, what would be the point? All that would accomplish, in my opinion, would be aiding the Bush campaign, and, as Chomsky says, there are "small" differences between Bush and Kerry, but even small differences can be important.

Thanks for all the good articles. I enjoy your site, and support most everything that you say.

MF

David Walsh's criticism of Chomsky is very interesting, and it is refreshing to hear someone treat Chomsky soberly and refrain from lionizing his stature, which Chomsky himself probably does not enjoy. I would add that I have seen Chomsky say, without bothering to support his claim, that the idea that the 9/11 attacks involved some government complicity is "hopelessly implausible." Chomsky's refusal to consider "conspiracy theories" is a blind spot in his political thinking, and may arise from the fact that his analysis is primarily linguistic (he was a linguist before he was an activist). He does not approach politics from a detective's point of view. In any event, to the extent Mr. Walsh suggests it's irrelevant whether Kerry or Bush is elected, I disagree. I would also point out that Michael Parenti shares this view, and will likely vote for Kerry.

Regardless of what Chomsky thinks, however, it is incumbent upon the Socialist Equality Party, insofar as it intends to provide workers with a political education, and insofar as it argues that Kerry should not be supported, to state precisely what workers should do between today and the 2004 election which would entail the principled rejection of both Bush and Kerry at the polls. Such instruction is especially crucial given that the Socialist Equality Party has rejected Ralph Nader and essentially advised workers not to vote for their own candidate:

"In launching this campaign, the Socialist Equality Party is completely realistic. We understand very well that our candidates will, in the present situation, win only a limited number of votes. But the purpose of our campaign is to raise the level of political debate within the United States and internationally, to break out of the straitjacket of right-wing bourgeois politics and present a socialist alternative to the demagoguery and lies of the establishment parties and the mass media. Our campaign is not about votes. It is about ideas and policies."

Who should workers vote for? Or should workers vote at all? If workers should vote for the Socialist Equality Party's candidate, how is that not tantamount to political complacency? If workers should not vote, then

what does it mean for workers to break with the Democratic and Republican (and Green) parties and build a workers party independent of the political establishment?

CR

Greetings:

Although I rely on WWS as a daily news-analysis source, and enjoy David Walsh's excellent film reviews, this recent text is a bit too sectarian for my ideological palate (I also happen to have some severe anarchist sympathies, and know Chomsky's work very well). Indeed, why waste energy on this kind of intra-left critique?

I suspect that Walsh will get tons of ignorant hate mail from so-called anarchists who have, against their principles, turned Chomsky into the head of a cult of personality (you should've seen the wrath at one of the IMCs last year when someone posted a Parenti article critical of Chomsky's position on something or other). Granted, if there is indeed an unintentional cult of personality built around Chomsky, then there is no doubt some danger of his followers adopting his position on this and other issues uncritically—but I seriously doubt that rational argument—sectarian or otherwise—will sway such folks.

For the rest of us—those who credit Chomsky's work on US foreign policy and his role in exposing some of the worst of Empire's abuses—we have enough wits about us to realize that his current "lesser evilism" is flawed. I just don't think there's any need for WWS to devote time and space to sectarian anarchist-baiting.

Yours,

RJ

Dear WWS:

You write: "If Chomsky admits that Kerry and Bush are merely two representatives of the same imperialist elite, how can he possibly justify support to either one? How will support for the candidacy of one or another of these reactionary figures contribute to the political clarification and long-term interests of working people in America?"

Since I live in New York State (which will undoubtedly go for Kerry), I will not be voting for Kerry, who is clearly an enemy. But I do see the logic of getting rid of Bush as a crucial primary objective. This is the logic of my position:

Bringing to the socio-political realm the "long-term interests of working people in America" depends on them being alive and on earth to attempt to do this. If US foreign and domestic policy causes catastrophic environmental damage, or causes a catastrophic nuclear/biological terrorist attack, the "working people of America"—those who haven't survived, at least, will cease to have any interest whatsoever. And those who do survive may exist in a society so unlike the one we have at present that their interests may turn out to be entirely different from what they are now—they may be reduced to hunting rats with bows and arrows. In other words, struggling for meaningful change presupposes that those who must engage in this struggle remain capable of doing so.

I believe that the Bushites are so reckless that they are willing to destroy the world as we know it in order to preserve their hegemonic role in it. The Kerryites, while no less malignant in the long run are, in my opinion, less likely in the short run to do something so drastic that the world's ecological/political system would be compromised.

Therefore it seems entirely plausible to me, in the given concrete situation, to support Kerry over Bush (and the various third party candidates).

Respectfully,

GG

Mr. Walsh:

Criticise Chomsky if you wish but he, like all Americans, is faced with the reality that either Kerry or Bush will win the US Presidential election of 2004 and has made a pragmatic choice in a high stakes game to do what he believes is "less harm." He clearly holds no great hopes for a

Democratic presidency beyond the narrow hope to do "less harm." Chomsky knows the danger that the foreign and domestic damage done by Bush's presidency may yet run on through a second term and his instinct is echoed by an unlikely source in John Dean, former aide to Nixon, "As with Nixon the concept of executive privilege is being abused. This is about pure politics: do it as long as you can get away with it, and when you can't get away with it any more, yield" (*Telegraph*, April 4, 2004). Chomsky wants to cut the period Bush "gets away with it" by four years.

I personally disagree with his decision while understanding the rationale. However, I recognise that Chomsky has offered an outstanding critique of US foreign policy for 40 years. To extrapolate from his pragmatic decision to vote against Bush by comparing him to "reformists and opportunists," seduced by the "siren song of bourgeois liberalism" and calling him a "vulgar defender of the two-party system" is just ridiculous and unworthy of someone seeking serious analysis.

Pragmatic choices are made every day, not least by the WWS which in April 2004, faced with the narrow choice between the continued occupation of Iraq or the immediate removal of troops, favours an Iraq de-occupied but left on the brink of a likely civil war to an Iraq occupied but with a real prospect of elections through which the Iraqi people will be able to vote loud and clear for what they want and what they think of the occupation. Would it be appropriate, given this WWS "less harm" choice, for me to label you "opportunistic, a vulgar defender of two vulgar positions," or appreciate that given the narrow available choices that, agree or not, there is some merit in your position?

Regards

MP

David Walsh is a moron.

I agree with Chomsky. He is realistic about the future.

I will never read another article with his name attached.

Instead of debasing and labeling Chomsky as this or that, why not ask him for an interview. Let him clarify his thought on Kerry and Bush. The fact remains Chomsky has credibility, and most on the left consider him progressive. Getting Bush out must be the priority, and if that involves strategic voting, so be it. Voting is one of the only ways to have an immediate effect. Does that mean revolutionary change, no; will the nature of the system be fundamentally changed, no; but it will curb the right and show peoples disapproval of Bush and Co. It will have a limited effect for sure but it is still the first step, on that long road of awakening the political consciousness of the working class.

Because in order to defeat Bush and Co., it would require the participation of many who normally don't vote due to apathy, cynicism, etc. This would be a good thing, and if Bush is defeated, people might begin to see that they can actually make a difference, that they have some power if they act and focus on an issue. Steps like this are important and might help to temper some of the apathy and alienation. Might help to draw more people into becoming political and understanding the future is in their hands, they will have the finally say. Common struggle brings folks of different politics and opinion together. When we are together we begin to talk share our views, and takes on politics. We begin to see each other, as having more in common than not. We begin to see things from another direction and point of view. Connections are made views, and opinions change or are moderated, allies are forged, the revolution is that much closer. Bush has got to go!

DB

Vancouver, B.C.

Hello,

I'm a longtime subscriber to WWS and really enjoyed your article on Noam Chomsky. I agree with you that his arguments for supporting Kerry are commonplace and that it is indeed a contradiction to support Kerry or Bush when arguing that they are essentially one and the same. However, I feel that perhaps you went too far in asserting that Chomsky must accept

responsibility for colonialist invasions that have not even happened yet (but will inevitably occur regardless of which candidate gets elected).

While Chomsky is an important sociopolitical critic of our time, your argument seems to afford him more supposed societal influence than reality. Simply because I have read Chomsky and agree with many of his criticisms of American imperialism does not mean that I will simply follow his lead and vote for Kerry. Again, while I am a longtime reader of WSWS and agree with most of what it written, I have to wonder about such an argument and say that if I did interpret it correctly, I would find it rather insulting. Even if I incorrectly interpreted that, how is Chomsky, simply due to standing among the academic elite, to carry any more responsibility than any other voter in this country who may vote Bush-lite in the upcoming election?

Another concern of mine is the role of SEP in social organizing. How can SEP expect to make real change or even get on the ballot without more house calling and community involvement? Obviously, the Internet is a tool that is not and cannot be utilized by everyone. How are you expecting to reach the proletarian masses by such limited means? Rarely do I see event postings for rallies, organizing, and such. Could one not then make the same argument about SEP being a bourgeois organization of (probably) mostly white, well-educated males? Please correct me if I'm wrong, as I hope that I am. Thanks and keep up the good work.

RM

Dear WSWS,

I frequently read your articles and most often admire the stand you take regarding the problems facing our society. I am most puzzled, however, regarding your almost scathing attack of MIT Linguistics Professor and respected dissident Noah Chomsky. You apparently seek to point out contradictions in Chomsky's political philosophy and they certainly do exist. However, it appears that your line of argumentation stems from a logic I believe is flawed. The main thrust of your article attempts to chastise Chomsky for choosing one of two establishment candidates and to accuse of him of being another supporter of the system because he is not an all-out socialist.

Regarding the first point and the eventual contradiction between the two attacks in your article, I also find it appalling to be faced with choosing between John Kerry and George Bush. Having to pick the lesser of two evils as the phrase goes is a disgusting flaw in American politics and reveals the bankrupt nature of the two-party system. My attempting to argue this as a reality one has to deal with is both self-defeating and not an argument I would normally choose to make, however Chomsky is correct in saying that Kerry does offer both enough difference in substance to make his Presidency far better than another four years of Bush.

Furthermore, and vastly more important, Kerry also offers a formidable challenge. In a perfect world, one would be inclined to possibly vote for Bill Van Auken, yet Mr. Van Auken has nearly no political base and is running on a platform so demonized by the establishment that to vote for him is nearly to cast no vote at all. I have never blamed Ralph Nader for Gore's defeat and can fully respect voting ones true opinion, however I feel to do so this election year is unwise but ultimately a matter of personal choice.

In dealing with the second thrust of your article, which is the demonizing of Professor Chomsky based on a perceived hostility towards his stand on socialism, is quite foolish in my opinion. I also express distrust of any state apparatus and, in a socialist system based upon the Leninist model, the state becomes the central and inescapable figure and arguably could lead, as it did in the Soviet Union, to the likes of Stalin. This model of socialism requires all power to be invested in the state; however, it is argued chiefly by proponents of socialism that this means little because it is "the people" who would be in control. It is precisely this danger that both Bakunin and Chomsky argue against and, I feel, rightly so. This brings one to the fundamental flaw in your line of

argumentation.

Beyond calls in your articles for the working people of the country to unite and all of the other wonderful phrases, there exist no tangible results of this and thus places the WSWS akin to Chomsky in that both offer nothing more than rhetoric.

Sincerely,

RW

I find your portrayal of Chomsky's arguments in support of the Democratic nominee as "vulgar, banal and threadbare" to be "kneejerkingly" banal and threadbare. Chomsky is absolutely right in that almost anyone is better than this cabal we now have in the White House ... these are dangerous men and have been labeled (before attaining office) as "crazies" by other politicians of a less radical right bent. I for one and I hope many others will work and vote to get these people out of office and would tell other liberal groups to get their act together and spend some energy overhauling the electoral system and getting public funding for campaigns and other pertinent reforms

DM

I just wanted to make a few comments about the article on Chomsky's support of Kerry. First, you talk about Chomsky's criticism of the Lenin revolution. To make one quick point, I just think it would have been fair if you acknowledged that Stalin was indeed a Leninist.

This could lend some credence to Chomsky and others' claims that the revolution was flawed.

Then on another point, you discuss Chomsky's praise of the Spanish Revolution. I think I've come across some of Chomsky's remarks on that revolution and I believe his whole deal was to say it was as close to a workers' revolution so far. I am sure he admits that there were flaws. But your article insinuates that Chomsky sees this revolution as perfect in its formation.

Anyways, just those two quick points. And I am not defending Chomsky; I am not a Chomsky-ite or some such thing as you might say. I am unsure of support for Kerry, as well.

C

Dear Editor:

The WSWS's attack on Chomsky reveals either an ignorance on your part of what he stands for or a blatant willingness to misrepresent his position.

Nobody that I have read on the WSWS comes close to Chomsky in terms of the accuracy, depth and power of his fundamental critique of the capitalist system. So instead of bashing him with shallow, false and inaccurate representations of what he stands for you should appreciate the true depth of his ongoing contributions to a better world, for the working class particularly.

DW

Long Beach, California

No one ever went broke underestimating the Left's penchant for backstabbing, eh? While the rhetoric of Trotsky lives, his philosophy died some years back. Say about 50 or 60 years ago.

There are no workers at the barricades; the workers simply want to be like the people held up as role models of success. Hell, most of the world wants to live like Americans, not like idealized Marxian proletarians! There are some sad delusions in the attack on Chomsky: like the people really are going to reject the tweedle-dum /tweedle-dee farce of the coming elections. Like that's proper behavior to the mess of American politics. We went through similar self-destructing weirdness with the "New Left" a few decades back. All it did was scare the moderate Republicans into become utter reactionaries and turn the moderate Democrats into neo-Dixiecrats.

It's been downhill ever since.

Attacking the Catalan anarchists was equally stupid. The anarchists actually established a working class movement. There were co-ops and

factories that really were run by the workers—not Party-brained Marxist intellectuals. They answered to no party structure, which made them so repellent to conventional intellectuals, ever hopeful of the job (a dirty one, but somebody’s got to do it, right?) of “leading” the workers and those otherwise less intelligent...

So sad. Nobody learns from history.

P

To David Walsh,

A simplistic, deceitful and very personal attack. Absolutely appalling. I even went to the trouble to read the two articles that you say show that Chomsky “has endorsed the presumptive Democratic Party candidate for president, John Kerry...” Chomsky never “endorsed” anybody, how can you possibly read the word “endorse” from Chomsky’s “Keeping the Bush circle out means holding one’s nose and voting for some Democrat, but that’s not the end of the story.” “The basic culture and institutions of a democratic society have to be constructed, in part reconstructed, and defeat of an extremely dangerous clique in the presidential race is only one very small component of that.”

In the future I will read any article that has your name in its byline (if I bother to read it at all) with a very critical eye indeed!

Sincerely,

DC



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact