

US antiwar protest groups silent on Cindy Sheehan's resignation from Democratic Party

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The organizations and publications that head up the antiwar protest movement in the US have sought to suppress any discussion of the political conclusion drawn by antiwar campaigner Cindy Sheehan that the time has come for opponents of the war in Iraq to break with the Democratic Party.

Sheehan issued an open letter to the Democratic Congress May 26, announcing her resignation from the Democratic Party in response to last month's vote to provide another \$100 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Two days later, she announced she was temporarily suspending her active role in antiwar protest campaigns, in part due to family and health concerns. In that letter she noted bitterly that she had come under attack from some within the antiwar protest milieu because of her public repudiation of the Democrats.

Both the corporate-controlled media and the antiwar "left" groups have focused attention on the second statement and downplayed or suppressed outright any reference to the first. (A Google news search, for instance, reveals that not a single "mainstream" publication quoted Sheehan's declaration, "I am leaving the Democratic Party," although there were hundreds of reports of her second statement about discontinuing her active role in the antiwar protest movement.)

The reasons for the media to suppress any reference to Sheehan's decision to quit the Democratic Party are obvious: the major daily newspapers and television networks are controlled by the same financial aristocracy whose social interests are upheld by the two-party system. Anything that challenges the political monopoly of the Democrats and Republicans must be either ignored or ridiculed.

But what of the antiwar protest organizations and the array of left-liberal pressure groups? A survey of their responses to Sheehan's resignation from the Democratic Party shows a revealing pattern. All of these groups, from the avowedly pro-Democratic Party MoveOn.org to ostensibly "socialist" organizations such as the International Socialist Organization and Workers World Party, shy away from, downplay or flatly reject Sheehan's conclusion that a political alternative to the Democratic Party is needed.

The essential political orientation common to all of these organizations is reflected in the similarity of their methods. None of these groups presents Sheehan's criticism of the Democrats fairly and honestly, and none of them directly addresses her political conclusion. They combine falsification and distortion of the most shameless kind with abject political cowardice.

The Nation

John Nichols of *The Nation* magazine describes Sheehan patronizingly as "an honest player who spoke her mind—sometimes intemperately, often

imperfectly, always sincerely." His commentary does not mention Sheehan's resignation from the Democratic Party, making only this cryptic reference: "It is reasonable to argue with Sheehan about her read of politics and assessment of politicians. She's the first to admit she's no expert on campaign strategy or legislative tactics" (See: "Cindy Sheehan's Farewell").

The issue, however, is not one of political tactics and strategy, but of basic principle. Sheehan has concluded—on the basis of a deeply felt and steadfast opposition to the war and the Bush administration, and bitter personal experience with the two-faced and cynical maneuvers of the Democrats—that the Democratic Party is not an instrument through which a struggle against war and for progressive social change can be conducted, but is instead an obstacle to any such struggle.

Sheehan has, to her credit, decided to take a principled stand. That she as yet lacks a worked-out political perspective is entirely understandable in a country where historical truth is systematically suppressed and a media establishment devotes its huge resources to pumping out government propaganda and lies on a daily basis. Her great strength is that she strives to speak the truth.

She has taken the measure of the Democrats not only from their political record, but also from considerable first-hand experience. She has met or been in contact with nearly every leading Democratic politician in the two years since she first came to public attention when she established "Camp Casey" on the outskirts of Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, and began to demand an explanation from the "commander-in-chief" on why her son, killed in Iraq in April of 2004, died. Her revulsion against the double-dealing and cowardly capitulation of the congressional Democrats reflects the thinking of millions of people in the US.

As Sheehan said in an interview this week on the radio program "Democracy Now!," "If we don't get a viable third party—or some people say second party; you know, the Democrats and Republicans are so similar, and their pockets are lined by the same people—we are—our representative republic is doomed... we really need an opposition party in this country. But we vote out of our fear. We go and we vote for the lesser of two evils, and we always end up getting somebody evil."

The Nation is adamantly opposed to any struggle to develop a political movement of the working class independent of the Democratic Party and opposed to the two-party system. Its entire orientation revolves around the election of a Democratic administration in 2008 and continued Democratic control of Congress—which would result, not incidentally, in hundreds if not thousands of well-paying jobs for the privileged middle-class layer whose interests it articulates.

MoveOn.org

Another major player in the antiwar protest movement is MoveOn.org, which represents a wing of the Democratic Party. Its executive director, Eli Pariser, was interviewed Wednesday on CNN about Sheehan's suspension of activity in antiwar protests. He voiced criticism of the Senate and House Democrats who voted for the war-funding bill, but added, "Let's not forget, it's the Republicans who are obstructing the—you know, who are obstructing the two-thirds vote we're going to need to override President Bush's veto."

At one point, CNN interviewer John Roberts asked Pariser directly about Sheehan's criticism of MoveOn.org for acting as a political arm of the Democrats and subordinating the issue of the war in Iraq to the campaign to elect Democrats in 2008. According to the transcript, Pariser's answer combined evasion with a slur against Sheehan, suggesting her response to the war was too emotional.

Roberts: MoveOn.org was one of Cindy Sheehan's early supporters. She then turned against your organization as she moved further to the left, claiming that you're not anti-war enough. Is there any validity to her charges?

Pariser: Well, you know, I think none of us can really understand what it's like to be a mother who lost her son in this war. And I think, you know, in any war, but especially in a war that was as tragically mismanaged, as huge a blunder as this one. So, Cindy and MoveOn, you know, our members have had differences with her from time to time. I think she was a voice though at the beginning who spoke out when few other people would. And we're very thankful for that (Partial transcript here).

The Green Party

The Green Party issued a statement May 30 hailing Sheehan for "her courage and sacrifice." The statement declared, "Green Party leaders offered their thanks to antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan for dedicating three years of her life to ending the Iraq War, in the wake of Ms. Sheehan's announcement that she is retiring from the movement to end the war".

This statement continued with quotations from various state and national representatives of the party. Nowhere in any of their comments was there a single reference to the Democratic Party, or to Sheehan's break with it, despite the fact that the very existence of the Green Party as an electoral organization is supposedly bound up with a rejection of the two-party system.

The Greens do not welcome Sheehan's public letter of resignation from the Democratic Party, comment on its significance, or suggest that in doing so she is giving voice to the sentiments of millions of people currently trapped within the two-party framework. This silence demonstrates that the Green Party's independence from the Democratic Party is purely nominal, a device to allow the Greens to exert a bit of pressure in an attempt to push the Democrats to the left. They do not aspire to lead a mass break with the two-party system, nor do they believe such a political eruption is possible, or even desirable.

United for Peace and Justice

A similar commentary on Sheehan's statements came from Leslie Cagan, co-chair of United for Peace and Justice, the major liberal-left umbrella group for antiwar protest demonstrations. Cagan's response was published as an article on the web site of *Political Affairs*, the magazine of

the Communist Party USA. The Stalinists have perhaps the foulest record of support for the Democratic Party of any nominally left-wing political tendency, invariably denouncing any struggle by working people against the Democrats as a conspiracy by the ultra-right to divide and weaken "progressives"—in which category they place such stalwart defenders of American imperialism as Bill and Hillary Clinton.

Cagan flatters Sheehan, declaring, "Her clarity and her energy helped to inspire others to activism," but makes no mention of the Democratic Party at all. There is one coded reference to the subject: "There are differences among us and there always will be. The goal shouldn't necessarily be to eradicate those differences but rather to find new, constructive ways to deal with them. We're going to need every ally and every tool in the toolbox ... to end this war" (See article here).

These words will be clearly understood by the Stalinist milieu for which Cagan is writing in *Political Affairs*, but perhaps not by less experienced readers. Translated into plain language, it means that the struggle against the war in Iraq must be subordinated to the overriding goal of electing a Democratic president and Democratic Congress in 2008. Clinton, Obama, Edwards, Pelosi and Reid must be included in the category of "every ally and every tool in the toolbox."

The International Socialist Organization

Finally, there are the responses to Sheehan from the nominally socialist organizations. *Socialist Worker*, the publication of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), a split-off from the state capitalist tendency founded by the British ex-Trotskyist Tony Cliff, refers to Sheehan's statements in its lead article on the passage of the war-spending bill by Congress.

Again, there is no reference to the antiwar activist's resignation from the Democratic Party. Instead, *Socialist Worker* writes, "A few days later, an emotional Sheehan announced that she was retreating from political activity," as though this was simply the expression of political demoralization after the congressional vote.

The ISO reassures its readers that things are not so bad: "For antiwar activists, it is equally important to recognize how much the ground has shifted in mainstream politics—in spite of Bush's victory on war spending. The Democrats' surrender was greeted by an outpouring of anger, not least from liberal individuals and organizations that were quickest to defend the Democrats in the past. There is a rebellion brewing in the base of the Democratic Party—even if its political outline and future direction is still vague."

As evidence of this "outpouring," the ISO cites, not Sheehan's public attack on the Democrats, but the verbal scolding of Reid, Pelosi & Co. by MoveOn.org and liberal MSNBC journalist Keith Olbermann. According to their analysis, such criticism "has created the potential for much larger numbers of people to take an active stand against the war. Antiwar protest and organization has lagged behind the overwhelming sentiment against the war ... The key to ending the occupation of Iraq and building an opposition to the US empire lies outside Washington—in building up antiwar groups, organizing protests and turning the vast sentiment against the war into active opposition."

For all the radical rhetoric, the ISO does not pose the central task confronting working people in the United States, the building of a new, mass independent political party directed against the Democrats, the Republicans, and the corporate financial oligarchy. The perspective presented here is one of continued impotent protests which leave the two-party political monopoly undisturbed.

Even more heated rhetoric appears in *Workers World*, the publication of the Workers World Party (WWP). A lead article on the passage of the war-funding bill, posted May 31, carries the headline, “Democrats Bait and Switch: Betray Voters, Okay War Funds.” It denounces the Democrats for “stunning ... cynicism,” “total capitulation,” “grandstanding as war opponents,” and “defending imperialist interests”.

Lest the Democratic leadership take too much offense, however, this is followed by effusive praise for two House Democrats, Dennis Kucinich and Barbara Lee, who voted against the funding bill, and extended quotations of their remarks in the congressional debate.

The article then turns to Sheehan, quoting her May 26 letter of resignation from the Democratic Party, which *Workers World* concedes expressed “the deep frustration of millions of people who are opposed to the war and had faith in the Democratic Party.”

The *Workers World* article, however, draws no political conclusions from this event, other than the need to “move the struggle into the streets,” i.e., into protests directed to the same Democratic politicians who have just demonstrated their complicity in Bush’s imperialist war in Iraq. Despite their verbal attacks on the Democrats, they have only tactical differences with openly pro-Democratic outfits like MoveOn.org. They believe it more effective to lobby Congress with marchers on the Mall than with email blasts on the Internet.

The article points to a planned “encampment” outside the US Capitol in late September, and a march on September 29, timed to coincide with the Democrats’ own plans for another series of phony antiwar proposals—after which Congress will dutifully rubberstamp another year of bloodshed in Iraq in the name of “supporting our troops.”

According to *Workers World*, the call for these demonstrations “opens an opportunity for an independent intervention representing millions of workers and oppressed people.” This is to turn language on its head: an “independent intervention” on the legislative timetable of Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi!

The Workers World Party is perfectly prepared to make verbal denunciations of the two-party system, declaring, “Both the Democratic and Republican parties are committed and loyal to the same imperialist system of corporate rule, based on private ownership of the resources and labor of all of society on a global scale.” But in limiting the alternative to “*militant action* [emphasis mine] independent from both capitalist parties,” the WWP effectively rules out *political action*: the struggle to build a socialist, mass political party of working people as the alternative to the parties of big business.

That is because the WWP, for all its occasional paeans to “socialism” (whose highest expression, according to them, is the grisly Stalinist dictatorship in North Korea), has quite definite and practical relationships with leading Democratic Party politicians which it wishes to maintain—including not only Kucinich and Lee, but also Charles Rangel, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and author of legislation to reestablish a military draft in the United States.

The tendencies discussed above cover the full range of the liberal and radical “left” in the United States—that is, they occupy the intermediate position between outright capitalist reaction and the revolutionary socialist perspective advocated by the *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party. But they all have one characteristic in common: they reinforce, in one way or another, the political monopoly of the two-party system, through which the American ruling elite purposes its policies of imperialist war abroad and social reaction at home.



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