

SEP candidate for US Senate addresses Buffalo meeting

“Our campaign offers the only alternative to the profit system”

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30 October 2006

The following is a speech delivered by Bill Van Auken, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for US Senate from New York, to a public meeting in Buffalo, New York on October 19.

I am running as the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for US Senator from New York, challenging the incumbent Democrat Hillary Clinton.

The midterm elections are being held under conditions of extraordinary crisis for the US ruling elite and its government, both at home and abroad.

Certainly two issues overshadow the upcoming vote more than any others. The first is the ongoing military and political debacle for US imperialism in Iraq, and the second is the wholesale and historic attack on democratic rights within the US itself.

This week we had the publication of the scientific survey conducted by the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health estimating that 655,000 Iraqis have lost their lives as a result of the US invasion and occupation. This estimate, carried out with the most rigorous scientific methodology of population surveys and public health studies, actually found that the number of deaths could be anywhere between 393,000 and 943,000.

George Bush, who has shown no inclination to strain his mental capacities to grasp such statistical methods as the use of sample clusters and their extrapolation to general populations, dismissed the report as not credible. He described the work carried out by Iraqi physicians who worked at great personal risk to gauge the carnage taking place in their country as a “guess.”

This is no “guess,” but a scientific appraisal of the dimensions of the catastrophe that the Iraqi people are suffering every single day as a result of the policy of “preventive war” carried out by the Bush administration. With the collaboration of the Democratic Party, this administration dragged the American people into this war based upon lies about weapons of mass destruction and terrorist ties.

Its real aim was to exploit the political conditions created by the 9/11 terrorist attacks to implement long-prepared plans to utilize American military might for the purpose of seizing control of the strategic oil reserves of Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. The administration saw Afghanistan and Iraq as relatively defenseless countries that the US could easily conquer and, in doing so, secure a decisive strategic advantage over its main economic rivals in Europe and Asia.

This criminal project was not merely the brainchild of the cabal of right-wingers in the Bush White House and the civilian leadership of the Pentagon. The policy of global militarism enjoyed the backing of decisive sections of the ruling elite.

One can now say without fear of contradiction that this grand strategy of the American oligarchy has failed, producing a debacle of historic proportions.

The scale of the killing disclosed in the report published in the British medical journal the *Lancet* makes it abundantly clear that this

administration and its key personnel are guilty of war crimes and should be brought before a tribunal for criminal prosecution. It also demonstrates that the US strategy of securing super profits off of conquered Iraqi oil has failed miserably. Washington’s dreams of reaping a bonanza from the country’s oil wealth have literally gone up in smoke.

Meanwhile, with the media largely looking the other way, the death toll among US troops in Iraq is edging ever closer to the 3,000 mark, with an average of four soldiers being killed every day this month, the highest toll since the invasion itself. Easily 10 times that number are being wounded, in many cases suffering life-altering head wounds and amputations.

Meanwhile, the US government is spending \$2 billion a week to pay for this fiasco, money that is badly needed to provide jobs, education and healthcare at home.

In New York, the Socialist Equality Party was placed on the ballot thanks to the support of 25,000 New Yorkers who signed to nominate me for the US Senate. Many of them were veterans, active duty military and families of young men and women who are either in Iraq, recently returned or about to go back on yet another tour of duty. One mother from Queens signed because her son had been killed in Fallujah, and she said that “no one else’s children should have to die” in a war based on lies.

They and tens of millions of other Americans—indeed the majority of the population—have drawn their own conclusions that the war in Iraq must end, despite the fact that no significant section of the ruling establishment, its politicians or the corporate media are promoting such a policy.

The other issue overshadowing this election is the sweeping attack on democratic rights embodied in the Military Commissions Act of 2006, approved by Congress just before it took its pre-election recess.

It should be recalled that it was in the same period preceding the last midterm election in 2002 that Congress voted its blank check for Bush to launch a war of aggression against Iraq. Leading Democrats, including New York’s junior Senator Hillary Clinton, voted in favor of that resolution. The party’s strategists at the time put forward the conception that the vote would take Iraq off the table and allow the party to run on a domestic agenda.

Of course, the Democrats had no significant proposals to make regarding the economy, healthcare, education or jobs, and the strategy proved a fiasco, with the party suffering one of its worst-ever defeats.

Similarly, this time around, the Democratic leadership took the decision not to block the passage of the Military Commissions Act with the idea that it would undercut any attempt by the Republicans to cast them as “soft on terrorism.” They could have easily sustained a filibuster against the legislation, something that Senate Democrats have done over far lesser issues, such as judicial appointments.

As a result, Congress enacted legislation that legitimizes torture and abrogated fundamental rights that have been in effect since the founding

of the American republic. It has placed in the hands of the Bush administration extraordinary powers traditionally identified with police states and military dictatorships. These powers can be utilized not merely against a relative handful of so-called enemy combatants now imprisoned in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, but against political opponents of the government within the US itself.

For those who claim, in the words of Sinclair Lewis's famous political novel, "It can't happen here," the answer is, "It can and it has."

It should be recalled as we prepare the final stage of our campaign in the 2006 election that the most successful American socialist candidate, Eugene V. Debs, won nearly 1 million votes in 1920, despite the not inconsiderable impediment of running for office from a jail cell.

Debs, along with at least 2,000 others, were prosecuted by the federal government under the Alien and Sedition Acts for the sole crime of speaking out against America's involvement in World War I. Some were sentenced to prison terms of up to 20 years.

This was followed by the post-Russian Revolution Red Scare and the Palmer Raids of 1919-1920, in which some 10,000 foreign workers were rounded up, many of them subjected to harsh imprisonment, beatings and even torture—not for carrying out any crime, but for their suspected connections to socialist, communist or anarchist organizations. The authorities of that time pioneered the ugly and legally baseless thesis, dusted off by the Bush administration in its policies towards "enemy combatants," that non-citizens enjoy no protection under the US Constitution and may be denied rights to due process.

And, of course, the Second Red Scare that followed the World War II targeted US citizens themselves through the enactment of hundreds of federal, state and local laws dedicated to the persecution of so-called communist subversives. Guilt by association, blacklists and loyalty oaths became common features of American political life. Many thousands lost their jobs and were stripped of basic rights while hundreds were jailed under the Smith Act for contempt and on other charges.

Yet the new legislation goes considerably further than the repressive measures implemented in those earlier dark periods of American history. It includes a sweeping denial of the right of prisoners to seek a writ of habeas corpus—that is, to have the charges against them established in a court of law. It empowers the president to lock people up without any formal charges, much less evidence, on his sole say-so that they are "enemy combatants."

Habeas corpus is not some recent innovation. It dates back to the English Magna Carta enacted nearly 800 years ago, and even before, and it is incorporated into Article 1 of the US Constitution.

The legislation takes the odious practices of the Bush administration that emerged through the exposures at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, as well as reports leaking out of other secret CIA prisons and torture chambers, and turns them into the law of the land.

Moreover, it expands the concept of "enemy combatants" explicitly to include US citizens as well as legal residents who are deemed to have "purposefully and materially supported hostilities against the United States or its cobelligerents."

This definition is so broad that individuals who speak out against the government—or indeed against the government of Britain and Israel, which could be classified as cobelligerents—can be brought before a military tribunal and thrown into a dungeon without any recourse to the civilian courts.

The *New York Times* recently quoted the reassuring words of a "senior administration official" that the new provisions of the law were nothing to worry about because, and I quote, "The only people who will be tried will be people who have committed a crime." In other words, anyone charged is already guilty, and the military kangaroo court that they will be dragged in front of will duly confirm that fact. This is the very definition of a police state.

The lurch by the American ruling establishment toward militarism and police-state methods of rule can only be understood in the context of what is undoubtedly the most salient feature of social life in the United States today: the unprecedented concentration of wealth and with it the unrestrained growth of inequality.

It is this ever widening gap between a financial oligarchy at the top and the masses of working people that also explains the stark disconnect between America's political establishment and the sentiments of its people. It explains why, 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. The two-party political monopoly represents not the people, but the top 1 percent.

The gulf separating this oligarchy from the ordinary working people has never been wider. A few recent statistics bear this out.

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 over \$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 precisely this vast upward redistribution of social wealth.

There are growing signs as we approach the elections that the results of the voting on November 7 may well prove a stunning defeat for the Republican Party, with the potential for one or even both houses of Congress falling back under Democratic leadership. The Washington Post reported yesterday that the Republican National Committee is pulling funds from a number of races which it has concluded are lost in order to concentrate on those where it still has a chance, as part of a desperate bid to maintain a razor-thin majority in the House.

Of course, we do not have a crystal ball, and no doubt things can happen between now and Election Day. According to some press accounts, the threat of the Bush administration staging an "October surprise" is seen as a serious concern within the leading bodies of the Democratic Party. The threat that the administration would engineer or allow a terrorist incident on US soil or launch another act of military aggression in a desperate attempt to stun the American people into supporting it is undoubtedly a danger. Of course, as the attempt of the Spanish government in 2004 to spin a terrorist bombing for its political purposes indicated, such maneuvers can backfire badly against their perpetrators.

Should the Democrats score such a resounding victory, the political implications are far-reaching. Certainly, such a turn against the Republican administration at the polls would reflect the determination by wide layers of the population to bring about fundamental change.

And we can say confidently that they will not get it through a Democratic victory. Even if the Democratic Party regains Congress next month and wins the presidential election in 2008, it will not fundamentally alter American imperialism's policy of criminal military aggression. A Democratic victory will not bring about an end to the US occupation and the mass killing in 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 right-wing character of the Democrats' election campaign. I have already mentioned their attempt to get the issue of terrorism off the table by sitting on their hands as the Military Commissions Act sailed through Congress.

We have made the point on the WSWS that at the end of September,

two revelations surfaced that spelled political trouble for the Bush White House and the Republican Party. The first was the publication of the book by Bob Woodward, *State of Denial*, establishing that the head of the CIA George Tenet specifically warned the administration two months before the September 11 attacks that a major terrorist attack on a US target by Al Qaeda was imminent, and received what was described as a “brush-off.”

The implications of this revelation—coming from an author who has functioned until now as a semi-official court chronicler for the Bush White House—is devastating. After all, this is a government that has justified all of its policies by invoking the specter of 9/11.

The tragic events of that day have yet to be subjected to a serious and independent investigation, and not a single official has been held accountable with so much as a demotion for what ostensibly represents the worst security and intelligence failure in the country’s history. An examination of the facts points inexorably toward collaboration and facilitation at high levels of the US government in allowing this attack to happen in order to provide a pretext for war plans that were drafted well before Bush ever entered the White House.

Almost the same day as Woodward’s revelations, it was disclosed that a Republican Congressman from Florida, Mark Foley, was implicated in sending inappropriate emails and instant messages to underage male Congressional pages.

Now which one of these events do you suppose the Democrats chose to make an issue in their campaign? Of course they seized on the Foley sex scandal, working it into television commercials across the country, while ignoring the evidence of the Bush administration’s responsibility for the worst loss of life on American soil since the Civil War.

The Democrats have also tried to exploit popular opposition to the war in Iraq for their own political purposes. My opponent Hillary Clinton typifies their approach. While she postures 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 bungled the job.

In criticizing the Iraq policy and going so far as demanding the resignation of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Clinton declared recently that the administration was guilty of numerous misjudgments. Among them, and I quote, “We didn’t go with enough troops to establish law and order, to put down a marker as to our authority.” What is she saying? That the massive violence unleashed against the Iraqi people in the “shock and awe” campaign of 2003 and the subsequent massacres of civilians in cities like Fallujah wasn’t enough. She wanted more troops and more firepower in order to put down a bigger marker in blood—to terrorize the population and crush resistance.

Clinton and other leading Democrats have floated a policy consisting of “a phased redeployment of US forces” in Iraq to “a more limited mission.” What these words mean in practice is that tens of thousands of American forces would remain in Iraq, US aerial bombardment of centers of Iraqi resistance would intensify, and Washington’s attempt to control the country’s oilfields would continue.

On domestic issues, the Democrats will likewise offer no real alternative. This is guaranteed by the control exercised over this party—no less than over the Republicans—by financial and corporate interests.

Again Hillary Clinton, who is the party’s presumed front-runner for the 2008 presidential nomination, provides the best example. She has amassed a campaign reelection fund that is estimated at over \$40 million, largely thanks to the support she enjoys from corporate America. She is either the top or next to the top recipient of funds from the main Wall Street finance houses, the major drug companies, the healthcare giants and other sections of big business. She and the Democrats will continue the assault on working class living standards undertaken by Bush and by her own husband before them.

This is what makes the campaign being waged by the Socialist Equality Party in this election so decisive. We are entirely realistic about this

campaign. We are campaigning broadly for our program and we are asking workers, students and young people to vote for us, but clearly 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.

Whatever the results of the election, they will lead to deepening popular disillusionment and alienation from the Democratic Party. Our campaign and the program we advance are offering workers the only real alternative to wage a struggle against the profit system.

That alternative is the building of the Socialist Equality Party, working in common struggle with our comrades in the International Committee of the Fourth International all over the world. I urge you to participate in this campaign, carefully study our program and make the decision to join this party.



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