The political meaning of the conflict between Cindy Sheehan and the Democratic Party

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The arrest of antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan along with several dozen others on July 23 in the office of Rep. John Conyers, Democratic congressman from Detroit, has a political significance that transcends the immediate event.

Sheehan and others had come to Conyers' office in Washington to urge him to pursue impeachment proceedings against President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney. In 2005-06, when the Democrats were in the minority in Congress, Conyers grandstanded on the issue, holding hearings that raised impeachment and introducing legislation seeking an impeachment inquiry into the launching of the Iraq war.

Last Monday, when Conyers, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, informed Sheehan and her colleagues that he would not begin impeachment proceedings, they occupied his office. The congressman promptly called the Capitol police, who took them off to be booked, a process that lasted more than six hours.

Conyers, a longtime Democratic political operative with strong connections to the trade union bureaucracy, belongs to what passes for the "left" in official American politics. There is, in fact, nothing left-wing or radical about him. Conyers is a leading figure (along with his wife, City Councilwoman Monica Conyers) in Detroit's corrupt, black upper-middle-class establishment. His district includes pockets of abject poverty such as Highland Park. Conyers and others of his ilk exploit this social misery for their political advantage, while doing nothing to relieve it.

In her own fashion, Sheehan speaks for broad layers of the population opposed to the war, the Bush administration and the Democrats' complicity and impotence. Conyers' decision to order the arrest of Sheehan and the other protestors was intended to send a clear political message. The Democratic Party leadership, to which Conyers belongs, is not going to tolerate any opposition from the left to its collusion with the Bush administration on the Iraq war and the assault on democratic rights.

One of the most telling moments in the heated exchange between Conyers and the protest delegation came when the longtime congressman informed his visitors (according to an account by participant Ray McGovern) that he could not launch an impeachment inquiry because if it fell short, right-wing cable channel Fox News would have a field day. Sheehan later told fellow protestor David Swanson, "If I based my decisions on Fox, I would never do anything."

The hostility of Conyers, the Democrats and various left liberal groups toward Sheehan is concentrated around precisely this point. They claim that nothing can be done, the Democratic majority in Congress is too slim and everything depends on the outcome of the next elections. By her actions since 2005, when she set up camp outside Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas and evoked an enormous response, Sheehan has given the lie to such Democratic alibis for their right-wing policies.

Sheehan is a thorn in the Democrats' side because she rejects the premise that nothing can be done until or unless a veto-proof Democratic majority is elected to Congress. Moreover, she increasingly identifies the Democratic Party and those who operate within and around it as *obstacles* to the development of a mass movement against the Iraq war. And she embodies a principled spirit of struggle and self-sacrifice that inspires genuine opponents of the Bush administration in opposition to the cynicism and complacency of the official anti-war movement.

Her arrest on Conyers' insistence is a high point so far in her conflict with the Democrats, which is a clash, in the final analysis, of social forces.

Sheehan, who lost her son in the Iraq war in 2004, has gone through bitter experiences with every section of the American political establishment. Repulsed during a personal encounter by the indifference and ignorance of George W. Bush, Sheehan turned for support to the opposition party, the Democrats, and the various liberal groups that work in its periphery (MoveOn.org, the Democratic Underground, the *Daily Kos* web site, the *Nation* magazine, etc.). As she has explained, as long as she solely targeted the Bush administration, she was the "darling" of this social element.

The November 2006 elections represented a watershed. The Democrats were returned to power in Congress largely because they were seen as the party that would extricate the US from the war in Iraq. The new Democratic leadership, including Harry Reid of Nevada in the Senate and Nancy Pelosi of California in the House, wasted no time in reassuring the American ruling elite that there would be no cut-off of funds for the colonial occupation of Iraq and that the impeachment of Bush and Cheney was "off the table."

In late May, after months of antiwar posturing, the Democrats provided ample votes in both the Senate and House to ensure the approval of an additional $100 billion to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They gave Bush a free hand to escalate the military violence in Iraq, the opposite of what the population had elected them to do.

Sheehan, along with many others, was outraged, and announced her resignation from the Democratic Party in the days following the approval of the war funding. The *Nation* and others in the media and liberal circles remained silent on her withdrawal from the Democrats, while noting her subsequent statement announcing her retirement from political activism.

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Sheehan's 'retirement' was brief. Angered anew by Bush's announcement of clemency for convicted Cheney aide I. Lewis Libby, in July she helped organize a "Journey for Humanity," a cross-country protest against the war and congressional complicity with Bush. She wrote, "I can't sit back and let this BushCo drag our country further down into the murky quagmire of Fascism and violence, taking the rest of the world with them!"

Sheehan also made it known that if Speaker of the House Pelosi had not put impeachment "back on the table before our tour reached [Washington] DC on July 23," she planned to announce her candidacy as in independent in Pelosi's San Francisco district. After the news was leaked to the press, Sheehan commented July 9, "The feedback I have been receiving since then has been about three-to-one positive and supportive ... I was a life-long Democrat only because the choices were limited. The Democrats are the party of slavery and were the party that started every war in the 20th century except the other Bush debacle."

She continued, "I don't have the power to destroy the Democratic Party as some people have written. The Dems themselves are doing a good job of that and if they don't wake up and distance themselves from George faster than the Republicans are, and if they don't realize that people are more important than politics, they will go the way of the Whigs, and sometimes endings are as appropriate and constructive as beginnings."

On July 12, Sheehan noted that liberal and "left" blogs "were trashing us for targeting John Conyers and Nancy Pelosi. My question for these bloggers is whom should we target?" She further noted that since she had announced her candidacy there had been "the expected slurs from the 'left.'"

The *Daily Kos* web site barred Sheehan from continuing her web diary there, as she reported July 12, "because my potential run for Congress is not on the Democratic ticket." She has come under fierce attack from pro-Democratic Party elements on the various liberal web sites. Of her criticisms of the Democratic Party, one correspondent at the Democratic Underground commented, "The entire whine is a mix of self-pity and lunacy."

Perhaps chastened by criticism of his silence over Sheehan's previous announcement of a break with the Democrats, John Nichols in the *Nation* July 24 gingerly reported Sheehan's decision to run for Congress. Nichols called the move "a bold gesture, rooted in the deep frustration of the nation's most prominent anti-war activist with Pelosi's hyper-cautious approach to her duties as both the leader of the congressional opposition to an unpopular president and as a sworn defender of the Constitution."

There is nothing "hyper-cautious" about Pelosi's conduct; she is a full accomplice of Bush's war policy. As Sheehan wrote in her open letter to the Democrats in Congress May 26, "It used to be George Bush's war ... Now it is yours." In his column, Nichols blandly commented that Sheehan was "[f]resh from being arrested on Capitol Hill, along with 45 other activists demanding that Congress get about the business of impeaching George Bush and Dick Cheney," but neglected to mention that Conyers, a political ally of his, called the cops on Sheehan and the others.

One of the most strident and uncritical "left" defenses of Conyers (and attacks on Sheehan, although she is never referred to by name) on the issue of impeachment was offered by Joel Wendland, managing editor of the Communist Party's *Political Affairs* magazine. The American Stalinists continue to carry considerable weight within the antiwar milieu, particularly in United for Peace and Justice, where they are among the most hostile to any movement developing outside the grip of the Democratic Party.

Wendland's article is a Stalinist gem: a mix of slanders of his opponents, parliamentary cretinism and populist demagogy. The American Stalinists are well-practiced in slander, after decades of using it against Trotskyists and other left-wing opponents.

So there will be no confusion, the piece is headlined "Get off John Conyers' back." Wendland argues that because only 54 percent of Americans favor impeachment and it has no possibility of succeeding in the current congress, "it could harm the chances of advancing a progressive agenda in this and the next congressional sessions," i.e., the possibility of increased majorities for the Democrats.

Impeachment, in reality, is not a strategy for ending the war in Iraq or addressing the social crisis in America. While Bush and Cheney are guilty of "high crimes and misdemeanors" many times over, it would be illusory to imagine that their removal will solve any of the great social questions and, what's more, concentration on the single issue of impeachment tends to evade the central problem facing the American working population: the need to break from the Democrats and establish a mass movement on a socialist basis.

In any event, Wendland is arguing against impeachment *from the right*. The Democratic congress with a larger majority that he has in mind would be no more "progressive" than the current one, which has collaborated with Bush in escalating the violence in Iraq and puts up no serious opposition to the advanced preparations for police-state dictatorship.

Presumably (and callously) referring to Sheehan, the Stalinist journalist continues, "Splitting the antiwar movement and the pro-democracy movement with personal agendas won't convince Congress to take a new course and won't convince voters to look for an alternative, but it would, at this point, re-arm the Republicans with renewed numbers and electoral victories." There could hardly be a more hopeless and reactionary perspective than that of convincing Congress, responsible for launching the war, to "take a new course."

It should be remembered that the US Communist Party opposed the impeachment of Richard Nixon in 1974 because it threatened détente and relationships between Washington and Moscow.

These are some of the political forces aligned against honest opponents of the war and in defense of the political status quo. What Sheehan has gone through and the conclusions she has already drawn have a genuine significance. The logic of the situation has driven her to recognize that ending the war requires working outside the two-party system.

There is growing and widespread anger in the population, which Sheehan expresses. She is politically sincere, not dominated by layer upon layer of corruption and all the double-dealing of the Democrats and their hangers-on. The political job ahead is not "convincing" the war criminals in Washington, but of creating a new party, a new social power, aligned with the international working class in a struggle against war and social inequality.

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