

After the 2004 US elections: the Socialist Equality Party and the struggle for the political independence of the working class

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On the weekend of January 8-9, the Socialist Equality Party held a meeting of its national membership in Ann Arbor, Michigan. We are publishing here the first part of a report given by Barry Grey, a member of the World Socialist Web Site editorial board, on the political situation in the aftermath of the US 2004 elections. The second part will be published January 15.

The opening report, by David North, the national secretary of the SEP and chairman of the WWSW editorial board, was posted in three parts on January 11, 12 and 13.

The United States that emerges from the 2004 elections is a society in profound crisis, deeply divided along class, geographic and ideological lines. Bush's reelection, by a narrow margin, in no way signifies a diminution of the mass opposition to the war in Iraq or his policies of social reaction and authoritarianism.

Notwithstanding the popular confusion and disorientation that were encouraged and exploited by Bush's handlers to secure a second term, the administration exhibits many signs of disarray and perplexity even before it is officially sworn into office later this month. It confronts a deteriorating situation in Iraq and a mounting dollar crisis that threatens to mushroom into an international financial crisis of historic proportions.

Bush's election victory cannot be taken seriously as a mandate for his policies. By historical standards, his margin was small. He won the popular vote by 3 percentage points (an edge of 3,337,000 out of 117,000,000 votes cast). This is the smallest margin of victory recorded by an incumbent president who successfully ran for reelection in more than 100 years. Even Bill Clinton defeated Bob Dole in 1996 by nearly 7 percentage points.

The electoral map in 2004 showed a country starkly divided along geographic as well as demographic lines. The sea of red states in much of the interior of the country surrounded by blue states in the Northeast, the Great Lakes region and the Pacific Coast largely duplicates the result of the 2000 election. This shows that the divisions within the body politic revealed four years ago were not accidental or fleeting, but rather of a more deep-going character.

Social tensions are exerting powerful centrifugal pressures on the country. As in 2000, the most urbanized, industrialized, and economically and culturally developed regions went for the Democratic candidate, while the Republicans won those states—in the South, the upper Midwest and the plains—where economic and cultural backwardness, poverty, and rural isolation are most pronounced.

The overall voter turnout was high by American standards, and many cities saw a significant increase in turnout by young voters—many of whom voted for the first time—as well as minorities and workers, who largely voted for the Democratic candidate John Kerry. But the increased turnout brought an even greater gain in votes for the Republicans. This

gain came largely from rural and what are called exurban areas—more remote suburbs of the cities—where the Republicans' appeal to religious fundamentalism and its associated prejudices—against gays, foreigners, blacks—evidently had its main impact.

Looking at the electoral map as a whole, one sees a country that is being politically balkanized, in which neither of the two major bourgeois parties can be truly called a national party.

The Bush campaign employed as its modus operandi fear-mongering, political smears and character assassination, and lies. It faced an opponent whose political cowardice and vacillation were exceeded only by his campaign's incompetence. Nevertheless, the Republican right was unable to make any significant inroads into those regions that had gone for Gore in 2000. This suggests that the Republicans have reached the limits of their electoral fortunes on the basis of religious fundamentalism and the use of so-called wedge issues, such as abortion, gay marriage, stem cell research, school prayers and guns.

Even more momentous, from the standpoint of the stability of the bourgeois two-party system, are the longer-term implications of the resort to a messianic Christian version of jihadism. By playing this card, the American ruling elite is undermining the secular foundations of its entire constitutional order. In an attempt to develop a social base for its policies of war and social reaction, it is setting up explosive charges across the political landscape.

The thoroughly unstable and untenable character of the political situation is compounded by the fact that, despite an electorate essentially divided down the middle, all of the levers of state power reside in the hands of the most right-wing faction of the ruling elite. The Republicans emerge from the election not only with control of the executive branch, but also with a tighter grip on both houses of Congress and the judiciary.

One must be forgiven, surveying this situation, for referring yet again to the profound observation of Hegel (the great nineteenth century German philosopher, not the senator from Nebraska) that all that is rational is real, and all that is real is rational, and the brilliant elaboration of this axiom by Engels, who explained its revolutionary implications. If what is rational is real, then it must be in the process of becoming irrational, and hence, unreal. If the present political setup in the US is so thoroughly irrational, it must have lost its reality—i.e., it must be ripe for being overturned.

Events since the election confirm the highly unstable character of the political situation in the US. They underscore the enormously contradictory—to many people, inexplicable—nature of the election result.

Opinion polls taken in the days and weeks after the November 2 vote show that a substantial majority of Americans oppose the policies upon which Bush ran. A *Washington Post*-ABC News poll released December 21 recorded, for the first time, a solid majority opinion (56 percent) that the war in Iraq was a mistake. The same poll said that 57 percent

disapproved of Bush's handling of Iraq, a leap of 7 percent from a poll taken last September. A bare 53 percent approved of Bush's leadership on terrorism, a drop of 17 percent from a poll conducted one year previously.

Other polls showed a solid majority opposing Bush's proposals to partially privatize Social Security and "reform" the tax code.

Polls conducted by the *Washington Post*-ABC News, Gallup and *Time* magazine put Bush's overall approval rating at 48 or 49 percent. That is 10 to 20 points lower than the number recorded by every elected sitting president in the run-up to his inauguration since just after World War II.

There are numerous signs of acute divisions within the political establishment and state apparatus, including within the Republican Party. Within days of the election, leading Republicans were calling for Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to be fired.

Recent days have seen the extraordinary spectacle of 12 retired military brass issuing a public letter opposing Bush's nomination of Alberto Gonzales as attorney general. These military figures, including a former chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, warn that elevating the man who, as Bush's White House counsel, played a key role in sanctioning the use of torture and defying the Geneva Conventions, to the post of chief law enforcement official jeopardizes the position of US soldiers around the world and further discredits Washington's claims to represent freedom and human rights.

There is the memo to the chief of staff of the Army from Lt. Gen. James Helmly, head of the US Army Reserve. This astonishing document, deliberately leaked to the *Baltimore Sun*, declared that the Army Reserve was in danger of becoming a "broken force" due to the policies of the Pentagon. Helmly wrote of the Army Reserve's "inability...to meet mission requirements associated with Iraq and Afghanistan...."

Stratfor, a web site with close links to military and intelligence agencies, called the leaked memo "a major revolt by senior Army commanders," who are saying, "the Army itself is unable to carry out its mission."

Then there is the cabinet being assembled for the second Bush administration. It is largely a collection of nonentities who owe their positions entirely to their personal ties to Bush. The disastrous attempt to replace Tom Ridge with Bernie Kerik in the post of homeland security secretary highlights a significant political phenomenon: a cabinet whose key members have no independent base of support, either in the general population, business or academia. Ridge, for all his obvious limitations, had been elected governor of Pennsylvania. Colin Powell was a well-known public figure. Even John Ashcroft had served as the governor of Missouri. Their replacements, such as Condoleezza Rice and Alberto Gonzales, have no similar political résumé.

In the past, cabinets were carefully constructed to represent definite geographical and social constituencies. The collection of personal retainers being assembled by Bush reflects a further narrowing of the real social base of the government, and the increasingly insular, conspiratorial, elitist and undemocratic character of political rule in America.

The initial reaction of Bush and the entire government to the tsunami disaster is a further expression of political disorientation that has its roots in a regime so totally wedded to the financial oligarchy that it finds it difficult even to make the appropriate gestures of humanitarian concern for the poor and downtrodden.

These developments, if anything, compound the seeming anomaly of Bush's victory. An administration installed through fraud and illegality, mired in corporate scandals involving the president's closest financial backers and implicating the vice president, presiding over the most catastrophic terrorist attack in the nation's history, which occurred as a result of, at best, criminal negligence, and, more likely, government complicity, responsible for illegal and increasingly unpopular wars waged on the basis of outright lies, engaged in an unprecedented assault on civil liberties and constitutional norms, exposed as a practitioner of torture against Iraqi and other foreign prisoners, overseeing a growth of

unemployment, poverty, homelessness and the ranks of the uninsured, and pursuing policies overtly aimed at further enriching the wealthy elite not only won a second term, but increased its party's majorities in the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The explanation for this is not an outpouring of popular support for Bush and his policies, but rather a colossal failure of the Democratic Party. The hapless Kerry campaign was unable to offer any serious alternative to the policies of the Republican right because, on the fundamental issues, it had no principled differences with these policies. The overriding concern of the Democratic Party was to prevent the election campaign from becoming a referendum on the war in Iraq, which it supports, or the focal point of a popular movement against the Bush administration itself.

On this, the Democrats were one with the rest of the political establishment. This was spelled out in a document published last March by the bipartisan Independent Task Force on Post-Conflict Iraq, sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations.

Entitled *Iraq: One Year After*, the document declared: "The Task Force believes that sustaining this public consensus is essential, especially as the political will of the United States will be tested in the months and years to come in Iraq. These tests, which could include more high-profile attacks on US troops, could come at a time of heightened political debate in the United States, as we enter the final phase of the 2004 election campaign.... Nevertheless, Task Force members, who represent a broad diversity of political perspectives, are united in their position that the United States has a critical interest in a stable Iraq whose leadership represents the will of the people. Civil conflict in Iraq...would risk intervention by and competition among Iraq's neighbors, long-term instability in the production and supply of oil, and the emergence of a failed state that could offer a haven to terrorists. It would also represent a monumental policy failure for the United States, with an attendant loss of power and influence in the region."

Hence the massive media effort to torpedo the campaign of Howard Dean for the Democratic presidential nomination, resulting in the selection of Kerry for president and John Edwards for vice president, both of whom had voted to authorize the invasion of Iraq. In direct contradiction to the expressed will of the vast majority of Democratic primary voters, the Democratic leadership moved to take the issue of the war off of the election agenda.

The result of this overtly pro-war policy was a disastrous decline in political support for the Kerry campaign, resulting mainly from the disaffection of rank-and-file Democrats. Only in mid-September, when prominent Republican senators—Lugar of Indiana, Hegel of Nebraska and McCain of Arizona—publicly criticized Bush's handling of the war, did the Kerry campaign feel it had the authorization to make the war an issue.

Behind the intervention of these Republican politicians were fears within the ruling elite that the alarming growth of Iraqi resistance and deterioration of the US position raised the possibility of a foreign policy disaster with monumental implications both abroad and at home. Concerns over Iraq coalesced with worries over the explosive growth of American budget, trade and balance of trade deficits, and the relentless and rapid decline in the US dollar on world currency markets.

An additional concern was the possibility that the visible disintegration of the Kerry campaign would so discredit the Democratic Party as to permanently eviscerate it as an instrument of bourgeois rule and undermine the two-party system through which the American ruling class has for nearly 150 years suppressed any independent political movement of the working class and maintained its monopoly of political power.

But even as he attacked the Bush administration for its handling of the Iraq war and occupation, Kerry repeatedly made clear that his differences were over means and tactics, not ends or strategic goals. In the ensuing presidential debates and campaign appearances, Kerry reiterated ad

nauseam his determination to “kill or capture” anti-American Iraqi fighters and other so-called “terrorists.”

It is not possible, within the confines of this report, to review in detail the events of the election campaign, but it is useful nevertheless to list some of the major developments that revealed the crisis and disarray of the Bush administration, the internal divisions festering within the ruling elite, and the scale of popular opposition to the war and the Bush White House.

* Fall and winter of 2003: Dean emerges as front-runner for Democratic nomination by appealing to anti-war sentiment and anger over the prostration of the Democratic Party leadership before Bush and the Republicans.

* January, 2004: Former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill publishes book detailing discussions within the Bush administration in early 2001 for war against Iraq, and documenting Bush's own ignorance and intellectual incapacity.

* March/April 2004: 9/11 commission holds public hearings that bring forward highly damaging testimony on the failure of the Bush administration to heed advance warnings of an impending terrorist attack in the US. Former White House intelligence adviser Richard Clarke accuses Bush administration of security failure and denounces Iraq War as diversion from “war on terrorism.” Condoleezza Rice acknowledges August 2001 presidential daily brief headlined “Bin Laden Determined to Strike in US.”

* March, 2004: Pro-war Aznar regime swept from office in Spanish election. Socialist Party prime minister pledges to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq.

* April, 2004: Iraqi insurgencies in Sunni Triangle and Shiite center Najaf.

* April, 2004: Abu Ghraib torture photos published.

* June, 2004: Michael Moore's anti-war, anti-Bush documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* opens and sets box-office records.

* August, 2004: 400,000 march in New York on eve of Republican convention to protest war and Bush policies. 2,000 arrested in police sweeps.

* September, 2004: Death toll of US soldiers in Iraq hits 1,000.

* October, 2004: Report by CIA weapons inspector Charles Duelfer published on eve of second presidential debate. Duelfer confirms Saddam Hussein destroyed his WMD capacities after Gulf War of 1991.

* October, 2004: Mutiny by US Army reservists in Iraq.

The Kerry campaign and the Democratic congressional leadership scrupulously refrained from capitalizing on the exposures of the Bush administration's lies and crimes. Their overriding concern was to defend the stability of bourgeois rule, regardless of the implications for their electoral fortunes.

Kerry's campaign was a study in evasion and duplicity. While attempting to present himself as a defender of the “middle class” against an administration that served giant corporations and the rich, he told business groups that he was an “entrepreneurial Democrat” who would be “better for business.” While calling for a rollback of Bush's tax cuts for those making more than \$200,000 a year, he championed an across-the-board cut in corporate taxes and promised he would sacrifice any or all of his meager reform proposals, such as for health care, in order to impose a “pay-as-you-go” regimen of budget-cutting and fiscal austerity. While criticizing Bush's “premature” decision to invade and his handling of the Iraq occupation, he advocated an increase in US troop strength and a doubling of Special Forces assassination units. He attacked Bush from the right on North Korea and Iran, all but accusing Bush of appeasement toward these regimes and indicating he would not rule out military action. He made clear he accepted, in principle, Bush's doctrine of pre-emptive war, while criticizing the administration's unilateralist tactics in applying the militaristic policy. He supported the incipiently police-state Patriot

Act, while criticizing a few of its provisions.

These features of the Kerry campaign had their roots not in the personal attributes of the candidate, but rather in the class character of the Democratic Party and its specific function in American bourgeois politics. For most of the history of the United States, the Democratic Party has served as the party of American capitalism that presents itself as the party of the working man, the common people, the “middle class.” Kerry simply embodied, in a particularly acute form, the contradiction between the public persona and essential class being of this party of US imperialism.

It is a party, moreover, that long ago abandoned the social reform policies of the New Deal and the Great Society. It no longer is capable of offering any serious relief to the economic and social oppression of the working class, because American capitalism has undergone a profound decline in its world economic position and exhausted the financial reserves that had once made social reforms possible.

As Democratic Party liberalism has shed its association with social reformist policies, and its working class base of support has eroded, the party has come to rest ever more squarely on sections of the financial elite and privileged layers of the upper-middle-class, including the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy and the narrow layer of African-Americans and other minorities who have benefited from affirmative action and other race-based policies.

In the course of the election campaign, both Clinton, in his speech to the Democratic convention, and Kerry, in his second televised debate with Bush, openly and rather boastfully characterized themselves as members of the multimillionaires' club that has reaped the benefits of a quarter century of attacks on the working class and government policies benefiting the rich.

One of the critical domestic consequences of the eruption of American militarism is the destruction of democratic rights within the United States. The 2004 election was a continuation of the assault on democracy that preceded it, in the right-wing political conspiracy to unseat Clinton in 1998-1999 and the stolen election of 2000. The overtly anti-democratic essence of the two-party duopoly was in full display, not only in the systematic exclusion of any left-wing or anti-war challenge to the major bourgeois parties, but also in more flagrant threats to voting rights.

There was, let us recall, the extraordinary threat from the Bush administration to postpone or cancel the November election, or hold it under conditions of martial law, in the event of a terrorist attack. Plans for such an open assumption of dictatorial powers were leaked by *Newsweek* magazine in July, and then either endorsed in principle by the press organs of what passes for American liberalism (the *Washington Post*) or ignored (the *New York Times*). This was followed by the Republicans' mobilization of tens of thousands of operatives to challenge working class and minority voters in key “battle ground” states on Election Day.

The Democratic Party was part and parcel of this anti-democratic attack. It was weak-kneed and cowardly toward the Republicans and the media, but relentless and ruthless in its drive to keep anti-war and left-wing third-party candidates off the ballot, through means fair or foul. This was not an incidental aspect of the Kerry campaign. It embodied the essential and profoundly reactionary role of the Democratic Party.

In the end, the ability of the most right-wing and criminal elements within the American ruling elite, represented by the Bush administration, to win the votes of substantial numbers of workers was the product of the political disorientation and desperation resulting from decades of subordination to the two-party system, primarily through the Democratic Party and its right-wing allies in the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. The appeal to religion and so-called “moral values” by the professional cynics and hucksters of the Republican Party could find a significant response among broad layers of workers only under conditions of extreme economic insecurity and the absence of any mass forum through which they could

express their independent class interests.

Abandoned and betrayed by the unions, confronting unceasing attacks from ruthless corporations and a hostile government, subject to an incessant and mind-numbing diet of propaganda and lies from a corrupt, corporate-controlled media, deprived of any means of exercising their social strength to fight back, workers have been thrown back upon themselves as individuals.

The supposed strength of the Republican right is, in fact, the contradictory expression of a gaping political vacuum, resulting from the collapse of bourgeois liberalism. So decrepit is the Democratic Party, it did not even contest nearly half of the states in the national election, including such former bastions of working class militancy and Democratic Party support as West Virginia and Kentucky.

The election dealt a severe blow to all those left-liberal and middle-class radical tendencies who rallied behind Kerry and opposed, under the banner of “anybody but Bush,” an independent working class alternative to the Democrats. This includes not only the overtly pro-Kerry voices such as the *Nation* and Noam Chomsky, but also the nominally independent campaigns of the Greens and Ralph Nader. Their efforts, a combination of self-delusion and deliberate deception, to portray Kerry as in some way an opponent of the war and champion of working people, have, in the aftermath of the Democratic debacle, been supplanted by open demoralization and denunciations of the American people.

The political authority of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*, which alone conducted a principled campaign against the Bush administration and the war, opposed the “lesser evil” nostrums of the radical left, and intervened with its own candidates to advance the struggle for a socialist and internationalist program and the fight for the political independence of the working class, has been immensely strengthened.

We intervened in the 2004 elections, and we prepare our further political work in its aftermath, not from the standpoint of electoral calculations, but from what the elections signified in relation to the development of the economic and political crisis, the changes in the pace, character and trajectory of the class struggle, the political problems confronting the working class, and arising from these, the challenges and tasks posed to our party. For us, the important question was, and remains, what the election portended for the future development of the class struggle.

As we clearly explained in our election statement, we set out not primarily to win votes, but rather to present to the widest possible audience of workers, youth, students and others a revolutionary socialist and internationalist perspective, upon which the American and international working class could unite and develop an independent political struggle for power and socialism. Our intervention, therefore, did not arise from a national, purely conjunctural or electoral orientation, but rather from a historically developed perspective articulating the objective interests of the working class.

Basing itself firmly on the independent socialist and internationalist political line laid down in the election statement, the SEP campaign achieved the basic goal it set out for itself. Quoting from the document: “[T]he purpose of our campaign is to raise the level of political debate within the United States and internationally, to break out of the straitjacket of right-wing bourgeois politics, and present a socialist alternative to the demagoguery and lies of the establishment parties and the mass media. Our campaign is not about votes. It is about ideas and policies.... The Socialist Equality Party will use the elections as an opportunity to develop a serious discussion on the social and political crisis, and lay down the programmatic foundations for the building of a mass movement for a revolutionary transformation of American society.”

Despite the limitations of our present forces and the barbed wire of obstacles thrown up by the political establishment and media, we reached, primarily through the *World Socialist Web Site* but also through the direct

political activities of our candidates, members and supporters, hundreds of thousands of people both in the US and around the world.

The public meetings addressed by our presidential candidate, Bill Van Auken, in London and Sri Lanka in October epitomized the international character of the campaign and its international socialist program.

The election statement outlined the main features of the crisis of American and world capitalism underlying the eruption of American militarism, and clearly defined the political orientation of our party—to the working class. It surveyed the crisis of American society, focusing on the enormous growth of social inequality. It laid out a programmatic framework of democratic and socialist demands corresponding to the needs of the broad masses of working people.

Finally, it argued for the necessity of a break with the Democratic Party and all forms of bourgeois politics and the struggle to establish the political independence of the working class. This crucial and historic struggle was identified with the building of the SEP. Quoting from the statement:

“The SEP fights for the political independence of the working class. This means not only a formal break with the two-party system, but a rejection of various forms of ‘radical’ and quasi-populist politics which, in the final analysis, are only a left prop for bourgeois politics as a whole....

“All such ‘lesser evil’ politics are truly a trap for the working class. There is no shortcut in the struggle against imperialist war and social reaction. It is necessary to undertake now the construction of an independent, mass socialist party. It is to provide a framework and focus for this struggle that the Socialist Equality Party is running in the 2004 elections.”

I will return to the critical question of the political independence of the working class. For the present, I will simply say that the party’s intervention in the elections marked an important advance in the struggle to achieve this urgent and historic task.

The SEP’s ongoing analysis and political intervention throughout the election period is registered in the collection of lectures by David North we have just published (*The Crisis of American Democracy: the Presidential Elections of 2000 and 2004*, Mehring Books). It is further embodied in scores of articles and statements published on the WSWS.

On the basis of this principled political line, we were able to win and mobilize new forces from among the working class and youth, and take others who are relatively new to the party through a decisive political experience. The growth of our movement is reflected in the presence of many of those attending this conference.

We were able, in the face of arbitrary and anti-democratic ballot access rules, a media boycott, and numerous attempts to keep us off of the ballot by both Democratic and Republican officials, to place our presidential and vice presidential candidates, Bill Van Auken and Jim Lawrence, on the ballot in five states: New Jersey, Minnesota, Iowa, Washington and Colorado. We placed two candidates on the ballot for the US House of Representatives, Carl Cooley in Maine and Jerry White in Michigan. Because of prohibitive ballot requirements, John Christopher Burton ran as a write-in candidate for Congress from Pasadena, California. David Lawrence, who met the signature requirement for ballot status in Cincinnati, Ohio, was denied a place on the ballot on the basis of technicalities, despite a concerted legal campaign backed up by letters and statements of protest from across the country and around the world. He also ran as a write-in candidate.

Tom Mackaman won ballot status as the SEP candidate for Illinois state representative from the Champaign-Urbana district, in the face of a flagrantly dishonest and anti-democratic effort by the state Democratic Party to keep him off the ballot. The campaign waged by the party won broad support and defeated the Democrats’ attempt to deny him ballot status.

The party won significant electoral support in Maine and Illinois. Carl Cooley, the first-ever socialist to run for Congress from that state, obtained 2.5 percent of the vote in his congressional district. Tom Mackaman gained 4 percent of the vote in Illinois' 103rd District, the home of the main campus of the University of Illinois.

The party held successful campaign meetings in Michigan, Maine, Illinois, Minnesota, Ohio, New York, New Jersey, Washington state and California. These included areas where the party had for many years lacked an organized presence.

To be continued.



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