

Why Maine workers should vote for the Socialist Equality Party

Exchange between SEP candidate Carl Cooley and Bangor Central Labor Council president

10 July 2004

We are publishing here a letter sent to the SEP recently by Jack McKay, president of the Bangor Central Labor Council, and a reply by Carl Cooley, SEP candidate for Congress from Maine's 2nd Congressional District.

To the editor:

I recently saw that here in Maine's 2nd Congressional district the Socialist Equality Party's Carl Cooley is trying to run against Mike Michaud for Congress. Such a campaign is incredibly divisive. Mike Michaud is perhaps the only member of Congress who comes from the factory floor—his other job is driving a forklift at the paper mill in East Millinocket. Three generations in the mill—he's the real deal.

We in labor (I'm a UNITE member and president of the Bangor Central Labor Council) love Mike—he's there for us, comes to all events and he gets the importance of building a movement. Here in Maine we have done some great steps putting labor and progressive movement groups together. This unity has caused Maine to pass first-in-the-nation Clean Elections laws, Maine Rx bill, Maine anti-sweatshop legislation, Maine Jobs, Trade and Democracy Act and many other bills. If Mike were to lose in a protest vote, it would be devastating up here and hurt the work that countless people have put into this.

In order to make change, we need to build working class power. Up here the analysis is not the problem—just about everyone knows that the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. The real problem is do we have the power to do anything about it. To create power we must organize. Mike Michaud is crucial in this movement. Mike is an inspiration to workers across Maine and across the country. We can come off the factory floor, without fancy education, and effectively fight for progressive issues at the Legislature or Congress. I would hate to see the Socialist Equality Party undermine one of the few, true working class heroes in America today.

In solidarity,

Jack McKay

Dear Brother McCay:

As I am sure you know by now, I have been placed on the ballot in the Second Congressional District with the support of 3,000 Maine workers, students and professionals who want a socialist alternative to the two big-business parties in the November election.

You describe my challenge to incumbent Democrat Michael Michaud as "incredibly divisive." Clearly, the thousands of voters who signed the petitions to put the Socialist Equality Party on the ballot don't see it that way.

They want a candidate who is making a loud and clear demand for an end to the war in Iraq and the immediate withdrawal of all US troops from that occupied country. For them, too many of Maine's young people, forced into the military by a lack of jobs and funds for their education,

have already died.

They want to be able to vote for someone who stands for a socialist program. They believe, as I do, that society's resources must be redirected to meet the needs of working people for decent-paying jobs, free universal health care and affordable housing, rather than to fuel the profits of the corporations and the accumulation of wealth at the top.

They will not find such a candidate in either Michaud or his Republican challenger.

The only thing "divisive" about my campaign is that it is consciously directed at dividing working people from the Democratic Party and establishing a new, independent mass political party fighting on a socialist and internationalist program.

We in the SEP are well aware that this perspective is diametrically opposed to that of the AFL-CIO in Maine and nationwide. For decades, the union bureaucracy has promoted illusions that the Democrats represent a genuine alternative to the Republicans—that it is a party of the "people" and can be pressured into carrying out reforms in the interests of workers.

For decades, the Democrats have collaborated with the Republicans in destroying social benefits and wiping out jobs. They joined in handing the Bush administration a blank check to launch an illegal war based on lies. Now this party is running two multimillionaires on its national ticket, both of them committed to continuing the Iraq war and the attacks on living standards and basic democratic rights at home. No doubt, to even state these truths is "divisive" in the AFL-CIO's book.

What has the alliance of the AFL-CIO and the Democrats done for workers in Maine? The loss between 2000 and 2003 alone of nearly 18,000 jobs—including 22.1 percent of the state's manufacturing employment—hardly stands as a political achievement. The legislation that you praise has done nothing to stem this hemorrhaging of jobs.

You say that Michaud's "other job is driving a fork lift at the paper mill" in East Millinocket. If he's kept it, he is one of the lucky few. Great Northern in Millinocket and East Millinocket employed about 4,500 workers in the 1980s. Now only a few hundred work in the same mills. Unemployment in Michaud's hometown of East Millinocket stands at 32 percent, worse than during the Great Depression.

You say that "analysis is not the problem" and "everybody knows that the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer." First, it should be said that this old cliché doesn't begin to do justice to the social tragedy confronting the state's working class. Second, the need for analysis is made painfully clear by the determination of the AFL-CIO to keep following the same policies that have led working people into this catastrophe.

I don't see how Michaud's coming off the "factory floor" without a "fancy education" is some kind of a qualification for leadership. I spent 12 years on the line in a Chevrolet assembly plant, so I know something

about the politics of the factory floor. They aren't that different in an auto factory than in a paper mill.

They are the politics of a union bureaucracy committed to labor-management collaboration and the preservation of its own privileges at the expense of the workers. Any independent struggle on the "factory floor" is subordinated to the bureaucracy's relations with the bosses and the Democratic Party. Should anyone in the rank and file question this setup, they are told to shut up, if they know what's good for them.

What has been the result of this brand of politics, as practiced by the Maine AFL-CIO and the Democrats in response to the jobs crisis created by the actions of Great Northern, International Paper and other major manufacturers?

It has been endless rounds of wage cuts for the workers and tax breaks for the bosses that were supposed to attract new corporate saviors and defend jobs. One after another, these corporations have taken advantage of the giveaways, sucked out as much profit as they could, and then carried out new rounds of layoffs and shutdowns, looting employee pension plans on their way out the door.

The tax concessions have resulted in the loss of funding for education and other vital services, leading to a further erosion in the living standards of the state's working people.

When workers have attempted to fight back—as in the 16-month International Paper strike of 1987-88 in Jay, Maine—their struggles have been isolated and betrayed by the union leadership, who told the strikers the answer to layoffs, wage-cutting and union-busting was to vote for the Democrats.

It is hardly a surprise that the Maine AFL-CIO has hailed John Kerry's "jobs plan," which boils down to another set of tax breaks for the corporations, supposedly given as an incentive to locate operations in the US rather than abroad.

In an opinion piece in the *Bangor Daily News* last month, Maine AFL-CIO President Edward Gorham praised Kerry's proposal, concluding: "One thing I know to be true—if you give American workers a fair playing field to compete on, there's no one in the world that the American worker can't compete against. What we need now is leadership in Washington that will work with us to level that playing field."

Maine workers have seen more than two decades of Democratic politicians and union bureaucrats working to "level the playing field" so that they can "compete" with workers overseas. What is the competition about? To see who will make the most sacrifices so as to provide the best profit-making conditions for the corporations.

We know the results: nine out of ten jobs gone, with the few still working making less in real wages than they did in the 1980s.

My party rejects any proposal to make workers more "competitive" with their class brothers and sisters in other lands. If ever there was a losing proposition, this is it.

The corporations operate globally. They can move their operations and jobs to whatever country offers the lowest wages, the most ruthless levels of exploitation and, consequently, the highest profits. Those who start from making their region or nation "competitive" end up pressuring workers for more and more concessions to attract capital investment, rather than fighting to defend the workers' rights and living standards. For the workers, it is a vicious race to the bottom. This is just what the policies of the AFL-CIO and the Democrats have produced in Maine.

There is no national solution—much less a Maine solution—to these problems. The way out of this crisis starts with workers in Maine and throughout the country rejecting the nationalist and protectionist prescriptions offered by Michaud and the AFL-CIO. Their policies serve only to subordinate the interests of workers to the interests of the bosses who exploit them, while dividing American workers from workers in other countries who are oppressed by these same transnational corporations.

Our party starts from developing a global strategy for the working class to counter the global strategy of the transnational corporations. This means coordinating the struggles of workers in Maine and throughout the US to defend jobs and living standards with those of workers internationally, fighting for the interests of workers of all countries on the basis of a common anti-capitalist and socialist program.

What is needed in Maine are not a few sops to the unemployed—which, judging from the record of the Clinton years, are more illusion than reality—but a massive public works program to guarantee jobs for all at decent wages. Both the Democrats and Republicans claim that there is no money for such a program. They lie. There is plenty of wealth, but it is monopolized by the rich.

The SEP proposes a radical restructuring of tax policy, beginning with the repeal of all the tax cuts given to the wealthy over the past two decades and the institution of major tax increases for those with the highest incomes and greatest accumulated wealth. We maintain that the wealth looted from the people of Maine and elsewhere by giant corporations must be recovered and used to help meet the social needs of working people.

Our basic premise is that the accumulation of personal wealth should be subordinated to the satisfaction of human needs. In opposition to the immense concentration of wealth in the hands of a financial elite, the SEP advances the principle of social equality, and advocates a system of public ownership and democratic control of the economy.

The Democratic Party is opposed to this program. No less than the Republicans, it is controlled by and defends the interests of the financial oligarchy.

Michaud, like Kerry and other Democrats, counts on the votes of those who go to the polls out of outrage against the war in Iraq, while he himself continues to back the occupation. The Democrats cynically calculate that those who oppose Bush have nowhere else to go.

Michaud voted last March for the so-called "Liberation of the Iraqi People" act, justifying once again the Bush administration's illegal war. More recently, he voted for a \$500 billion Pentagon budget that includes some \$25 billion to continue the US occupation.

One cannot support these appropriations for war and claim to be standing up for the rights of working people at home. These massive military outlays can be paid for only through the gutting of social programs and the lowering of living standards for the vast majority.

My candidacy will allow those hundreds of thousands of people in Maine who are revolted by this war and want US troops to be withdrawn from Iraq to make their voices heard. It will directly challenge the squandering of vast resources on militarism and demand that they be used instead to fund jobs, health care, education and other basic social needs.

Michaud has lined up with the right-wing elements in the Republican Party in passing the first legislation in three decades restricting the right of women to abortion. Hundreds of thousands in Maine are opposed to this attack on democratic rights and the attempt to exploit religion for political gain. My candidacy will give them a voice at the ballot box.

This will not be a "protest vote." It will advance the necessary fight for the political independence of the working class from the two parties controlled by big business. My campaign, and that of the SEP nationally, will utilize the 2004 elections for the purpose of building a new mass socialist movement from the ground up. We are confident that broad layers of working people, students and youth in Maine will join us in this fight.

Sincerely,
Carl Cooley



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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