

US SEP presidential candidate addresses Sri Lanka meetings

“Our campaign fights to unify workers internationally”

Bill Van Auken
29 October 2004

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka held two successful meetings in Colombo and Kandy over the last week addressed by Bill Van Auken, the presidential candidate for the SEP's sister party in the US, on the Iraq war and the US election. Van Auken's speech is published in full below.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak to an audience here in Sri Lanka about the upcoming presidential election in the United States and the war in Iraq. I know that there are questions both here in Sri Lanka and in the US itself over why the Socialist Equality Party decided to send its presidential candidate abroad to address audiences in Europe and South Asia in the weeks directly preceding the vote in America.

One Colombo media pundit suggested that it was because I could get more press coverage here. This begs the obvious question of why an American presidential candidate would look for media exposure in Sri Lanka in the first place. I hardly think it's going to win me many more votes.

No, the decision flows from my party's internationalist perspective. The most important task of our campaign in the 2004 election is to fight for the international unification of the working class and to represent the interests of workers in every country in the course of this campaign.

As the Socialist Equality Party election program states:

“Given the global impact of the United States, it would be entirely appropriate to allow the citizens of every country to participate in the election of an American president.”

For billions of people around the globe, the course taken by US imperialism and the actions decided upon by American presidents do indeed pose matters of life and death. With its so-called global “war on terrorism,” the United States has become the most destabilizing force in the world. In Iraq, the US government is conducting a war that represents a regression to the days of naked colonialism. It has asserted the right to conduct similar “preventive”—that is, unprovoked—wars wherever it pleases, posing a direct threat to peoples throughout the former colonial countries, and, indeed, throughout world.

Already, the consequences are being felt far and wide. The spiraling rise in oil prices, which has led to such a dramatic and punishing increase in the cost of living here in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, is directly tied to the reckless militarism of the US government in the Persian Gulf.

Both the US government and international agencies that it dominates, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, dictate economic austerity policies to governments in countries like Sri Lanka. Governments change hands from one party to another, and yet these austerity measures remain the same because they are the outcome of political decisions taken elsewhere, principally in Washington.

So when we say that you should have a vote in this election, and that a candidate such as myself should appeal for your support, we are not just

saying it for effect. Our party's internationalism is firmly grounded on the reality of a global capitalist economy, global politics and the increasingly common problems confronting workers everywhere.

There is no national solution, either for the American working class or for the workers of the rest of the world. Transnational corporations operate on a global scale, scouring the world for the cheapest possible labor. Workers in the US, just as workers here in Sri Lanka's free trade zones, are told: Either you accept the wages and conditions we offer, or we'll take our production elsewhere. The result is a global downward spiral in living standards for the working masses.

Only through the unification of the struggles of workers in every country across national boundaries can capitalism be defeated. There is a force that is objectively opposed to imperialism within the heart of imperialism itself—the American working class. But it cannot succeed outside of a common international fight for socialism.

Of course, I am here in this country because the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka invited me. The struggle waged by the Trotskyist movement here in Sri Lanka and our party's essential perspective of socialist internationalism have a long and profound relationship.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the historic betrayal by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which entered the bourgeois coalition government of Madame Bandaranaike in 1964, repudiating in a decisive fashion the perspective of revolutionary socialist internationalism upon which our world movement, the Fourth International, was founded.

The political tendency that established our party in America began as a minority faction within the Socialist Workers Party, then the US Trotskyist movement. The leadership of that party was headed in much the same direction as the LSSP, rejecting internationalism and the political independence of the working class, searching instead for substitutes such as Castroism, guerrillism and other non-proletarian forces.

The LSSP's action in 1964 marked an historic milestone internationally. For the first time, a party historically associated with the Fourth International had entered a capitalist government. The role of revisionism as a direct prop for imperialism was out in the open.

Our tendency in the American SWP demanded a discussion on this event and its implications for the world movement. The leadership of the American party responded by expelling those who had asked for a discussion. Those who were expelled went on to found the organization that was the precursor of the Socialist Equality Party, thereby preserving the historic continuity of the Trotskyist movement in the US.

Our ability to wage an election campaign that is firmly founded on the struggle for the political independence and international unity of the working class is thus inextricably bound up with the bitter lessons of the struggle for Trotskyism here in Sri Lanka. This perspective has been strengthened immeasurably by the close political collaboration that our

parties in the US and Sri Lanka have been able to establish, particularly over the past two decades.

This year's presidential election in America takes place above all against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Iraq. Thus, US politics are dominated by international events. Yet, the mass killings and immense human suffering inflicted upon the Iraqi people merit not a mention in the debates between the candidates of the two major big business parties, the Democrats and Republicans.

In recent weeks, the US has carried out daily bombings in the Iraqi city of Fallujah and elsewhere, demolishing neighborhoods and wiping out entire families. The Pentagon regularly insists that those it kills are "terrorists" and that it is bringing stability to Iraq.

Yet more candid officials within the administration of George W. Bush and the US military acknowledge that the real targets of these attacks are the civilians themselves. They are told to hand over the Iraqi resistance fighters or die. This tactic reproduces the kind of collective punishment used by the Nazis to crush resistance in occupied Europe in the 1940s. It is a practice that was outlawed as a war crime by the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949.

Even bloodier crimes are to come. Administration officials have acknowledged that a full-scale ground offensive against Iraqi cities is being delayed until after Election Day out of fear that large numbers of US casualties would hurt Bush at the polls.

What is the response of the Democrats and their candidate John Kerry? They have denounced the delay, accusing Bush of allowing politics to interfere with the war. In other words, they want the bloodbath to begin immediately.

The war is the product of a systemic crisis of American capitalism and a historic failure of American democracy. It is now accepted by everyone, with the possible exception of Bush and his vice president, Dick Cheney, that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, nor any ties between the Iraqi regime and the Al Qaeda terrorist network—the two pretexts given for the war. The US government's own reports bear this out.

But all of this was evident well before the war began. Our movement certainly said so repeatedly, and the statements and articles are on our Internet site, the *World Socialist Web Site*, to prove it. Nor were we alone. Many independent analysts, government officials and even weapons inspectors said well before the war that the US justifications were false.

Neither the Democratic Party—the Bush administration's ostensible political opposition—nor the US media challenged the false assertions or sought to probe the underlying reality. Instead, they were content to repeat Bush's lies. Prominent among those parroting these lies was John Kerry, the man now running against Bush as the candidate of the Democratic Party.

The complicity of the major parties, the Congress, the media, the US corporations—in short, the entire ruling establishment—in this deceit can be explained only by the fact that it served to advance a strategy upon which the ruling elite in America was in substantial agreement. This strategy entailed the use of military power to establish US control over the world's key oil and gas producing regions. It was a desperate bid to guarantee Washington's hegemony under conditions of US economic decline.

Control over the oil and natural gas reserves of the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Basin, it was reasoned, would secure US capitalism's supplies under conditions of mounting demands and depreciating reserves. At the same time, it would create conditions for dominance over existing and potential rivals, allowing Washington to place them on energy rations.

The result has been an act of imperialist aggression without precedent since the Second World War. It will be remembered in the collective consciousness of humankind largely through the grotesque images of US troops torturing Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, and the scenes of Iraqis pulling bodies from the rubble of homes demolished by US bombs and

missiles.

It is an intervention characterized by not only brutality, but also corruption and sheer incompetence. More than 18 months after seizing control of the country, US authorities have been unable to secure even the center of Baghdad, which remains the scene of guerrilla attacks. It has failed to supply electricity to major cities on more than a half-on, half-off basis, making economic production, basic sanitation, water treatment, and decent conditions of life impossible.

The most basic institutions—hospitals and schools—remain largely in the state of disintegration that followed the US invasion and mass looting of last year. Meanwhile, politically connected corporations have raked in windfall profits, largely by appropriating for themselves money that was supposedly for Iraqi reconstruction.

Washington has managed to antagonize the entire Iraqi population in a remarkably brief space of time. It faces an insurgency that is growing continuously under conditions in which virtually every US combat unit is already either in Iraq, recently returned, or preparing to redeploy there. The US military machine—supposedly the mightiest force in the world—has been stretched to the breaking point by an intervention in an impoverished country of barely 26 million people.

No section of the American political establishment is proposing an end to the war. The Democrat Kerry voted for the war in 2002, then posed as an opponent in order to win support within the Democratic Party from those who mistakenly believed that this capitalist party could be turned into a means of curbing imperialism. Once he won the Democratic presidential nomination, he dropped his pretense of opposition.

In August, he declared that "even knowing then what we know now"—that is, the absence of any weapons of mass destruction or terrorist links—he still would have voted to give Bush the power to invade Iraq. This extraordinary statement merits close scrutiny. After all, the legislation granting Bush authorization to go to war was predicated precisely on the existence of such weapons and such ties.

The only politically coherent explanation for such a position is that both big business parties understood—both then and now—that these claims were lies intended merely as a pretext, designed, like the never-ending "war on terrorism," to intimidate and frighten the American people into submitting to the imperialist war drive.

Kerry's statement provoked dismay among those who had naively hoped that his campaign would offer a means to oppose the war. Last month, Kerry felt compelled to reverse course once again and attack the decision to go to war. From a purely electoral standpoint, the attempt to run a campaign without challenging the Bush administration's Iraq policy had proven to be a form of political suicide. Kerry's standing in the polls plummeted, and the steepest decline was in the percentage of people describing themselves as "strongly committed" to the Democratic candidate.

More essential, however, was the fact that divisions had grown within the ruling elite itself over the Bush administration's handling of the Iraq war. Kerry's attack on Bush articulates the view of those sections of the ruling class who fear that Bush's conduct of the war is leading to a disaster for US imperialism. While occasionally denouncing the administration for "misleading" the nation into war, his critique centers on charges that Bush failed to make adequate preparations, diplomatically or militarily, and that his administration has mismanaged the occupation.

At various times Kerry has suggested that the war was unnecessary and that the administration lied to the American people. Under the clear provisions of international law, an unnecessary war waged on the basis of false pretexts is a war crime. The launching of such an aggressive war constituted the principal basis for the indictment presented against the German Nazis who were tried and hung at Nuremberg.

Kerry draws no such conclusion and makes no such comparison. On the contrary, he levels his criticisms to argue that he can wage the war more

effectively. “I’m not talking about leaving, I’m talking about winning,” he said during his debate with Bush. He has indicated that US troops will remain in Iraq throughout his first four-year term. At the same time, he has advocated the addition of 40,000 troops to the US military and the doubling of the size of the US Special Forces, the Army’s elite killing squads.

“Failure is not an option” is one of Kerry’s favorite slogans relating to Iraq. We agree: it is not an option, but an inevitability—and the sooner the better. The worst outcome for the working class in the US and internationally would be a consolidation of US control in Iraq. Such a success would only pave the way for even bloodier interventions and ultimately a new world war.

The Socialist Equality Party has campaigned intransigently against this war. Our candidates are the only ones who have demanded the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq.

In every state where we have fought to get our candidates on the ballot, we have won powerful support for this demand. In gathering the tens of thousands of signatures that are required, we have had relatives of soldiers in Iraq tell us that they want this war over and will support us for this reason.

Some polls have indicated that around half of the US population supports a withdrawal, while not a single prominent politician from either big business party nor any voice in the mass media has made such a proposal. That this widespread opposition to the war finds no expression in the two-party system that exists in America is one of the defining features of the current election.

Everywhere we campaign we encounter a deep sense of frustration with this political system—its systematic exclusion of the sentiments of the vast majority of people and the rigid domination of two parties that agree fundamentally on almost every issue.

It is worth considering the fact that in Sri Lanka—a country of 20 million people—nearly a dozen political parties are represented in parliament. Yet in America, with a population of nearly 300 million, only two parties are represented.

The result is deep-going alienation from the political process. In 2000, barely 50 percent of those eligible to cast votes actually went to the polls. In terms of popular participation in elections—a measure of the social and political health of any country—America ranks 136th among the world’s nations, midway between the poverty-stricken African states of Chad and Botswana.

Out of the 50 percent who went to the polls in 2000, slightly less than half gave their votes to Bush. The triumph of the candidate who lost the popular vote is now a notorious feature of the US political system, and one that could be repeated in the 2004 election.

In 2000, the defense of this system by the US Supreme Court entailed an explicit statement that the American people have no constitutional right to vote for their president—that the state legislatures may decide for them. As we said at the time, the failure of any significant section of the US political establishment to defend democratic rights against the open theft of an election marked a turning point in America’s political history.

The result is a government that has waged two wars of aggression in the space of three-and-a-half years. It is a government that has carried out the most sweeping attacks on civil liberties in US history. These include arrogating to itself the right to lock up citizens and non-citizens alike without charges, hearings, trials or the right to counsel, solely on the basis of a finding by the US president that they are “enemy combatants”—a term with no meaning in international law.

This government has conducted a ferocious witch-hunt against immigrant workers from Islamic, Arab and South Asian countries, rounding up thousands on the basis of no evidence. Some have been detained for long periods on the pretext of minor immigration offenses; others merely for traffic violations. In many cases, they have been

imprisoned for six months or more—in open defiance of the law—and subjected to brutal beatings in prison before being deported back to their own countries.

Our party has worked to expose and denounce this wave of persecution and to defend the immigrant workers, while warning that whatever the government does to the immigrant today, it will inflict upon the working class as a whole tomorrow. Indeed, two American citizens have already been held incommunicado as enemy combatants.

The theft of the election also produced a government that is unabashedly run for the benefit of the wealthiest one percent of the population, at the expense of the vast majority. It is a government of the rich, by the rich, and for the rich, which provides a form of welfare for the banks, corporations and wealthy elite, while condemning the vast majority of working people to the depredations of the capitalist “free market.”

Even in its selection of candidates, the iron grip of the US financial oligarchy is unmistakable. Kerry, the Democrat, sits on one of the greatest family fortunes in the country, with a disclosed value of over \$750 million. Bush is poor by comparison, having assets of only \$18 million. Funding both party’s campaigns are the very same financial interests. Figuring among the top 10 corporate donors for both Kerry and Bush are four of the biggest US finance houses: Citigroup, Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley and UBS-AG Inc.

The selection of such personnel and their backing by the same Wall Street financiers is a political reflection of the intense social polarization that has grown uninterrupted over the past two decades in America. Today, corporate profits account for the highest share of the national economy, and take-home wages the lowest, since the government began keeping records in 1929, the eve of the Great Depression.

As *Forbes* magazine noted recently in its annual listing of the 400 richest Americans, this distinguished group has become largely a club of billionaires, excluding anyone whose fortune is valued at least than \$750 million. Together, their combined assets amount to \$1 trillion, somewhat more than the gross national product of Canada.

Meanwhile, nearly 40 million Americans live below the poverty level. This accounts for nearly one quarter of the American workforce and is the most rapidly growing segment.

Some 1.6 million jobs have been wiped out under the Bush administration. The number of long-term unemployed, those who have exhausted all jobless benefits, has doubled, and there has been a 60 percent increase of those described by the government as “discouraged workers,” that is, those who have given up looking for decent-paying jobs that do not exist.

The jobs that have been created in the last few years pay far less than those that have been destroyed. As much as 90 percent of them are in low-wage industries, and fully a third are for janitors, temporary laborers and fast food workers.

Another 45 million people lack private health insurance—a basic necessity in America, where the public hospital system has been all but eliminated.

The Democratic Party offers no alternative to Bush on this score either. The token health care, education and other reforms floated by the Kerry camp are illusory. The Democratic Party is firmly founded on a pledge of “fiscal austerity,” with a promise to cut the ballooning government deficit—already over \$400 billion—in half within four years. The party’s vice presidential candidate declared in a recent debate that a Democratic administration would abandon any of its promises if they conflicted with deficit reduction.

None of the immense problems that plague working people in the United States—and, for that matter, worldwide—can be resolved outside of confronting social inequality, the most important factor of which is the vast accumulation of wealth by the US financial elite and the subordination of the global economy to its financial interests.

That is why we are fighting for the building of an independent political movement of the working class, armed with a program for the revolutionary socialist transformation of society.

We have won significant support, placing our candidates on the voting lists in eight states, with a combined voting population of over 30 million people. We have stressed from the outset of our campaign that we are realistic about the votes we will receive in this election. The corporate-controlled media rigorously excludes any candidates but the Republicans and Democrats. We also have limited financial resources, particularly in contrast to the billion dollars that the two big business parties are spending to poison the political atmosphere through massive advertising campaigns.

Nonetheless, these two parties take our election campaign with deadly seriousness. The Democrats, in particular, are extremely sensitive to any challenge from the left, let alone the emergence of a genuine socialist alternative in America.

The campaign of our comrade Tom Mackaman in Illinois offers an instructive example. He is running for the office of state representative—what could be described as an entry-level political office—against an incumbent Democrat in one district within a single state. In response, the Democratic Party mounted a full-scale effort to excluded him from the voting list, dispatching state employees from the capital to spend days challenging our filing petitions.

They challenged hundreds of signatures on petitions signed by voters calling for our party to be on the voting list. When a secretary at the election office where these challenges were made saw her own name on the list and verified that she had signed, the Democratic official said he did not care and he was challenging her signature anyway.

With support from voters in Illinois and solidarity from around the world, we defeated this arrogant and anti-democratic operation. We are still, however, fighting a similar effort to exclude our candidate from the voting list in Ohio, one of the most hotly contested states in this year's presidential election.

For us, this ferocious opposition is a sign of things to come. The ruling elite is losing faith in its own political system. It feels the ground shaking beneath its feet and is desperately attempting to prevent the emergence of a political alternative.

Our campaign has also faced opposition from elements on the so-called "left" in America, who have subordinated themselves to the Democrats and Kerry under the cowardly slogan of "anybody but Bush." They insist that all political questions must be put aside to assure a Democratic victory on November 2.

None of these "lefts" subject Kerry's program to a serious analysis. Who will suffer less with him in office? Will his election spell an end to the US occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan? On the contrary, he has pledged himself to victory over the so-called "terrorists" there.

Will it mean an end to US support for Israel's brutal oppression of the Palestinian people? Kerry has declared his unconditional support for whatever acts of violence the Sharon government chooses to inflict upon the Palestinians.

What about jobs for the unemployed or improved living standards for the working class? There are no grounds here either for anticipating an improvement.

If Kerry is selected as president, it will be largely because the ruling elite feels that the Bush administration is too discredited and it needs a new man at the helm who will be able to wage war more effectively and carry out its reactionary policies against the working class.

Given the present crisis facing the US military in Iraq, there are growing signs that the revival of military conscription is under serious consideration. If such a widely unpopular measure were to be taken, Kerry—who has promoted himself as a veteran of the Vietnam War—may be seen as a better person to impose it than Bush.

In the end, the arguments of the so-called "lefts" merely confirm that

their politics are confined entirely within the framework of the two-party system and capitalism. They are incapable of understanding that the contradictions of US imperialism are more powerful than imperialism itself. They reject the scientific understanding of the revolutionary role of the American working class. And they cannot see that the struggles of American workers unfold today as part of an international working class that has grown enormously and is objectively bound together in a global process of production.

The more conscious representatives of the ruling elite have far less confidence in their system than those so-called radicals who claim to oppose it.

This system confronts a confluence of crises. Its current accounts deficit has risen to over \$600 billion annually. For all the Bush administration's unilateralism and scorning of international public opinion, the US economy is dependent upon some \$2 billion in daily infusions of foreign capital to cover these deficits. America today is importing twice as much, in dollar terms, than it exports.

These gross imbalances are unsustainable. The conditions are emerging for an immensely destabilizing world economic crisis and a new wave of revolutionary struggles internationally, including in America, the center of world imperialism.

I know that in Sri Lanka and in other so-called developing countries, the image of the United States is one of great wealth and political power. Television programs exported abroad portray a population with few social problems. That is, they conceal the social reality of poverty, unemployment and indebtedness confronting millions of Americans.

The popular portrayal of America abroad also conceals the history of the United States. The wars of aggression, global militarism and political repression conducted by the US government and the intense social inequality prevailing in the US today are in direct contradiction to profound historical traditions that also exist in America.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a reactionary measure passed by the US Senate, opening up new territories in the American West to slavery. It was an action that radicalized much of the nation, sending a flood of "free" settlers—including the famous abolitionist martyr John Brown—to Kansas, where they engaged in bloody guerrilla war against pro-slavery elements. The act also propelled Abraham Lincoln into national politics, paving the way for the founding of the Republican Party and the southern secession that led to the American Civil War.

Karl Marx followed the war's progress with intense interest, describing the struggle against the slave oligarchy as a "world transforming revolutionary movement," and predicting accurately that it would be the harbinger of a political offensive by the international working class.

The emancipation of four million black slaves entailed the expropriation without compensation of the principal form of property in one third of the country—human capital that in today's currency would be valued at \$3 trillion.

The war turned on unresolved contradictions remaining from the first American Revolution. The Declaration of Independence, the document of 1776 upon which the first American Revolution was waged, declared that "all men are created equal" and are endowed with the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Yet, for the slave owners in the south, equality was for the white race only, and the "pursuit of happiness" encompassed the ownership of other men.

Two years before the Civil War, Lincoln denounced the pro-slavery Democratic Party, declaring that it had nothing to do with its founder, Thomas Jefferson, who was one of the principal authors of the Declaration of Independence. Rather, he said, it was a party that held "the liberty of one man to be absolutely nothing when in conflict with another man's right to property."

The Civil War abolished chattel slavery, but it hardly resolved the

essential contradiction between liberty and property that runs as a common thread through US history, and, it could be said, the history of the world.

From the latter part of the nineteenth century onward, this conflict has taken the form of struggle between capital and labor. In the United States, these struggles have often been associated with insurrectionary violence and near-civil war conditions. This was true from the railroad workers' strikes of the 1870s, which saw pitched battles between workers and troops in many major cities, to the mass strikes and factory occupations of the 1930s, the civil rights movement and ghetto rebellions of the 1960s, and the series of battles against mass layoffs and the destruction of unions in the 1980s.

The past decade has provided an extremely bitter experience for the American working class, characterized by an unrelenting attack by the financial oligarchy and the complete prostration of its old trade unions. Nonetheless, the profoundly revolutionary and democratic traditions that exist in the United States have not been extinguished, and are the inheritance of the American working class, whose interests are directly opposed to those of the capitalist ruling elite.

The issue of liberty versus property fought out during the Civil War is posed with all its urgency today. Consider again the words of Lincoln, denouncing those who held "the liberty of one man to be absolutely nothing when in conflict with another man's right to property."

Is this not the policy of every major government in the world today, of the transnational corporations and all the international financial institutions that condemn hundreds of millions around the globe to poverty and hunger in order to guarantee the profits of the multinational banks and corporations?

Basic social and democratic rights are entirely incompatible with the existing property relations and the levels of social inequality they have created. This contradiction must give rise to a new period of revolutionary struggle. Our election campaign is aimed at preparing for these coming struggles. We are concentrated not on the ballot boxes on November 2, but on the what will follow this election, which will be a period of intense crisis for whichever administration takes control of the White House.

We are fighting for the emergence of a genuinely independent workers' movement, which can arise only on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. After November 2, we will draw the lessons of this election. We will redouble our fight to win the working class to the perspective that the only way forward against war and social reaction is the building of a new mass socialist movement as part of the world struggle of the working class to conquer power and put an end to capitalism.

We can do this only as part of a world party that consciously unites the struggles of workers in every country. So, in the end, working people here in Sri Lanka and around the world, and the political work done by our sister Socialist Equality Parties in this country and elsewhere, will play the most vital role in resolving the crucial issues posed by this American election.



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