

On eve of 2004 election: US faces unprecedented social conflict

Socialist Equality Party
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In an atmosphere charged with political tension, tens of millions will go to the polls November 2, joining the millions who have already cast ballots in heavy early voting in the US presidential election. Tabulations of new voter registrations, absentee balloting and early voting indicate that voter turnout will rise sharply, both in absolute numbers and in the percentage of those registered who go to the polls, reaching levels not seen for some 40 years.

Pre-election polls suggest that Tuesday's vote will be one of the most closely contested presidential races in American history, whose outcome remains too close to call. Whatever the result, the election cannot resolve the mounting social and political tensions in the United States.

The press is filled with commentaries noting the acute polarization in the presidential vote: the huge numbers attending rallies on both sides, the doubling of turnout in early and absentee voting, the dramatic increase in voter registration, the obvious intensity of popular feeling against Bush and his policies. There is an undercurrent of concern about the potential for individual eruptions of violence or even wider civil strife, particularly in response to the Republican Party's unprecedented efforts to suppress voter turnout in minority working class areas.

This political polarization is strangely disproportionate to the stated differences between the candidates. On the war in Iraq, whatever their disputes over its origins, both Bush and Kerry pledge to maintain the US occupation and achieve a military victory over the Iraqi resistance. Both subscribe to the doctrine of unilateral, pre-emptive US attack on any country deemed to be a potential threat, and both single out Iran and North Korea as the likely next targets. Both unreservedly support Israeli military violence against the Palestinian people.

The two candidates have clashed on some areas of domestic social policy, principally abortion, stem cell research and health care, but they agree on the fundamentals: defense of the profit system and the subordination of American society to the interests of giant corporations and the very wealthy. Both are multi-millionaire representatives of the financial aristocracy. Both were educated at Yale, having even been members of the same exclusive society at the elite university—Skull and Bones.

Kerry has identified himself as a capitalist (he is married to the billionaire heiress of the Heinz ketchup fortune) and explicitly rejects wealth redistribution as a goal of social policy. He has made balancing the federal budget his top domestic priority, pledging to scrap his promises of more affordable health care coverage and other social reforms if and when they come into conflict with deficit reduction.

Given the relatively narrow substantive differences between the Democratic and Republican parties, what accounts for the enormous tension over the outcome of the presidential vote?

The popular opposition to the Bush administration owes little to any enthusiasm for John Kerry or the program of the Democratic Party.

Rather, it reflects a recognition on the part of millions of working people that the Bush administration represents a new phenomenon in America: a government more reactionary than any that has preceded it—one that openly seeks to rule through fear and intimidation, wages war on the basis of lies, and plunders the public treasury to enrich corporate America.

The character of the Republican campaign—lies, smears, provocations, efforts to suppress voter turnout—profoundly offends the democratic instincts of millions of working people. This government came to power through electoral fraud and the anti-democratic intervention of the US Supreme Court to halt the counting of votes in the Florida election crisis of 2000. There is growing concern that even more flagrant attacks on democratic rights may take place on or after November 2.

The geographical pattern of the presidential vote is indicative of the social forces involved. Bush draws his strongest support from the states of the South, still the main centers of social reaction, poverty and backwardness, and from the depressed farming and mining states of the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains. Kerry's support is concentrated in the major urban centers of the northeast, the Great Lakes, and the Pacific Coast—the longtime centers of industry and finance most closely associated with education, culture and technological development.

The political climate of the past decade in the United States cannot be compared to any other period of American history save the decade of the 1850s that preceded the Civil War. The last ten years have seen virtually uninterrupted political warfare between the two major parties, including the shutdown of the federal government in 1995-96 by the Republican majority in Congress, the series of investigations into the Clinton administration that culminated in the impeachment and Senate trial of Clinton in 1998-99, and finally the stolen election of 2000, in which the Supreme Court installed as president the candidate who had lost the popular vote. The 2004 campaign threatens to take this conflict to an even higher level.

In the final analysis, the source of the intensifying political conflicts must be found in the social structure of America—above all, in the enormous growth of social inequality. The gulf between the wealthy elite and the vast majority of the population has reached staggering dimensions over the past 25 years.

The top 1 percent has doubled its share of the wealth of American society, from 20 percent in the late 1970s to over 40 percent today. The 400 richest individuals, according to the most recent *Forbes* magazine list, have amassed a combined fortune of over \$1 trillion. This coincides with rising or record levels of poverty, homelessness, job insecurity, personal bankruptcies and small business failures.

To a great extent, this social chasm has thus far found expression in a political polarization that runs not along clearly economic lines, but rather around cultural issues such as abortion and gay marriage. The confusion over such issues—by means of which a section of the working class is mobilized behind the most right-wing, pro-corporate elements and against its own self-interest—compounds the central and longstanding historical

problem of the American working class: the lack of a tradition of mass working class politics, and the absence of any mass party identified with the working class.

From a historical standpoint, both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party are parties of the American bourgeois ruling class. They appeal for the votes of working people, but do the bidding of the corporate elite. Over the past 25 years, both big business parties have shifted drastically to the right.

American politics has assumed the form of a sweeping social reaction, aimed at overturning the reformist legacy of the New Deal. The essential feature of this process has been the massive redistribution of wealth from the working class to the richest sections of American society.

It is impossible to gain mass support by advocating openly a policy of plundering of the many to enrich the few. Hence the cultivation of a social base for reactionary policies by disguising the real economic program with appeals to political backwardness and cultural prejudice.

This process began in the 1960s under Nixon, who turned the Republican Party toward the South—previously the bastion of the Democrats—and made overt use of white racism to build up a regional base. In this, the Republicans invented nothing new: they simply appropriated the methods of the old Southern Bourbons—segregationist Democrats from Theodore Bilbo to George Wallace, who worked to split the working class along racial lines—and adapted them to the post-Jim Crow era.

This was increasingly combined with the utilization of Christian fundamentalism to whip up political backwardness and give right-wing policies a religious gloss. Agitation over issues such as abortion and school prayer has most recently been supplemented by appeals to anti-gay bigotry. This year, the Republican Party has sought to boost Bush's campaign by scheduling referendum votes in eleven states on measures to ban gay marriages and even same-sex civil unions. These votes will take place on November 2, and are the focus of efforts to bring Christian fundamentalists and other religious conservatives to the polls.

It would, however, be wrong and highly misleading to believe that every Bush voter is a confirmed reactionary. Many are from layers of the working class hard hit by mounting economic insecurity. (The counties carried by Bush in 2000 generally had lower average incomes than the counties carried by Gore).

The Republican campaign is able to exploit the political confusion of these voters, making bogus appeals on an array of issues, because there is no mass political force making a serious appeal to their more fundamental social interests.

The Democratic Party is careful to avoid any clear class appeal, presenting itself invariably as the party that speaks for the “middle class”—a deliberately nebulous term used to signify nothing in particular. While relying on the apparatus of the trade unions to provide funds and hustle for votes in working class areas, the Democratic Party offers nothing to the rank-and-file workers. That would require it to break with its own class—the same multimillionaires who control the Republican Party and use the two-party system to prevent any genuine mass participation in American political life.

The half-heartedness, cowardice and incoherence of the Democrats go a long way in explaining the most obvious question in the 2004 elections: how is it possible that a president with Bush's abysmal record could remain virtually tied in the polls on the eve of Election Day? These traits are not simply personal features of Kerry or the congressional Democratic leadership: rather, they express the intrinsically two-faced and dishonest nature of the party itself, which relies for electoral purposes on historical links to the reform policies of the New Deal and the civil rights era—policies that it has entirely abandoned.

Significantly, the Democrats have not conducted a political campaign against the Bush administration *as a party*. The Kerry campaign is not

linked to any effort to elect a Democratic Congress. While 34 seats in the Senate and all 435 seats in the House of Representatives are at stake in the election, only nine Senate seats and a few dozen House seats are being seriously contested. Continued Republican control of the House is all but conceded, and the Democratic candidates in contested Senate races are running right-wing campaigns which stress fervent support for the war in Iraq and, in many cases, past support for Bush administration policies.

Whichever candidate wins, the two big business parties face a political dilemma.

Even if the Republicans retain the White House, the election will have revealed the extremely limited social base for Bush's reactionary policies. The country is deeply divided, with half the population voting to oust a sitting president in wartime.

If the Democrats come to power, they will have won by making an appeal, even in the most limited way, to a constituency which is far to their left—opposed to the war in Iraq, demanding greater social equality, a rollback of Bush's anti-democratic measures, and serious social reforms. A Kerry administration will rapidly come into conflict with expectations and demands for social change to which they are neither able nor willing to respond.

A profound social and political challenge to the status quo is inevitable whether Bush or Kerry occupies the White House.

The Socialist Equality Party has intervened in the 2004 presidential and legislative elections in order to present its socialist program to the widest possible audience among working people and youth. In those areas where our candidates are on the ballot—our presidential ticket, Bill Van Auken and Jim Lawrence, in Washington, Colorado, Minnesota, Iowa and New Jersey; our legislative candidates in Illinois, Michigan and Maine—we urge a vote for the SEP. In other areas, where possible, we urge a write-in vote for the SEP presidential candidates.

In the eleven states where anti-gay marriage referenda are on the ballot, we urge working people to vote “no” against bigotry and in defense of democratic rights.

But November 2 is only one day in a struggle that must accelerate and broaden enormously after the election. There will be differences in the tempo of development, depending on which candidate, Bush or Kerry, becomes president. But the working class will come into conflict with the new administration, and in this conflict the central issue will be the struggle for the political independence of the working class.

The working class must break with the two big business parties and develop an independent mass political movement of its own, to fight for its own class interests, based on a socialist program. The SEP campaign has sought to elaborate such a program and present it to the widest possible audience, both in the United States and internationally, to pave the way for the emergence of this movement.

See Also:

[The SEP 2004 Election Website](#)

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[As early balloting begins: tensions build over Bush vote-suppression drive](#)
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[Final presidential debate confirms: no choice for working people in Bush-Kerry contest](#)
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