

SEP participates in third-party debate in Tennessee

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The Multi-Party Presidential Debate 2004 was held Friday, October 15, in Johnson City, Tennessee. Third-party candidates have been systematically excluded from the debates featuring George W. Bush and John Kerry, and the event provided one of the few opportunities for candidates other than those of the Democrats and Republicans to argue their parties' policies and platforms.

The debate was sponsored by the Green Party of Tennessee and the Campus Greens at East Tennessee State University (ETSU). The Green Party, the Socialist Equality Party, the Workers World Party, the Socialist Party, the Libertarian Party, and the Personal Choice Party were represented. Ralph Nader declined an invitation to participate.

In addition to being excluded from the "major party" debates, the Socialist Equality Party and the Greens, as well as the Nader campaign, have been engaged in battles for ballot access in the 2004 elections in states across the country, against bad-faith efforts by the Democratic and Republican parties to exclude them.

The October 15 debate was held on the ETSU campus and attracted an audience of about 150 people interested in hearing an alternative to the two big-business parties in the 2004 elections, including students as well as working people from the eastern Tennessee area. The debate was the culmination of a daylong series of events, including an opportunity for candidates to address an environmental science class at nearby Tusculum University and interviews on WETS-FM, the public radio station broadcasting from the ETSU campus.

Following four-minute opening remarks by the presidential candidates or their representatives, the moderator addressed questions to the panel. Each member was given an opportunity to respond to each question, followed by a rebuttal. The debate was then opened up for questions from the audience.

The questions covered a wide range of topics, from the issue of pre-emptive strikes, the outsourcing of American workers' jobs, health care, the environment and criminalization of drugs. It was noteworthy that outside of the remarks of Jerry White, who represented the SEP presidential campaign, the words "John Kerry" and "Democratic Party" were barely spoken by any of the panel members, including by Green Party candidate David Cobb and the representatives of the other two parties who claim to espouse an alternative socialist viewpoint.

In his opening statement, Jerry White—the SEP's Congressional candidate in Michigan's 15th District, who represented SEP presidential candidate Bill Van Auken in the debate—emphasized that the key issue in the 2004 elections was the necessity for working and young people to break with the Democratic Party and build a political alternative to the two big-business parties, based on an internationalist, socialist program.

White stated, "The SEP has intervened in the 2004 elections to provide a political alternative and prepare working people for the struggles that must ensue after the election. We understand very well that our candidates, in the present situation, will win only a limited number of votes. But our campaign is aimed at raising the level of political debate,

which has been denigrated by the two big-business parties, whose virtually identical policies are deeply hostile to the interests of working people."

White said that nowhere within the political establishment was there any serious opposition to the launching of the war and the deliberate effort to defraud the American public. "Millions of working Americans had hoped this election would provide them with a way to defeat the Bush administration and repudiate its policies of war, attacks on democratic rights and the further enriching of the wealthy elite," White said. "Yet John Kerry and the Democratic Party offer no significant alternative. Kerry is committed to continuing the criminal occupation of Iraq."

White explained that the disenfranchisement and alienation of masses of workers from the campaigns of the two big-business parties is representative of the deep-going decay of the capitalist system itself. Those parties at the debate that attempted to present themselves as a progressive alternative, in one way or another seek to place pressure on the Democratic Party and reform the "bad" aspects of capitalism.

None of these forces, including independent candidate Ralph Nader, are fighting to educate working people on the class character of the Democratic Party, or on what basis an alternative to the big business parties must be built. This serves to lend credence to the "anybody but Bush" sentiments, and support to Kerry and the Democrats. The SEP campaign, on the other hand, argues that a genuine alternative to the politics of the two-party system must be based on a revolutionary socialist, anti-capitalist perspective.

In the course of the debate, the Green Party never addressed the Democrats' collusion with Bush's war in Iraq. Instead, candidate David Cobb elaborated the Greens' strategy of winning support and influence through the electoral process. The Green Party has a definite material interest in defending the political establishment and the profit-system that supports it. The number of Green local elected officials is up from 40 in 1996 to 205 as 2004 began, and they don't want to jeopardize their stake in the political system.

Cobb, a leading Nader campaign organizer in 2000 and the party's general counsel, was nominated at the Green Party convention in June. While Cobb insisted at last Friday's debate that he and running mate Patricia LaMarche were "in it to win it," in fact the Greens' presidential ticket is providing critical support to the Kerry campaign. They have advocated a "safe state" strategy in the closely contested "battleground states," where they are running a low-visibility campaign in an effort to avoid having the Greens criticized as "spoilers."

Cobb went out of his way to point out that the Green Party is "not socialist," and is rather "a little left and a little right." This was clear from his response to a question from the moderator as to whether the candidates would under any conditions support a pre-emptive strike, such as the Bush war on Iraq. "There are times," Cobb said, "when military and peacekeeping forces are necessary."

White responded by pointing out that imperialist powers have always

sought to conceal the predatory aims of their wars with claims of “humanitarianism.” Cobb’s position, he said, demonstrated that the Greens had no real independence from the capitalist class. In Germany, White said, the Green Party, in coalition with the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany), has supported the government’s militarist policy in Yugoslavia and jettisoned its pacifist program. Cobb chose not to respond.

The Workers World Party (WWP) is running John Parker for president and was represented at the debate by Dierdre Griswold, a former presidential candidate. WWP was formed in a pro-Stalinist split from the Trotskyist movement in 1959. Today it concentrates its efforts on organizing antiwar and other protests oriented towards influencing elements within the Democratic Party. At the same time it seeks to revive the influence of the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy, which has been discredited after decades of betraying working class struggles and aligning itself with the Democrats.

Griswold made the ludicrous claim that a protest her party was organizing with a layer of left-talking union officials was proof that the “American labor movement” was making an “historic turn” to oppose the war in Iraq. She failed to mention that the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, which has long served the interests of US imperialism, was going all out for the Democrats and John Kerry—a pro-war candidate. This was no mistake. Through their ties to various strains of trade union bureaucrats, one of the key props of this big-business party, Workers World funnels support to the Democratic Party.

When White pointed out that the unions had been transformed by the globalization of capitalist production from organizations that fought for concessions from the corporations, to organizations that extract huge concessions from their membership in the interest of attracting business, Griswold could only comment that the unions are “not antagonistic” to their membership and are “not irrelevant at all.”

Earlier in the day at Tusculum University, after White explained to students that trade union reformism had been proven unable to defend working class and workers needed to take the road of political struggle against capitalism, Griswold criticized the SEP for advocating “pie-in-the-sky” solutions—i.e., a principled socialist perspective that challenges the economic foundations of the capitalist system and those bureaucratic hangers-on that defend it.

Presidential candidate Walt Brown represented the Socialist Party at the debate. The Socialist Party is a thoroughly reformist party that opposes revolutionary socialism and advocates fighting for “modified socialism” through the development of credit unions, consumer co-ops, people’s utility districts, etc., which will serve their “owner-customers.”

Brown served for many years in the Oregon State Senate as a Democrat, justifying this on the opportunist grounds that it was only way he could get elected. Responding in the debate to the question about the dangers of socialism turning government into a giant conglomerate, Brown commented that “smaller is better.”

When asked to name a party that represented a progressive alternative, he pointed to the New Democratic Party in Canada, a right-wing social-democratic outfit that has betrayed the interests of Canadian workers and has been thoroughly discredited. He also praised the public health insurance system in Canada—which has been the target of deep cuts over the last decade and faces privatization—as an “imperfect” example of “socialized medicine.”

The two other parties represented at the debate were the Libertarian and Personal Choice parties. Both are ultra-right-wing, pro-big-business political groupings that advocate the glories of the “free market system” under the guise of opposing “big government.” They argue that government regulations stunt the ability of those who in their opinion work the hardest—the capitalist property owners—to enrich themselves, and must be abolished.

Gary Nolan, representing the Libertarian’s presidential candidate

Michael Badnarik, said the party was opposed to raising the minimum wage because it would promote “job displacement”—i.e., workers forced to work for poverty wages would be displaced by more qualified workers compelled to work for slightly higher wages.

Personal Choice candidate Charles Jay said that his party “didn’t have a platform,” but his “personal platform” includes abolishing the Federal Income Tax, the Social Security program and the Department of Education.

A young member of the audience spoke passionately, directing her question to the Libertarian candidate: “Have you ever tried to pay rent, raise your children, and put gas in your car, all on \$5.15 an hour [the federal minimum wage]?”

Nolan responded that, no, he hadn’t, but “you can’t fool with the free market system.” Jay said it was “up to the individual to establish himself as a commodity” and went on to claim that American capitalism was based on “meritocracy,” which rewarded the hardest working.

Debunking this claim, Jerry White said, “We have to question a system where the most criminal elements in America like Enron’s CEO Kenneth Lay and President Bush himself had risen to the top.” The US, he said, is the most economically polarized society in the world. Nowhere are there such conditions of social inequality. To fight poverty and the drastic attacks on social conditions, White said, working people must make a political break with the Democrats and Republicans, who defend the profit system. This will require a thorough-going revolutionary change, to organize social and political life to represent their interests.

Jerry White and SEP supporters spoke at a reception following the debate with a number of East Tennessee State University students, who gathered round the literature table with questions about the SEP and its election platform. Miriam is the oldest child from a poor, southwest Virginia family who joined the US Navy in 1998 with dreams of gaining a college education. She left the army after she dislocated both of her shoulders in an accident, which is the only way she made her way to ETSU. “They lie to you about financial aid [for college] and military health insurance,” she said.

Miriam commented on the elections: “It’s sad because it’s not a choice. I don’t see my voice represented by the national candidates. After hearing the debate, I am very proud to label myself a socialist. We have to talk to all the working class people around the globe.”

She said that only the SEP had talked about the issues confronting working people on an international scale. “The Socialist Equality Party addressed the issues that are not just about American workers, but the world’s workers.”



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