The struggle against war and the 2004 US elections

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We are publishing here the report delivered by David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the WSWS and national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, to a Midwest aggregate meeting of the SEP held April 17 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Just over a month has passed since we last met here in Ann Arbor to discuss the Socialist Equality Party's presidential campaign. We spent two days on March 13 and 14 reviewing the political and programmatic basis of our intervention in the 2004 elections. A great deal has happened since we met—above all, the eruption of a genuine nationwide insurrection in Iraq against the American occupation of that country.

The desperate attempts of the media to vilify the insurrection as the work of a few thugs, Saddam loyalists, etc., are despicable lies that fly in the face of observable reality. After nearly three weeks of fighting, during which the United States has unleashed its massive arsenal against opponents armed with the most primitive weapons, the American military has been unable to suppress the insurrection.

The web site *Stratfor*, which is run by a group of right-wing analysts with very close connections to American military and intelligence circles, recently published an analysis of the military situation in Iraq. It made the following observation about a week and a half ago:

"If the current trends accelerate, the United States faces a serious military challenge that could lead to disaster. The United States does not have the forces necessary to put down a broad-based Shiite rising and crush the Sunni rebellion as well. Even the current geography of the rising is beyond the capabilities of existing deployments or any practicable number of additional forces that might be made available. The United States is already withdrawing from some cities. The logical outcome of all this would be an enclave strategy, in which the United States concentrates its forces in a series of fortified locations—perhaps excluding Iraqi nationals—and leaves the rest of the country to the guerrillas. That, of course, would raise the question of why the United States should bother to remain in Iraq, since those forces would not be able to exert effective force either inside the country or beyond its borders."

During the past week, the chaotic situation has escalated. Supply lines are under attack, and the decision of the United States to reverse the rotation of troops out of Iraq is an important indication that the military confronts a very difficult situation. I think one can be certain that in the not-too-distant future the press will be carrying reports indicating just how serious the danger confronting the military was during April 2004.

The reaction within the media is significant, but also predictable. There are ever more extravagant calls for blood. A typical expression of this are a number of columns written by George Will of the *Washington Post*.

First, on April 7, 2004, he wrote: "Regime change, occupation, nation-building—in a word, empire—are a bloody business. Now Americans must steel themselves for administering the violence necessary to disarm or defeat Iraq's urban militias." One week later, on April 14, he wrote: "After Fallujah it is clear that the first order of business for the marines and other US forces is their basic business: inflicting deadly force."

Wall Street Journal has contributed its share of poison, including an editorial called "Rethinking Armageddon," in which it calls for the development of "highly precise, low-yield" nuclear weapons that can be used to "save American lives." This gives some sense of the thinking that prevails within sections of the American elite.

Hundreds of Iraqis are known to be dead in Fallujah. How many have died throughout the country over the past three weeks is unclear—no one has given an estimate—but it is clear that the losses have been very, very substantial. The United States has been using aircraft to deliver missiles and bombs against Fallujah.

It is fitting to ask: What is taking place in Iraq that does not recall the events of the 1940s—the campaign of reprisals that the Nazis carried out against the resistance in France, Holland, Poland and occupied sections of the Soviet Union, such as the shooting of partisans and the suppression of the insurrection in Warsaw? In Czechoslovakia, when partisans succeeded in assassinating the Nazi leader Reinhardt Heydrich in Prague—the equivalent of the US proconsul in Iraq, Paul Bremer—the response of the fascists was to carry out mass reprisals, including the destruction of the town of Lidice.

The war is having a serious impact upon the United States. A profound and unbridgeable chasm is opening up between those who planned, support and benefit from the occupation of Iraq, and those who oppose it. There is already a moral polarization. The bitter and explosive social struggles of the future are anticipated in this essential division that, in the final analysis, is rooted in opposed class interests. No common ground is possible with the organizers of this war and their apologists. They inhabit a different moral universe.

We are here today, however, to discuss not morality, but politics. Of particular interest to us is the response of the Democratic Party to these developments that have unfolded since we met a month ago. As we anticipated, the Democratic Party has completed its repudiation of any association with opposition to the war in Iraq.

When we met last month, we placed emphasis on the necessity of a political break by the working class with the bourgeois two-party system. Our draft election statement, prepared in advance of the conference, and the opening report to the conference stressed that the SEP rejected the argument that the overriding issue in the 2004 election was the defeat of President Bush and that all questions of political principle and program had to be subordinated to the most vulgar and pragmatic electoral calculations.

The bankruptcy of this argument had already been exposed by the manner in which the campaign by Howard Dean had been derailed and the nomination of John Kerry secured. The opening report at last month's conference explained that the ruling elite was determined, first of all, that the presidential election not be allowed under any circumstances to become a referendum on the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

If I may be permitted to quote from my own report: "Though he [Dean] himself was a thoroughly conservative man who represented no political

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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.... 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."

The entire primary season operation was directed towards assuring that opposition to the war and the occupation of Iraq would not find expression during the election campaign. Why that was so necessary is perhaps clearer today than it was a month ago. Despite the fact that the political activism of the autumn and winter of 2003-2004 was almost entirely fueled by antiwar sentiment, and that the candidate who identified himself most openly as a supporter of the war—Senator Joseph Lieberman—was the most unpopular of all the Democratic candidates, the outcome of the process has been the virtual disenfranchisement of the entire antiwar constituency.

Officially, public opinion polls show that the war is openly opposed by nearly half of the population of the United States. But this opposition finds no expression whatsoever within the politics sanctioned by the existing two-party system, which demonstrates, if nothing else, its utterly undemocratic character.

Let us look at the position that has been adopted by John Kerry since he became the presumptive nominee of the Democratic Party. In March, he was challenged by the *Washington Post* to repudiate any association with opposition to the occupation of Iraq. He responded to this challenge by publishing a statement in the *Washington Post* on April 13 in which he stated:

"While we may have differed on how we went to war, Americans of all political persuasions are united in their determination to succeed. The extremists attacking our forces should know that they will not succeed in dividing America, or in sapping American resolve, or in forcing the premature withdrawal of US troops. Our country is committed to helping the Iraqis build a stable, peaceful and pluralistic society. No matter who is elected president in November, we will persevere in that mission. But to maximize our chances for success, and to minimize the risk of failure, we must make full use of the assets we have. If our military commanders request more troops, we should deploy them."

There is nothing that could be clearer than this. Those who support Kerry, those who argue that the issue in this election is simply the defeat of Bush, cannot claim, if their perspective should be successful, that they were taken by surprise by the outcome of that political line. They are committing themselves to positions that Kerry is now clearly articulating—that the war and occupation of Iraq are in the national interest of the United States, that this war must be supported, and that troops must be supplied as they are required by the military to overcome resistance within that country.

The ruling elite views this election as means of honing its global strategy and making those tactical adjustments, which might perhaps include the replacement of the present occupant of the White House, that it deems necessary to secure its interests. As the incompetence and unpopularity of the Bush administration become more apparent, as its internal divisions grow more acute, as dissatisfaction within the elite over the performance of this administration intensifies, Kerry may come to be viewed as an acceptable alternative. Unequivocal support for the invasion and occupation of Iraq is the price of admission to the White House.

The ruling class knows very well that the continuation of this war will entail far greater costs in money and lives than the American people expect or are prepared to accept. It is precisely in this situation that the utility of the Democratic Party, in lending a pseudo-progressive, liberal veneer to imperialistic politics, comes to the fore.

Kerry's campaign is oriented almost exclusively to convincing the ruling class that he is the man they need. Since becoming the nominee presumptive of the Democratic Party, he has completely shed the antiwar persona that he had cultivated, in order to compete effectively against Dean, during the primary season. He is now waging a battle for the "hearts and minds" of the ruling class.

When Kerry says that everyone in America desires the success of this war and the occupation of Iraq, this has a great political significance. It is not simply a lie. It means that opposition to the war is being placed outside what is considered legitimate politics in the United States. Such statements have to be looked at within the context of the political implications of the war.

When the United States plunged into war, neither the Bush administration, the Democrats, nor the media foresaw the consequences of this reckless decision. But events are unfolding in accordance with the bloody logic of imperialist war. Within Iraq, the success of the occupation requires ever greater levels of violence against the peoples of Iraq and the Middle East. Within the US, the human resources required for the prosecution of this war cannot be found without making many more people available for the Army, and that must mean the reintroduction of the draft.

Trial balloons to prepare the public for the draft are being sent up all over the place. The *New York Times* wrote on April 11: "Bush could even bolster the desperately strained military with the draft, if Americans understand the need to sacrifice."

There is an editorial in today's *Washington Post* that includes the following paragraph. Noting that the Army is under strain, the *Post* writes: "The administration entered a global war against terrorism on September 11, 2001, but hasn't adjusted the size of the armed forces accordingly. If world events prompt the administration to call on active duty and reserve troops at the current pace, recruiting and retention will suffer and an institution that has proved itself many times over the past few years may be damaged. The time has come to think more seriously about the likely troop needs in Iraq and throughout a dangerous world and about how the country can meet them most fairly in the years to come."

The meaning of this is absolutely clear: the draft is coming back. It should be noted that the web site of the Selective Service System has posted a notice saying that while there are at present no plans for the reintroduction of the draft, the Selective Service continues to register all American men over the age of 18, and should it become necessary to resort to the draft, the Selective Service is prepared to carry out whatever it is told to do.

I will add in this context, I don't think it's simply an exercise in electioneering when Kerry decides to raise as a point of attack against the Republicans that Cheney and other high-placed members of the Bush administration did not serve in the military. What we're getting is a new patriotism associated with support for the war, encouragement of the draft, and the call for everyone to share in this "worthy cause."

The ideological foundations for a public campaign in support of the draft are being laid. For example, Paul Berman, who many years ago opposed the Vietnam war, but has since discovered the charms of militarism, has written a book that seeks to justify the invasion of Iraq and the "war on terrorism" as a legitimate and necessary struggle against Islamic totalitarianism. This is the sort of intellectually banal and dishonest argument that is being whipped up to provide a basis for an unabashedly neo-imperialist policy.

These are not accidental developments. However serious its tactical differences with the Bush administration, the Democratic Party is beholden to a social constituency whose financial and class interests are not fundamentally different from those of the Republicans. The most influential constituency of the Democratic Party consists of those sections of the ruling elite and the wealthiest strata of high-salaried professionals who have benefited materially from the economic policies pursued by the

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United States.

Recent decades have been characterized not so much by a genuine development of the productive forces as by the maintenance of cheap commodities and the depression of wage levels and enforcement of conditions of super-exploitation of the working population, which have provided the material foundations for the massive accumulation of wealth by sections of the ruling elite and nouveau riche over the past 20 years.

The very rapid developments over the past month—the war in Iraq, the resistance that the occupation has brought forward, and the extraordinary speed with which the Democratic Party has defined itself in relationship to these issues—must be taken as a serious signal of how explosive the events of this year are going to be. Keep in mind that we are still seven months away from the election.

One characteristic of a shift in the political climate and the emergence of a pre-revolutionary situation is that developments produce a jolting impact on political consciousness. During the autumn and winter, many people who opposed the war looked to the Democratic Party. As virtually all the candidates, with the exception of Lieberman, postured as opponents of the war, many people who voted in the primaries were caught up in a certain euphoria, and believed that the mounting opposition to Bush would somehow lead to the repudiation of policies with which this administration is associated. Far from it! The Democratic Party has embraced all of these policies.

At the same time, the investigation into 9/11 has become a bipartisan exercise to legitimize and strengthen the Patriot Act, all in the name of combating terrorism. No examination has been made of the real issues arising out of September 11—that is, the way this event was used to advance the agenda of war in the Middle East. Amazingly, the criticism of the CIA and FBI is that they have failed to act more aggressively in dismantling democratic rights in the United States.

As the weeks and months go by, it will become clearer to ever broader sections of the working class and students that none of their concerns are being addressed. The two-party system provides no framework within which their own political and social needs can be addressed. One should add that this political crisis unfolds within the context of an increasingly unstable economic situation, which is characterized not only by what remains a slump in industry, but also by a significant growth of inflation. According to the most recent figures, the official inflation rate stands at 5 percent, but if one looks at gasoline prices and food prices, the situation is far more severe.

The *New York Times* reports that the price of some food items has doubled in a month. The price of milk has increased by over 30 percent in the space of a month. And the real cost that workers incur driving their cars to work means a massive reduction in living standards. The impact on living conditions is going to have, without any question, a radicalizing effect on broad sections of the working class.

We build our election campaign, whatever the current limitations we may have in terms of manpower and resources, on the basis of a perspective and an analysis—on the basis of an insight into the consequences of the intensifying political, economic and social crisis within the United States and internationally.

To emphasize again: the strength of our analysis against that of the erstwhile radicals, the Greens and other petty-bourgeois groups, who are incapable of articulating any serious perspective of principled opposition to the Democratic Party, is already becoming very clear.

There is Mr. Chomsky, the well-known dissident, declaring his support for John Kerry, and, whether he likes it or not, winding up in his old age in the camp of those who are stating quite openly that it is their intention to prosecute the war against Iraq to its conclusion.

Then there is the pathetic spectacle of Mr. Nader defending his candidacy as the most effective means of defeating George Bush and ensuring the election of John Kerry.

Our campaign proceeds on the basis of irreconcilable opposition to both parties. Neither the Democrats nor Republicans represent a “lesser” evil. We do not propose that workers choose between poisons.

For the ruling class, this election is a means of making the tactical adjustments that it deems necessary for the more effective implementation of its economic and political agenda. After all, if a draft has to be introduced, wouldn’t it be better to have it brought in by President Kerry—a former Vietnam veteran who was against the war, supported by a whole spectrum of liberals and ex-radicals, such as the *Nation*.

The perspective that we outlined last month has been vindicated. The election campaign of the Socialist Equality Party represents the only principled alternative for the working class and youth to the imperialist policies of the two big business parties.

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