The Democratic convention and Kerry's left apologists

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28 July 2004

Boston's FleetCenter is ringed by double seven-foot metal fences and surrounded by thousands of police and security agents. However, there is another layer of protection for the Democrats' national convention, which, though not as obtrusive, is every bit as critical.

This right-wing big-business party is being guarded on its left flank by a collection of professional political demagogues, who have descended upon Boston in order to lend a "progressive" façade to the convention's reactionary proceedings. A series of events are being staged throughout the week that bring together these political fakers with self-deluded layers of the middle-class protest movement.

Not a small number of the former are calling upon Kerry to fight on a different program, one that calls for an end to the Iraq war and social reforms at home. Typical of this approach is the *Nation*, a publication that accurately reflects the degeneration of American middle-class radicalism. The magazine issued a "convention special" that included submissions from dozens of people on what should be included in the Democrats' platform.

The underlying premise is that Kerry and the Democrats are running on a right-wing program as a result of a misguided tactical approach to winning the election. If only they could see that a more left-wing platform would win them a larger vote!

This absurd conception serves to mask the class character of the Democratic Party and the main constituency to whom Kerry is appealing. He and the Democrats have adopted a reactionary platform not because they think it is necessary to win the popular vote, but because such a program is required by the financial oligarchy that controls both major political parties.

Thus, the antiwar protest coalition United for Peace and Justice took out a full-page ad in the weekly *Boston Phoenix* recalling Kerry's protest against the Vietnam War 33 years ago. "In 1971, you showed courage," the open letter to Kerry said. "But now, in 2004, we wait, and the world waits, to see if you will denounce the grave damage that the occupation of Iraq is doing to the United States and the world." The ad attributed Kerry's support for continuing the occupation and sending even more troops to political "caution" and "calculation."

On the weekend before the convention, the Boston Social Forum, a local affiliate of the World Social Forum, held a two-day conference at the Boston campus of the University of Massachusetts, where the likes of Angela Davis and former Labor Secretary Robert Reich spoke on the need to push Kerry to the left.

On Monday, supporters of Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich—who ended his bid for the presidential nomination and threw his support to Kerry—came together at St. Paul's Cathedral across from the Boston Commons. Kucinich was the main attraction, but he was preceded by a series of speakers who promoted identity politics, the policies of the trade union bureaucracy, and non-violent protest.

Every speaker was interrupted—not once, but over and over again—by standing ovations, whoops and foot-stamping. The merest mention of any issue over which audience members might have protested in bygone years brought the crowd to its feet in sustained applause and cheering.

This haze of "irrational exuberance" and self-congratulation rising from the pews of the Episcopal cathedral was evidently meant to obscure the stench of political reality. The Kucinich campaign—which many in the crowd had touted as the principal means to oppose the war in Iraq—had turned into a "left" prop for a Democratic candidate committed to continuing the killing of Iraqis and plundering of their resources.

The week before the convention, the Democrats convened their platform committee at a Florida resort, hammering out a document that accurately reflects Kerry's policy: a commitment to continue—and even escalate—the US military intervention in Iraq as long as is required to defeat the popular insurgency and impose a government loyal to Washington.

Kucinich, whose slogan during the campaign was "US out, UN in," dropped any opposition to the platform, claiming that language had been incorporated that showed the "influence" of his campaign.

Precisely what language, he did not say. The platform, in fact, includes the statement that "People of good will disagree over whether America should have gone to war in Iraq" and that the Bush administration "did not send sufficient forces into Iraq to accomplish the mission."

It advances the empty pledge that "As other countries...contribute troops, the United States will be able to reduce its military presence in Iraq, and we intend to do this when appropriate so that the military support needed by a sovereign Iraqi government will no longer be seen as the direct continuation of an American military presence."

Kerry's own frank estimate is that this will not become "appropriate" during his first four-year term in office, should he be elected.

Many in the crowd were displeased by Kucinich's embrace of Kerry, but most appeared prepared to swallow it nonetheless. One Kucinich delegate from the state of Washington, when asked about his candidate's support for the platform's language on Iraq, replied: "It's a disaster, a total capitulation to the muddle." He quickly added, however, "But we'll be much better off with Kerry as president. At least we'll have our foot in the door. Unfortunately, we've got to take it one step at a time."

Most of the speakers at St. Paul's were there to defend Kucinich's action. James Zogby, the head of the Arab-American Institute and a

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member of the Democratic Party Executive Committee, praised the former candidate because “he didn’t walk away from the fight in the Democratic Party.” Zogby condemned anyone who refused to back Kerry because of his pledge to continue the war in Iraq as an “elitist” who “has the luxury to be pure.”

He compared Kucinich to then-Georgia State Representative Julian Bond, who, after a bitter fight on the floor of the 1968 Democratic convention, “held up the hand of Hubert Humphrey” when the latter prevailed as the presidential nominee on the basis of a commitment to continue the Vietnam War. That war would continue for another seven years, costing the lives of hundreds of thousands more Vietnamese and tens of thousands of US soldiers.

Zogby is only one of many who are drawing parallels between the present Democratic convention and the one held in 1968 in Chicago. Both were convened under conditions of a broadly unpopular colonial war and in an atmosphere of police-state repression. Any serious comparison between the two, however, only reveals the thoroughgoing putrefaction of American democracy and the lurch to the right by the Democratic Party over the intervening 36 years.

At the 1968 convention, Democratic opponents of the Vietnam War forced a debate over a majority plank backing the Vietnam policy of the Lyndon Johnson government and a minority plank advocating an end to the war. Typical of this debate was the intervention of Theodore Sorenson, John F. Kennedy’s speechwriter and special consul, who said: “We call for an end to the bombing now—they [Humphrey’s supporters] call for an end if and when and maybe. Second, we call for a mutual withdrawal of all US and North Vietnamese troops now.... The majority plank says maybe, sometime.... Third, we call...for letting the South Vietnamese decide for themselves the shape of their own future. They call for the United States to stay and conform the Vietnamese to our political and economic standards. Fourth, we call for a reduction of American troops now.... They call for a reduction of troops only when the South Vietnamese Army can take over....”

Substituting the word Iraq for Vietnam, virtually the same speech could be delivered on the floor of the convention this week. There is no danger of that, however, as there is no minority plank to upset the stage-managed spectacle in Boston. For that, Kerry can thank the political cowardice of Kucinich and his not-so-radical supporters.

Kucinich himself took the pulpit of St. Paul’s to give a tub-thumping address. Shouting radical phrases and slashing the air with his hands, he told his cheering audience: “We will continue to challenge the status quo, whether that status quo is run by the Democrats or Republicans.” He neglected to add, “We just won’t challenge it during this convention or the upcoming election.”

The meeting closed with a surprise appearance by Jesse Jackson, fresh from his cordial encounter with George W. Bush at the Urban League convention the previous Friday. Jackson, who has dedicated himself in recent years to cultivating lucrative connections on Wall Street, gave a crass speech extolling every Democratic electoral victory since 1986, while highlighting the part played by his own two bids for the party’s presidential nomination.

Acknowledging popular dissatisfaction with the right-wing character of the party’s current platform and nominees, Jackson said some were asking, “Can Kerry and Edwards motivate us?” Replying to his own question, he said: “My experience has been that motivation goes from the bottom up, not the top down.” He went on to invoke nearly every major social movement in American history from abolitionism onward, leading the crowd in chanting that they came “from the bottom up.”

But the issue is not whether Kerry and Edward can inspire social change—they are committed to defending capitalism based on a platform promising an unending “war on terrorism” and domestic austerity, without offering any serious social reforms. The real question is how those who claim to oppose war abroad and reaction at home can support such candidates and such a platform.

To that question, Jackson had no answer beyond leading the assembled faithful in his trademark call and response of “Keep hope alive.”

All the talk of pressuring Kerry while making things a “little better” through the election of a Democratic administration cannot hide the fact that these various elements of “radical” politics lack any independence from the two-party system. In the end, they serve as a left prop for bourgeois politics as a whole and an obstacle to the struggle to mobilize the working class independently in a political struggle against capitalism.

These elements employ radical demagogy for the purpose of diverting the mass opposition to the Bush administration behind Kerry and the Democratic Party. To the extent that they exert “pressure,” it is directed not against Kerry, but rather against anyone who rejects the “lesser evil” politics that they embrace and dares to oppose the Democrats from the left.

The Socialist Equality Party’s campaign is diametrically opposed to the dishonest and politically corrupt efforts of these “left” apologists for Kerry. We say frankly to workers, students and young people that there is no political shortcut via the Democratic Party in the struggle to end war and social reaction. A new, independent, mass socialist party must be built to unite the struggles of American workers with their class brothers and sisters internationally in the fight to put an end to capitalism.

We call upon all those seeking a genuine alternative to the criminal policies of the Bush administration and its political accomplices in the Democratic Party to support our campaign. Join the effort to place myself and my vice-presidential running mate Jim Lawrence, as well as our congressional and local candidates, on the ballot, and make the decision to become a member of the Socialist Equality Party.

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