

After the 2004 elections: the political and social crisis will intensify

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The reelection of George W. Bush, achieved largely through the mobilization of the evangelical Christian vote on the basis of overtly religious appeals, will have far-reaching and disastrous consequences for American democracy.

Notwithstanding the platitudes and bromides dispensed by Senator John Kerry in his stereotypical concession speech, the results of the 2004 election will not give rise to a rebirth of national unity. The 2004 election represents a further stage in the decay and crisis of the American political system. It is the culmination of a strategy, developed by the Republicans over the past three decades, of cultivating religious fundamentalists to create a mass base for social reaction and militarism. The corporate and financial oligarchy has fashioned its own Frankenstein monster—a force whose political and social agenda is incompatible with the secular constitutional foundations of the United States and the maintenance of traditional democratic norms.

Bush and the Republicans ran a deeply reactionary campaign, employing lies and political smears and playing on the fears, insecurities and confusion of key sections of the electorate. But even with the advantage of incumbency, a friendly media, and the relentless exploitation of the 9/11 tragedy, Bush was barely able to eke out a 51 percent majority of the popular vote.

Whatever the media pundits may say, the election is anything but a popular endorsement of the Bush administration and its policies. Historically, presidents who have won reelection have been able to utilize the benefits of incumbency to obtain decisive victories. This was the case with Roosevelt in the 1930s, Johnson in the 1960s, Reagan in the 1980s, and even Clinton in 1996. Yet Bush gained little more than an absolute majority.

Looking at the electoral map, it is immediately clear that the Republicans, four years after the disputed election of 2000, were not able to shift any sizable population centers to their side. With a few exceptions, those states that went for Gore in 2000—including the most industrialized and urbanized states on the East and West coasts and in the Midwest—went for Kerry in 2004. In other words, the Republicans, despite pulling out all stops in the use of fear-mongering, lies, and other tricks from their grab bag of political reaction, have reached a limit on their ability to extend their base socially and geographically.

The electoral map shows another aspect of the crisis of American

democracy—the balkanization of US politics. Neither of the two major parties can be truly said to be national parties.

The election once again revealed a starkly polarized country, and a broad and deeply felt opposition to Bush and the Iraq war. The sharply increased voter turnout, and especially the spike in voting by young people, most of whom cast ballots against Bush and the war, reflected the immense social opposition that exists to the Republican right.

Yet the result of the vote will be to further concentrate political power in the hands of the extreme right, which will control all three branches of government—the executive, the legislative and the judiciary—with the Republicans increasing their majority in the Senate. The stage is set for a series of Supreme Court appointments that will further shift the axis of the Court to the right, and lead to the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* on abortion rights and other anti-democratic rulings of a far-reaching character.

The election was less a victory for Bush than a colossal, historic defeat for the Democratic Party. In the midst of an unpopular war, massive job losses, declining living standards, growing poverty, a series of corporate corruption scandals alongside huge tax breaks for the rich, the Democrats have proven themselves unable to oust an administration that was installed by undemocratic means and viewed by half the population as illegitimate, and has since been caught in monstrous lies. Kerry and his party were unable, despite the mass opposition to Bush, to expand their social base of support and make serious inroads in the working class electorate.

Running on the basis of a hypocritical and two-faced campaign—appealing to antiwar sentiment, while supporting the war, appealing to the economic concerns of working people, while promising fiscal austerity, criticizing the Patriot Act, while demanding stronger police-state powers in the “war on terror”—Kerry and his party were incapable of effectively countering the Republicans’ strategy of exploiting fears, prejudices and political disorientation.

The Republicans have a coherent electoral strategy. They seek to create a popular base for social reaction and militarism by sponsoring Christian fundamentalism and utilizing so-called “wedge” issues such as gay marriage, abortion and school prayer.

They were able to effectively exploit the contradictions that riddle the Democratic Party. Kerry, for example, was never able to answer Bush’s basic point that his opponent was now criticizing as “the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time” a war for which both Kerry and his running mate, John Edwards, had

voted. Indeed, Kerry's response was to repeat endlessly that he would prosecute the war in Iraq—and future wars—more effectively than the incumbent “commander in chief.”

The so-called “flip-flopping” of Kerry flows from the contradictions of a party that claims to speak for working people, while defending the American ruling elite and its interests both at home and abroad.

Kerry barely won a majority in such highly industrialized and urbanized Midwest states as Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. He hardly bothered to make an appeal to the millions of white workers and urban and rural poor in the South, in border states such as Tennessee and Missouri, and in former Democratic bastions like coal-rich West Virginia.

In the absence of any consistent and credible appeal to the class interests of working people, the Republican strategy of capitalizing on religious backwardness and confusion proved highly effective. The Democratic Party will not, and cannot, make a serious and direct appeal to the real social and economic needs of the working class, because it is a party of American capitalism and is beholden to the US financial oligarchy. The trade unions, which provide the Democrats with some manpower, phone banks, etc., are utterly useless when it comes to mobilizing the working class.

As a result, tens of millions of working people—most starkly in the so-called red states of the South, the central plains and the Southwest—voted for a president whose economic policies have had devastating consequences for their own living standards. But this anomaly did not arise out of the blue. The Republicans have made inroads among large sections of the working class that have been abandoned by both the Democrats and their right-wing allies in the trade union bureaucracy.

Bush's red states include West Virginia and Kentucky, former Democratic bastions whose mining communities have been devastated by closures and wage cuts made possible by the betrayal of scores of struggles against union-busting and wage-cutting in the 1980s and 1990s. There are similar stories to be told in Ohio, Missouri, Arizona, Alabama and many more of the states that have ended up in the Republican column. In every case, the Democratic Party worked in tandem with the AFL-CIO union bureaucracy to isolate the workers and smash their resistance. As always, such defeats leave a legacy of economic devastation, despair and a loss of perspective—fertile soil for the propagation of reactionary politics packaged as religious faith.

There is no doubt that a considerable section of the Republican constituency is motivated by racism and other reactionary sentiments. But a substantial segment votes Republican because no major party speaks to its class interests.

Just as the shift to the right by the Republican Party has been a protracted process, the collapse of the Democrats is the product of a long evolution. For more than a generation, the Democratic Party has disassociated itself with any policies considered suspect in corporate circles. Its rightward movement has been marked by an almost comical effort to repudiate the “liberal” label—something Kerry continued in his election campaign. As a result, the party has forfeited any ability to appeal to the genuine economic interests of the working class.

In any event, the working class has already been burned by

Democratic politicians who promise reforms on health care and other social needs. Within one year of his inauguration, Bill Clinton abandoned his health care plan, while essentially continuing the economic policies of Reagan and Bush senior.

The response of the Democrats to their latest political debacle will be to move even further to the right. They will desperately seek to conciliate with Bush and the Republicans, try to don religious trappings, and present themselves as a more “moderate” version of their bourgeois rivals.

We warn against and reject in advance the demoralized and uncritical response to the election that will emerge from the Democratic Party and those “left” liberals and radicals who orient to the Democrats: the notion that the blame for Bush's reelection rests with the American people, and that nothing can be done to oppose the Republican right's policies of war and reaction.

The outcome of the 2004 election guarantees an intensification of the social and political crisis in America, and the emergence of great shifts and struggles. There is a grotesque political imbalance that is untenable—one that mirrors the enormous economic polarization of American society.

All political power is concentrated in the hands of extreme-right forces. The official opposition, in the form of the Democratic Party, has proven itself bankrupt. Meanwhile, in the country at large, there is massive and intense opposition to the Bush administration, the Iraq war, and the policies of the Republican right. Adding to the unstable and explosive mix is the fact that millions of people who voted for Bush did so out of fear and confusion—exploited by the Republicans—and thereby ensured a continuation of policies that will further undermine their own living standards.

Objective conditions will supply ample fuel for social and political struggle. The quagmire in Iraq and the future military adventures that will follow, the deepening economic crisis of American capitalism—marked by soaring deficits and a weakening dollar—will compel the second Bush administration to launch new attacks on the working class, including millions of workers who voted to return Bush to power.

These attacks can be countered only through the political mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist program. This entails systematic opposition to the policies of the Republicans and the American ruling elite, including a merciless exposure of the hypocrisy and cynicism of their religious appeals.

The leadership for this fight cannot be developed within the framework of the existing two-party system. Such a struggle requires a clear and irrevocable break with the Democratic Party. In the months ahead, as it draws out the lessons of this election, the Socialist Equality Party will be fighting for the development of this new mass socialist movement.



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