

The John Edwards campaign: A representative of the American ruling elite postures as a working class populist

Tom Carter
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On a campaign stop in Portland, Oregon last Wednesday, candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination John Edwards was introduced by Tom Chamberlain, head of the Oregon AFL-CIO, as “a blue collar president for a blue collar America.” To whistles and applause, Edwards emerged in blue jeans and a blazer as loud rock music blared over loudspeakers.

One might imagine that a “blue collar,” populist campaign would be a somewhat problematic endeavor for someone like John Edwards, a multimillionaire lawyer and consultant for a \$30 billion hedge fund with a record of support for antidemocratic, militarist policies during his six years in the US Senate.

Nonetheless, this particular campaign speech in Portland, like many the former senator has delivered to meetings around the country in recent weeks, was littered with appeals to the nation’s working poor: “I think it says something about our character, how we treat the needs of our own people who wake up every day just worried about surviving,” Edwards intoned.

Edwards proceeded to denounce President Bush’s recent veto of the latest war-funding bill, a bill he falsely characterized as representing opposition to the war. Meanwhile, he called for universal healthcare, regulations on predatory lending, and restrictions on carbon emissions.

Edwards made similar statements the following day before a labor meeting in Tucson, Arizona. “I’m the only candidate who talks about poverty in America,” he said.

The cynicism with which Edwards has conducted himself during his political career deserves a brief review.

While he was the vice-presidential candidate on the 2004 Democratic ticket, Edwards participated in a debate with Vice President Dick Cheney in which he attacked Cheney, former CEO of Halliburton, for making use of offshore tax havens and loopholes to avoid paying taxes. “Those are the kind of things that ought to be closed,” Edwards declared. “They ought to be closed. They ought to be closed for anybody. They ought to be closed whether they’re personal, and they ought to be closed whether they apply to a corporation.”

After his Senate term was up, however, Edwards took a consulting job at Fortress Investment Group—a \$30 billion hedge fund operation incorporated in the Cayman Islands, where investors can avoid paying US taxes. He continued his consulting work there until December 2006, when he quit and announced his

intent to seek the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination.

According to the Center for Responsive Politics, Fortress Investment Group is the top contributor in Edwards’ campaign for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, with fund executives having donated \$182,260 so far—more than twice the amount supplied by his second-largest contributor.

Throughout his campaign in 2004, both during the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination, where he finished a poor second to Kerry, and later in the general election campaign, Edwards’ trademark speech came to be known under title “Two Americas.”

“Today, under George W. Bush, there are two Americas, not one,” Edwards declared. “One America that does the work, another America that reaps the reward. One America that pays the taxes, another America that gets the tax breaks,” and so on. As we noted recently, when Edwards settled into his \$6 million, 102-acre North Carolina estate this past year, he left no doubt as to which of these Americas he actually belonged. (See “John Edwards’ ‘Other America’: Democratic presidential hopeful moves into 28,200 square foot mansion”)

Edwards is being assisted in his posturing as an “advocate for the people” by the trade union bureaucracy, which has bent over backwards to provide him with campaign venues, friendly audiences, and photo-ops at workplaces. In 2006, the AFL-CIO awarded him the Paul Wellstone Award, given out annually to the politician who most dependably advances the interests of the bureaucracy.

The cynicism involved in the unions’ support for Edwards is extraordinary. In 2006, for example, Edwards embarked on a “Wake Up Wal-Mart” bus tour, sponsored by the United Food and Commercial Workers, which according to the tour’s web site involved “19 states, 35 cities in 35 days with 1 mission—to change Wal-Mart and change America for the better.” At each stop, Edwards denounced Wal-Mart for its low wages, lack of job safety, poor healthcare benefits, and extravagant CEO salaries.

The UFCW apparently was not concerned that Edwards profitably held Wal-Mart stock from 1999 through 2003, according to public Senate financial records. He sold the stock when he began his 2004 presidential bid.

After making his fortune as a North Carolina trial lawyer, Edwards spent \$6 million of his own money to defeat incumbent

Republican Senator Lauch Faircloth in 1998. Even before the end of his first full term in the Senate, during which he distinguished himself as a reactionary and champion of the interests of American imperialism, he sought the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination.

While he lost the 2004 presidential nomination—in large part because of his pro-war positions—he was subsequently selected by Kerry as his running mate. He toured the country, denouncing “wealthy insiders” and appealing to voters by condemning the growth of social inequality.

After Kerry’s defeat in 2004, Edwards did not leave politics completely, however. In a 2006 Council on Foreign Relations report, “Russia’s Wrong Direction: What the US Can and Should Do,” for example, one finds Edwards denouncing Russia’s refusal to cooperate fully in the so-called “war on terror” and, more importantly, to cooperate with American oil businesses.

In this election, Edwards is attempting to run a very specific kind of campaign, combining various populist slogans with nationalism, patriotism and protectionism.

Edwards had this to say about immigration and border security in Arizona on Thursday: “I agree our border is not secure. We’ve done a terrible job,” he said, going on to discuss immigrants’ “need to learn English.”

Edwards also appeals to the massive antiwar sentiment expressed in last November’s elections, lauding the recent war-funding bill passed by Congress as “antiwar.” In fact, the bill funds the war to the tune of more than \$100 billion, while it includes a timeline for a tactical redeployment inside Iraq and benchmarks for the Maliki regime that include a crackdown on the insurgency.

“The American people have given us a mission to end this war in Iraq,” Edwards nonetheless declared in Arizona. “I’m optimistic that Congress will stay strong.” In a recent TV ad aired in the Washington DC area, Edwards called on Congress to send Bush the exact same bill a second time.

Democratic Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid scoffed at this ad, characterizing it as meaningless campaign posturing. “He’s not in the Senate; I am,” Reid said. “He doesn’t have to cast votes here in the Senate; we do.” In other words, if Edwards were in the Senate, he would certainly fall behind whatever compromise bill is worked out between the Democrats and the Bush administration.

When Edwards actually did have to cast votes in the Senate, he voted “yes” to the authorization to use force in Afghanistan, the infamous Patriot Act, and the May 1999 air strikes in Kosovo. As for Iraq, he personally co-sponsored the Senate version of the authorization to use military force against Iraq, passed in October 2002.

He now claims that the Patriot Act “removes liberties that it’s supposed to protect,” and declares he was “wrong” and “mistaken” to back the Iraq war authorization. This is merely hypocritical posturing. As with the Democratic Party leadership as a whole, Edwards does not oppose the occupation of Iraq any more now than he did in 2002. There exist tactical differences within the American ruling establishment over policy in Iraq, but these differences have nothing to do with the mass antiwar sentiment of the population.

Like the other Democrats, Edwards refers to the war in

Afghanistan as the “good war,” and frequently attacks the Bush administration from the right regarding its prosecution of that war. The party adamantly defends the interests of American imperialism in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Democratic strategists and wealthy campaign financiers regard Edwards as a serious candidate in part because of his connections in the impoverished and historically conservative American Southeast, which includes Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, and North and South Carolina. According to research by PoliticalMoneyLine.org, Edwards has so far raised \$2.7 million in that region, while his Democratic opponent Hilary Clinton, by comparison, has only raised \$440,000, and Barack Obama raised \$706,000.

As of this writing, Edwards has raised a total of \$14 million for his campaign, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. The financing of the Edwards campaign is typical of all the Democratic nominees, who are pulling in enormous contributions from big business and the wealthy. Edwards is third in the Democratic “money primary” behind Clinton (\$36.1 million) and Obama (\$25.8 million).

However, in terms of cash “on-hand”—total campaign contributions minus spending to date—Edwards’ war chest comes to \$10.7 million. By comparison, the top Republican candidates Mitt Romney and Rudy Giuliani have \$11.8 million and \$11.9 million in cash “on-hand,” respectively.

Why are these huge sums of money being accumulated and spent? The overriding concern of the Democrats and their constituents in the American financial elite going into 2008 is channeling the mass antiwar sentiment and opposition to the destruction of jobs and living standards behind the Democratic Party, which will continue the war and defend the interests of the American ruling elite.

In this context, the various populist and “antiwar” appeals by Edwards could play an important role in bolstering illusions in the Democrats and providing a fig leaf for this right-wing imperialist party.



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