

On Cindy Sheehan and impeachment: a reply to a Stalinist critic

David Walsh
31 July 2007

In the course of discussing the political significance of the recent arrest of antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan in the offices of Rep. John Conyers (Democrat from Michigan), we noted that “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.” [See “The political meaning of the conflict between Cindy Sheehan and the Democratic Party”]

The criticism seems to have struck a nerve. Wendland has responded with a lengthy comment, “Impeachment Redux: A Reply to a Cranky Critic,” posted at politicalaffairs.net, “Marxist Thought Online.”

Great historical issues are involved here.

Tens of thousands of workers, students and professionals joined the American Communist Party in the 1930s, believing it represented the traditions and perspectives of the Russian Revolution of 1917. By that later decade, tragically, the entire Communist International had fallen under the sway of a reactionary nationalist bureaucracy in Moscow, which brutally suppressed the population in the USSR and betrayed the interests of the international working class. We raised the question of Stalinism in our criticism of Wendland.

He now tells us, “Well, I don’t want to live in the past. I don’t want to have that debate any more. In my view, it is irrelevant and those who insist on obsessing over it can’t show us a way forward.” Wendland can be as indifferent to history as he likes, but he doesn’t set the rules of this discussion. It’s impossible to grasp any process in any field without a historical approach; although one can understand why Wendland wouldn’t want to discuss the background of his party.

The attack on the WSWS is rooted in the history of the Communist Party, a history of treachery and criminality. If Wendland is not aware of his party’s record, he has the obligation to inform himself. Whatever his own attitude to or knowledge of the history, it seems no accident that he’s drawn to such an organization.

A full history of the CPUSA is beyond the scope of this comment. [I would recommend “Gus Hall (1910-2000): Stalinist operative and decades-long leader of Communist Party USA”—6 November 2000 and “Socialism, Historical Truth and the Crisis of Political Thought in the United States”—23 April 1996.]

Let us just remind the readers of a few facts: the American Communist Party enthusiastically supported the mass murder carried out by Stalin of his socialist opponents in the Soviet Union in the late 1930s. The American Stalinists repeated every monstrous falsehood issuing from Moscow. A typical headline in the *Daily Worker*, the CPUSA’s newspaper, for example, read “Hitler’s chief assassin, Himmler, directed fiendish Trotskyite assassination plot against

leaders of the Soviet Union.” [See “60 years since the Dewey Commission”—19 May 1997]

Research has established that the American CP provided personnel and other resources for the plot to assassinate Leon Trotsky, exiled Russian revolutionary leader, in Mexico. In 1941, the US Stalinists, by now having thrown their lot in with the Democratic Party, supported the prosecution of leaders of the Socialist Workers Party on trumped-up sedition charges (CP leaders would be prosecuted a few years later under the same statute.) During World War II, Earl Browder, who patriotically called communism “20th century Americanism,” and the rest of the CP leadership were fervent supporters of the “no-strike” pledge and policed the industrial working class on behalf of the US ruling elite.

The McCarthyite witch-hunts, aimed at all left-wing opposition in the American working class, confronted a relatively easy target in the Communist Party, which found itself isolated and vulnerable in part because of its rotten policies during the war and postwar years. By 1958, the vast bulk of CP members had left the party, leaving behind a bureaucratic shell. Over the past several decades the American Stalinist party has become, by and large, a geriatric society. The most active section of its press has been the obituary page. Its “youth” are not revolutionary elements, looking for a way to fight and overthrow capitalism, but career “activists,” operating in and around various protest movements and the trade union bureaucracy and slavishly supporting the Democratic Party.

This is the disreputable outfit Wendland is associated with. Or is he? His reply is full of oddities. He informs us that we are jumping to conclusions when we insist that “the opinions I expressed in my article are those of the editorial board of Political Affairs and of our publisher, the Communist Party USA.” Perhaps we can be forgiven for thinking that the opinions of the “Managing Editor” of a Communist Party publication’s web site might have something in common with the views held by that party. (Wendland, apparently troubled, writes, “Indeed, WSWS editorials are the views of the party behind the website.” We plead guilty to running editorials that reflect our party’s views.)

In any event, whether his editorial board agrees with his stance on impeachment or not, Wendland is unquestionably a practitioner of Stalinist politics. The dishonest and slanderous methods are instantly recognizable.

Something else needs to be cleared up. In his original article, subtly entitled “Get off John Conyers’ back,” Wendland criticized those “with personal agendas” who were “splitting the antiwar movement and the pro-democracy movement.” Since the article dealt obliquely, but unmistakably, with Cindy Sheehan’s arrest in Conyers’ office and

the criticisms leveled subsequently at Conyers by individuals in and around Sheehan's camp, it was reasonable to assume that "those with personal agendas" referred to Sheehan, who suffered a grievous personal loss in the war.

Wendland now accuses us of putting words in his mouth; he didn't have Sheehan in mind, he respects and expresses solidarity with all those who have suffered losses, etc. As for the reference to "personal agendas"—"I intended an altogether different point that involves the intersection of our personal motives with the political realities in which we are forced to operate. In politics or a political movement should we let passion and emotion rule our choice of tactics? I think it is a mistake to do so."

Just to set the record straight, we don't believe him. We think he absolutely had Sheehan in mind—the context would lead any objective reader to draw that conclusion—but he doesn't want to be seen as openly attacking someone who is popular with antiwar forces. His mealy-mouthed generalizations about not letting "passion and emotion rule our choice of tactics" are quite unconvincing.

The essential thrust of Wendland's reply is that the WSW and Socialist Equality Party are "sectarian" for opposing support to the Democratic Party. What Wendland refers to as "sectarianism" is nothing other than Marxism, the fight for the working class to establish its political independence from the bourgeoisie. There is nothing more basic to the development of a mass socialist political movement in the US than the struggle against the subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party, the principal mechanism through which workers are subordinated to bourgeois politics and society in general.

In 2004, Wendland penned a memorable piece, a crass defense of the politics of "lesser of two evilsism," entitled "Marxists for Kerry." Sen. John Kerry was the Democrats' candidate for president on a pro-war, pro-militarist program. Wendland wrote, "I support the lesser of two evils philosophy and will vote for Kerry and will encourage others to do likewise; even more so, I will campaign for his election on November 2."

Wendland's program of support for the Democrats, one of the two parties of the American ruling class, has nothing remotely to do with Marxism or class politics. His uncritical defense of corrupt career politicians like Conyers, who politically exploits the population in Detroit and surrounding areas, is simply repugnant to anyone who has familiarity with the operations of such figures. No independent working class movement could be built on that basis, let alone one rooted in revolutionary principles.

Wendland still makes references to Marx, Engels and Lenin in his articles. However, all of the efforts of Marx, Engels and Lenin were grounded in the implacable struggle against the bourgeoisie and its political representatives. They came under relentless attack from the Wendlands of their day, for their 'factionalism,' 'splitting mentality' and 'sectarianism.'

Lenin's description of opportunism fits Wendland's politics perfectly: "Advocacy of class collaboration; abandonment of the idea of socialist revolution and revolutionary methods of struggle; adaptation to bourgeois nationalism; losing sight of the fact that the borderlines of nationality and country are historically transient; making a fetish of bourgeois legality; renunciation of the class viewpoint and the class struggle, for fear of repelling the 'broad masses of the population' (meaning the petty bourgeoisie)."

The appearance of Wendland's article is proof positive that the end of the USSR and the eastern European regimes did not mean the

Stalinists were going out of business, although their operations have been deeply discredited and weakened. Stalinism is not simply about police-state dictatorship and show trials, it is an especially pernicious brand of national-opportunist politics. Trotsky once aptly called it the "syphilis of the labor movement."

In the US, a section of the American petty bourgeoisie—with no independent policies of its own—leaned on the resources of the Soviet Union during the 1930s. This social layer eagerly accepted the "Popular Front" policy adopted by international Stalinism after 1935, which meant it could orient itself to the Roosevelt administration and a program of social reform. In return, the Soviet bureaucrats used the CPUSA and the other national parties as pressure groups to win more favorable attitudes toward the USSR from the various governments.

The touchstone of the struggle against Stalinism in the 1930s was a struggle against its support for the Democrats. And that was the Democratic Party at the *height* of its social reformism, the New Deal. What is the Democratic Party today? An organization that speaks for multi-millionaires and the most complacent elements of the upper middle class, thoroughly indifferent to the conditions of the mass of the population. The Democrats' differences with the Republicans are only minor.

However things have changed, some things stay the same: Stalinist class collaboration and falsifications continue. A radicalization is under way and the Stalinists consider it their sacred trust to see that such a movement does not escape the confines of the Democratic Party. They are well-prepared for such a role, after decades in the business. Lying and slandering are their stock in trade.

Wendland writes, "According to the party that publishes his articles on WSW, the deaths of the people who participated in the invasion and subsequent occupation, including Sheehan's son, or ultimately supported the new regime in Iraq are justifiable." Which article or statement is he citing? Or is he simply working from a laundry list of slanders?

Wendland's article introduces a new generation to Stalinist politics. The Soviet bureaucracy is gone. Bribes, handouts and slush funds are no longer available to the CP leadership. But the party's essential functions remain: collaborating with the Democrats, serving as political hitmen for the labor bureaucracy, apologizing for and justifying countless acts of swinishness. Such a movement attracts unscrupulous people, people to whom history and principle mean nothing.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact