

SEP congressional candidate John Christopher Burton speaks at LA-area debate

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John Christopher Burton, the Socialist Equality Party write-in candidate for California's 29th Congressional District (Pasadena) debated the Democratic, Republican, Libertarian, and Green Party candidates for the 27th and 29th Congressional Districts at an election forum on Wednesday evening.

The event, which was sponsored by the League of Women Voters and held at the Burbank City Hall, was attended by some 40 people. The local cable television station, Channel 6, will repeatedly broadcast the debate until Election Day on November 2.

Burton is running as a write-in candidate due to prohibitive and undemocratic ballot laws, which require an independent candidate in the 29th CD to submit 9,000 signatures of registered voters. The SEP candidate directed his opening remarks against the pro-war policies of the Democratic Party and his incumbent Democratic rival, Adam Schiff.

"Tens of thousands of people in this district, and millions across the US, oppose the predatory war against Iraq and the neo-colonial occupation," he said. "They have no voice so long as their only alternative to the Bush Administration is the Democratic Party.

"Adam Schiff provided necessary political cover for Bush's invasion by voting for the war resolution and repeating the lie that Iraq maintained weapons of mass destruction stockpiles. Schiff supports Kerry's plan of continuing this barbaric and illegal occupation, which is resulting every day in more Iraqi and American dead."

The war was a recurring theme in the debate. When an audience member asked the candidates what they would say to a soldier who believed he was lied to about the reasons for going to war, Burton said he would tell this soldier he was exactly right. He explained that the real aim of the invasion and

occupation of Iraq was to secure US hegemony over Iraqi oil resources and give major American corporations a critical advantage over their European and Asian competitors.

"The people that sent you there to kill and be killed should be tried as war criminals," said Burton.

The Republican and Democratic representatives used this question as an opportunity to express their continued support for the war. The Republican contender for the 27th CD, Robert Levy, said the troops should "understand that they haven't been lied to."

Neither Schiff nor Brad Sherman, the Democratic incumbent in the 27th CD, raised any criticisms of the Bush Administration for deceiving the American public and US soldiers, despite the fact that numerous investigations have revealed that the claims that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and links to Al Qaeda were outright lies.

Green Party candidate Philip Koebel responded to this question by suggesting that soldiers who believed they had been lied to about the war should register as "conscientious objectors." Koebel said he was opposed to the war and presented himself as the candidate for peace.

In his closing statement, however, he insisted that the most important thing was to "get John Kerry elected." He declared, "I love Democrats," ignoring the glaring contradiction between his supposed opposition to the war and his call for voters to support a presidential candidate who has promised to continue the occupation of Iraq, increase US troop strength by 40,000 soldiers, and double the number of Special Operations troops.

At one point in the debate, Schiff sought to discredit Burton's position by describing him as "far left." Burton responded by pointing out that his so-called "far left" views on the war were actually representative of

the vast majority of Schiff's constituents.

In addition to the war, the attack on democratic rights was a central issue in the debate. Burton, who is a well-known civil rights attorney in the Los Angeles area and was the SEP's gubernatorial candidate in last year's recall election, pointed out the relationship between US militarism abroad and increased domestic repression. "It is impossible to prosecute a criminal war while protecting civil rights," insisted Burton.

He pointed out that Schiff, who is a co-author of the Patriot Act and introduced a law to deem US citizens "enemy combatants" and deny them basic constitutional liberties, has played a critical role in the attack on democratic rights. Burton warned that the policies advocated by Schiff, whether implemented under a Bush or Kerry administration, were aimed at creating a situation in which opponents of the government's policies could be "disappeared" for years.

In response to an audience question about the growing threat to the constitutional separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, Burton said that Bush's repeated characterization of himself as the "commander-in-chief" and Kerry's promise to be a better "commander-in-chief" had ominous implications. He pointed out that the Constitution gives the president this title only in regard to leading the Army and Navy during times of war. The president is not the "commander-in-chief" of the whole country, he said, and any attempt by a president to define his office in this manner is a gross and dangerous falsification of the powers accorded to the presidency.

Another audience member spoke of the threat of terrorism and suggested that lax security at US borders was a major contributor to this danger. In reply, Burton said the spread of terrorism could not be explained as a result of the free flow of goods, resources, and people across national boundaries. Rather, he said, the central problem was US foreign policy, which seeks to subjugate other countries and peoples in order to further the geo-strategic and economic interests of American capitalism. "The solution to terrorism is a more democratic and just world", insisted Burton.

In addition to fielding questions from the audience, the debate participants responded to questions from a panel of representatives that included students and

administrators from public schools in the 27th and 29th CDs.

When asked about the "No Child Left Behind" act and funding for public transportation in California, Burton explained that the only way to address the crisis in the educational system and the state's lack of a mass transit system was to reorganize society to meet human needs, rather than subordinating these needs to corporate profit.

"The needs of masses of people for well-paying and secure jobs, free health care, quality public education, a clean environment, and a secure retirement cannot be met through the existing two-party system, which caters to the interests of a narrow financial oligarchy," Burton said.

None of the Republican or Democratic candidates offered any serious policies to address the critical social and economic issues facing voters in their areas. Schiff and Sherman issued the usual Democratic platitudes, while Republican Levy blamed illegal aliens for the state's deepening social crisis.

The Libertarian candidate, Ted Brown, called for the elimination of the income tax, which would effectively destroy every publicly funded social program in existence. The Green Party's Koebel said, on the one hand, that the billions of dollars being spent on the war should be diverted toward funding education and housing, and, on the other, called on voters to support Kerry, who has promised to increase military spending and intensify the so-called "war on terror."

The closing statements by the Democratic, Republican, Libertarian, and Green Party candidates lent a surreal air to the entire affair and demonstrated the depth of the gulf separating the representatives of bourgeois politics and the concerns of ordinary working people. In the midst of one of the most explosive periods in US political history, these candidates used most of their two-minute final statements to thank their wives, children, and campaign staff.



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