

On the eve of the 2006 midterm election

US faces stepped-up war abroad, social conflict at home

Bill Van Auken, Socialist Equality candidate for US Senate from New York
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The following is the speech delivered by Bill Van Auken, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for US Senate from New York, at a public meeting held in New York City on Sunday, November 5.

As Americans prepare to go to the polls in this year's midterm elections, virtually all of the polls suggest that this vote will yield a defeat for the Republican Party and the Bush administration, with the Democrats winning control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 12 years. The party also appears within striking distance of gaining a majority in the US Senate.

Whether these polls are accurate will be determined on Tuesday.

It is clear that if they are confirmed, the Democrats will owe whatever gains they make to the overwhelming anger and hatred felt by millions towards the Bush White House over the US war in Iraq, the ominous attacks on democratic rights and the shameless social and economic policies that have transferred immense amounts of wealth from masses of working people to a financial oligarchy.

To describe such an outcome on November 7 as a Democratic triumph, however, would be a gross misuse of the term. The Democratic Party will not have achieved its anticipated gains through a struggle for any kind of genuine alternative. Rather, it will be the undeserving beneficiary of mass revulsion towards criminal policies in which the Democrats have acted as willing accomplices.

The Democrats have given no reason for anyone to vote for them. Their candidates make no appeal to the broad masses of working people who are paying the price for the Iraq war, both in terms of lives lost and the decline in living standards and social funding as \$2 billion is poured into this criminal venture every single week.

We do not analyze these elections as some impartial observers, but as active political fighters and participants. We can say proudly that, as opposed to the Democrats, we have fought for a clear and extensively elaborated program that stands in stark opposition to the entire two-party system.

I do not know what our vote will be and will not hazard a guess today. We know that, thanks to the rigorously enforced media blackout of our campaign, for the vast majority of the voters in New York the first knowledge that the Socialist Equality Party is even on the ballot will come only after they step into the voting booth.

But whatever our totals, I feel safe in saying that our party will record a significant triumph. In the first instance, this is because the SEP alone has used this election to raise the political consciousness of a significant layer of working people, students and youth, to educate them on the nature of the capitalist system, the objective causes of war, repression and inequality, and on the nature of the political struggle that is required to put an end to these social evils.

Moreover, we can say with confidence that the perspective that our party

has championed throughout this campaign—that the burning issue confronting working people is that of building an independent mass party based upon a socialist and internationalist program—will be vindicated in the period that follows this election.

Those who vote for the Democrats as a means of punishing Bush and the Republicans will make a bitter experience with this party, an experience that will drive home the warning that we have made throughout our campaign: that the differences between the two big business parties are not fundamental, but of a tactical character. They are over how best to uphold the interests—both at home and abroad—of the financial oligarchy that controls this country.

It is universally recognized that the preeminent issue in this election is the debacle suffered by US imperialism in its attempt to conquer Iraq.

The scale of this catastrophe—and this crime—comes more starkly into focus with every passing day. We have had the recent study from the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health placing the number of Iraqi civilian deaths resulting from the US invasion and occupation at a probable 655,000 people, with a possible total of over 900,000.

Last week, the United Nations refugee agency released a report estimating the number of refugees caused by the war at over 3 million—approximately half internally displaced and half forced into exile. The UN, meanwhile, has warned that these refugees face desperate conditions because international donors have cut funding for the agency in half.

Today, virtually on the eve of the US midterm election, the kangaroo court set up by the US occupation has announced its guilty verdict against deposed Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, sentencing him to hang in connection with repression carried out by his regime in the wake of an assassination attempt.

One must, of course, ask: If Hussein merits hanging for this crime, which claimed the lives of a few hundred, what punishment is deserved by Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and company for the deaths of hundreds of thousands?

Predictably and absurdly, the White House has hailed the rigged decision to hang Hussein as yet another “turning point” in Iraq.

It should be recalled that little more than three years ago the capture of Saddam Hussein was hailed by the administration as a decisive turning point. In a televised speech to the nation, Bush declared that it meant “the torture chambers and the secret police are gone forever” and that Iraqis would “come together and reject violence and build a new Iraq.”

Since then, nearly 2,400 American soldiers have been killed, approximately 85 percent of the US fatalities since the war began. Torture has become routine in Iraq and far more widespread than it ever was under the Baathists. Bodies of victims turn up daily bearing the marks of hideous torment with power drills, electric shocks, acid and cigarette burns.

One recent report indicating the depth of the crisis in Iraq came in a November 1 report by Patrick Cockburn of the British daily the *Independent*, entitled “Baghdad is Under Siege.”

He reports that well-armed Sunni militias have largely encircled the Iraqi capital, cutting off major highways leading in and out of Baghdad. Bloody sectarian battles are being fought for control of villages controlling these roads, while within the city itself entire neighborhoods are being ethnically cleansed of either Shia or Sunni minorities. One of the results of these developments, Cockburn says, is the beginning of food shortages in the city.

He writes, “The impotence of US forces to prevent civil war is underlined by the fact that the intense fighting between Sunni and Shia around Balad, north of Baghdad, has raged for a month, although the town is beside one of Iraq’s largest American bases. The US forces have done little and when they do act they are seen by the Shia as pursuing a feud against the Mehdi Army...”

“Another ominous development is that Iraqi tribes that often used to have both Sunni and Shia members are now splitting along sectarian lines.”

Within Baghdad itself, the much publicized US operation aimed supposedly at quelling violence through the deployment of thousands of additional troops has proven an abject failure, with the rate of sectarian killing continuing to spiral out of control and a sharp spike in US casualties.

What can we anticipate after the election? If history is a guide, one can confidently predict a major escalation in the bloodletting.

Let us recall what followed in the immediate wake of the last national election in November 2004. The Bush administration celebrated its reelection by launching a murderous siege of Fallujah, killing thousands of men, women and children and systematically leveling a city that was home to at least 300,000 Iraqis.

It should be noted that two years after Fallujah was devastated, emptied of its population and then subjected to tight US control over who could enter the city, it has once again become a major center of resistance, with regular attacks on American forces.

In 2004, the massacre in Fallujah was held in abeyance until after the election was out of the way. There is every reason to anticipate that a similar bloodbath is being prepared in the aftermath of this year’s vote. This time, in all likelihood, the attack will be directed against the Shia population of Baghdad itself and may well be accompanied by a move to depose the Shia-dominated government of Prime Minister Maliki, who has publicly objected to US security operations against this sector.

Such an offensive will hardly advance the stated goal of US policy, that of bringing stability to Iraq. On the contrary, it will in all likelihood bring a widening of the war.

And what of the Democrats? Whether they regain control or remain a minority in Congress, it can be confidently predicted that they will not question in the slightest a new massacre of Iraqi civilians.

The Democratic leadership’s criticism of the Iraq war has never been an indictment of the criminal nature of this war of aggression, but rather that the Bush administration botched the job. Thus, my opponent Hillary Clinton recently declared 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? She wanted more troops to put down a bigger marker in blood and to terrorize the Iraqi people into accepting the authority of a colonial occupier.

Then, on the eve of the election, we have the bizarre episode with the mangled joke of Senator John Kerry, the Democrats’ 2004 presidential nominee, about getting a good education or getting “stuck in Iraq.”

The Republicans succeeded for several days in making the gaffe by Kerry, who is not up for reelection, a bigger issue than the war itself. In

part this was due to the venality of the press, which for the most part did not bother to report the prepared version of Kerry’s remarks, which made it clear that the target of his remark was Bush. But it was even more decisively thanks to the cowardice of the Democrats, who responded in their overwhelming majority by joining in the Republican pile-on, demanding that Kerry apologize and banishing him from campaign events.

Of course, the explosive content of Kerry’s misstatement is the reality that the vast majority of those sent to Iraq are drawn from the working class and the poor who have neither the resources nor opportunities to seek higher education and are drawn into the military largely in search of employment and cash bonuses offered for enlistment. That Kerry could not hear the class implications of his own words only points to the vast gulf dividing him and other members of the financial elite from the mass of working people.

The panicked reaction of the Democrats to Kerry’s remark is one more indication of the party’s support for militarism and a continued occupation aimed at achieving the American ruling establishment’s bipartisan policy of seizing control of Iraq’s strategically important oil reserves.

In all likelihood, a Democratic victory on November 7 will signal a renewal of bipartisanship in pursuing this goal. This will be furthered as well by the anticipated release—shortly after the elections—of the report by the Iraq Study Group, headed by former Republican secretary of state James Baker and former Democratic representative Lee Hamilton.

The recommendations of the bipartisan panel could further the Democratic agenda on Iraq, which is not to end the US occupation but to rescue it. Plans advanced by leading Democrats have ranged from tactical redeployment—meaning a withdrawal of US occupation troops to super-bases and oilfields, with the use of increased air strikes to punish the restive population—to the partition of the country into Kurdish, Shia and Sunni enclaves.

This is a proposal that would facilitate the negotiation of oil contracts with relatively powerless statelets, while necessitating a bloodbath and population transfers on a par with India’s partition in 1948.

A Democratic ascendancy in the US Congress will also make all the more likely the renewal of the draft—the dragooning of American youth into the military to serve as cannon fodder in Iraq and elsewhere.

Illinois Congressman Rahm Emanuel, the principal figure in the US House of Representatives responsible for selecting this year’s Democratic candidates, has written a book entitled *The Plan*, which lays out the party’s agenda on a number of issues. This includes the creation of a new mandatory program of “universal citizen service” in which “all Americans between the ages of 18 and 25 should be asked to serve their country by going through three months of basic civil defense training and community service.”

While the book claims this is not a step toward the draft, one doesn’t have to be a soothsayer to predict that, combined with Democratic criticisms that not enough troops have been deployed in Iraq and the party’s proposal to significantly expand the ranks of the US Army, this is precisely what it represents.

And the restoration of the draft to provide the military forces needed in both current and future US wars can far better be advanced by the Democrats than by discredited figures like Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld. Already, Democratic politicians have indicated the line of the “liberal” argument for expanded militarism, pitching it as “equality of sacrifice” in which the burden would not be borne only by the disadvantaged.

Thus, while a Democratic victory on November 7 will be the result, above all, of mass popular opposition to the US war in Iraq, its effect will be quite the opposite—a deepening and expansion of American militarism.

Of course, there is no guarantee that even a tactical shift in relation to US policy can be effected without precipitating a deep-going political

crisis. The gang of war criminals in the Bush administration fear that even the suggestion of backing down can lead to political and personal ruin.

Thus, on Friday, Cheney told ABC news, "It may not be popular with the public. It doesn't matter, in the sense that we have to continue what we think is right." The objective, he said, "is victory in Iraq. And it's full speed ahead on that basis."

And what about the question of democratic rights? Again, a look at the positions of Hillary Clinton, my Democratic opponent and the perceived front-runner for the 2008 presidential nomination, provides ample insight into what can be expected. In the debates with her right-wing Republican challenger, Clinton took pains to stress her support for the USA Patriot Act, noting that her only qualms were over what she perceived as insufficient funds to pursue its police-state goals within New York itself.

While she voted against the Military Commissions Act, she and the rest of the Senate Democratic leadership decided not to use a filibuster to block this frontal attack on the US Constitution, including the abrogation of the bedrock principle of habeas corpus. More recently, she has voiced her support for legislation giving the US president authority to order the torture of suspects in "extraordinary" situations. In short, no halt in the destruction of democratic rights can be anticipated, much less a reversal of the reactionary measures implemented over the past five years.

Finally, on the question of social inequality, continuity with the past five years is also indicated. Nowhere have the Democrats waged a campaign appealing directly to the class grievances of hundreds of millions of American working people over the decline in real wages, under conditions in which the top 1 percent has doubled its share of the national income. Instead, Democrats have run largely on a program of fiscal austerity, demanding no new taxes and no increased social expenditures. At the same time, the party calls for an expansion of the military budget.

Moreover, Democratic leaders in the House who are poised to take over key regulatory committees have gone to great lengths to reassure the ruling elite that they face no threat to their wealth and power. Thus, New York Congressman Charlie Rangel, who would head the House Ways and Means Committee, which sets tax policy, has sworn that there will be no attempt to reverse the sweeping tax cuts for the wealthy signed into law by the Bush administration.

On Saturday, another erstwhile liberal, Massachusetts Congressman Barney Frank, who would head the House Financial Services Committee, told the *Wall Street Journal* that he was prepared to ease enforcement of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, the rather mild regulatory legislation passed in the wake of Enron and other corporate scandals, and would make no attempt to regulate hedge funds used by the wealthy to garner super-profits from insider deals.

The character of the Democratic candidates themselves represents another pledge to the ruling elite that the party's ascension will not shift fundamental policy. They have been handpicked by the right wing of the party to include a number of former Republicans, business executives, former military officers and opponents of abortion rights and gay marriage.

There can be no anticipation of relief from the deepening crisis facing millions of American working people, who are confronted by falling living standards, rising debt and the destruction of social services. There is every indication that this crisis will deepen sharply in the months following the election.

The Bush administration last week hailed the latest unemployment figures, which showed the official jobless rate at 4.4 percent, the lowest level since May 2001. But these figures only serve to mask the real state of affairs.

The economy added only 92,000 new jobs in October, far fewer than the 150,000 required to keep pace with the number of new applicants seeking to enter the workforce.

This reality found stark expression here in the streets of Manhattan on

Friday. When a Times Square candy store placed an ad for new workers—65 full-time jobs and about 140 part-time—an estimated 5,000 people turned out, prompting the city to deploy mounted police to control the crowd. The company was so overwhelmed that it shut its doors and cops ordered the crowd to disperse.

In addition to the low growth in employment, the Labor Department reported that the manufacturing sector lost 39,000 jobs in October and the construction industry, shaken by a fall in the housing market, lost 26,000. Meanwhile, economic growth figures have plunged from 5.6 percent in the first quarter of this year to 1.6 percent in the third quarter. As hiring trends generally lag several months behind such changes in economic growth, a further wave of mass layoffs is in the offing.

Underlying these immediate negative economic indices lie the gross imbalances in the global capitalist economy, underscored by the record US trade and budget deficits, which threaten to precipitate a major worldwide recession.

Thus, the inevitable disillusionment with the Democratic Party will unfold in tandem with a deepening social and economic crisis, creating the conditions for a radicalization of a new layer of workers, students and youth.

We do not underestimate the difficulties ahead or the political confusion that a Democratic victory may precipitate, at least in the immediate term. The pragmatic tendency expressed in the familiar sentiment—"give them a chance, they just got in there"—will undoubtedly make itself felt. But, as Trotsky noted in a previous period of great crisis, "objective historical necessity in the long run will cut a path for itself in the consciousness of the vanguard of the working class."

Our election campaign has served to prepare that path. We have every reason to be proud of this campaign waged in New York and nationwide and every reason to anticipate that the struggle we have waged for our program has made an impact and will bear fruit in the coming period.

We began this campaign in July with the extraordinary effort by comrades and supporters to collect the daunting number of signatures required by the state to secure a place on the ballot. In the space of just six weeks, we gathered 25,000 signatures across more than half of the congressional districts in the state, from New York City to Buffalo.

This achievement was testimony to both the political determination of our own members and supporters and the intersection of the demands raised by our party for an end to the Iraq war, a halt to the attacks on democratic rights and for social equality with the changes in consciousness among broad layers of the working class.

The overcoming of the hurdles placed in the path of our party here in New York was joined with the full-scale battle we were compelled to wage against the Democratic Party in Illinois, which conducted an extra-legal campaign to keep Joe Parnarasukis, the SEP's candidate for the state Senate, off the ballot. This battle, which won the party widespread sympathy, only underscored the degradation of the entire American political system and the necessity for a revolutionary socialist alternative.

Through the generous sacrifices of comrades and supporters, we were able to open a campaign headquarters and print tens of thousands of election brochures that were distributed throughout the petitioning drive and afterwards.

At the end of September, we had the publication of our national election statement, which firmly distinguished our campaign from that of any other party. This 11-page document provides not only a concrete program, but a scientific analysis of the fundamental political questions facing the American and international working class. In stark contrast to the lies and slanders that pass for political propaganda in the two big business parties, our program has served to educate the working class.

Moreover, in the course of the campaign we issued at least 40 statements, addressing issues ranging from the bipartisan support of Clinton and the Republicans for the continuing war in Iraq, to police-state

repression and torture, to the Israeli war on Lebanon, to questions confronting immigrant workers, to the Queens blackout and the health crisis facing 9/11 rescue and recovery workers.

Our campaign has also stood in stark contrast to that of the so-called lefts of the Green Party. In New York, the Greens defended our right to participate in the Senate debates from which we were excluded, and we took the same position in relation to them as a basic question of democratic rights. Their senate candidate Howie Hawkins and I were both chased away from the debate site in Rochester by police.

The differences between ourselves and the Greens, however, are of a profound political and class character. In the end, no matter how left-sounding the individual candidate, the program of the Greens is one of reforming the capitalist system. It accepts the rule of the corporate elite, proposing only that it become more socially and environmentally responsible.

What became more clear in the course of the campaign in our contacts with the Greens was: (1) their fundamental orientation to the Democratic Party and their agenda of seeking to push it to the left; (2) their utter lack of any class appeal to the working class and orientation to a vaguely defined “middle class,” much like the Democrats themselves, and (3) the completely nationalist and even community-based character of their politics.

The bankruptcy of such politics emerges clearly when one considers what is supposedly the core issue for the Greens—the protection of the environment. Scientists are warning with increasing alarm that without a fundamental social and economic shift in policies internationally in the next decade, climate change brought on by the increase in greenhouse gas levels will threaten the survival of life on the planet.

The idea that such a transformation can be effected on a national basis and without overthrowing the profit system is ludicrous on its face.

The real content of the nationalism and reformism of the Greens becomes clear when one examines the policies they have pursued wherever they have achieved political power, most notably in Germany, where the party jettisoned its earlier championing of environmental reform and pacifism and the Green foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, engineered the deployment of German troops in Bosnia and Afghanistan—the first such intervention since the fall of the Third Reich—and covertly aided the Bush administration both in launching the Iraq war and in its illegal abduction, imprisonment and torture of alleged terrorist suspects.

No one should underestimate the impact that our party’s campaign has had. Our exclusion from the debates and the blackout imposed by the media are designed, of course, to prevent our program from reaching a broader public. But we have continuously challenged the attempts to isolate us, and wherever we have been given a hearing—speaking before audiences of students, at community forums, and, at least here in New York in the one opportunity we have had to put our message across on network television—we have won a powerful response.

We are confident that this response will find its expression in the period ahead in a major expansion in the membership and influence of our movement. We are not indifferent to what happens at the polls on Tuesday, but we know that whatever the results, the politics of war and reaction and the attacks on the working class will continue and deepen. We aim to continue to provide both the programmatic alternative and the leadership that the working class requires.

As the founder of our movement, Leon Trotsky, put it in 1938 in a speech directed to the American section of the Fourth International, “We are not a party as other parties. Our ambition is not only to have more members, more papers, more money in the treasury, more deputies. All that is necessary, but only as a means. Our aim is the full material and spiritual liberation of the toilers and exploited through the socialist revolution. Nobody will prepare it and nobody will guide it but ourselves.”

This remains our fundamental perspective and we are confident that the struggle we have waged in the course of this campaign will advance the cause of this liberation and this revolution in the coming period.



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