

US: SEP holds election meetings in Seattle and Portland

Our reporters
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On May 18 and 20, the Socialist Equality Party continued its series of meetings on the West Coast in the US focusing on the war in Iraq and the party's campaign in the 2004 presidential election, as well as other races.

The SEP is running Bill Van Auken, a full-time writer for the WSWs, for president; Jim Lawrence, a retired auto worker from Dayton, Ohio, is the party's vice presidential candidate.

In Seattle, Washington, on May 18 the SEP held a public meeting in the Central District at Garfield Community Center. The meeting, which attracted readers and supporters of the WSWs, was addressed by WSWs Arts Editor David Walsh. Walsh addressed the nature of the Iraq war and what it had revealed about American society.

He noted that a "vast apparatus of repression has been built up in the US. There are some two million individuals incarcerated in this country. Ten percent of those in state prisons are serving life sentences, these are horrific statistics.

"The last decades have witnessed the proliferation of a population of hundreds of thousands of police, prison guards, security guards, body guards, thugs for hire of various kinds. What's behind this? The vast social inequality. In the final analysis, the repression stems from the determination of those who have accumulated vast wealth to keep their ill-gotten gains. They want guarantees, not merely in the form of the destruction of the welfare state, the massive tax cuts and gutting of the progressive tax system, the elimination of virtually every mechanism by which those who work for a wage might defend themselves. The wealthy elite wants guarantees, written in blood if necessary, that their riches will never be threatened, never tampered with. What was gained, perhaps stolen, will never be given

back."

Following Walsh's report, there was a wide-ranging discussion. One participant asked about the SEP's analysis of the Howard Dean campaign: Hadn't voters, after all, cast ballots for John Kerry? Another member of the audience asked "How can we get the message of the SEP out there" more aggressively? He noted that many Americans "want to get rich themselves" and that it was necessary to dispel the myth of the American Dream.

Walsh replied that there were indeed problems in the consciousness of millions, all the more reason for a patient explanation of the role of the Democratic Party as one of the principal defenders of American capitalism and a persistent effort to extend the influence of the WSWs and SEP. He emphasized that there was no quick fix to the problems currently plaguing the working class either in this country or internationally. As Walsh stated, "If you want change, you are going to have to fight for it."

He asserted that the "Anything But Bush" appeal was entirely bankrupt. Both Bush and John Kerry are cut from the same essential cloth, supporters of the imperialist war in Iraq and promoters of the corporate ruling elite. Clearly, there is a need for an alternative for the working class, he argued.

This led to an interesting debate with several members and supporters of the Freedom Socialist Party (FSP), which describes itself as the voice of "revolutionary feminism." One FSP supporter accused the SEP and WSWs of "sectarianism" for criticizing the positions of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and Lutte Ouvrière (LO) group in France during the 2002 presidential elections. Another FSP member called for support for the organization's project of "uniting the left."

Walsh replied that a central tenet of the Marxist movement was the need of the working class to establish its political independence. He suggested that the FSP represented one of the diverse varieties of middle class protest politics that showed no way forward for working people.

As for the French events, Walsh pointed out that the LCR and LO had carried out a serious betrayal of the working class: in the case of the LCR, more or less open support for a vote for the leading representative of French capitalism, Jacques Chirac, in the second round of the 2002 elections; the LO had taken a confused and abstentionist position, capitulating to the pressure of the Stalinists and the trade union bureaucracy.

“We stood on May Day 2002 and distributed a leaflet calling for a working class boycott of both Chirac and [extreme right-winger Jean-Marie] Le Pen. The LO said this couldn’t be done, that there was too much hostility. A few members of the Socialist Party threw the leaflet away, everyone else read it seriously. The LO ran away and hid.”

Many of the organizations on the “left” in America, Walsh noted, had neither a following nor significance. The SEP saw its task as uniting the working class, not the left.

A number of participants at the meeting expressed interest in helping with the SEP campaign efforts that will take place in Seattle next month. In compliance with the Washington State ballot requirements, SEP members and supporters will work to collect signatures for both the presidential and senatorial candidates over a one-week period from June 26 through July 3.

In Portland, Oregon, on May 20 students and workers attended a meeting sponsored by the SEP on the campus of Portland State University (PSU). They included a pipe fitter, a nursery worker, a writer, a nurse and a computer programmer, among others. Participants in recent antiwar rallies, supporters of the Green Party and long-time readers of the WSWS also attended.

Earlier in the day, David Walsh was interviewed in a 30-minute live program broadcast by the nonprofit Portland-based radio station KBOO.

At the PSU meeting Walsh discussed the most recent outrage: the photographs of American soldiers torturing and humiliating Iraqi prisoners. The acts depicted in those photos, he noted, even if carried out by a

relatively small number of soldiers, do not represent an aberration: “The photos of repression correspond directly to the nature of the entire enterprise,” he said. “It is a brutal, colonial exercise.”

“All of this,” he added, “reveals the true visage of American imperialism.”

Walsh impressed upon the audience the importance of understanding that neither the Democratic Party nor the Green Party represent in any way an alternative for the working class. The entire political establishment has been discredited by the developments in Iraq, along with the growing social divide in the United States, he said, but he added that opponents of the existing social order should be wary about assigning too much significance to Bush himself.

“To demonize Bush is to make too much of him,” he said, noting that the crisis stems directly from the social order—capitalism.

Following Walsh’s presentation, several members of the audience asked questions, about the Greens, problems in consciousness and other matters. Unlike the bombast and sheer banality one is subjected to by either right-wing radio or the allegedly “left” forum of the recently launched “Air America” radio network, the ensuing discussion was intense and thoughtful.

For those who attended, the meeting accomplished precisely what the SEP’s 2004 election campaign is about: to raise the level of political discussion, and to highlight the vital role that class consciousness must play in a principled struggle against capitalism.

One participant in the discussion expressed an intention to join, while others indicated they planned to learn more about the SEP. Several bought books and pamphlets from a literature table.



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