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

Part Two

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15 January 2005

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 second and concluding 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* first part *was published January 14.*

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

With the debacle of the Kerry campaign and reelection of Bush, the question of the need for a radically new political strategy is posed squarely and urgently before the working class. Once again, the falsity of all perspectives based on the notion that the Democratic Party can, through mass pressure from below, be transformed into an instrument for the defense of the interests of working people and for progressive change has been dealt a severe blow.

Nevertheless, it would be a serious political error to believe that this party, notwithstanding its present state of demoralization and disarray, will simply vanish from the political stage, or that, even should this occur, a mass party genuinely controlled by the working class and representing its interests will automatically and spontaneously arise in its place.

The political independence of the working class means more than a formal break with the political parties of the bourgeoisie. It signifies the development in a substantial section of the working class of an understanding of the need for a revolutionary political struggle for socialism, and confidence in the capacity of the working class to carry through such a struggle.

Historically speaking, the great weakness of the American workers movement has been its inability to break from the parties of the bourgeoisie and establish its own mass party. Of the two main capitalist parties in the US, the Democratic Party has long served the specific function of blocking such a development and, by posing as a party of the people, channeling the instinctive and incipiently anti-capitalist sentiments of the working class back into the framework of bourgeois politics.

There have been various third-party movements in the US, but insofar as they rested on middle-class social and nationalist political foundations, whether of the openly reformist or more radical variety, they have inevitably served as a left front for bourgeois politics in general, and the Democratic Party in particular. The lack of an independent political development of the American working class does not, however, signify a lack of willingness to struggle. On the contrary, the struggles of the American working class have often assumed extremely militant and explosive forms.

That nonetheless the workers have been unable to free themselves from the tutelage of parties representing the very bosses they have fought on the streets and in the factories can only mean that the question of a genuine political break with the Democratic Party is invested with enormous revolutionary implications, and, for precisely that reason, there are immense ideological and political pressures and forces marshaled against it.

The irreplaceable instrument for enabling the working class to overcome these obstacles is the revolutionary party, which bases itself on the entire heritage of the struggle of the Marxist movement for the principles and program of international socialism. That is why the struggle for the political independence of the working class is inseparably bound up with and dependent upon the building of the Trotskyist movement in the US and internationally.

It does not take long in any argument with those who, in one way or another, promote the politics of “lesser evilism” to establish that the question of a break with the Democratic Party and the building of an independent working class alternative raises the most fundamental issues: (1) nationalism versus internationalism; (2) private ownership of the means of production, domination of the market over economic life, production for profit versus common ownership of the means of production, scientific planning and production for human need.

These issues, in turn, are bound up with the development of socialist consciousness in the working class. The working class is a revolutionary class. It is also an oppressed class. The ruling class controls all of the means of education and information. Its ideology is the dominant ideology. The very forms of capitalist production and exchange, as Marx explained, necessarily generate forms of social intercourse and thought that conceal the essentially exploitative nature of the capitalist system and the class interests it serves.

At the same time, the contradictions of the system impel the working class into struggle against it. The great historical issue is the emergence within the working class of a conscious grasp of its objective position in capitalist society and its role as a force for social revolution. This is what Marx called the transformation of the working class from a class in itself to a class for itself.

The objective crisis of the capitalist system creates the conditions for this development. But the indispensable instrument for achieving this transformation is the revolutionary Marxist party, which bases itself on the entire heritage and legacy of scientific thought. It is, in Marx’s words, the midwife of socialist revolution.

The American Trotskyist movement has throughout its history conducted an implacable and principled struggle to break the working

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class from the Democratic Party. It has done so in a tireless struggle against bureaucracy within the workers movement—the trade union bureaucracy and its Stalinist, social democratic and middle-class radical allies. And it has always tied this struggle to the fight for a program of transitional demands that proceed from the immediate needs of the working class and direct it to the struggle for workers power and socialism.

It is not possible here to review in detail the history of this struggle. I will just briefly deal with an important phase, when the Trotskyist movement, first the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and then the Workers League (the predecessor to the Socialist Equality Party), which emerged in the struggle against the opportunist degeneration of the Socialist Workers Party, raised as a central tactic the demand for the building of a labor party. (David North deals with this question in his essay "The Iraq War, the Democratic Party and the Campaign of Howard Dean," which is included in the newly published book, *The Crisis of American Democracy*.)

Trotsky urged the Socialist Workers Party to adopt the demand for the building of a labor party based on the trade unions in 1938, under conditions of the explosive birth of the industrial unions in the Congress of Industrial Organizations. This mass union movement, born in sit-down strikes and pitched battles between auto, steel, electrical and other workers against company goons, police and national guard troops, was a contradictory phenomenon. On the one hand, it revealed the revolutionary capacities and potential of the American working class. Many of the struggles were led by socialist-minded militants. On the other hand, it was dominated at the top by class collaborationist trade union bureaucrats and Stalinists of the Communist Party, who tied the new movement to the Roosevelt administration and the Democratic Party.

Within a year of its emergence, the CIO movement had come to an impasse because of its subordination to Roosevelt. But the ultimate trajectory of the movement—toward class collaboration or toward revolutionary political struggle—had not been settled.

Trotsky proposed that the SWP advance the labor party demand and link it to a program of transitional demands in order to weaken the grip of the pro-capitalist CIO bureaucracy and the Stalinists and place the SWP in a powerful position to spearhead the fight for the political independence of the working class. He made clear that he was not advocating the formation of a reformist labor party, such as those in Britain and Australia, and opposed any conception that the American working class was obliged, because of exceptional national conditions, to pass through a reformist labor party stage on the way to revolutionary socialist politics. To the contrary, he raised the labor party demand as a means of posing before the American working class, in terms it could grasp, a strategy for political power and socialism.

Despite its efforts, due to world conditions beyond its control, the SWP was not able to break the grip of the trade union bureaucracy on the workers movement. The bureaucracy not only enforced the subordination of the unions to the Democratic Party and opposed any movement for an independent workers party, it spearheaded an anticommunist purge of the unions and allied itself to the Cold War policies of the American ruling class in the aftermath of the Second World War. This condemned the labor movement to a protracted degeneration and ultimate collapse.

The turn by the SWP away from the working class and a Marxist perspective in the late 1950s and 1960s was accompanied by its abandonment of the labor party demand. The Workers League, on the basis of its defense of internationalism and the program of the Fourth International, revived the demand and fought for it from its inception in 1966 as a central tactic in the struggle against the trade union bureaucracy and for the development of socialist consciousness in the working class. The fight for this demand unalterably involved a struggle against all sorts of opportunist left tendencies that sought to encourage illusions in the Democratic Party and denigrate the revolutionary role of the working class.

The massive betrayals of the working class by the AFL-CIO in the 1980s, the bureaucracy's adoption of a corporatist policy of labor-management "partnership," and its ever more vicious promotion of economic nationalism and chauvinism signified the transformation of the old trade unions into more or less direct agencies of the corporations. It was no longer possible to reconcile a revolutionary line with the call for a labor party based on such organizations. Thus, at the end of the 1980s, the Workers League reformulated the demand, calling for a labor party based on a socialist program, and dropping the condition that it be based on the unions.

Finally, in the aftermath of the Stalinist bureaucracy's liquidation of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Workers League and the International Committee of the Fourth International assimilated the essence of this betrayal and concluded that the entire stage of "leagues" tactically focused on a struggle to pit rank-and-file workers against the leaders of the unions and bureaucratized labor parties had been superseded. Our international movement initiated the transformation of its leagues into parties, giving birth to the Socialist Equality Party.

The labor party demand had exhausted its utility and revolutionary content. The task of the Trotskyist movement was to directly build its organizations as components of an international party. Out of this struggle emerged the *World Socialist Web Site*, as the central instrument for rebuilding a socialist culture and a genuine international workers movement.

The central point of this review is the programmatic significance of the struggle for the political independence of the working class, the decisive role of our party in this fight, and the conception that its essence is the struggle for a socialist and internationalist perspective, for Marxism, in the working class.

We must anticipate and consciously make the necessary political preparations for major shifts and upheavals both in the political superstructure and the orientation of broad masses of working people in the US. The impact of the Iraq war and the deepening financial crisis will bear down ever more heavily on the working class. Among those bourgeois commentators who are capable of observing the economic problems of American capitalism with any degree of sobriety, the consensus is that the United States must put its house in order, i.e., it must take drastic measures to slash its budget, trade and balance of payments deficits. Some speak openly of the need to sharply reduce the consumption of the American people.

An indication of what this means in practice is this week's bankruptcy court ruling voiding the contract between US Air and its machinists union, which will slash the pay of union members by 6 to 35 percent and eliminate thousands of jobs. The judge further approved the company's request to terminate the pension plans for machinists, flight attendants and retirees. This ruling, at a single stroke, authorizes the transfer of $1.3 billion in wages, benefits and pensions from the workers to the employers.

This legal theft in the airline industry sets the stage for an unprecedented wave of wage-cutting and an offensive to destroy workers' retirement benefits throughout the economy. Out of the shock and anger produced by such actions—compounded by the utter prostration of the unions—certain truths will begin to assert themselves, including the fact that the "war on terror" is, in reality, an escalation of the war on the working class.

The growth of social tensions will inevitably find a reflection within the established bourgeois parties and their periphery—a process that will be vastly intensified by the outbreak of mass social struggles. We cannot predict the precise tempo of this process, or the exact forms it will assume. But there are certain things we can say, drawing from the lessons of history as distilled by the Marxist movement.

First, there will be attempts by the ruling elite to adapt and adjust its

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political instruments to, if possible, preempt any such social movements, and channel them within the framework of bourgeois politics when they do emerge. There will be no shortage of outright repression and state violence. But that, in itself, will not suffice. New political snares and traps will have to be laid.

History strongly suggests that, no matter how discredited and demoralized it may be at the present time, the Democratic Party will not simply disappear from the scene. It has served too long and too well as a critical instrument for suppressing the independent mobilization of the working class and defending the foundations of capitalist rule for those within the ruling elite who have not lost their political bearings to simply allow it to perish.

At the same time, we must anticipate that, on a mass scale, the political radicalization of the working class will pass through various centrist stages. The most advanced elements can and will be won more or less directly to the program of the revolutionary party, but broader masses will first have to make their experiences with programs and tendencies offering more pragmatic and superficially "realistic" solutions to the impasse created by the policies of the two major parties of big business.

This could, for example, take the form of a growth of influence and popular support for the Green Party, or some other yet-to-be constituted left reformist formation. Nor should we assume that "left" and quasi-populist tendencies will not come forward from within the Democratic Party itself. I would submit, for example, that the maneuvering within the top leadership of the AFL-CIO under the auspices of Service Employees Union President Andrew Stern, a former student radical, is bound up with efforts to refurbish the tattered image of the Democratic Party in advance of new and large-scale class battles.

The SEP enters this evolving and changing situation in a position of political strength and growing authority. In the *World Socialist Web Site*, our entire international movement possesses a means of political clarification and education and a weapon for building our forces beyond anything that previously existed in the Trotskyist movement. But it, and the party that wields it, must meet the considerable political, theoretical and organizational challenges that will be posed by the reemergence onto the political scene of the working class.

We will have a great deal of complex and challenging work to do. We will have to conduct the fight, without any vacillation or political adaptation, for our program and policies, and for the entire historical legacy of the Fourth International, while at the same time taking into account the problems, contradictions and inevitable confusion of broad masses of workers, students and youth beginning to move to the left. We must certainly take into account the problems caused by decades of treachery on the part of the trade union bureaucracy and the impact of its efforts to extirpate from the consciousness of the working class all vestiges of class consciousness and its best traditions of militant struggle, solidarity and sacrifice.

As Trotsky said on a number of occasions, our starting point is the objective situation and the requirements it imposes on the working class, not the present level of consciousness of the class. The party is the instrument for vanquishing political backwardness and raising up the class to the heights demanded by the crisis of capitalism. But this task requires, as he noted, sensitivity and the ability to make, not a political, but a pedagogical adaptation to the present consciousness of the class.

So we must be prepared to engage in a patient discussion and dialog with workers and youth, and find tactical means for helping them overcome their illusions in the Greens, Nader, the Noam Chomskys of the world, and similar forces. We should conduct our polemics with our centrist and reformist political opponents firmly and decisively, but objectively, and, to the extent possible, fraternally.

Our rock solid firmness in principle will enable us to carry out the struggle for socialism, internationalism and the political independence of the working class against the parties and politics of the bourgeoisie with the necessary flexibility in tactics and means.

It is necessary to follow carefully the debates and discussions taking place within the Democratic Party and its periphery. For the purposes of this report, I can provide only an initial sampling of what is presently being written and said.

It should be said from the start that the general level of the discussion within the Democratic Party is, from an intellectual and political standpoint, abysmal. Of course, this party has never been a font of wisdom. But there is no doubt that the general debasement of culture that has accompanied the suppression of socialism and working class struggle has produced a marked deterioration within what is the oldest bourgeois party in the United States.

Reading the pronouncements on the 2004 election and the various recipes for reviving the party's fortunes, one finds almost no attempt to relate the Kerry debacle to objective historical, social or economic processes. As a rule, the analyses do not go beyond the recitation of certain voting statistics and poll numbers—which are generally selected to suit the preconceived political axes that are being ground. With depressing regularity one finds invocations to fashion a new "narrative" for the party—reflecting the baleful influence of postmodernist twaddle and the ingrained belief that all problems have their roots in image rather than reality, and the loadstone of success is the right kind of "spin."

There are, however, different factions and tendencies vying with one another. On the right, there is the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), whose members have included the Clintons, Al Gore and Kerry. Their analysis is that the Democrats lost in 2004 because they had not moved far enough to the right.

For example, they chastise Kerry for not having made it sufficiently clear that he was just as "tough" on Islamic terrorism and just as eager to use military force as Bush. Precisely what Kerry could have done, beyond his flag-waving, war hero performance at the Democratic convention, with a cast of retired generals and admirals arrayed on the platform behind him, they do not say. But, as part of their "heartland strategy" for reviving the fortunes of the Democratic Party, they demand an even more explicit repudiation of the party's antiwar stance of the early 1970s and an explicit embrace of militarism. "It needs an updated version of the Kennedy-Truman tradition of muscular internationalism, which combined military strength and the will to use it with an equally strong commitment to collective security," writes Will Marshall, the president of the DLC's Progressive Policy Institute and the organization's leading theoretician.

All of the leading lights of this group evince a bizarre and obsessive hatred for Michael Moore. Fairly typical is the following screech from Marshall: "So let the glitterati in Hollywood and Cannes fawn over Michael Moore; Democrats should have no truck with the rancid anti-Americanism of the conspiracy-mongering left." They hate Moore because they associate him with opposition to war and big business.

They denounce any inclination to curry favor with the working class by means of populist slogans. Instead, they advocate that the Democrats adopt "the language of faith." Democrats, Marshall writes, "ought to be able to defend the establishment clause and religious liberty without getting in bed with the secular absolutists of the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union]."

Another leading light of the DLC, Bruce Reed, a former domestic policy adviser to President Clinton, poses the challenge before the Democratic Party as follows: "How can a blue party become a red-white-and-blue party once again?"

The same basic line was advanced even more bluntly by Peter Beinart, the editor of the *New Republic*, in a column published last month in the *Washington Post*. Subtitled "Cold War Lessons for Reclaiming Trust on National Security," the article hailed the adoption of anticommunism as the basic platform of the Democratic Party liberals in the late 1940s and

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said the party should take this Cold War stance as its model for today's supposed war with Islamic extremism. It should, he proposes, build a present-day version of the anticommunist Americans for Democratic Action and "make the fight against America's totalitarian foe a liberal passion."

On the left are various strands of watered-down New Deal reformism and residues of protest politics. Here we are dealing with reformism without real reforms, and the language of protest used to promote conventional bourgeois politics. A particularly cynical example of the latter is a piece in the current edition of *Mother Jones* magazine by a genuine political scoundrel, the former Vietnam protester and current professor Todd Gitlin. He hails the campaign for Kerry as the harbinger of a new phenomenon, the fusion of mass protest and the Democratic Party "machine."

By virtue of the hatred he inspired, Gitlin writes, Bush "coaxed the two divergent strands of the left, or liberalism, or progressivism, or whatever you want to call it, into the same insurgent republic and opened up the prospect of a historic resurrection. He convinced old-school Democratic wheelhorses and newly-inspired activists, old pros and young amateurs, union faithful and vote mobbers, that if they did not hang together they would most assuredly hang separately...

"So, in 2004, a vast and ragged regeneration movement met a Democratic Party straining to be reborn, and the two forces, instead of looking askance at each other and wondering how best to beat each other into dust, decided to buddy up, not only to reinvent politics—no small task in itself—but really to redeem America..."

Leaving aside the ridiculous presentation of the campaign of the pro-war multimillionaire Kerry, Gitlin expressly lauds its most reactionary aspect—its success in channeling and emasculating mass sentiment against the war and the Bush administration. And he cites precisely this as the model for the future. He implicitly bemoans as a political tragedy the conflict between the antiwar movement of the 1960s and the Democratic Party machine of that era, which found its most brutal expression in the police riot ordered by Chicago Major Richard Daley against demonstrators outside the 1968 Democratic Convention. He overlooks the fact that the protest movement was directed against the Johnson administration and the Democratic Party precisely because they were chiefly responsible for the imperialist slaughter in Vietnam.

Finally, I will cite several articles published in the December issue of the *American Prospect* magazine, a more conventional liberal rival of the Democratic Leadership Council, co-founded by Clinton's labor secretary, Robert Reich. The general line of these pieces, with some divergences and differences in emphasis, is that the Democratic Party must seek to reclaim the mantle of liberal reform and make a quasi-populist appeal to the economic interests of the working class.

One can get a sense of the hollow character of the neo-reformism of this group from the following passage of the main article, written by the liberal historian Alan Brinkley. Under the heading "Reconnect with Working People," he writes:

"Democrats need to turn much of their attention away from culture and back toward class.... Roosevelt won two landslide victories—with huge Democratic majorities in Congress—by talking not about culture but about class.... At times, Roosevelt used a language of class conflict in a manner almost without precedent in the history of the presidency. 'We have earned the hatred of entrenched greed,' he said in his 1936 State of the Union address. 'They seek the restoration of their selfish power.... Give them their way and they will take the course of every autocracy of the past—power for themselves, enslavement for the public.'"

Brinkley immediately goes from Roosevelt's excoriation of "entrenched greed"—utterly foreign to the present breed of Democrats—to write: "No one should wish for today's Democratic Party to adopt such language or to portray itself as the adversary of the corporate world."

One imagines the writer crossing himself while his readers intone: "Perish the thought!"

Brinkley goes on to endorse the "war on terrorism" and urge the Democrats to forge a "comfortable relationship with military culture and national pride." He reveals his demoralized pessimism when he suggests the "rebuilding of the Democratic Party" will be the work of "perhaps even decades."

Interestingly, a more astute prognosis and appreciation of the crisis and vulnerability of the Bush administration is provided by the old Cold War liberal Arthur Schlesinger Jr. He has been around the block more than a few times, and has seen how "unassailable" administrations can crumble under the pressure of great events. In a piece headlined "Opportunity Knocks," he writes: "After a time the American people, even the religious right, will tire of Iraq. I would judge this to be around the midterm elections of 2006. There is no guaranteed immunity for wartime presidents. The Korean War forced President Truman to withdraw in 1952. The Vietnam War forced President Johnson to withdraw in 1968."

One of the more demoralized articles in the magazine is penned by Senior Editor Garance Franke-Ruta. David North, in his lecture "After the 2004 Election: the Political Challenges Confronting the American Working Class" (included in *The Crisis of American Democracy*), states: "To claim that voters backed the Republicans because of 'values' that they hold far dearer than their own real material interests is to substitute mysticism for scientific socio-political analysis."

This is precisely the standpoint of Franke-Ruta, who attacks "a materialist vision of politics that fundamentally misunderstands what millions of people value most in life.... More generally, this purely materialist vision of self-interest simply misunderstands human nature."

The final word is reserved for Reich, whose concluding article is a call for economic populism. He writes: "Once again, Democrats are 'rethinking' what they stand for. After previous defeats, such 'rethinkings' resulted in rightward drifts. Democrats courted upscale suburban swing voters and steadily distanced themselves from the party's working-class roots.... Democrats used to speak passionately about social justice, and it should still be the core of the Democrats' morality.... The only way for Democrats to fight cultural populism is with an economic populism grounded in conviction and faith."

There are certain things that need to be said about Reich's line. First, American capitalism is far less able to sustain social reforms today than it was in Roosevelt's day, despite the Depression, or in the 1960s. And yet, Johnson's "War on Poverty" was virtually stillborn. So there is, of necessity, little substance behind the talk of Reich and others of his ilk of a return to social reform.

Nor should we forget that Reich himself shares political responsibility for an administration that ignominiously abandoned its health care reform, destroyed welfare as a federal entitlement, and proclaimed "the end of big government."

In any event, should there be a serious effort to turn the Democratic Party toward a posture of economic populism, it would rapidly fuel internal divisions to the point of a split.

All of this notwithstanding, the different positions being advanced within the Democratic Party have a political significance. They reflect the attempts being made to, in one way or another, revive this entity and prepare it to once again derail the movement of the working class. And there will be no lack of radical groups and tendencies formally standing outside the Democratic Party that will assist in this enterprise.

This is why the education of our cadre in the history and principles of the Marxist movement and the lessons of the struggles of the international working class is today so crucial. That internal preparation will go hand in hand with the development of the *World Socialist Web Site* and a resolute turn more deeply into the working class.

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