

Ralph Nader and the Democratic election debacle

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Ralph Nader's first public pronouncements following the Democrats' electoral debacle have reaffirmed the political orientation to the Democratic Party that underlay his nominally independent campaign for US president.

In reacting to Bush's victory, Nader has not raised, even remotely, the need for a break with the Democratic Party. His response is quite the opposite: he offers tactical criticisms of John Kerry's campaign and various suggestions for reversing the Democratic Party's electoral decline.

In a November 4 press statement headlined "Kerry Missed the Opportunity," Nader urges the Democrats to become a "tough opposition party" during Bush's second term, while blaming Kerry's loss on the Democratic candidate's refusal to heed his advice during the election campaign. Kerry should have listened to Nader's pleas that he speak out on corporate fraud, the looting of pension funds and stagnating wages, Nader writes, instead of appealing to conservative "swing voters" and mimicking Bush's policies.

Far from drawing any fundamental conclusions from the Democratic collapse, Nader declares that the Democratic Party can be revived, reformed and made progressive. "The Democrats could build a coalition," he writes, "of the economically deprived and disrespected...including 50 million low-wage workers and their families, small farm and rural families" that could compete with the Republicans throughout the United States, especially in the Midwest and South.

Coming from Nader, the complaint about pandering to conservative swing voters is highly disingenuous. During his campaign, Nader repeatedly declared that he could win—and was actively seeking—the support of disaffected conservatives and Republicans. On the basis of his nationalistic opposition to the World Trade Organization, his calls for fiscal "responsibility," his proposals to limit immigration, and his attacks on media violence and Hollywood immorality, Nader argued that he would attract Republican and Libertarian voters away from Bush and thereby aid Kerry's campaign.

The most striking aspect of Nader's election post-mortem, aside from its unabashed orientation to the Democrats—which Nader does not attempt to square with his supposed opposition to the "two-party duopoly"—is the absence of any serious analysis of the political collapse of the Democratic Party.

Kerry's defeat—under conditions of an unpopular and disastrous war, massive job losses and declining wages, and an administration caught lying to the people on a gargantuan scale—was not, after all, an aberration. With the exception of the Clinton years, the Democrats have lost every presidential election since 1980. And Clinton's prostration before the right-wing attack on his presidency and political adaptation to the policies of the Republican Party resulted in Republican control of both houses of Congress. It set the stage, moreover, for the stolen election of 2000, which was followed by the rout of the Democrats in the 2002 congressional elections.

For more than 25 years, the Democratic Party has been repudiating the social reform policies of the New Deal and the two decades that followed the Second World War. It has been moving ever more sharply to the right.

The Democrats' 2004 presidential campaign was wholly in line with this general trajectory. As Nader is well aware, Kerry obtained the nomination through a concerted attack by the media and the most powerful forces in the Democratic Party on the candidacy of Howard Dean, who emerged as the early leader in the race for the Democratic nomination on the basis of his appeal to anti-war sentiment. Kerry's capture of the nomination was meant to remove the Iraq war as an issue in the elections, and even when Kerry began criticizing Bush on the war in mid-September, he did so entirely from the standpoint of Bush's tactical mistakes and incompetence. He repeatedly pledged to conduct the war more effectively, maintaining the occupation of Iraq until US victory was assured.

This pro-war position was consistent with a generally right-wing campaign, which sought to assure the US ruling elite that Kerry would protect its interests—through corporate tax cuts, fiscal austerity, and continued prosecution of the so-called "war on terrorism."

Nader ignores this history, and treats Kerry's debacle simply as the result of subjective failures on the part of the candidate and his advisers. On this banal basis, he asserts that the Democratic Party should adopt a social reform program, and insists that it can be made to do so by pressure from below.

The refusal of Nader to make an objective and historical analysis of the Democratic Party and its failure in the 2004 elections is indicative of his type of politics. Like all of those

who hover around the Democrats, Nader obscures the class character of the party and denies the fact that its policies have always flowed from the imperatives of the capitalist system.

Before making superficial observations about what the Democrats did not do in the past, or what they should do in the future, one is obliged to seriously consider the underlying reasons for the party's refusal to address the concerns of working people, and its organic inability to maintain any principled opposition to Bush and the Republican right.

It is necessary to establish from an objective historical, social and political standpoint, what the Democratic Party is.

While the Democratic Party has sought throughout its history to present itself as a party for working people, it has always been a capitalist party. Its repudiation of social reformism has its roots, not in the subjective qualities of this or that Democratic candidate, but in the mounting crisis of American capitalism. As long as the US dominated the world economy, the Democrats, as well as the Republicans, could pursue a policy of class compromise and limited concessions to the working class.

As the US accumulated massive budget and trade deficits and faced ever more serious economic challenges from its capitalist competitors in Europe and Asia, class compromise was abandoned in favor of a policy of class confrontation. Over the last three decades, both parties have sought to dismantle the social gains of the past and enact a massive transfer of wealth from the working class to the financial oligarchy. The bipartisan support for the imperialist plunder in Iraq, along with the introduction of more authoritarian forms of rule in the US, is an expression of this consensus policy.

The 2004 election was the culmination of this long process. Predictably, the electoral defeat has only produced more demands from the Democratic Party leadership to accommodate to Bush's militarist and socially reactionary agenda.

The susceptibility of significant layers of workers to the right-wing nostrums of Bush and the Republican Party cannot be separated from the political confusion generated by the decades-long subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party. The absence of a clear class alternative to address the immense social problems confronted by working people has created a political vacuum, which, to this point, has been largely filled by the Republicans, on the basis of appeals to religion and various other so-called social issues such as abortion, gay marriage, gun control, and school prayer.

That such reactionary, anti-working class politics has influence among working people is testimony to the Democratic Party's long-standing role in suppressing any expression of independent class politics and its effort to delegitimize any critique of the profit system. In the past, the Democrats combined their anti-communism with liberal reformist policies. Today, the Democrats increasingly reject even token appeals to workers' interests as "class warfare" and

openly embrace "free market" capitalism.

In the 2004 elections, the Democratic Party sought to crush any political challenge from the left. Even Nader's liberal criticisms were beyond the pale, and the Democrats waged a concerted campaign of dirty tricks and frivolous lawsuits to bar him from the ballot in dozens of states and drain his campaign of resources. These same anti-democratic methods were used against the Socialist Equality Party.

It is measure of his political unseriousness that Nader, who was the primary victim of these attacks, should promote the Democratic Party as a viable alternative for working people and youth. Although Nader denies it, there is a direct connection between the anti-democratic drive against third-party candidates and the destructive impact of the subordination of the working class to the Democrats on American political life and the ability of the working class to defend its interests. In the end, bolstering illusions in the Democratic Party only facilitates the efforts of the ruling elite to create a base for militarism and social reaction.

Without a principled class opposition to the Democrats, one is left with the politics of delusion and wishful thinking. Nader and other would-be reformers of the Democratic Party make periodic criticisms of the Democrats. In the end, however, they all claim the Democratic Party can be transformed into something that it never was and never can be. Such politics serve a definite function for the ruling class: to channel political and social discontent back within the harmless precincts of the Democratic Party, and block the working class from building its own party on the basis of an anti-capitalist and internationalist program.



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