

SEP meeting launches California ballot drive

Our correspondent
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John Burton, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for Congress in the 29th District of California, addressed a public meeting in Pasadena on Wednesday. Burton spoke and answered questions about the basic issues of his campaign.

In his remarks, Burton stressed three basic issues that will be central to his campaign and the campaign of the SEP nationally during the 2006 congressional elections: US militarism and the occupation of Iraq, the attack on democratic rights, and the growth of social inequality in the US and internationally. “I see these issues as essentially interconnected, as part of the same basic process,” Burton said, and argued that only the program of the SEP offered a solution to these problems.

Discussing the war in Iraq, Burton pointed to a recent interview given by US Ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalizad, to the *Los Angeles Times*, in which Khalizad declared, “We must perhaps reluctantly accept that we have to help this region become a normal region, the way we helped Europe and Asia in another era.” Burton responded, “Putting aside the absurd comparison of the bloody occupation of Iraq with the presence of US troops in Europe following World War II, Khalizad’s statements are clear: The US military, which has already begun setting up permanent bases in Iraq, has no plans on leaving and will occupy the country for decades.”

A passage in the *Times* article on the interview with Khalizad noted that the ambassador “predicted that the long-term US effort to ‘shape the future of this region’ would continue regardless of which party controlled the White House, how many troops remained in Iraq and what tactics and strategies are employed.” Khalizad, Burton said, is here “expressing the justifiable confidence that, in the event that the Democrats win in 2006, this may have an impact on tactics in the Iraq occupation...but it will not effect the basic thrust of American military policy.”

A basic theme of Burton’s remarks was that the Democratic Party is complicit in the growth of American militarism, the attack on democratic rights, and the

growth of inequality. He emphasized in particular the role of Adam Schiff, the Democratic incumbent in the 29th District. He noted that Schiff voted to approve the authorization to use military force against Iraq and that he was adamant in promoting the lies used by the administration to justify the war.

After explaining that the invasion of Iraq constituted a fundamental violation of international law, Burton cited a recent comment by Schiff that it is “now conventional wisdom that Americans do not care why we went to war in Iraq, that it is enough that the world is better off without Saddam Hussein.”

“Schiff,” Burton said, “has good reason to want to cut off all discussion of the motives behind the invasion of Iraq—that it was carried out on the basis of lies—because he would like to avoid discussion of his own responsibility. But we are also entitled to disagree. Yes, Mr. Schiff, it does matter why we went to war, and I will make this issue a central component of my campaign.”

Burton also outlined the different aspects of the attack on democratic rights in the United States, including the attempt by the Bush administration to use the commander in chief clause of the Constitution to justify everything from indefinite detention, to warrantless spying on American citizen, to torture. He cited a bill currently under discussion in Congress that would give the CIA and the National Security Agency broad powers to arrest people within the United States.

Schiff’s record on democratic rights is not better than his record on militarism, Burton said. Schiff voted for the Patriot Act and later its extension, and he has introduced legislation in Congress that would sanction the use of the term “enemy combatant” to deprive people of their constitutional rights. He recently introduced legislation that would retroactively give sanction to the NSA’s domestic spying program.

“The question of democratic rights is central to my own practice as a civil rights lawyer,” Burton explained. “Indeed, it was this issue that first attracted me to the socialist movement.” Constitutional rights must be

defended and extended, he said, but this cannot be done outside of a social movement that addresses the underlying causes of the decay of democracy in the US and around the world.

Turning to the question of social inequality, Burton cited several studies pointing to the enormous concentration of wealth in the United States, giving as an example the case of Lee Raymond, the former CEO of ExxonMobil, who, during the course of his thirteen-year tenure as CEO, took home \$686 million. He also pointed to recent figures showing that all of the growth in income in the US is being swallowed up by the top one percent of the population, while the income of the vast bulk of the population is stagnating or declining.

“These concentrations of wealth,” Burton explained, “are not for us a moral issue, and certainly not a question of individual resentment. It is the social cost that these fortunes impose on people all around the world, and the price that we as a world society pay for this inequality that is most critical.” He argued that, on the one hand, the accumulation of wealth comes at the expense of jobs, wages, and social programs, as well as spending on social infrastructure and the environment.

On the other hand, the growth of an oligarchy in the US is the driving force behind the growth of militarism and the attack on democratic rights. It is to a small layer of very wealthy individuals that both the Democrats and Republicans are beholden. Burton noted that in a recent trip to Los Angeles, Hilary Clinton, a frontrunner for the Democratic Presidential nomination in 2008, did not bother to speak to ordinary people in the city, but instead spent her time at a fundraiser for her Senate campaign hosted by billionaire supermarket mogul Ron Burkle. The same basic orientation is expressed in Schiff, Burton said, which is why he has been so unresponsive to his own constituents on the question of militarism and the attack on democratic rights.

After addressing these three components of his campaign, Burton argued that the only possible solution to the crisis confronting humankind was the development of a socialist movement of the working class internationally. “So long as a small percentage of the population, the oligarchy, increases its control over the giant forces of production, the corporations and the banks, it is impossible to deal with any of the problems I have discussed,” he said. “To defend democratic rights and end war, it is necessary to confront the problem of the burgeoning American oligarchy, but one cannot address *this problem* without addressing the cause of the oligarchy-

the organization of social and economic life, the subordination of everything to the accumulation of profit and individual wealth.”

Burton concluded his remarks by stressing that the problems he outlined were not confined to the United States. “Capitalism is a global system of exploitation,” he noted, and can only be addressed through a global movement of working people. He explained that the SEP campaign in California and in other parts of the United States would be directed toward the political education of working people in order to lay the foundation for such a international socialist movement.

Several issues were discussed during the question and answer period that followed. One person asked Burton what was his attitude to the question of immigration. Burton explained that the SEP supported the democratic right of any worker to live wherever they wanted. He argued that immigrant workers and workers born in the United States are both exploited by the same corporations and have identical interests. None of the problems faced by these workers or workers of any country can be solved except through a unified movement of working people of all countries.

Another person asked about how the SEP would address the problem of homelessness. Burton noted that the enormous homeless population in Los Angeles, a city that is also home to a layer of people with extraordinary sums of wealth, is an indictment of the capitalist system. Many of the homeless people in the city and in other parts of the country suffer from mental illness. Burton said that the SEP advocates a vast increase in the use of social resources to provide health services, decent jobs and quality living conditions for everyone.

The meeting in Pasadena was intended to launch the petition drive to get John Burton on the ballot in California. Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and the Students for Social Equality at UCLA will begin petitioning on April 29 and are aiming to collect 15,000 signatures by August. The SEP appeals for the help and support of all WSWS readers in the area.

To participate in the SEP campaign in California, click here



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