

After the 2004 election: perspectives and tasks of the Socialist Equality Party

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The following report was delivered by David North, chairman of the WSWs international editorial board and national secretary of the SEP, to a meeting of the Metro Detroit area membership of the SEP in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Sunday November 14, 2004.

The purpose of today's meeting is to analyze the results of the 2004 Election and to outline the perspective that will guide the work of the Socialist Equality Party as we head into the first year of the second Bush administration. It is already clear that the political situation within the United States and internationally has been profoundly affected by the results of the election. The re-election of George Bush has come as a shock to broad layers of the population. There is a sense, within the United States and around the world, that something bad, ugly and dangerous has happened.

Prior to Election Day, there was a widespread belief that the outcome of the 2000 Election was a fluke, an aberration, that would correct itself, as a sort of natural purgative process, in 2004. All that had occurred during the past four years, in the aftermath of the stolen election of 2000, encouraged the belief that Bush's re-election was inconceivable. The exposure of Bush's various justifications for war as lies, the disastrous consequences of the invasion, the growth of unemployment and accelerating decline in living standards, the widespread sentiment (reflected in the polls) that the United States was headed in the wrong direction: all these and related circumstances were bound to result, so many wanted to believe, in an Election Day repudiation of the Bush administration by the national electorate. This optimistic presentiment was bolstered by the outcome of the three presidential debates, which cast a harsh and unforgiving light on Bush's mental limitations.

These pre-election hopes—which were nourished by large doses of wishful thinking and self-deception—were shattered on November 2, 2004. Back in 1974, following Richard Nixon's resignation at the height of the Watergate scandal, New York columnist Jimmy Breslin wrote a book, *How the Good Guys Finally Won*. The title reflected the complacency of American liberals in the aftermath of a crisis triggered by the illegal and unconstitutional actions of the Republican president. The malefactor had resigned, and the system had supposedly displayed its resiliency. Three cheers for American Democracy. But this time, 30 years later, the "good guys"—a rather implausible title for the feckless cowards and incompetents of the Democratic Party—didn't win. Rather, an administration, waist-deep in blood and corruption, consisting of political criminals, is back in office. How is this to be explained? This is, of course, not a question for which an easy answer can be found. But to begin with, one must acknowledge that the re-election of George Bush has laid bare a deep crisis of American democracy and American society as a whole for which there exist neither simple nor conventional solutions.

For the Democratic Party leaders, the cause of their defeat is obvious: their campaign and their candidate wandered too far to the left of the American mainstream. Adapting themselves to the rhetoric of the

corporate media, the Democrats find the roots of their disaster in their insufficient sensitivity to the "moral issues" that American voters hold so dear. In a commentary published on November 11 in the *Wall Street Journal*, Dan Gerstein, a former adviser to Senator Joseph Lieberman, writes: "We must realize that many swing voters won't listen to us on the issues—let alone share their votes—if they don't think we share their values."

What are these so-called "values" that the Republican Party has so brilliantly articulated? As the McCarthyite fever of the 1950s subsided and anti-Communism became less potent as an election-winning strategy, the Republican Party, sought to develop a new mass base for right-wing economic and social policies by exploiting the political reaction, particularly in the South, against the mass movement of African Americans for their civil rights. The transformation of the South into a bastion of Republicanism dates back to the Goldwater campaign of 1964, when the Republican candidate vehemently opposed the passage of civil rights legislation. Though Goldwater was defeated, his campaign set the stage for the so-called "Southern Strategy" proclaimed in 1968 by the next Republican presidential candidate, Richard Nixon, who recognized the possibility of establishing a new political base in the South by appealing to the backlash against the civil rights movement.

Another critical element of the "values issue," the Democrats insist, is the issue of religion. Here, too, they confess, they must regain the trust of God-fearing Americans. Gerstein writes: "Mr. Bush was able to convince more voters that God was on his side because he was speaking in a vacuum—Mr. Kerry barely talked about religion until the closing days, which helps explain why the Catholic candidate lost the Catholic vote." Even if it were true (and it is not) that the shipwreck of the Democrats was the result of insufficient concern for religious beliefs, it would still be necessary to explain why religion in its most backward, fundamentalist, form has come to dominate the politics of the United States. This is a very serious issue, especially when one considers how profoundly the climate has changed since the election of 1960, when the Democratic Party nominated John F. Kennedy as its presidential candidate. He was only the second Catholic to receive the presidential nomination. Thirty-two years earlier, the first Catholic nominee, Governor Alfred E. Smith of New York, had suffered a devastating defeat after a campaign marred by vicious religious bigotry. Given this history, Kennedy was obliged to address forthrightly the issue of religion, which he did in a speech delivered before hundreds of Southern Baptist religious leaders in Houston, Texas, on September 12, 1960.

Kennedy began by expressing regret that it was even necessary to discuss the issue of religion in the America of 1960, when there were so many other critical problems facing the United States, such as "the hungry children I saw in West Virginia, the old people who cannot pay their doctor's bills, the families forced to give up their farms—an America with too many slums, with too few schools, and too late to the moon and outer space." He declared that "These are the real issues which should decide

this campaign. And they are not religious issues—for war and hunger and ignorance and despair know no religious barrier.” But because his Catholic background had made religion an issue in the campaign, Kennedy accepted that “it is apparently necessary for me to state once again—not what kind of church I believe in for that should be important only to me, but what kind of America I believe in.” He then declared: “I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute—where no Catholic prelate would tell the President (should he be a Catholic) how to act and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote ...”

Kennedy further stated that his conception of America was one in which “no public official either requests or accepts instruction on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source” and “where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials.” He added, “I believe in a President whose views on religion are his own private affair ...”

A fairly conventional declaration of consensus opinion on church-state relations within the political establishment in 1960, Kennedy’s remarks appear today to be nothing short of heretical. One cannot think of a single prominent figure in the Democratic Party, not to mention the Republican Party, who would dare to state his opposition to religious meddling in political life so forthrightly. Indeed, when Kerry was asked during one of the debates to respond to instructions issued by Catholic bishops to members of their dioceses, that they not vote for the Democratic candidate because of his Senate votes in defense of the right of women to abortions, Kerry stated that he “respected” their opinion. Why has the political climate changed so dramatically? What is the relation between socio-economic changes in the United States in recent decades and the resurgence of religious backwardness? Is there, perhaps, a connection between the extreme economic uncertainty which afflicts tens of millions of American workers and the constantly growing influence of religion?

Questions such as these are not even raised. No effort is made by the Democratic Party leaders to uncover the rational source, in the current conditions of American society, for the spread of the irrational. As far as they are concerned, the religious revival, notwithstanding its reactionary agenda, is to be accepted as an unalterable fact of American political life. This capitulation to political reaction, for which religion provides a useful guise, finds its consummate expression in the following statement by Mr. Gerstein: “The election also confirmed that culture and character are far more important to connecting with voters than policies and programs.”

As a summing up of the philosophy that guides a significant section of the Democratic Party, it is a more or less complete confession of political prostration and bankruptcy. If “culture and character” are more important than “policies and programs,” what, then, is the purpose of a political party? Even the most casual reflection on the history of the United States exposes the absurdity of Gerstein’s nostrum. The colonies of 1776 were chockablock with “policies and programs” over which the founders of the new American republic labored with an obsessive attention to detail. What was the American Civil War if not a world-historical conflict over “policies and programs” centered on the conflict between abolitionism and slavery? In the mid-1890s, the popular opposition to the growing domination of Wall Street over the national economy found programmatic expression in the demand for a silver-based currency. At the turn of the century, reform factions within the bourgeois parties—which by then were under increasing pressure from new socialist tendencies—advanced a “progressive” program with myriad policy initiatives.

Even within the Republican Party, differences over policy were of a magnitude sufficient to produce a split in 1912, with ex-President Theodore Roosevelt breaking with President Taft and forming the so-called “Bull-Moose” Party. That very interesting election year witnessed a four-way contest between Taft, Roosevelt, the Democratic candidate

Woodrow Wilson, and the Socialist Party candidate, Eugene V. Debs. Issues of policy and program dominated political debate. The Democrats, under pressure from the left, adopted a platform at its national convention denouncing the “high Republican tariff” as “the principal cause of the unequal distribution of wealth,” and labeling it as “a system of taxation which makes the rich richer and the poor poorer...” It attacked “private monopoly” as “indefensible and intolerable” and condemned the Taft administration for “compromising with the Standard Oil Company and the tobacco trust and its failure to invoke the criminal provisions of the anti-trust law against the officers of those corporations...” The platform also endorsed a national income tax, the popular election of senators, the establishment of a one-term limit on the presidency and—in what today would appear to be nothing less than a revolutionary proposal—“the enactment of a law prohibiting any corporation from contributing to a campaign fund and any individual from contributing any amount above a reasonable maximum.”

In the 1930s the Democratic Party advanced the program of the New Deal and, finally, in its last attempt to advance an agenda of social reform, the Great Society of the Johnson presidency. I hope that it is understood that I refer to these experiences not to glorify the history of the Democratic Party, which has always been a bourgeois party devoted, in the final analysis, to the defense of capitalist interests. The socialist movement in the United States, from its inception, has devoted no small portion of its intellectual labors to a thorough critique of the Democratic Party’s essentially bourgeois character, the inadequate and limited character of its reformist experiments, and the falsity of its claim to represent the interests of the working class. However, the magnitude of the political decomposition of the Democratic Party can only be understood when placed in the necessary historical context. Gerstein’s contemptuous dismissal of “policies and programs” is a concise expression of the Democratic Party’s complete repudiation of its liberal and reformist past, and its inability to address in any meaningful way the needs and interests of the broad mass of the working class in the United States. Indeed, the Democratic Party makes no effort to do so. That is not what it is about.

In his lively and interesting study of contemporary politics, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, Thomas Frank offers this succinct description of the social orientation and agenda of the Democratic Party:

“The Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), the organization that produced such figures as Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Joe Lieberman, and Terry McAuliffe, has long been pushing the party to forget blue-collar voters and concentrate instead on recruiting affluent, white-collar professionals who are liberal on social issues. The larger interests that the DLC wants desperately to court are corporations, capable of generating campaign contributions far outweighing anything raised by organized labor. The way to collect the votes and—more important—the money of these coveted constituencies, “New Democrats” think, is to stand rock-solid on, say, the pro-choice position while making endless concessions on economic issues, on welfare, NAFTA, Social Security, labor law, privatization, deregulation, and the rest of it. Such Democrats explicitly rule out what they deride as “class warfare” and take great pains to emphasize their friendliness to business interests. Like the conservatives, they take economic issues off the table. As for the working-class voters who were until recently the party’s very backbone, the DLC figures they will have nowhere else to go; Democrats will always be marginally better on economic issues than the Republicans. Besides, what politician in this success-worshipping country really wants to be the voice of poor people? Where’s the soft money in that?”

To put it somewhat differently, the ideal party supporter, as conceived by the Democrats, is an arbitrageur with a social conscience.

Kerry’s problem was not too many programs and policies, but, rather, the absence of any serious proposals to address the great problems

confronting the mass of working class Americans. His entire campaign was a protracted and painful exercise in evasion, ambiguity, mixed signals and duplicity. Every concession to the popular base of the Democratic Party was invariably balanced with reassurances to his corporate sponsors. Kerry's belated criticisms of the war in Iraq were accompanied by fervent declarations of his unswerving support for the "war against terror." Yes, he was for increasing the taxes of the very rich ... but not by very much. Yes, he was for the defense of critical social programs, but only if they could be cost-justified on a "pay as you go" basis. Had Kerry's campaign had a motto, it would have been "Absolutely, but not really." The Republicans, with their infallible sense of their opponent's weaknesses and ability to strike at his jugular, knew what they were doing when they mocked Kerry as a "flip-flopper." But Kerry's apparent inability to be clearly for or against anything expressed not simply his own indecisiveness but rather the basic contradiction of the Democratic Party, that is, of an organization that presents itself as the "party of the people" while faithfully serving the interests of its corporate masters.

There has been a considerable amount of discussion in the recent period of one of the strangest facts of American political life: that many of the states that voted Republican—especially in the South and traditional border regions (Kansas, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia)—are among the most impoverished in the United States. The impact of Republican economic policies upon the citizens of these states has been devastating. The statistics bear this out: the highest poverty rates, crime rates, divorce rates (despite—or should we say because of—the pervasive influence of religion) and other indices of social distress and misery are to be found in the states that voted for Bush. To claim that its voters backed the Republicans because of "values" that they hold far dearer than their own real material interests is to substitute mysticism for scientific socio-political analysis.

Abstract references to "values," whose precise meaning is clear to no one, does little to explain why workers have come under the influence of the Republican Party and its retinue of religious hucksters and moralizing commens. A more convincing explanation is that the virtual collapse of the old labor movement in states that were once bastions of militant trade unionism has left millions of workers without any means of confronting social problems and defending their interests as a class. Let us consider the social experience of just one section of the American working class. For much of the twentieth century, the struggles of coalminers, organized inside the UMWA, raged across West Virginia and Kentucky, as well as significant sections of Virginia, Tennessee, Arkansas, Ohio and even Indiana. The coal miners were arguably the most class conscious section of the American working class. They fought "with fine impartiality"—as John L. Lewis might have said—mighty coal corporations and defied the White House on innumerable occasions. But during the 1980s the miners suffered a series of devastating defeats, for which the treachery of the union bureaucracy was principally responsible, that reduced the UMWA to a hollow and insignificant shell. Thousands of coal mining jobs were wiped out.

Without jobs, cut off from the deep-rooted social relations that sustained class consciousness over generations of struggle, alienated from a union that had deserted them, the militant workers of yesterday became susceptible to well-practiced pitchmen of the Evangelical Industry, always on the look-out for new customers. For the children of such workers, who have grown up entirely outside the milieu of an organized labor movement and with little or no awareness of the traditions of class struggle, the obstacles to the development of class consciousness are considerable. From what source will they acquire the information and insights that facilitate the development of a critical attitude toward contemporary society, let alone a sense that a better and more humane society—in *this world and in their lifetime*—is possible? Certainly not from the existing political parties or from the cesspool of the mass media.

This does not mean that the average American worker buys into the propaganda to which he or she is subjected relentlessly by the mass media and the Republican political machine. Not by a long shot. They see enough of life to know that things are not as they should be. When a worker speaks of "values," it has a very different meaning for him than it does for Enron's Kenneth Lay or for George Bush.

A number of reports have emerged that already call into question the significance of the "values" issue in the 2004 Election. It now appears that the polling data upon which the initial post-election claims were made were either misleading or misinterpreted. This, I am sure, is the case. But the really important point that must be made is that the "values" issue has arisen in a political vacuum created by the absence of any articulation by either party of the genuine social, economic and political interests of the broad mass of working Americans. The Democrats, the Republicans and the mass media form different parts of one massive chorus that sings rapturous hymns to the glories of American capitalism.

This is not a temporary weakness that can be overcome through a reshuffling of personnel or the recruitment of better candidates. It is a product of the evolution of American capitalism, the extraordinary concentration of wealth in relatively few hands, the extreme levels of social inequality, the rapid decline of the traditional "middle class" strata that once served as arbitrators in the class struggle between capitalists and workers and which formed a substantial constituency for social reformism, and, finally, the disappearance within the ruling elite itself of any substantial bloc seriously committed to the maintenance of traditional bourgeois democratic forms of rule.

This very advanced stage of bourgeois democratic decrepitude is inextricably bound up with the metastatic spread of American imperialism, which manifests itself not only in violent predations upon foreign countries but also in the internal corrosion of all the traditional institutions of bourgeois democracy within the United States itself. In one way or another, the personal wealth and general material interests of every section of the ruling elite, and its substantial upper-class social periphery, depends upon America's domination of the world capitalist economy. This forms the basis for the consensus that exists within broad sections of the ruling elite, supporting the aggressive use of the military to achieve the global strategic objectives of the United States.

Had it been up to the key strategists of the Democratic Party, the issue of Iraq would never have been raised during the election campaign. Following the defeat of Howard Dean's bid for the Democratic nomination, it was the intention of Kerry and his advisors to pretend that Iraq did not exist. There was to be no criticism of the invasion of Iraq, let alone the so-called "war against terror" as a whole. Even as Kerry's standing in the polls fell dramatically in the aftermath of the Democratic Convention—which was largely a reflection of disillusionment among Democratic supporters over Kerry's refusal to speak out against the invasion—the candidate remained silent.

Not until mid-September, when chaos in Iraq led a number of key Republicans to criticize Bush's handling of the war, did Kerry decide that it was now politically legitimate, from the standpoint of the ruling elite, to make the war an issue in the presidential campaign. And even then, Kerry was careful to distinguish his criticism of Bush's "premature" invasion of Iraq from any suggestion that he favored or, if elected, would sanction any withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. Had Kerry been elected, the gory headlines of the past week would not have been any different. He would have endorsed without any hint of criticism the onslaught against Fallujah. While making, perhaps, certain tactical accommodations to the European governments to gain broader support for the American occupation of Iraq, the basic course of American international policy would have proceeded under a Kerry administration without any significant change.

In the aftermath of the election, amidst the anxiety and apprehension

about the future, there is a widespread sense that a turning point has been reached—that political life cannot continue as it has until now. The symptoms of a historic crisis of American democracy are too numerous and pervasive to be denied and covered over, and it has become all too clear that the system cannot correct itself. The crisis of American capitalism, unless resolved through the intervention of the great mass of the working people of the United States on the basis of a new, genuinely progressive and democratic, that is, *socialist* program, threatens to engulf the entire planet in a catastrophe.

There are certain political conclusions that must be drawn from the debacle of the 2004 Election. The first of these is that this election must be the last in which the fate of the American working class is tied to the stinking corpse of the corporate-controlled two-party system and, in particular, the Democratic Party. For American workers, political wisdom begins with the understanding that their class interests cannot be achieved through the medium of a party that is controlled by and subservient to corporate interests, and that the most pressing task confronting workers is to organize themselves as a politically independent force, in a party of their own, armed with a platform and program which clearly articulates their needs and aspirations.

Viewed historically, the greatest weakness of the American workers' movement has been its subordination to the Democratic Party. This alliance was justified by political opportunists of various stripes—within the bureaucracies of the trade unions, by liberals, and innumerable radical tendencies—who claimed that the Democrats were “friends of labor” whose commitment to social reform would raise the living standards and secure the democratic rights of the working class.

In an earlier historical period, these claims seemed plausible to many workers. For the generation of workers and large sections of the middle class who had lived through the aftermath of the Crash of 1929, the transition from Herbert Hoover to Franklin Roosevelt represented a significant change. The “Coming of the New Deal,” to borrow the phrase of liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., marked the beginning of an era of social reformism which led over time to a substantial improvement in the living conditions of tens of millions of Americans. Measures which had been rejected prior to 1933 as incompatible with “laissez-faire” capitalism—such as deficit spending, price supports for agriculture, official government recognition of the right of workers to organize and join unions, the introduction of social security, and the establishment of numerous regulatory agencies that placed certain legal restraints on the business practices of corporations—marked a profound change in the social climate of the United States. But Roosevelt was neither a revolutionary nor a socialist. He was, rather, an immensely skilled and farsighted bourgeois political leader who realized that capitalism would not survive the crisis of the 1930s unless it was reformed.

Roosevelt's “New Deal” experiments would not have been possible, however, were it not for the fact that the United States still possessed immense economic resources. There existed sufficient financial reserves to sustain a program of class compromise and accommodation. But even then, Roosevelt's desire, which was no doubt sincere, to create a more just society ran up against the realities of capitalism. In his State of the Union address of January 1944 Roosevelt called for the creation of a second Bill of Rights “under which a new basis of security and prosperity can be established for all regardless of station, race or creed.” Among the social and economic rights that were to be guaranteed by the United States to all its citizens were “The right to a useful and remunerative job,” “The right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation,” “The right of every family to a decent home,” “The right to adequate medical care and opportunity to enjoy and achieve good health,” “The right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment,” and “The right to a good education.” Roosevelt asked Congress “to explore the means for

implementing this economic bill of rights—for it is definitely the responsibility of the Congress to do so.”

Roosevelt's second Bill of Rights was never enacted and none of the proposals which he presented as rights to which all citizens are entitled have ever been realized. The three decades that followed Roosevelt's death in April 1945 witnessed a colossal expansion of American capitalism, which emerged from World War II as the greatest economic power and wealthiest country in the world. And yet even under those optimal conditions, Roosevelt's vision could not be reconciled with the economic imperatives of American capitalism. Twenty years later, in May 1964, President Lyndon Johnson, the last president to advance an ambitious agenda of social reform, unveiled his proposals for the realization of a “Great Society.” But by that time, the global position of US capitalism was already in decline, its trade balance was deteriorating, and its currency was weakening. The added strain of the Vietnam War on the federal budget dramatically undermined the financial basis for the implementation of an ambitious program of social reform. The “Great Society” died in its infancy.

In the 40 years since Johnson proclaimed the advent of the “Great Society,” successive presidential administrations, Republican and Democratic alike, have sought to undermine and dismantle whatever has remained of its legacy as well as that of the New Deal. This process of social and political reaction cannot be adequately explained as the result of the evil intentions of one or another president. Its real cause lies in the objective contradictions of the capitalist system.

The growing political tensions within the United States, the epicenter of world capitalism, are symptoms of the real breakdown of a socio-economic system based on private ownership of the means of production and organized internationally within the framework of inter-dependent but mutually hostile nation-states. The immense development of industry and technology has given rise to a global and mass society whose complexity requires a level of international coordination and conscious social planning that is inconceivable under capitalism. How is it possible to resolve what are basically world problems when the planet is divided into competing national states? How is it possible to satisfy the needs of billions of human beings—for nourishment, education, housing, health care, and a myriad of other social necessities—within the framework of an economic system in which considerations of corporate profit and personal wealth determine the allocation of critical financial resources? These problems cannot be solved on the basis of capitalism. The dictatorship of transnational corporations, ruled by financial oligarchs, must be ended. A new, collective, and genuinely democratic means of allocating resources and meeting social needs is required.

The fight for this program presupposes the building of a new political party of the working class, based on a socialist and international program. This is the task that has been undertaken by the Socialist Equality Party, and which found expression in our intervention in the 2004 Election. From an organizational standpoint, the physical scale of our presidential campaign was limited by the resources available to our party. The United States is a vast country, and the obstacles that are placed in the path of third-party candidates by election officials working on behalf of the Republican-Democratic duopoly are enormous. In Illinois and Ohio we had to conduct bitter and expensive fights against efforts made by state officials to keep our candidates off the ballot. In Illinois, we defeated the attempt to keep Tom Mackaman off the ballot. In Ohio, though Election Day has come and gone, our appeal is still pending in the federal courts. Despite all the difficulties and limitations, our candidates did a splendid job and, in some cases, garnered a significant number of votes—especially in Maine and Illinois. But more important than the immediate practical results are the long-lasting political consequences of the intervention of the Socialist Equality Party.

For socialists, there is one critical yardstick by which they measure and

evaluate their political activities. To what extent did they, through their political work, express the objective interests of the working class, contribute to its political education, and prepare the ground for future struggles? From this standpoint, we have every reason to be proud of what was achieved by the Socialist Equality Party in 2004. The platform upon which we based our campaign, which provided workers with a clear analysis of the crisis of American and world capitalism and advanced an international socialist strategy, will endure beyond the campaign as a political guide for future struggles.

The perspective advanced by the SEP stood in stark contrast to those of myriad radical tendencies who, to a lesser or greater degree, regardless of this or that criticism of the two-party system, conceived of their own political intervention in 2004 as a means of applying pressure to the Democratic Party, of moving it to the left. This was certainly the aim of Nader and the other official candidate of the Green Party. This perspective found its most bankrupt and even delusional expression in the political line of the *Nation*, which on the eve of the election published a ringing endorsement of John Kerry. They praised him as “a man of high intelligence, deep knowledge and great resolve.” But aside from his personal qualities, Kerry’s election, argued the *Nation*, was the only way democracy could be defended in the United States. The re-election of Bush would pose a threat to constitutional rule in the United States. Only by electing Kerry could this danger be averted.

Time does not permit a detailed critique of the *Nation*’s position. I will confine myself to pointing out that the line of the *Nation* rejected the most important lessons that have arisen out of the tragedies of the twentieth century. As the experience of European fascism demonstrated in the 1930s, efforts by the working class to defend its democratic rights require its independent political mobilization. It cannot fight the threat of dictatorship as long as it remains politically subservient to the parties of the ruling elite. To advise workers that they entrust the defense of their democratic rights to the Democratic Party—which the *Nation* describes in the same editorial as “reluctant imperialists”—is to counsel suicide.

It is hardly surprising that the response of the *Nation* to the re-election of Bush is panic and despair. In an article which bears the title, “Mourn,” Katha Pollitt hurls verbal thunderbolts at the American people as a whole. John Kerry, she writes, “was a pretty good candidate.” The problem is that “the voters chose what they actually want: Nationalism, pre-emptive war, order not justice, ‘safety’ through torture, backlash against women and gays, a gulf between haves and have-nots, government largesse for their churches and a my-way-or-the-highway president.”

While Pollitt denounces the American people for not being worthy of John Kerry’s efforts, the editors of the *Nation* lament on another page: “At no time during the campaign did the Democratic candidate discuss in an honest way the single most important issue facing the country: how to disengage from the war in Iraq.” Nor, they acknowledge, was Kerry able to address the real social concerns of workers. “He did not offer plausible remedies to their pain.” Despite these failures, the *Nation*’s editors reaffirm their commitment to influencing the Democratic Party. “Historically,” writes the *Nation*, “that party’s finest moments have come when it was pushed into action from outside by popular movements, from the labor movement to the civil rights movement to the women’s movement to the gay-rights movement.”

The Socialist Equality Party rejects entirely this analysis and perspective. Only by breaking unequivocally and irrevocably with the Democratic Party can the working class move forward. This break implies not only a change in organizational affiliations, but a profound and thoroughgoing transformation in the political perspective and world view of the working class. It involves a shift from a nationalist to an internationalist perspective; from the resigned acceptance of the permanence of capitalism to the realization of the necessity of socialism; from the mere hope that things may someday change for the better to the

fervent advocacy of a revolutionary structuring of American society.

Two factors are working in favor of such a transformation. The first is the objective crisis of capitalism itself, which will provide the working class with no respite from shocks and upheavals. The war will not just go away, let alone remain merely a disturbance on the distant horizon. As always, the horrors of war will spread their shadow over an ever-expanding area, demand ever-greater human sacrifices, and accelerate the erosion of rights at home. Nor will the accumulating global contradictions of the capitalist system permit a respite from the ongoing attacks on the living standards of the working class. The precipitous decline of the US dollar in the aftermath of the election is a harbinger of worsening economic instability. The chaos generated by the worsening crisis will confront workers with the necessity of defending their most basic social interests.

The second factor is of a subjective character: that is, the efforts of the Socialist Equality Party, in alliance with its international co-thinkers in the International Committee of the Fourth International, to educate a new generation of working people and students in the principles of socialism, and to provide a clear political orientation to the working class as a whole as it enters into struggles of a historic character. In the days that have followed the election, we have received scores of letters from readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* in which a wide range of attitudes and emotions find expression ... outrage, disgust, confusion, bitterness and sorrow. Some letters combine all these elements. But most of the letters express a desire to fight back, and recognize the need to re-examine and probably change their own political conceptions. The results of the election have shaken things up.

This provides the SEP with an opportunity and challenge. A huge responsibility falls upon the Socialist Equality Party to expand its activities, to reach out more aggressively and persistently to its many supporters among the very large daily readership of the *World Socialist Web Site*, and convert many of these readers and supporters into active members of the Socialist Equality Party.

We neither deny nor minimize the difficulties that will arise in the struggle for socialism in the United States. The impact of decades of anti-Communist propaganda and witch hunting, the corruption and betrayals of the trade unions, the relative absence of a politically-engaged intelligentsia, the low level of popular culture and the degrading influence of the mass media, the traditions of national insularity, the persistence of “rugged individualism,” and the pragmatic disdain for history and theoretical generalizations—all these are factors which complicate the struggle for socialist class consciousness. But we take as our point of departure the objective implications of the crisis of American and world capitalism. Moreover, however complicated the process, social being does in the final analysis determine social consciousness. As Leon Trotsky once said so well, history will in the long run cut a path to the consciousness of the working class. American workers will find no other way to solve the problems arising out of the crisis of capitalism except along the path of socialism and internationalism. All other paths lead to catastrophe. That is the alternative that confronts the working class. The responsibility of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* is to confront the working class, as clearly and precisely as we can, with this alternative. As long as we do this, we can leave it to the working class to decide which alternative they prefer.



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