

A reply to readers' letters on "The New McCarthyism: the witch-hunting of Ward Churchill"

David Walsh
28 February 2005

The *World Socialist Web Site* has received numerous letters in response to the article, posted February 11, on the witch-hunting of radical, pro-Native American activist Ward Churchill. (See "The new McCarthyism: the witch-hunting of Ward Churchill") The University of Colorado professor has come under fire for his essay, "'Some People Push Back'—On the Justice of Roosting Chickens," written in reaction to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, DC.

In his piece, Churchill argued that the "most that can honestly be said about those [suicide bombers] involved in September 11 is that they finally responded in kind to some of what this country has dispensed to their people as a matter of course." He referred to some of those who died in the World Trade Center in New York as "a technocratic corps at the very heart of America's global financial empire" and "little Eichmanns inhabiting the sterile sanctuary of the twin towers."

When the article came to light, the right wing in Colorado and nationally (*Fox News*, *Wall Street Journal*, etc.) began a campaign against Churchill, denouncing him as a traitor and demanding that university authorities fire him. School officials began a 30-day review of Churchill's writings, the results of which will be announced in early March, to see if they could discover grounds for dismissing the tenured professor.

The WSWWS article defended Churchill against this "new McCarthyism," while arguing that his view of the September 11 attack was politically false and reactionary. In part, we wrote, "to identify the American people, from whom virtually all knowledge about the consequences of the Persian Gulf War and sanctions has been withheld, with the US war machine is a terrible political mistake and writes off the possibility of profound social change in America. Moreover, the essential callousness of Churchill's response to the bombings works in the opposite direction of cultivating humanitarian and generous impulses in the population."

In response, a number of readers have written in to solidarize themselves with Churchill's bleak opinion of the US population. (Click here to access the letters in question.)

IL, for example, commented, "It was a disappointment to me that you half-heartedly supported Ward Churchill. You are incorrect in your assumption that the American people do not know what is going on. They know just as all the meat eaters know that animals are tortured and mistreated, and you know what? They don't give a damn as long as they get theirs."

"Give me a break," wrote PK, "the people who vote for Bush know what they are doing, and they know what Bush et al stands for. They are not ignorant people, they are people who want the world Bush gives them. It is disingenuous to argue that the American public is not informed. The big non-secret is that a large percent of the American public knows the

consequences of the Persian Gulf War ... and the consequences are fine by them."

EK asserted, in regard to US crimes in Iraq, "all is known, was known. (Especially within the cadre of Mutant Elite housed in the WTC.) The ongoing genocide in Iraq was not obscure knowledge known only to a moralistic cognoscenti (aside from the war-criminals conducting it), but to all—even to readers of the *New York Post* and *Daily News*." The latter is apparently a reference to the working class population in New York.

The views expressed here and in other letters along the same lines are wrong, in our view, from many different standpoints.

The political situation in the US in its various aspects—the criminal Bush regime, the corporate-controlled media, the growing influence of the religious right—ought to provoke outrage. Outrage can be a healthy and progressive sentiment, but it needs to be tempered by knowledge of history and social life. A political platform constructed entirely from subjective frustration and impatience will never produce positive results. "Subjectivism," Trotsky noted, "is a poor adviser, particularly in great questions."

According to our critics, the American people knew everything and supported every crime of US imperialism; they are entirely willing accomplices.

In the first place, wide layers of the population have little access to significant historical and political knowledge about the Middle East and the US role in the area. They have been told relentlessly by major media outlets that Saddam Hussein was a Hitler-like figure, responsible for the mass murder of his own people, and that, moreover, his regime had links to Al Qaeda. How else to explain that some 70 percent of the population believed—and a majority apparently still believes—that the Hussein government had a hand in the September 11 bombings?

How many people in the US are aware of the extensive relations between the Hussein regime and the Reagan administration in the 1980s? How many know that bin Laden (via Pakistani intelligence) was essentially a CIA asset in Afghanistan in the conflict with Soviet forces in the 1980s, and that the Islamic fundamentalist forces are, in many ways, a Frankenstein monster produced by US policy?

Our letter writers fail to mention that the American population has expressed broad opposition to the Iraq war. In the face of an historically unprecedented campaign of lies launched by the Bush White House and transmitted by the media, linking the Iraqi regime with "weapons of mass destruction" and the 2001 terrorist attacks, hundreds of thousands participated in demonstrations in February 2003 to oppose the war. Polls indicate now that an absolute majority believe the invasion was a mistake, and Bush's approval rating on Iraq is now at 40 percent.

But what avenues have been available through which the population might express its feelings? By implication, our critics suggest that a vote

for John Kerry would have been a legitimate expression of opposition to the war. If so, they fail to understand the key to the 2004 election.

The Democratic Party deliberately worked to prevent the election from becoming a referendum on the war by sabotaging the campaign of Howard Dean, a fairly conventional bourgeois and pro-imperialist politician, who had nevertheless made an appeal to antiwar sentiment in his bid for the Democratic presidential nomination. The Democrats nominated Kerry, a pro-war candidate.

It is a fact that both major parties and the entire political and media establishment have rallied to the colonial-style war of plunder in Iraq.

This helps to explain the confusion and disorientation that does exist in the population around the issue of the war. The ability of the Bush forces to rally support, however tenuous, behind “moral” and “family values” indicates that growing economic insecurity and deteriorating conditions for millions have not yet found a progressive political expression. As a result of the political vacuum left by the collapse of American liberalism and its traditional Democratic standard-bearer, Bush received votes from some very angry, restless social layers that do not yet grasp their own social position. That will change as a result of the conscious struggle waged above all by the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party for socialist consciousness and a revolutionary internationalist program, together with the impact of the deepening crisis of American and world capitalism.

Our critics fail to see this because they remain entirely in the realm of subjective attitudes. Apparently, anyone working in the World Trade Center, anyone who voted for Bush, is a vital cog in the machinery of imperialist war. This sort of superficial moralizing is a dead end. The working population in America is objectively counterposed to the Bush administration and the entire ruling elite. That is determined not by what each individual industrial or professional worker thinks at any given moment, but by the objective position of the working class within capitalist society.

The relentless attacks on jobs, living standards, social programs, which will only intensify as tens of billions of dollars are drained off by the American global war drive, as well as growing insight into the reality of the Iraq war, will sooner or later bring masses of people in the US into conflict with the entire establishment. That is determined ultimately by objective, historical laws.

Confusion exists. Does one therefore give up, or conduct a struggle to offer an alternative? Social development takes this course, from confusion and a false view toward a more coherent and profound understanding, and this development is objectively driven—by the crisis of capitalism.

In any event, if our critics were right about the American people, what political perspective would flow from it? Certainly not one we as socialists would call our own. One would either have to throw in the towel or, in the face of the reactionary character of the broad layers of the population, seek out within the political establishment “less ugly” faces, i.e., support a Dean, a Kennedy, a Boxer, the supposed “lesser of two evils.” In fact, the arguments presented, despite their “radical” coloration, inevitably lead their adherents back to the orbit of the Democratic Party.

This idle talk about the alleged rottenness of the population misses every critical point. Let us recall, first of all, that the September 11 terrorist bombings were atrocities in which some 3,000 innocent people were incinerated. Anyone who chokes on the word “innocent” has no right to call him- or herself a democratically minded human being, much less a socialist.

Moreover, our critics, by implication, like Ward Churchill, accept the argument that the bombings, even if horrific, were somehow a legitimate “payback” delivered by representatives of Third World peoples to American imperialist oppression. They were no such thing. The terrorist attacks were carried out by very reactionary forces, influenced by Islamic fundamentalism—in the case of bin Laden, a dissident element of the Saudi

Arabian bourgeoisie.

What a godsend the September 11 events have proven to the most reactionary sections of the American ruling elite! Our critics entirely ignore the political consequences of the attacks: the Patriot Act and a sweeping assault on democratic rights, the bloody invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and a new lease on life for the Bush government in all its right-wing pursuits.

The notion that those who worked in the World Trade Center were more or less legitimate targets of a terrorist attack is foul and unworthy. And here we speak not simply of lower-paid workers. The socialist cause, rooted in the logic of economic and social life, will not be waged successfully as a vendetta against upper-middle-class social layers or even individual capitalists.

Those working in the financial trade in the World Trade Center were no more responsible for the crimes in Iraq than our letter writers, or Ward Churchill. EK writes, “Those who felt at-ease (or proud!) of working there were complicit in whatever emanated from there in terms of consequences. After all, we’re not talking about some 120-floor Denny’s standing in the middle of Idaho. The World Trade Center stood for something very definite: morally, architecturally, and historically. To have been ignorant about precisely what that was in 2001 was an ethical decision, even a lifestyle one.”

First of all, one would think, from this sinister language, that Hitler’s SS had rented the entire 220 or so floors of the buildings that collapsed. What is EK talking about? These were primarily international finance, trade, banking and brokerage firms. This is Churchill’s “technocratic corps at the very heart of America’s global financial empire—the ‘mighty engine of profit.’” In reality, these individuals and firms will continue to function until economic life is transformed by the action of the working class on a world scale.

EK asks rhetorically, “Were the working-class construction workers who built the [Nazi] camps and the ovens as guilty of genocide as those who turned on the gas?” and answers, “Of course they were.”

No, they were not. Their role cannot be compared by any objectively meaningful standard to that of the leaders of the German fascist regime, responsible for planning out and executing the most monstrous crimes in history.

In his subjective moralizing, EK has entirely lost his bearings. Does he pay taxes? Then, according to his own logic, he is an accomplice in the crimes of the US government. Does he drive an automobile, use an electric appliance or fly on an airplane? In that case, he is most likely helping to line the coffers of one or another firm that is profiting from the Iraq war and the worldwide thrust of American militarism.

There is no end to the possibilities, all of which avoid the central political questions of the day—above all, the struggle to establish the political independence of the working class from the big business parties and revive the principles of internationalism and socialism. There is no other route to ending the horrors of imperialist war.



To contact the WWSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact