

SEP Senate candidate addresses campaign meeting in New York City

Our reporter
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Socialist Equality Party candidate for US Senate Bill Van Auken addressed a public meeting in New York City Sunday on the party's intervention in the midterm elections and the role played by his opponent, incumbent Democrat Hillary Clinton, in the ongoing campaign of US militarism in Iraq and the attacks on the working class in the US itself.

The well-attended meeting in Manhattan brought together workers, professionals and students from New York and neighboring states, including many who had worked in the fight to place the party on the ballot.

In introducing Van Auken, Peter Daniels, a veteran member of the SEP and writer for the World Socialist Web Site, reviewed the six-week campaign in which the party's supporters gathered nearly 25,000 signatures from working people across the state. He stressed that the response won through this effort had set the stage for the party to make a powerful appeal on the basis of its socialist program during the period leading up to the November 7 vote.

Van Auken's remarks were followed by a lively discussion period, in which questions were posed on a number of subjects, including the threat of war against Iran, the crisis within Republican administration and the controversy over the proposed development of a new sports stadium and building complex on the site of the Atlantic rail yards in Brooklyn.

A collection received \$1,000 in donations for the election campaign, and supporters took thousands of copies of a new campaign brochure to distribute throughout New York.

The following is the main report delivered by Bill Van Auken at the meeting.

In little over seven weeks, the United States will hold its midterm election. There is growing speculation over how this vote will affect the current political balance of power between the two major parties in Washington, and whether a decisive shift to the Democrats in either or both houses of the US Congress will lead to a change of course in the five-year-old policy of unrestrained militarism and lawlessness that has caused the US to be seen throughout the world as a dangerous pariah state.

There is also, inevitably given the experience of the past five years, widespread speculation and fear—including, according to press reports, within the top echelons of the Democratic Party—that the Bush administration is preparing an “October surprise” with the aim of reversing the apparent threat of a significant erosion of its power. Such an event would be aimed at frightening or stunning the American people into supporting the administration at the polls.

Given the evident indifference and outright skepticism with which the public has greeted the endless succession of announcements of foiled terror plots—the vast majority of which turn out to be either unfounded or orchestrated by paid government informants—such a “surprise” would have to take the form of either another real act of terrorism on American soil or a major escalation in US military violence abroad.

Whether such a staged crisis will occur or what form it would take cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty. That it is seen within the

political establishment as a distinct possibility, however, is a measure of the desperate crisis confronting not only the Bush administration, but the American ruling elite as a whole.

The fact of the matter is the great project initiated by this ruling elite in the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks has degenerated into a fiasco.

What happened that day has yet to be seriously investigated, much less explained to the American people. Not one official in the US government has ever been held accountable for what ostensibly represented the most massive intelligence and security failure in US history. The official story, that 19 individuals directed by the Islamic fundamentalist and former CIA asset Osama bin Laden carried out such an attack without any foreknowledge or, indeed, facilitation on the part of any section of the US government itself is less credible than the most far-fetched conspiracy theory.

What we do know is who benefited—at least in the short term—from this crime. The strange and horrible events of that day were seized upon as a pretext for executing a long-planned strategy of utilizing American military might to seize strategic positions in the oil-rich Caspian Basin and Persian Gulf, with the aim of reasserting the global hegemony of American capitalism.

Five years after 9/11, it is readily apparent that the campaigns of conquest launched by US imperialism in its aftermath have turned into miserable military and political failures.

In Iraq, the military command has essentially acknowledged that it has been defeated in the key province of Anbar, the center of resistance to the US occupation, and that there is nothing they can do about it. Savage acts of repression, like the November 2004 siege of Fallujah, have only succeeded in swelling the ranks of the resistance and increasing the popular support it enjoys from the general population.

All essential indices of life for the Iraqi people, from real income, to employment, to electricity supplies, continue to fall, while US dreams of reaping a bonanza from the country's oil wealth have gone up in smoke, quite literally, with production still lower than pre-invasion levels due to continuous sabotage.

The number of attacks on US troops has increased fourfold since January 2004, while the Shia-dominated government appears to be drawing closer to Iran.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan has become a similar political and military disaster, with much of the country falling back under the control of warlords linked to the Taliban and to the drug cartels. The US casualty rate in Afghanistan this year is double what it was 2005, while close to 3,000 Afghans have been reported killed by occupation forces in 2006.

The fiasco in Iraq is the inevitable realization of the criminal conception that gave rise to the war in the first place. The idea that US military might could “shock and awe” the Iraqi people into welcoming their recolonizers with music and flowers, handing over the country's oil wealth to the US energy conglomerates.

But the dizzying pace of the deterioration of the US position in Iraq can also be traced to the gross incompetence of those who organized the occupation. The *Washington Post* today carries an article that gives a glimpse into the arrogance and backwardness of those who organized this venture. They were dominated by utter indifference to the people of Iraq, seeing the country merely as an object of plunder.

Those recruited as staff for the Coalition Provisional Authority for the most part had no skills or experience, the *Post* reports. They were selected for their political loyalty to Bush and largely gotten from outfits like the college Republican Clubs. “A 24-year-old who had never worked in finance—but had applied for a White House job—was sent to reopen Baghdad’s stock exchange. The daughter of a prominent neoconservative commentator and a recent graduate from an evangelical university for home-schooled children were tapped to manage Iraq’s \$13 billion budget, even though they didn’t have a background in accounting.”

And, of course, our own sainted ex-Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik, the former third-grade detective, now a convicted criminal, was supposed to be reorganizing the country’s entire security apparatus. As the article points out, he spent most of his time going out with the Iraqi police on midnight busts of car-theft rings, while sleeping through the day.

The *Post* writes: “Many of those selected because of their political fidelity spent their time trying to impose a conservative agenda on the postwar occupation that sidetracked more important reconstruction efforts and squandered goodwill among the Iraqi people.”

Among their principal concerns were privatizing the state-run economy, modernizing the stock market, imposing a flat tax, eliminating food rations for the poor and doing away with free medical care, all while Iraqi society disintegrated.

The Iraqis took their own measure of this operation, and the resistance to the US occupation flourished.

The undeniable catastrophe in Iraq is not shifting the Bush administration from its program of militarism. On the contrary, the administration has launched a concerted offensive to once again link Iraq to the so-called “global war on terror,” warning that unless the “terrorists” are defeated in the streets of Baghdad we’ll be fighting them in Manhattan.

At the same time, the administration is laying the ideological and political groundwork for a war against Iran, casting it as the principal state sponsor of terrorism—a category that Bush has repeatedly declared will be treated the same as terrorism itself. It is now going through the motions of UN resolutions and threats, much as it did in the buildup to the 2003 Iraqi invasion.

We say without fear of contradiction: even if the Democrats score a major victory in the election next November and once again in 2008 it will not fundamentally alter the criminal and aggressive trajectory of American imperialism. It will not spell an end to the US occupation of Iraq and it will not decrease the threat of new and even more terrible wars in the coming months and years.

Nothing makes this fact of American political life clearer than the words and deeds of my opponent Hillary Clinton, the supposed icon of Democratic Party liberalism. While she has attempted to posture as an opponent of the Bush administration’s policy in Iraq, it is not the war for oil itself that she opposes, but the fact that the administration has botched the job.

Thus, she has emerged as a prominent spokesperson for the demand that Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld resign. In making the case for this change in Pentagon personnel, Clinton stated the following:

“Let us not confuse the leadership’s failures with either the remaining mission in Iraq or the war on terrorism or with our support for our troops. What we have here is a failure of leadership to accomplish that mission. What was hailed as our shortest war has now become one of our longest. What was hailed as a model of democracy teeters on the brink of complete

anarchy. What was the leadership that quickly claimed credit for success has been lethargic in the face of misjudgments and setbacks.”

What are these misjudgments? Principal among those mentioned by Clinton is: “We didn’t go with enough troops to establish law and order, to put down a marker as to our authority.” In other words, the campaign of “shock and awe” against the Iraqi people failed to employ sufficient violence to intimidate the population and crush resistance.

She continued in enumerating Rumsfeld’s “misjudgments,” saying he “repeatedly underestimated the nature and strength of the insurgency, the sectarian violence and the spread of Iranian influence.” What is one to conclude from this? Once again, that more troops are required, and, clearly, an expansion of the war itself to combat the “spread of Iranian influence.”

It should be noted that Clinton prefaced her criticisms of the defense secretary by declaring: “No one is questioning his patriotism, his honorable service. We’re questioning his judgment and his leadership.”

What is she saying? Rumsfeld was one of the chief architects of a policy of aggressive war—the crime for which the Nazis were hung at Nuremberg. He bears major personal responsibility for the policy of torture that led to the horrors of Abu Ghraib. There is nothing honorable about any of this. They are war crimes for which he, along with others, deserves to stand trial.

Clinton’s words only make it clear that she and the Democratic Party have served as necessary accomplices in these crimes, from their voting of unprecedented war powers to Bush in 2002 to their continued support for the US occupation today.

Hillary Clinton has declared her policy to be that of “a phased redeployment of US forces” in Iraq to “a more limited mission.” In other words, tens of thousands of American forces would remain, US aerial bombing of centers of Iraqi resistance would intensify, and Washington’s attempt to lay claim to the country’s oil fields would continue.

While I am confident that those here today grasp the reactionary character of Hillary Clinton’s politics and understand the social interests she defends, this is not so clear to wide layers of the population. She has been turned into a political commodity, a brand name—Hillary, as recognizable as Pepsi—and the supposed content of the brand is liberalism.

Of course, this is only a manifestation of the fact that American liberalism has itself been stripped of the slightest progressive content and the least vestiges of reformism. Clinton’s role is likewise a manifestation of the breakdown of democratic processes in the US under the weight of a political monopoly exercised by two parties that both represent the interests of a financial oligarchy.

Under conditions in which polls show up to two thirds of the US population want US troops out of Iraq now, not a single leading political figure in either major party will call for their immediate withdrawal. This startling disconnect between America’s political establishment and the sentiments of its people has its source in the unprecedented social polarization that pervades every facet of American society. Never in history has the gulf separating the ruling elite from the masses of working people been wider.

It is worth citing some recent statistics that make the scale of this polarization even clearer.

According to census data, between 1980 and 2004, real wages in manufacturing fell 1 percent, while the real income of the richest 1 percent—people making more than \$277,000 in 2004—rose 135 percent.

A recent report from the US Commerce Department indicates that for the first quarter of 2006, wages and salaries accounted for only 45 percent of the gross domestic product, down from 53.6 percent at the beginning of the 1970s. With each percentage point representing about \$132 billion, this means over \$1 trillion more a year going into the profits of the corporations and the portfolios of their wealthiest investors and out of the pockets of average working people.

The thrust of the policies pursued by successive administrations, Democratic and Republican alike, over the last three decades has been to achieve this vast upward redistribution of social wealth.

Nowhere is the contradiction between wealth and poverty posed more starkly than here in New York City, the capital of capital.

In 2005, Wall Street paid out \$21.5 billion in bonuses, with CEOs and partners of major financial firms getting anywhere from \$14 to \$40 million each.

During just the last year, the number of apartments in New York City renting for more than \$10,000 a month increased by 54 percent. In the three years between 2002 and 2005, the median monthly rent for unsubsidized apartments increased by 20 percent.

Families with incomes of \$32,000—80 percent of median income in the city—are able to afford less than half of available rental housing units.

Meanwhile, according to census figures, the proportion of city residents who live below the federal poverty level—about one in five—has not changed in the last five years.

According to a report issued by the city last week, the number of people receiving food stamps increased substantially over the past year, while the number of families entering the city's homeless shelter system rose by more than 6 percent. Not surprisingly, Manhattan registers the widest income gap of any county in the country.

There is no question on which side of this divide Hillary Clinton is to be found. She and her husband reported a combined income for last year of close to \$8 million. Her vast personal wealth is combined with ever-growing support for her political career from the wealthiest sectors of American society—from the extreme right-wing Australian-born media mogul Rupert Murdoch to the Republican dynasty that runs the Corning Glass company in upstate New York. She has emerged as either the top recipient or runner-up of campaign contributions from the most important layers of corporate political donors—from Wall Street to the big drug companies and healthcare giants.

These are the interests that stand behind the war and have sought to expand their power and wealth through military plunder abroad and the plundering of the working class at home.

Amid the threats of a new and wider war—coming from both major parties—the atmosphere in Washington suggests a ruling elite that finds itself increasingly besieged and disoriented.

Bush spent the week before the fifth anniversary of 9/11 giving a series of propaganda addresses attempting, once again, to terrify the American people, while at the same time suggesting that the US is now engaged in the great ideological struggle of the twenty-first century. The supposed enemy in this ideological war is a retrograde and thoroughly discredited movement that supposedly seeks the resurrection of an Islamic caliphate that would impose Muslim law upon the entire planet. That this ideology enjoys minuscule popular support in the Muslim world itself is beside the point, as the US is apparently losing.

In the course of one of these speeches, delivered to a meeting of the Military Officers Association of America September 5, Bush made a remark that was little noted by the media, but nonetheless of undeniable political significance.

Attacking those who scoff at the threat that Al Qaeda is on the verge of subjugating us all to the caliphate's rule, Bush declared the following:

“History teaches that underestimating the words of evil and ambitious men is a terrible mistake. In the early 1900s, an exiled lawyer in Europe published a pamphlet called “What Is to Be Done?”—in which he laid out his plan to launch a communist revolution in Russia. The world did not heed Lenin's words, and paid a terrible price.”

As matter of fact, a significant portion of the world did indeed heed Lenin's words—in the first instance, the most advanced workers of early twentieth century Russia. The result was the greatest revolution the world had ever seen, in October 1917.

It is doubtful that our nation's incurious and semi-literate “decider-in-chief” troubled himself to investigate what Lenin actually had to say in “What Is to Be Done?” One somehow cannot imagine him seeing the need for such an intellectual exercise. He probably assumed that Homeland Security had it covered, and that it is a handbook on bomb-making and assassination.

The practical implications of his remarks, however, are clear. Had George W. Bush been in charge and his policies in place, Lenin would have been dragged out of his London apartment or from his desk at the library of the British Museum by a CIA rendition team and bundled off to a clandestine prison. There he would have been tortured and likely killed for daring to elaborate ideas that conflicted with the interests of the corporations, banks and wealthy elite whose interests Bush defends.

It was Trotsky who pointed out that this was precisely the conclusion drawn by the German bourgeoisie from the experience of October 1917: murder the revolutionary leaders. And so they killed Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, a crime that helped set the stage for the subsequent rise of German fascism, with which the Bush family enjoyed friendly and profitable relations.

There is certainly more than a whiff of fascism in Bush's remarks. Their implications are that those who express “dangerous” ideas should be arrested and repressed. The US president's words make it clear that his administration's aggressive militarism and anti-democratic measures are directed not against “terrorism,” but rather against any social or political force that stands in the way of American capitalism.

Had Bush bothered to read “What Is to Be Done?” he would have discovered—no doubt to his great surprise—that significant sections of the book are directed against terrorism. In a chapter entitled “What Is There In Common Between Economism and Terrorism?” Lenin compared the perspective of terrorism with that of the so-called Economists within the Russian socialist movement, who rejected the revolutionary political struggle for socialism in favor of adaptation to the spontaneous forms of struggle of the working class—strikes, economic demands, etc.

Lenin wrote: “At first sight, our assertion may appear paradoxical, so great is the difference between those who stress the ‘drab everyday struggle’ and those who call for the most self sacrificing struggle of individuals. But this is no paradox. The Economists and the terrorists merely bow to different poles of spontaneity; the Economists bow to the spontaneity of ‘the labor movement pure and simple,’ while the terrorists bow to the spontaneity of the passionate indignation of intellectuals, who lack the ability or opportunity to connect the revolutionary struggle and the working-class movement into an integral whole. It is difficult indeed for those who have lost their belief, or who have never believed, that this is possible, to find some outlet for their indignation and revolutionary energy other than terror.”

A year later, he wrote, in an article entitled “Why the Social-Democrats Must Declare a Determined and Relentless War on the Socialist-Revolutionaries”:

“The Socialist-Revolutionaries, by including terrorism in their program, and advocating it in its present-day form as a means of political struggle, are thereby doing the most serious harm to the movement, destroying the indissoluble ties between socialist work and the mass of the revolutionary class. No verbal assurances and vows can disprove the unquestionable fact that present-day terrorism, as practiced and advocated by the Socialist-Revolutionaries, is *not connected in any way* with work among the masses; for the masses, or together with the masses; that the organization of terroristic acts by the party distracts our very scanty organizational forces from their difficult and by no means completed task of organizing a revolutionary *workers’* party; that *in practice* the terrorism of the Socialist-Revolutionaries is nothing else than single combat, a method that has been wholly condemned by the experience of history.”

Lenin opposed acts of terrorism—carried out against what was

unquestionably a terrorist regime, headed by the Tsar of Russia—because they were antithetical to the development of the revolutionary class consciousness of the working class.

He insisted on the necessity of an organized struggle for a scientific appraisal of social and political relations among the advanced workers, in opposition to the spontaneous forms of thinking shaped by daily experience in the workplace and the relentless bombardment with the ideology promoted by the mass media. This was the paramount task of the party he built, and remains that of our own party and of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The SEP's participation in the 2006 election is dedicated to this purpose. As you know, until now, the bulk of our party's campaign, both here in New York and nationally, has been necessarily directed at placing our candidates on the ballot, fighting to surmount undemocratic ballot access laws that are crafted by the Democrats and Republicans to exclude third parties in general, and socialists in particular, from the electoral process.

This year, the Democratic Party has proven that where these undemocratic statutes do not suffice; it is prepared to break the law itself to keep us off the ballot. This is the case in Illinois, where the state acknowledged that our candidate for a state senate seat, Joseph Parnaruskis, met all the requirements and that the Democrats' challenges were frivolous. The Democratic members on the board of elections responded by refusing to allow a vote to certify his ballot status.

In a sense, they have done us a political favor, confirming our charges that what exists in the US is not genuine democracy, but a political monopoly enforced by two parties that both represent the rich.

Here in New York, Hillary Clinton and her handlers decided not to pursue such a challenge to the SEP, because they know that undemocratically suppressing a party that demands the complete and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq would only draw further public attention to the fact that she herself supports a continuation of the war and occupation. Instead, they are counting on her overwhelming financial base and the self-censorship of the news media to effectively exclude us from the political process.

We will fight this exclusion in every way possible, seeking to bring our program to the widest possible audience. We will seek support on a broad level, but the central aim of our campaign is not winning votes. Rather, we intend to use this campaign to politically educate the working class as to the real nature of the capitalist system—the source of war and inequality—and the necessity of building a fundamentally new party that conducts an internationally coordinated struggle for socialism. That party is the SEP, working in common struggle with our comrades in the International Committee of the Fourth International all over the world. I urge you to participate this struggle and, if you are not a member of the SEP, to study its program and make a decision to join this party.



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