

Launching petition drive

Socialist Equality Party opens New York Senate campaign office

A reporter
11 July 2006

The Socialist Equality Party in New York inaugurated its campaign to place Bill Van Auken on the ballot as its candidate for the US Senate with an open house Sunday at its new headquarters in New York City.

In a speech to the open house in Long Island City, Queens, Van Auken stressed that the opening of the New York office represented a significant advance for the party and would lay the foundation for the expansion of the SEP's political activity and influence in the area, both in the coming election and afterwards.

Attended by SEP members and supporters, the open house served to outline the political perspective guiding the upcoming election campaign and to begin the organization of the considerable work needed to place the party on the ballot in New York state.

New York state election law requires that parties other than the Democrats and Republicans obtain 15,000 signatures during a six-week period to obtain a place on the ballot. The SEP is aiming to get some 25,000 signatures between July 11, the first day of petitioning, and August 23, when the petitioning period ends.

Van Auken noted in his speech that in announcing its decision to intervene in the 2006 elections, the Socialist Equality Party had declared that its campaign would give voice to both the opposition and anger of millions of people towards the Bush administration and their disgust with the right-wing policies and cowardice of the Democrats.

"Our opponent, the Democratic incumbent Senator Hillary Clinton, epitomizes these characteristics," he said. Van Auken pointed out that on July 4, Clinton had issued a statement on the political crisis of Connecticut's right-wing Democratic incumbent Senator Joseph Lieberman, who is facing a primary challenge from a candidate who has criticized his unconditional support for the war in Iraq. Faced with a possible primary defeat, Lieberman has announced that he will organize a campaign to place his name on the ballot as an independent.

In her statement, Clinton declared her support for Lieberman in the primary, while adding that she would support whichever candidate won.

"This utterly superfluous statement was greeted by the *New York Times* as a stroke of political genius," Van Auken said. "As the newspaper commented, 'It allowed her to signal to her party's liberal base that she is not in lockstep with Mr. Lieberman in defending the war in Iraq, without actually changing her own position that her vote in 2002 to authorize the war was justified.'"

"In other words," the candidate stated, "Clinton exploited Lieberman's well-deserved political predicament to formally distance herself from the Democrat most identified with support for the war, and thereby curry favor with a layer of liberal Democrats, while she herself continues to support the very same pro-war policy. Nothing could more clearly sum up the cynicism and right-wing politics that characterizes Hillary Clinton's entire career."

Van Auken pointed out that on the same day that Hillary Clinton was elaborating her crafty political strategy, the family of 20-year-old Army Private First Class Colin Mason in Staten Island was receiving the news that he had been killed in Iraq, the victim of a rocket-propelled grenade. He is one of more than 2,500 American troops, most of them drawn from the working class youth, who has died since the war began.

"This war represents a historic catastrophe for Iraq, which has seen hundreds of thousands killed and the country's economic and social life devastated," Van Auken continued. "It is a political and one can even say moral debacle for the US. In addition to the more than 2,500 soldiers killed, tens of thousands more have returned home maimed or psychologically damaged. And the brutalization of the entire military deployed in this dirty colonial war is producing the inevitable result: an endless series of unspeakable war crimes, the grotesque details of which are emerging daily in the media.

Van Auken also took note of a recent column by another prominent Democrat, James Rubin, an assistant secretary of state in the Clinton administration. Adopting a critical attitude toward the recent phony debate in the US Senate over the Iraq war, Rubin declared: “Next time the Democrats should try a different strategy. Instead of calling for troop cuts in Iraq, they should call for transferring forces and resources from Iraq to Afghanistan.... In Afghanistan, our efforts could still be decisive.... By forcing a debate on transferring American forces back to Afghanistan, the Democrats can avoid the trap of allowing Republicans to claim they are weak.... By marrying good policy with good politics in this way, the Democrats can help win the war on terrorism and help themselves at the same time.”

“Again, one has the same cynical indifference to the terrible human cost of war, both in Iraq and Afghanistan,” Van Auken said. “But, consider for a moment this underlying conception that unless the Democrats are standing full-square behind US militarism somewhere, they will be vulnerable to Republican charges that they are ‘weak.’

“This is not a matter of fear that they will appear ‘weak’ in the eyes of the American people. Poll after poll have shown strong majorities supporting the setting of a timetable for US withdrawal from Iraq and even stronger ones stating their belief that the war was wrong from the outset.

“This broad sentiment against the war finds no real expression either in the two-party political system or in the mass media. Its very existence represents a growing popular rebellion against policies shared across the entire political establishment.

“No, it is not fear that the people will view them as ‘weak’ that determines the right-wing line of the Democrats on the war. Rather, it is concern that the corporate and financial elite will perceive the party as ‘weak’ in adapting itself to this mass opposition to the war, rather than defending the strategic aims—above all securing US hegemony over the oil wealth of the region—that underlay the decision to invade and occupy Iraq in the first place.”

The war in Iraq, Van Auken stressed, was not a mistake, but a crime, a premeditated act of aggression. It was launched with the aim of securing the interests of and further enriching a narrow financial elite that is simultaneously waging an unrelenting economic war against working people, the vast majority of the population, at home.

Van Auken said that the SEP does not underestimate the challenge that it faces in getting on the ballot, but is confident that the party will get a powerful hearing from workers, students and professionals throughout the state and broad support for its demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq.

“Our campaign is unique,” he said. “As opposed to every other political candidate and tendency participating in the election—from the Democratic challenger John Tasini to the Greens—we stand for the political independence of the working class. We are not running to influence or protest to anybody. We are not trying to shift the Democrats to the left, but rather to lay the foundations for a mass party of the working class.

“We stand for internationalism, declaring openly that the struggles of American workers can succeed only to the extent that they are united with workers all over the world, which means that we also defend unconditionally the rights of immigrant workers in this country. Finally, we place the issue of social inequality at the center of our campaign and advance a concrete socialist program against it.”

In conclusion, the candidate cited the statement of Leon Trotsky upon the founding of the Fourth International nearly 70 years ago that ours is not a party like other parties. “Elections for us are a means, not an end,” he said. “Ours is not a party for careerists, like Hillary Clinton and the army of aides, consultants and pollsters that surround her, but a party of revolutionaries, committed to the full social and spiritual liberation of the working class.

“We are intervening in the election not in pursuit of signatures and votes, though clearly in the coming weeks and months we will be seeking both, but rather to win the best elements of a new generation to the program and perspective of socialist internationalism.”

After the candidate’s speech, a presentation was given on the petitioning campaign, and all those present signed up to participate.

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