

Contributions to the ISSE/SEP conference: Bill Van Auken and Barry Grey

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The following are the contributions made to the International Students for Social Equality/Socialist Equality Party Emergency Conference Against War by Bill Van Auken, WSWS writer and 2006 SEP candidate for New York Senate, and Barry Grey, a writer and member of the WSWS international editorial board.

The conference was held March 31-April 1 in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

The contributions were made in the discussion on the main resolution (see “End the occupation of Iraq! No to war against Iran! For an international socialist movement against war!”)

Contributions on the work of the International Students for Social Equality as well as international greetings will be published in the coming days.

I want to address the question that came up relating to the nature of the regime in Iran and our attitude towards it, in light of the evidence of moves toward direct military intervention against Iran.

I think we have made this very clear in the material on the WSWS. In the statement “For an international mobilization of workers and youth against the war in Iraq”, we write, “The ruling elites of countries that have been historically oppressed by imperialism have responded to the US-led wars of aggression by attempting to utilize them to promote their own regional ambitions. The government of Iran collaborated directly in facilitating the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and has since sought to use the crisis confronting the US interventions to expand Iranian influence in both countries.”

This is undoubtedly the case. I think that when we talk about how we approach Iran, we recognize that the government in Iran represents the very definite class interests of the bourgeoisie coming out of the bazaar merchants within Iran, and seeks to promote the expansion of these interests, the expansion of Iranian capital, and the advancement of the profits of these layers.

These interests are profoundly hostile to those of the working class. All of the statements that have been made—including various denunciations of the US, denunciations of Israel, etc.—have been dedicated primarily to obscuring the social interests of those in power, of diverting the anger and hatred of the Iranian working class, both against American imperialism in the region and in response to their own social conditions. It is a regime that carries out brutal oppression against the working class, which was seen most recently in the attacks on striking teachers, in which thousands have been beaten and arrested, leaders jailed, and so forth.

This is our fundamental attitude toward the question of bourgeois nationalism. All over the world this is the case. The predominant tendency of the “left” protest groups is to celebrate these nationalist movements, to celebrate the statements of the Iranians denouncing Bush, and of course, most particularly, to celebrate the politics of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela.

We are hostile to all these political tendencies, because we recognize that what is being celebrated is an attempt to find a substitute for the independent political mobilization of the working class, a substitute for proletarian socialism, a substitute for an international perspective.

The “anti-imperialism” of layers such as those represented by Chavez is

based fundamentally on the decline of US imperialism itself. Within Latin America, the role of elements like Chavez in Venezuela and others of a somewhat less radical stripe—Lula in Brazil, Kirchner in Argentina, Evo Morales in Bolivia—is founded on a basic economic and political reality: the United States has lost the immense economic and political influence that it once had. It is no longer the only game in town in Latin America. There are other significant players—including China and Europe—that in some ways are beginning to eclipse the United States’ economic role in the region. These dynamics were seen in Bush’s recent tour of Latin America.

This is a fundamental question, because our movement has a long experience with those who have attempted to promote such elements. Chavez is a representative of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie. He represents their interests, and he represents them quite well, thank you.

The banking sector in Venezuela has never done better. Profits have never been higher. The commanding heights of the economy remain firmly in the hands of national and international capital.

A section of profits—which, as I say have never been higher, both in oil and banking—are diverted into social welfare programs. These are essentially used to try to placate the anger and resentments of masses of poor people, whose essential position in society has not changed. Social inequality has never been higher, rates of poverty remain the same.

We base ourselves on the struggle against this outlook. We recognize that those who are promoting these bourgeois forces do so in behalf of very definite social interests. Every one of these governments is now recruiting elements from those who formally called themselves Trotskyists. Chavez has hired a new labor minister who is a former member of a Pabloite pseudo-Trotskyist group. Lula’s personal advisor is a former supporter of the French International Communist Organization (OCI), as were many of his ministers. When this begins, when these pseudo-Trotskyist tendencies are being brought into bourgeois governments, it is in anticipation of enormous social explosions, and an attempt to divert those explosions.

I think the resolution lays out a scientific historical analysis that locates the origins of this war, and future wars that are being prepared by American imperialism and other imperialist countries, within the objective contradictions of the capitalist system itself.

It therefore concludes that imperialist war can be opposed only through the development of a movement that expresses consciously the objective interests of the broad mass of the working class, that bases itself on the struggle for the political unity and independence of the only social force can stop the war. It argues that this can happen only through our political struggle to bring into the working class, and among young people and students, an understanding of their real position in society. We must explain the need to break politically with all sections of the ruling elite and their political parties and establish the political independence of the working class.

These conceptions are absolutely fundamental. Before considering questions of tactics, as important as they are, it is necessary to think

carefully about the nature of the objective situation and the fundamental characteristics of the movement that we need to build in order to defeat imperialist war.

What are the implications of a massive defeat of American imperialism in Iraq, in the Middle East, which is what is happening? This defeat expresses a vast historical change. The power that to a large extent maintained world capitalism in the last century, whose strength and expansion economically made it very difficult for the working class—first of all in the US, but not only in the US—to achieve socialist consciousness and organization—this is really coming to an end before our eyes and the eyes of the entire world. Does this not have revolutionary implications? Does it not imply that we are entering a period of massive social upheavals that will pose the question in a direct way: revolution or counterrevolution, socialism or barbarism?

Within this context, it is useful to make some further observations regarding the political crisis of the Bush administration and of the United States as a whole, in order make clearer the nature of the period we have entered into and the tectonic political changes that are ahead. Even such fixtures as the 150-year-old two-party system in the US are by no means permanent. There is an immense crisis that in some respects is perhaps obvious. There is, however, a certain inertia in political life, in which old forms tend to hang on even after the social and economic bases upon which they rested are virtually gone.

Hegel speaks of the real and the rational, noting that when something becomes irrational, it ceases to be real. I think that this conception applies to the present political situation. The bases upon which the existing political order arose are largely gone. The 2000 election marked a real watershed in this process—the theft of an election sanctioned by the Supreme Court—but this was an expression not of the strength of American capitalism, but of its weakness. It reflected within the political elite, and within the Republican Party, a sense of foreboding, rather than confidence.

I want to cite a column that was published March 25 in the *Washington Post* by Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security advisor for President Jimmy Carter, with the headline, “Terrorized by ‘War on Terror.’” He gives a sense of this foreboding, writing, “The ‘war on terror’ has created a culture of fear in America ... The culture of fear is like a genie that has been let out of its bottle. It acquires a life of its own—and can become demoralizing. America today is not the self-confident and determined nation that responded to Pearl Harbor; nor is it the America that heard from its leader, at another moment of crisis, the powerful words ‘the only thing we have to fear is fear itself ...’”

What has developed since the theft of the 2000 elections? Both in 2004 and 2006, you had on the one hand an ever more overt and vicious attack on voting rights, along with attempts to manipulate voting results on the part of the Republican Party and the Bush administration. Meanwhile, the Democrats, as we know very well, have worked systematically to block all independent and third-party candidates, above all left-wing candidates. This is an expression of a political system that is on its last legs—in other words, it feels compelled increasingly to rely on repression to maintain the two-party monopoly.

This is very much what is involved in the current scandal involving the fired US attorneys. A central aspect is the attempt by the Bush administration and the Republican Party to use the US attorney system to suppress voting rights for likely Democratic voters, and to use criminal prosecutions to manipulate elections or even overturn elections that go the other way.

I think there is a certain parallel between the attempt to use these types of methods for domestic political purposes and the notion that American capitalism can solve its international problems simply through the use of military force. In both cases, you can’t. The growing opposition to both parties, the narrowing of their popular base—these are objective

phenomena that can’t be reversed through fraud and repression. What are these parties today? They are little more than direct apparatuses of corporations and very rich constituencies. This is increasingly obvious to everyone.

I want to briefly cite a Pew poll, “Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes,” which came out recently. Some of its major findings indicate that the population as a whole is moving to the left. They poll found this: “Increased public support for the social safety net, signs of growing public concern about income inequality, and a diminished appetite for assertive national security policies have improved the political landscape for the Democrats as the 2008 presidential campaign gets underway.

“At the same time, many of the key trends that nurtured the Republican resurgence in the mid-1990s have moderated. The proportion of Americans who support traditional social values has edged downward since 1994, while the proportion of Americans expressing strong personal religious commitment also has declined modestly ... In 2002, less than a year after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, more than six-in-ten agreed with the statement, ‘The best way to ensure peace is through military strength.’ Today, about half express similar confidence in military power.”

The poll finds greater public acceptance of homosexuality and less desire for women to play “traditional roles in society.” This is in a country where last year a bill to amend the US Constitution to ban gay marriages was defeated in the Senate by one or two votes. Such is the incredible disconnect between the political establishment and the sentiments of broad masses of people.

The poll also found, “Interpersonal racial attitudes continue to moderate. More than eight-in-ten (83 percent) agree that ‘it’s all right for blacks and whites to date,’ up six percentage points since 2003 and 13 points from a Pew survey conducted 10 years ago.”

Now, on economic and social distress in the US, the poll found, “More than four-in-ten (44 percent) say they ‘don’t have enough money to make ends meet,’ up from 35 percent in 2002.” It goes on to say, “In addition, an increasing number of Americans subscribe to the sentiment ‘today it’s really true that the rich just get richer while the poor get poorer.’ Currently, 73 percent concur with that sentiment, up from 65 percent five years ago.”

Given this general description of a population that is clearly moving to the left, you have indications of the rapid and growing erosion of support for the two-party system and the political establishment as a whole. The poll finds, “Even more striking than the changes in some core political and social values is the dramatic shift in party identification that has occurred during the past five years. In 2002, the country was equally divided along partisan lines: 43 percent identified with the Republican Party or leaned to the GOP, while an identical proportion said they were Democrats. Today, half of the public (50 percent) either identifies as a Democrat or says they lean to the Democratic Party, compared with 35 percent who align with the GOP.

“Yet the Democrats’ growing advantage in party identification is tempered by the fact that the Democratic Party’s overall standing with the public is no better than it was when President Bush was first inaugurated in 2001. Instead, it is the Republican Party that has rapidly lost public support, particularly among political independents. Faced with an unpopular president who is waging an increasingly unpopular war, the proportion of Americans who hold a favorable view of the Republican Party stands at 41 percent, down 15 points since January 2001. But during that same period, the proportion expressing a positive view of Democrats has declined by six points, to 54 percent.”

Finally, the poll reports, “Americans feel increasingly estranged from their government. Barely a third (34 percent) agree with the statement, ‘most elected officials care what people like me think,’ nearly matching the 20-year low of 33 percent recorded in 1994 and a 10-point drop since

2002."

Given this situation, what are the implications of the failure in Iraq, and, in fact, the failure of the American system and ruling elite everywhere, including in the US? What are the words that resonate today in relation to the American government? Abu Ghraib, Fallujah, Katrina. Bush exemplifies this crisis, and in different ways so do the Democrats. And it is reflected even in the quality of the political figures. There are no FDRs, no John Kennedy's around—people who had certain capabilities and certain insights into social forces. Who are the figures today? Bush, Cheney, Harry Reid, Nancy Pelosi.

Robert Novak, the right-wing Republican commentator, published a column on March 26 that was headlined, "A President All Alone." He wrote, "Two weeks earlier on Capitol Hill, there was a groundswell of Republican demands—public and private—that President Bush pardon Scooter Libby. Last week, as Alberto Gonzales came under withering Democratic fire, there were no public GOP declarations of support amid private predictions of the attorney general's demise ... But this is less a Gonzales problem than a Bush problem. With nearly two years remaining in his presidency, George W. Bush is alone. In half a century, I have not seen a president so isolated from his own party in Congress—not Jimmy Carter, not even Richard Nixon as he faced impeachment."

What is Washington DC? There are the politicians, there are the think tanks with their ample staffs, there are the upper echelons of the federal bureaucracy, the lobbyists, and the media. You are talking about some tens of thousands of people. Of these, the big players are maybe a few thousand. They run the country. They live in an environment of raw power, greed, intrigue. They are really incredibly isolated, insulated from the vast mass of people and their concerns. They sense the growing crisis as tremors that are threatening to blow up the whole edifice.

There is a buildup of anger, disillusionment, discontent, frustration in the population, and a completely dysfunctional political system. What are the prospects for the self-reform of this system? What are the prospects for a liberal-reformist renewal led by an energized and socially committed Democratic Party? There are no such prospects.

But if one reads *The Nation* magazine, one sees that they speak as though the prospects have never been better. In their current issue, they have an article about how the Democrats are supposedly coming to the defense of wounded soldiers.

The Nation writes, "After Congressman Bob Filner read the *Washington Post*'s series on the scandalous treatment of injured soldiers at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, he called Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and delivered a simple message: Their party had to fund the wounded warriors as well as the war—or instead of it ... As the new chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, Filner is now in a position to translate his advocacy into action. 'This is a test for our party,' Filner told me during an interview in his Washington office, which looks directly out on the Capitol dome."

This is brainless and breathless nonsense. The fact is that in an historical sense, the game is up, and the contradictions of American and world capitalism are such that this whole political structure, which is increasingly sclerotic, criminal in its modus operandi, and entirely divorced from the people, lacking any genuine mass social base, is going to come under immense strain, and new forces will emerge, and we are very confident that this will take the form of an independent political movement of the working class.



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