Why Hillary Clinton voted for the anti-immigrant wall

Bill Van Auken, SEP candidate for US Senator from New York
4 October 2006

Last May, in the wake of mass demonstrations that brought millions of immigrants to the streets in cities throughout the United States, New York's Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton spoke with disdain for the Republican right's proposals mandating a crackdown on foreign-born workers.

This Republican-backed legislation, which turned undocumented workers—as well as anyone who provided them with aid—into criminal felons, was the provocation that sparked the mass protests.

"I cannot and will not support one-sided solutions that sound tough but neither deal with our porous borders nor treat with respect and dignity the millions of families who live and work in our country," Clinton declared.

Last Friday, however, she did exactly that, joining Senate Republicans and the majority of her Democratic colleagues in voting for an ignominious piece of legislation known as the "Secure Fence Act of 2006."

The bill calls for the erection of 700 miles of fortified fencing stretching across the entire length of Arizona's frontier with Mexico as well as portions of the southern borders of California, New Mexico and Texas. According to some estimates, the cost of such a massive project would reach $7 billion.

Last spring's pretenses, by both Democrats and Republicans alike, of drafting a comprehensive immigration reform with a supposed path to legalization for undocumented workers (in reality leading nowhere for millions of them) has been swept aside. What is left of that abortive proposal is its reactionary essence—state repression.

Even some of the bill's proponents acknowledge that completion of such a barrier is virtually impossible given the rugged terrain of much of the US-Mexican border and that whatever is built will do little to stem the tide of immigrants driven by economic deprivation to seek entry into the US. Even a massive deployment of the US military on the Mexican border would prove inadequate to maintain and defend such a structure.

The net effect of this reactionary measure will be to divert the flow of immigrants to even more dangerous crossings, driving up the already record number of deaths of migrant workers on the border. At the same time, it will impose a massive barrier to the economic and social relations that constitute the lifeblood of the border region in both the US and Mexico.

The virtual militarization of one of the longest borders in the world has profound political implications. For decades during the Cold War, US politicians regularly invoked the Berlin Wall erected by the East German Stalinist bureaucracy as a means of fomenting anticommunism. Now, in the midst of proclaiming a worldwide crusade for "democracy," Washington has decreed that a far more extensive barrier be erected, a symbol of American capitalism's repudiation of the most basic democratic and humane principles.

In response to the bill, Harry Reid, the Senate minority leader, declared, "It is a shame that President Bush caved to the radical anti-immigrant right wing of his party" by accepting the legislation. If the Republican president's bow to the right wing of his own party on the immigration issue is shameful, what then are the votes of supposed "liberals" like Hillary Clinton and 25 other Democratic senators in favor of the legislation? Reid was silent on this score.

For the Democrats as a whole, the vote on the immigration legislation is one more act of cowardice and cynicism. In many ways, it recalls the vote the party cast on the eve of the last midterm elections in 2002, when it gave unprecedented powers to the Bush administration to wage a war of aggression against Iraq in order to get the issue off the table in contest with the Republicans.

This legislation has similarly far-reaching and ominous implications. In part, it endows the Secretary of Homeland Security with virtually limitless authority to "take all actions the Secretary determines necessary and appropriate to achieve and maintain operational control over the entire international land and maritime borders of the United States."

This sweeping language essentially amounts to another "blank check" granting the Bush administration the power to carry out extra-legal and dictatorial actions up to and including mass detentions and wars with Mexico and Canada.

Yet, in order to avoid being branded by the Republicans as "soft on illegals," the majority of the Democrats in the Senate were willing to support this legislation. They did so under the whip of the Republican leadership, which blocked any review or discussion of the measure, much less the convening of a

conference committee to seek changes in the version sent up by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives.

In Hillary Clinton's case, the vote has a deeper significance. As the reputed frontrunner in the contest for the Democratic Party's 2008 presidential nomination, she is making a direct appeal to the same anti-immigrant sentiments that are being stoked by the right wing of the Republican Party.

The Republicans are politically divided on the issue, which has been utilized to whip up xenophobia and nativist reaction. At the same time, however, this anti-immigrant chauvinism cuts across the interests of the US financial oligarchy, the Republicans' most important constituency, which depends upon a steady supply of cheap and repressed immigrant labor as a source of profit.

Clinton aims to exploit this division, opposing the Republican leadership from the right. This is a calculated strategy that she has been developing for several years.

Thus, in a 2003 interview with WABC radio in New York, she declared: "I am, you know, adamantly against illegal immigrants."

Continuing with what amounted to a backward rant against the foreign-born, she said, "People have to stop employing illegal immigrants. I mean, come up to Westchester, go to Suffolk and Nassau counties, stand on the street corners in Brooklyn or the Bronx. You're going to see loads of people waiting to get picked up to go do yard work and construction work and domestic work."

Clinton's political calculations on the immigration question, as on the war in Iraq, democratic rights and social issues, are predicated on the political monopoly exercised by the Democratic and Republican parties, both organized for and by the corporations and wealthy elite.

The thinking of the New York senator and her political handlers runs along the following political lines: "Even if a vote for the anti-immigrant wall upsets Latinos and others, what are they going to do about it, vote for the Republicans?" On the other hand, by appealing to anti-immigrant sentiments, perhaps she can pick up some support from the Republicans' right-wing base, or at least diminish its virulent hostility to her.

Her primary concern is obviously not reelection in November, with polls giving her a 30-point lead over her Republican opponent. Moreover, in New York, which boasts one of the largest concentrations of immigrants of any state in the country, intransigent opposition to the Republican-sponsored legislation would have easily won her more support than her vote for it.

Clinton's eye is on the 2008 presidential contest, and it is evident that she aims to win the nomination on the most right-wing platform in the party's history. Part of it, as evidenced by her vote last week, will be to promote attacks on immigrants as part of the phony "war on terrorism."

This cynical and crude political strategy has consequences that go far beyond a potential boost for Hillary Clinton's standing in the polls. They serve both to fan anti-immigrant sentiments and strengthen the development of dictatorial and authoritarian methods within the government itself.

Clinton's support for the border wall underscores one fundamental political truth. The defense of the rights of immigrant workers and of working people as a whole is impossible outside of a direct challenge to the political monopoly exercised by the two parties controlled by big business.

This is the political purpose of my candidacy for the US Senate and the nationwide campaign being waged by the Socialist Equality Party. In challenging Clinton and the Democratic and Republican parties in the midterm elections, we aim to lay the political foundations for the birth and development of a new mass socialist party of the working class.

Such a movement can be built only on the basis of the firmest principles—above all, that of socialist internationalism. The SEP fights for the unification of the struggles of American working people with those of workers in every corner of the globe.

Within the US itself, the cutting edge of internationalism is the defense of the rights of immigrant workers. The SEP stands for the right of workers of every country to live and work where they choose. We reject every attempt to seal off the national borders to working people, while the transnational corporations and banks demand that these same borders be torn down to facilitate their worldwide search for the cheapest labor and best conditions for exploitation.

The SEP demands full and equal rights for all immigrants, including citizenship for the more than 12 million undocumented workers who have been turned into scapegoats by Republicans and Democrats alike with the aim of dividing the working class. We call for an end to all attacks on immigrants, including factory raids, detentions and deportations.

We urge all workers, students, youth and professionals who are repulsed by the antidemocratic and anti-immigrant politics of Hillary Clinton, the Democrats and Republicans to vote for the SEP in the November election, study our party's program and join in the struggle to develop the socialist alternative that is needed to put an end to war, oppression and poverty in the US and internationally.