

SEP presidential candidate Bill Van Auken speaks in New York

Our reporter
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Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Bill Van Auken spoke at a campaign meeting in New York City on October 30, just a few days after returning from an international tour that took him to London and Sri Lanka.

The meeting was attended by people from New Jersey and Connecticut, as well as New York. Those in attendance included supporters of the SEP, readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*, and students and young people met in the course of the election campaign.

Van Auken and vice presidential candidate Jim Lawrence are on the ballot in New Jersey, and are urging supporters in New York to cast write-in votes.

The first speaker at the meeting was Peter Daniels of the WSWs editorial board. Daniels spoke about the crisis of American capitalism reflected in the bitter political contest and the uncertainty over the outcome of the voting on November 2.

"It is becoming increasingly likely," he said, "that Election Day may come and go without anything being settled. No clear outcome may be known, with the determination being made once again by the courts. The only thing that can be stated with certainty is that the next occupant of the White House, whether Bush or Kerry, will be forced to confront the growing quagmire in Iraq and a deepening economic and political crisis at home and abroad."

Daniels explained that the political polarization that characterizes the presidential race is only a pale and distorted reflection of the social polarization within American society. "The Republicans are spearheading the program of domestic and international reaction, the attempt to turn the clock back a century and more on living standards and democratic rights, to rip up what remains of the New Deal reforms, while turning toward the recolonization of large sections of the globe. The Democrats, however, have demonstrated over and over their essential agreement with these policies of class war against the international working class..."

"Kerry's criticisms of the Bush Administration's domestic policies mirror the criticisms over Iraq. He speaks for that section of the ruling elite concerned that the Republicans' policies and methods risk provoking social and political upheaval. But there are no differences on fundamental aims."

The main speaker at the meeting, Bill Van Auken, pointed out that the entire 2004 election campaign has been dominated by an appeal to fear by both the Democrats and Republicans, with both parties "attempting to terrorize the American people with the invocation of a supposedly omnipresent threat of terrorism."

He continued: "What is behind the reliance of both sides on fear campaigns and the endless invocation of the never-ending war on terror? In the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution, the war against

terrorism has come to play the role previously reserved for anti-communism as the foundation of American bourgeois politics.

"It is a necessary—though fraudulent—ideological glue that is used in an attempt to justify all actions both foreign and domestic taken by America's ruling elite, and to suppress opposition from within. In a country so riven with class contradictions and so polarized between wealth and poverty, the specter of an external enemy bent upon the country's destruction has become indispensable. It serves to prevent any genuine discussion on the role played by American imperialism abroad and capitalism's impact on the lives of hundreds of millions of working people within the United States itself.

"This reliance upon fear as the central ingredient of capitalist politics in America is the hallmark of a society that is in deep crisis and of a ruling establishment that can offer no way out."

Van Auken pointed out that the election is overshadowed by the war in Iraq and dominated by international events. He condemned the continuing bombardment of cities like Fallujah, warning that Washington is preparing a bloody ground offensive once the election is over, delaying this carnage for fear that substantial US casualties could hurt Bush at the polls.

The candidate cited two recent reports spelling out the scale of the catastrophe that the US intervention has inflicted upon the Iraqi people. The first, issued by Johns Hopkins University, indicated that the invasion and occupation have resulted in an additional 100,000 violent deaths in Iraq, and that US "liberation" has meant that Iraqis are 58 times more likely to be killed than they were before the invasion.

The other report, released by the United Nations, showed that in the period following the US invasion, Iraq has registered the largest increase in child mortality of any nation in the world, with over one in ten children dying before they reach the age of five. The child death rate now, he said, "has climbed back to the highest levels reached under the punishing economic sanctions imposed by the Western powers, when UN officials lodged protests describing the policy towards Iraq as genocidal."

Van Auken cited the overwhelming support the SEP has received in campaigning on its demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq. He noted the deep sense of frustration that pervades the American electorate over the two-party system's failure to reflect either this vast opposition to the war or the needs and demands of ordinary working people.

"This frustration," Van Auken explained, "the sense that the old political forms offer no means whatsoever to address the problems confronting working people, is not merely an American phenomenon."

He reported on the speaking tour he had conducted in Britain and Sri Lanka the previous week. "For those who view politics from the standpoint of electoral calculations, the decision to send a presidential candidate overseas in the weeks directly preceding the election no doubt seems peculiar.

"But, as Trotsky noted at time of the founding of the Fourth International, 'We are not a party like other parties.' Elections for us are a means, not an end in themselves. We are not focused on the ballot boxes on November 2, but on preparing a revolutionary movement capable of providing leadership to the working class in the face of the crises that will follow this election.

"Our campaign begins from the understanding that the problems confronting working people in Britain, Sri Lanka, the United States and every other corner of the globe can be resolved only through the building of a genuinely worldwide movement against imperialism based on the perspective of international socialism."

The common economic and social problems facing workers in every country in a globally integrated economy, Van Auken said, are accompanied by similar political problems. "In Britain, where opposition to the Iraq war is even more intense than in the US, the working class is saddled with a Labour government that is committed to this war, and whose policies are indistinguishable from those of the Tory Party.

"The Labour government has taken up where the Tories left off after the savage attacks on the miners and other sections of the working class inaugurated under the government of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. What alternative is there for the working class under these conditions? The radical protesters demand that Blair resign, but they have no proposal on who or what should take his place. There is no answer outside of the building of a new revolutionary party."

In Sri Lanka, similar questions are posed, Van Auken said. He traced the political developments on the island from the "great betrayal" of the former Trotskyist party, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, which in 1964 joined a bourgeois government, through to the growth of chauvinist and national separatist movements and the onset of civil war.

He pointed out that over the past three decades, some 140,000 people have been killed, noting that an equivalent death toll in the US would be over 2 million.

"Today, these processes have reached a point of complete impasse," he said. "The Sri Lankan government is confronting mounting pressure from the native and international bourgeoisie to bring the civil war to an end. Decades of fighting have served as an impediment to the penetration of foreign capital and the integration of the island into the global capitalist economy.

"Having for decades utilized communal politics as the basis of its rule, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has been thrown into immense crisis by this demand."

Van Auken reported on the two meetings organized by the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka the previous week, at which he spoke on the US elections and the war in Iraq. "These meetings were inspiring," he said. "Under conditions in which every other political organization on the island bases itself on ethnic chauvinism, the Sri Lankan SEP brought together Tamil and Sinhalese workers and youth to discuss the American election, the war, and the intervention of the SEP in the US.

"A delegation traveled 14 hours from Jaffna in the north, past government roadblocks and through LTTE-controlled (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the Tamil separatist organization) territory.

Tamil workers came from the plantations, joining Sinhalese students, garment workers and others.

"If anyone here thinks this speech is long, you should try sitting through it as it is translated consecutively into two other languages. This was not only a practical, but a political necessity, given the discrimination against the Tamil language that has been the hallmark of Sinhalese chauvinism for the last half-century. But it did mean turning a 45 minute speech into a three hour presentation.

"Nevertheless, the audience remained extremely attentive. The sections of my report dealing with social polarization and the assault on living standards in the US, as well as the sweeping attacks on democratic rights that have taken place, were followed with intense interest. Many said afterwards that they had never realized that there existed in the US a working class that confronted problems similar to their own.

"In a country where common people have suffered so intensely from ethnic and national divisions, the party's essential perspective of internationalism struck a very powerful chord. One Tamil woman approached me after the second meeting and said, simply, 'This is what we need here, internationalism.'

"The question posed to peoples around the globe is: what is to be done about US imperialism, with its policy of aggressive war, its disdain for any restraints of international law or global public opinion, and its vastly destructive economic policies?

"Under conditions in which imperialism and colonialism are resurgent, all of the old so-called anti-imperialist forces of yesteryear are either defunct or prostrate. The so-called socialist bloc touted by supporters of Stalinism has been liquidated by the Stalinists themselves, as they sought to preserve their privileges and protect themselves from the working class by restoring capitalism.

"Bourgeois nationalism has failed to offer a way forward not only in Sri Lanka, but all over the former colonial world. Forces such as Castroism and guerrillaism, promoted by the Pabloite revisionists in the 1960s as the new road to socialism, have likewise proven a dead end."

There is no alternative, the candidate explained, outside of the building of a new party capable of uniting the working class internationally in the struggle for socialism.

Van Auken's speech was followed by a lengthy and lively discussion. Among the issues raised was the historical role of third-party movements in American politics, the prospect of civil war in Iraq should the US withdraw its forces, the danger of authoritarian forms of rule in the US, the relationship between the *World Socialist Web Site* and the broader opposition to the Iraq war, and the role of the middle class "left" in seeking to channel this opposition into support for the Democratic Party.



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