Final presidential debate confirms: no choice for working people in Bush-Kerry contest

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The third and final Bush-Kerry debate confirmed that neither candidate has any answer for the mounting social and economic crisis confronting working people in the United States.

On the war in Iraq and foreign policy as a whole, Kerry had already stressed, on the campaign trail and in the previous debates, his commitment to continue the basic thrust of the Bush administration's militarist and imperialist policies. Wednesday night's debate in Tempe, Arizona, which focused on domestic issues, underscored how narrow the substantive differences are in this arena as well.

The questions by moderator Bob Schieffer of CBS News concerned a range of economic and social issues. As in the previous debates, Bush seemed on the defensive throughout the evening.

The explanation for this does not lie primarily in the all-too-obvious intellectual limitations of the president. Rather, it reflects the deeply reactionary and anti-popular character of the Bush administration's policies. No discussion of the administration's record over the last four years—even within the framework of American bourgeois politics, where the raising of basic class issues is taboo—can conceal the glaring reality that the vast majority of the American people are worse off.

Kerry invoked significant social issues—poverty, inequality, unemployment, health care, retirement security—and decried the policies of the Bush administration. But his own counterproposals were hopelessly inadequate to meet these huge social needs. Even the timid social measures he listed are incompatible with his call for more troops, more Special Forces, more police and a "pay-as-you-go" regimen of fiscal austerity.

The promise of social reforms for electoral purposes is not a new phenomenon in American politics. But in the past, there was at least an element of substance behind such campaign pledges, and some prospect that they would be carried out. Those days, however, are long gone.

There has not been a single significant social reform—on jobs, health care, housing, education—carried out by either party in the US for nearly 40 years. The Democratic Party's irrevocable abandonment of liberal reform is the major legacy of the Clinton administration, which abjectly shelved its health care plan and went on to dismantle welfare and adopt the Republican mantra of an end to "big government."

In 2004, Kerry's campaign promises are nothing more than empty demagogy, to be quickly scrapped, should he win the election, in favor of fiscal "responsibility" and the requirements of the "war on terror" and "homeland security."

It is a testament to the right-wing character of the Kerry campaign that Bush, who has such an abysmal record on economic and social issues, could go into the final days of the election campaign standing roughly even with his challenger in pre-election polls.

As Kerry pointed out, Bush is the first president in 72 years to preside over a net loss of jobs during his term in office, and the new jobs being created pay far less than the jobs that are being destroyed. Five million more Americans, as Kerry also noted, are without health insurance than when Bush took office.

The Bush administration's policies have intensified the social crisis. As Kerry reiterated, Bush's tax cut provided the bulk of its benefits to the wealthy: $89 billion last year for the top one percent of the population. Bush's Medicare prescription drug plan amounts to a huge windfall for the drug companies. The White House and the Republican-controlled Congress have blocked a minimum wage increase for 15 million working poor.

Beyond specific policy choices is the obvious indifference of the Bush administration to the deteriorating conditions of life faced by the majority of working people. Bush himself is the personification of this attitude, as he demonstrated during the debate, repeatedly evading questions or responding with irrelevant remarks.

He could barely disguise his boredom and irritation when questioned on issues such as job cuts, the minimum wage and the effects of racial discrimination, giving the same answer—a canned recitation about the virtues of the "No Child Left Behind" education bill—to each. This was combined with reactionary moralizing on social issues like gay marriage, gun control and abortion, and unconvincing sallies against Kerry, in which he portrayed the Democratic senator, a Clinton-style right-wing New Democrat, as a profligate liberal who stands "on the left bank" of the political mainstream.

At one point Schieffer asked Bush directly what he would say to a worker who lost his job to someone overseas who received a fraction of the average US wage. Bush replied that workers displaced by trade should get retraining at community colleges. The spectacle of the semi-literate president instructing laid-off workers to "go get an education" provided one of the most memorable impressions of the evening.

The Democratic candidate sought to raise the issues of wealth concentration and social polarization in America without pressing them too far, lest he be criticized by the media for engaging in "class warfare."

"The American middle-class family isn't making it right now," he declared at one point, adding. "The fact is, the take-home pay of a typical American family as a share of national income is lower than it's been since 1929, and the take-home pay of the richest 0.1 percent of Americans is the highest it's been since 1928. Under President Bush, the middle class has seen their tax burden go up and the wealthiest tax burden's gone down."

Such figures have devastating political implications, but Kerry—the scion of an upper-class New England family who is married to the widow of a billionaire—is hardly in a position, personally or politically, to pose as an advocate for the working classes. He raises the issue of deepening social divisions, not to arouse the masses against the ruling elite, but to warn his fellow multimillionaires that under Bush they have gone too far. If they persist in grabbing up all the wealth of America, they risk igniting a dangerous social reaction.

Kerry's position on the social divisions in America mirrors his approach to the war in Iraq: he argues that the Bush administration is too reckless,

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and that a more cautious approach is required to safeguard the interests of the American ruling elite.

This in no way implies a return to policies of liberal reformism. Rather, Kerry and the Democrats seek to utilize the language of reform and concern for the downtrodden to defend the interests of the financial aristocracy. The actual content of the social measures proposed by Kerry, with the exception of his health care program, is extremely minimal. His "jobs" program is actually a Bush-style tax cut for American corporations, on the premise that reducing their taxes will encourage them to hire more workers.

As for health care—widely cited in opinion polls as the most urgent social need—Kerry is proposing to expand enrollment in the existing Medicare and Medicaid programs and give tax breaks to small businesses that provide private health insurance for their workers. The Democratic campaign estimates that the plan would reduce the number of uninsured from 45 million to 25 million, with the $650 billion cost to be covered by rescinding Bush's tax cuts for those with incomes above $200,000 a year.

Kerry makes this proposal—which would still leave 25 million people without health coverage—with the foreknowledge that there is no prospect of its being enacted even by a Democratic-controlled Congress, let alone by the current Republican majority. Ten years ago the Clinton administration, backed by sizeable Democratic majorities in the House and Senate, could not even get a vote in Congress on its health care program. Facing enormous deficits, the entrenched opposition of the drug, insurance and private medical lobbies, and the increasingly right-wing politics of the Democratic Party, a Kerry administration would be even less likely to deliver.

The Democratic campaign is incapable of offering any genuine solutions to the social crisis for two main reasons. First of all, Kerry's commitment to military victory in Iraq precludes any significant increase in social spending at home. The war in Iraq has already swallowed up nearly $200 billion, and Kerry has made an open-ended pledge to "win" in Iraq regardless of the cost.

Even in the heyday of the post-World War II boom, it proved impossible for the Democratic administration of Lyndon Johnson to combine "guns and butter," and social reform policies were sacrificed on the altar of Vietnam. Today, with American capitalism in decay, dependent on an enormous influx of foreign capital to sustain mammoth trade and budget deficits, continuing the war in Iraq will inevitably require drastic cuts in what remains of the social safety net.

Secondly, Kerry has declared that his top priority in domestic policy is fiscal austerity. In Wednesday's debate he repeated the pledge that in the event of a conflict between the goals of providing health insurance to more Americans and cutting the budget deficit in half over four years, he will choose cutting the budget deficit. He made a similar observation about Social Security, saying that "if later on, after a period of time, we find that Social Security is in trouble ... we'll make whatever adjustment is necessary."

Kerry is incapable of proposing any serious solution to social problems because he, like Bush, is a defender of the profit system. When attacked on health care—Bush claimed, absurdly, that Kerry's plan amounted to a federal takeover of the health care system—Kerry was at pains to declare that he was not proposing a government-based health insurance system, and that private medicine would still hold sway.

He did not dispute Bush's claim—equally ludicrous—that countries with government-based medical systems provide inferior care, and that the American health care system is the "envy of the world." It would be more accurate to say that European public opinion views the system of private, profit-based health care as one of the worst features of the United States, and any party which openly advocated its establishment in a European country would be routed at the polls.

Perhaps Kerry's most significant position was one that he expressed only by omission: his silence on the mounting attacks on democratic rights in America. In three debates, there has been no serious discussion of the Patriot Act, the mounting repression against immigrants and political opponents of the war in Iraq, and the increasingly open preparation for police-state measures against the American population as a whole.

Even when such repressive measures directly touch on the electoral interests of the Democratic Party, as in the theft of the 2000 election, Kerry has refused to raise the issue. It was remarkable that during Wednesday's debate only Bush, the beneficiary of the Supreme Court electoral coup, mentioned the post-election crisis of November-December 2000. Kerry did not touch the question, nor did he issue any warning against the far more widespread efforts at voter suppression that have been revealed during the 2004 campaign.

Instead, in one of his frequent bouquets to Republican Senator John McCain, Kerry hailed McCain's campaign finance reform legislation, and declared his own support for opening up the electoral process "to average people so America is really represented by the people who make up America." This is lying on a Bush scale, given the Democratic Party's efforts this year to suppress the Ralph Nader campaign and prevent third-party candidates like those of the Socialist Equality Party from obtaining ballot access.

The 2004 presidential debates have demonstrated the lack of any real choice for the working class between the two major-party candidates. For the American ruling class, however, there is a choice. Bush and Kerry offer certain differences in both foreign and domestic policy, albeit of a tactical character, and lodged entirely within the framework of the defense of the profit system and American imperialism. The election remains bitterly contested and its outcome still uncertain.

Whichever candidate prevails on November 2—or whenever the final result of the contest is determined—the working class faces the task of building an independent political movement to defend its own social and political interests. The Socialist Equality Party campaign in the 2004 elections seeks to pose this central issue before the widest possible audience, and lay the basis for the building of an independent mass political party of working people, based on a socialist program that will enable American workers to forge their unity with workers around the world and fight for a revolutionary transformation of society along genuinely democratic and egalitarian lines.

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