

The Democratic convention and the crisis of the two-party system

The Editorial Board
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The Democratic National Convention, which opened Monday in Boston, is the culmination of a drive by the most powerful forces in the Democratic Party, the media and the US ruling elite as whole to banish from the November presidential election any debate on the most critical issue facing the American people—the war in Iraq.

The impending coronation of Massachusetts Senator John Kerry as the Democratic presidential candidate is the result of a concerted effort during the Democratic primaries to undermine the campaign of then-front-runner Howard Dean. The former Vermont governor is a thoroughly conventional bourgeois politician who, however, recognized early on that his best chance for winning the nomination was to appeal to mass antiwar sentiment among Democratic voters and in the population at large. But any such appeal, no matter how limited and lacking in principle, was considered within ruling class circles to be a dangerous concession to popular discontent. Dean's presidential bid was shut down in order to marginalize and suppress antiwar sentiment and orchestrate an election in which it would be essentially ignored—and Dean himself quickly fell into line.

This process of political disenfranchisement is to be completed with the official endorsement of Kerry and his running mate, North Carolina Senator John Edwards. Both are multimillionaire representatives of the US ruling elite. Both voted in October of 2002 for the congressional resolution authorizing Bush to attack Iraq, and both voted in favor of the Patriot Act. That measure, under the guise of fighting the so-called “war on terror,” gives the CIA, FBI and other police agencies unprecedented powers to spy on the American people and override constitutionally protected civil liberties.

That there is to be no debate on the ongoing war and occupation of Iraq has been sealed by the passage of a party platform which refuses to take a position on Bush's decision to invade the country, and the agreement of Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich to squelch any floor debate on the question. Kucinich, who ran in the primaries as the most outspoken opponent of the war, formalized his junking of the war question by announcing over the weekend his endorsement of Kerry.

The contempt of the party hierarchy for the sentiments of Democratic voters and the squelching of any democratic discussion were underscored by a *New York Times*/CBS News poll released on Sunday showing that nine out of ten of the convention delegates thought the United States should not have gone to war in Iraq.

In the run-up to the convention, Kerry has gone out of his way to stress his support for the occupation of Iraq and the crushing of the anti-US insurgency, mainly criticizing Bush for not deploying more troops and, in general, botching the colonial enterprise. He has repeatedly proclaimed his support for the “war on terror” and the doctrine of preemptive war, which is the centerpiece of the Bush administration's policy of using military force to topple unwanted governments and seize the land and resources of foreign peoples.

Democratic officials have made clear they hope to use the convention to

outflank Bush on the “war on terror,” portraying Kerry as a strong military leader and hard-line enforcer of “homeland security.” The Democratic candidate has rushed to embrace the far-reaching and antidemocratic proposals of the 9/11 commission for a major consolidation and strengthening of US intelligence, security and police agencies.

Kerry summed up the approach he will take at the convention, telling the *New York Times* in an interview conducted on Friday, “I can fight a more effective war on terror.”

On domestic social issues, one can anticipate that the convention will issue some hollow phrases about the “two Americas” and criticize Bush's tax cuts for brazenly favoring the rich, but the Kerry campaign has steered clear of concrete proposals for social reforms and heeded the injunctions from the establishment press to avoid “class warfare” rhetoric.

An indication of the Democrats' social policy—under conditions of growing economic distress for large sections of the population—came in Kerry's speech last week before the Urban League. He presented as the centerpiece of his urban agenda a federally funded crackdown on youth crime, which is to include token expenditures for job-training and drug treatment and cost \$400 million over ten years—a drop in the bucket in relation to the \$1 trillion-plus annual federal budget.

On the same day that Kerry announced this initiative, Congress overwhelmingly approved a Pentagon budget totaling \$417.5 billion, including an additional \$25 billion for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. With the Democratic Party voting in lockstep with the Republicans, the Senate approved the measure 96 to 0, and the House of Representatives passed it by a vote of 410 to 12.

The essence of Kerry's domestic economic policy—and the center of his attack on the policies of the Bush administration—will be a call for fiscal responsibility. Under conditions of record budget deficits and massive military spending, this can only mean further cuts in social programs.

The further turn to the right represented by the convention is underscored by cautions from Kerry and other Democratic officials against any outright political attacks on the Bush administration. “This is not going to be about attacking George Bush,” Terry McAuliffe, the national Democratic chairman, declared over the weekend.

Among the proscribed topics is the stolen election of 2000. In line with the efforts of the party hierarchy to suppress any overt expression of hostility toward Bush or anger over the illegitimate origins and authoritarian character of the present government, the organizers have made sure that the speech by former vice president Al Gore, the party's 2000 presidential candidate, will not be aired by the broadcast networks. The titular head of the party has been relegated to a timeslot outside the hour being set aside for convention coverage by NBC, ABC, CBS and Fox.

What is planned is an orgy of flag-waving patriotism, in which Kerry's Vietnam War record will take center stage. An unnamed “senior Democrat” told the *New York Times*, “You're going to see more veterans,

more patriotism, more talk about protecting our country. You're going to think you're looking at a Republican convention."

The counterpart of this rightward shift—in the parlance of the media, an appeal to "independent" and "swing" voters—is a ruthless drive to silence political challenges from the left. The Democratic Party is engaged in a nationwide effort to exclude from the ballot all third-party and independent candidates who criticize the war in Iraq and articulate in any way the profound hostility of millions of working people and youth to the Bush administration. The Democrats are systematically working to deny ballot status to Ralph Nader and the Green Party, and are pursuing a brazenly antidemocratic operation to keep the Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Illinois state legislature, Tom Mackaman, off the ballot.

This effort to exclude from the political process all voices of serious dissent, and suppress the most vital concerns of the vast majority of the people—not only the war, but also the assault on jobs, living standards and democratic rights—testifies to the organic incapacity of the two major bourgeois parties in America to address, let alone resolve, a mounting social and political crisis of historical proportions.

The stage-managed and tightly scripted character of the convention is, in its own way, a further expression of the crisis of the two-party system. The event being mounted in Boston is a media spectacle devoid of any real debate or struggle. It has the character of a hollow ritual. Placed against the backdrop of a country at war, torn by social and political divisions and afflicted with a host of social problems, a country moreover with a massive and highly diverse population, the pageant in Boston underscores the disconnect between the existing political setup and the realities of American society.

It is a political system—in which the corporate-controlled media plays a critical role—that is entirely dominated by a financial aristocracy whose interests it openly and directly serves—one that dares not raise any serious social issues, for fear of lifting the lid on pervasive discontent that is churning below.

The *New York Times*, in its convention-eve editorial, felt obliged to pose the question: what is the point of the whole affair? Acknowledging that the convention was a political coronation, that the Democratic platform refused to even take a position on the invasion of Iraq, and that no real debate would be permitted, the newspaper said it could not argue with the decision of the broadcast networks to limit prime-time coverage to one hour a night. Nevertheless, the *Times* concluded, lamely: "But this is still a ritual worth having. The delegates may not have much to do, but it is important for them to get together."

It is more than three decades since the national conventions of the two major bourgeois parties had, to some degree, the character of a debate on policies, and in which the outcome was not preordained. The emptying of the conventions of any genuine content and their complete ritualization are bound up with definite political and social processes.

First is the lurch to the right by both bourgeois parties and the collapse of American liberalism, which finds its clearest expression in the repudiation by the Democratic Party of the social reform policies with which it was associated from the time of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal.

This phenomenon is bound up with the erosion of the mass social base of both parties, and their increasingly naked domination by the financial and corporate elite. What is the base of the Democratic Party? It consists of sections of the financial and corporate elite and a privileged and narrow stratum of the middle class, including the trade union bureaucracy and the most wealthy sections of blacks, Hispanics and other minorities.

The Republican Party has come to be dominated by an extreme right-wing element that most consistently and ruthlessly articulates the interests and demands of the most predatory factions of the financial oligarchy. As the crisis of American capitalism has intensified, these factions have come to the fore and assumed an ever-more dominant position.

Underlying the political atrophy and rightward trajectory of the two parties is the growth of social inequality. The ever-more-pronounced division of America between a very small and fabulously wealthy financial oligarchy and the broad mass of working people has rendered the two-party setup increasingly threadbare and ossified. The collapse of the labor movement and the absence of mass organizations that in any way articulate the interests of the working class have played a significant role in this process.

There is no longer any room within a capitalist system awash in insoluble contradictions for a party of social reform. Instead, the people are confronted with two right-wing parties which, no matter how sharp and even explosive the partisan conflicts, are united in their commitment to a strategy of US global hegemony abroad and social reaction at home.

Perhaps the starkest manifestation of the underlying social and political crisis is the extraordinary and unprecedented security surrounding the Democratic convention. This event, supposedly a showcase of American democracy in action, is being held under conditions of a virtual state of siege. Entire sections of Boston have been closed down. Steel barriers have been erected. Ordinary people are being excluded from the convention's environs. Thousands of police, security personnel and plainclothes federal agents have descended on the city. Police are randomly searching the belongings of people riding the subways.

Demonstrators are prohibited from assembling anywhere near the convention site. They are being herded into fenced-off, isolated "free speech zones"—an Orwellian term if ever there was one—where no one can hear what they have to say.

Meanwhile, behind the barricades and phalanxes of armed police, the politicians and corporate fat cats are indulging themselves in corporate-sponsored bashes.

These measures are not being taken to protect the convention from large hordes of angry protesters. The demonstrations promise to be relatively small and politically subdued. Most of the protest groups and liberal-left organizations are lining up behind Kerry, and staging whatever activities they have planned as unofficial addendums to the convention, rather than politically hostile actions.

This only underscores the existence of an unspoken agenda behind the massive police deployment. The official justification is the danger of a terrorist attack in the post-9/11 environment of perpetual threat and open-ended war. But no evidence has been advanced of any specific threat by terrorists to attack the convention.

The aim is to create an atmosphere of fear and accustom the public to accept as the norm the use of police-state measures and the suppression of democratic rights, including the very holding of elections. In the weeks preceding the convention, the Bush administration made dire warnings of a pre-election terrorist attack, and leaked reports that it was engaged in internal discussions on the possible postponement or cancellation of the November elections, on the pretext of such an attack.

The police-state operation in Boston has far more to do with the internal crisis in America than any external threat from terrorists. It provides a snapshot of a society riven by class divisions and social tensions.

Taken as a whole, the Democratic convention testifies to the crisis and disintegration of the two-party system. Here, the operative word is "system." The existing political setup has the character, not so much of two independent parties, as a single political structure consisting of two constituent parts. This system has long been maintained as a means of excluding any independent expression of the interests of the working class and defending the rule and basic interests of the capitalist class.

It is a system in mortal crisis. It is no longer able to present itself as a democratic vehicle for the masses. It is no longer able to contain the social contradictions of American society. Hence the ever more naked and ominous turn to extra-parliamentary and extra-constitutional methods, which, in their totality, constitute a transition toward police-state rule.

Herein lies the significance of the Socialist Equality Party campaign in the 2004 elections. The SEP alone is advancing a revolutionary socialist program that speaks to the needs of the working people—the vast majority of the population. Our party is calling for an end to the Iraq war and the immediate withdrawal of all US and foreign troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. We are demanding the immediate repeal of the Patriot Act, the dismantling of the Homeland Security Department, and the reversal of the whole battery of measures taken to curtail the democratic rights of the people.

We advance a program for a revolutionary transformation of economic life, in which the needs of the people for good-paying jobs, health care, decent schools, affordable housing and a secure retirement are placed above the drive for corporate profit and the accumulation of personal wealth.

We place at the center of our program the need for the working class to break from the Democratic Party and build its own mass party, in order to fight for a workers government and a socialist future in which poverty and class exploitation are eliminated and replaced by a genuinely democratic system based on social equality.

We are conducting this campaign, not so much to gather votes, as to open up a serious discussion and debate on the real issues facing working people, and lay the political foundations for the development of an independent political movement of the working class.

We urge all those who are looking for an alternative to the two parties of war and social reaction to study our election program, contact the SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site*, join the fight to place our candidates on the ballot, and make the decision to join and build the SEP.



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