

Militarism, hypocrisy, and the Democratic Party: Hillary Clinton speaks to students in San Diego

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In the run-up to the “Super Tuesday” vote in the US presidential primaries last week, Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton visited San Diego State University to give a campaign speech advertised as a “town hall meeting.” Held on February 1, four days prior to the California primary, the event was attended by an estimated crowd of about 8,000 people, mostly young college students.

The event, carefully scripted and orchestrated, presented a set of well-rehearsed promises to young people that Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party have no intention of realizing. The event is a case study in the hypocritical posturing of the Democratic Party as a whole, and her proposals are substantively no different from other Democratic presidential candidates, including her main rival Barack Obama.

Clinton made various demagogic statements about fighting for the middle class and working people against corporations. These were combined with proposals on health care and other domestic programs. However, Clinton made clear the underlying hypocrisy and unseriousness of these limited proposals when she underscored that her primary aim in economic policy was to “move back to fiscal responsibility.” Under conditions of growing economic crisis and the threat of recessions, Democratic demands for greater fiscal discipline will inevitably mean further inroads into social programs.

Taking into account her audience, Clinton focused much of her remarks on education policy, offering a series of palliatives that will do nothing to address the serious economic problems facing students. She decried the failure of the Bush administration’s education policy over the past seven years, calling for an end to the No Child Left Behind Act, for tax credits to families with children in college, for increased federal grants, and for cuts in interest rates on college loans.

Clinton did not discuss the role of the Democratic Party in facilitating the Bush administration’s education policy over the last seven years. Nor did she seriously address soaring tuition costs and the attack on school funding, despite her call for “making college affordable again.” Throughout the country, college fees continue to skyrocket, forcing students to take out more loans even as they face declining job prospects upon graduation.

Students in California, including at San Diego State University, will have to confront the consequences of an austerity budget proposed by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. The governor is

responding to the state’s budget crisis brought on by the declining housing market by proposing massive cuts in social programs, including \$313 million in funds from the California State University system.

Since taking control of Congress in 2006, the Democrats have done nothing to alter educational policies Clinton criticized in her speech, from the national standardized testing policy to outdated classroom procedures. Furthermore, Clinton, along with several other leading Democrats, voted in favor of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, an act she referred to throughout the afternoon as an “unfunded mandate.”

Clinton’s most substantial proposal for addressing college costs was for “two years of national service opportunity in order to be able to get grants to go to college.” Those who agree to this service would receive \$10,000 a year in education grants. Several other leading Democratic presidential candidates have made similar-sounding proposals, most notably Barack Obama. In these proposals, “civil service” is combined with “military service,” to obscure in idealistic sounding language proposals that are a step toward the reintroduction of the draft.

The issue of national service is unmistakably connected to US foreign policy and concerns about overstretched military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Clinton, who has long advocated increasing the size of the military, is clearly thinking ahead to a point when more active measures will need to be taken to sustain the interests of the American ruling class overseas.

Though they talk of “sacrifice” and “civic duty,” Clinton and the Democrats routinely conflate domestic service (nurses, teachers) with foreign service (military) under the all-encompassing umbrella of “national service.” To be sure, this rhetoric is given a progressive gloss and the former element of “service” is always emphasized over the latter on the Democratic campaign trail.

In proposing that college grants be made available in return for “national service,” Clinton and the Democrats are hoping to recruit more young people into military service by exploiting the increasingly precarious economic situation facing young people.

In making sense of Clinton’s proposal, it is worth recalling that in 2006 Congressman Charles Rangel (a Democrat from New York) proposed the Universal National Service Act, which called for all persons in the US between ages 18 and 42 to serve for two years in the military. Rangel’s proposal also included an option of

“civilian service.”

The nature of Clinton’s proposal on national service is highlighted by her staunch support for the occupation of Iraq and continued US militarism. In her speech, Clinton claimed that once in office, she would “right away” bring together military leaders to draw up a plan for the withdrawal of troops “beginning” within 60 days of her inauguration.

The language used by Clinton in making this proposal is calculated to appeal to existing popular opposition to the war. But while Clinton may well implement certain measures “right away,” these have nothing to do with ending the war. Rather, Clinton’s plan, in line with the position of sections of the Democratic Party, is a redeployment of troops around the Middle East, including to Afghanistan, while leaving tens of thousands of troops in permanent military bases in Iraq for an indefinite period of time.

There are increasing divisions within the US political and military establishment over where to deploy troops and how to best manage US domination over the Middle East. Clinton’s proposals, as well as her vote on the September 2007 resolution calling for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard to be labeled as a terrorist organization, clearly show the Democratic Party’s intent to continue to the militarist policies of the Bush administration.

On the one hand, particularly when faced with thousands of young students the vast majority of whom oppose the war, Clinton has to issue carefully calibrated and fundamentally dishonest statements about “ending the war.” On the other hand, she is also compelled to give assurances to corporations and the political establishment that she is a “responsible candidate” in matters of foreign policy.

Thus, in her speech, almost within the same breath as her duplicitous assurances to “end the war,” Clinton said that “anyone who says we should withdraw on the first day doesn’t understand how dangerous this situation really is,” wondering, among other things, about what would be the response of “charities, businesses, and the Iraqis who sided with us” to such a withdrawal.

Among the other issues addressed by Clinton was immigration. Speaking in a city that lies on the US border with Mexico, Senator Clinton’s speech was peppered with unpleasant chauvinistic allusions. Her speech culminated with a chilling and politically revealing thought experiment concerning immigration. This was done while explaining Senator Clinton’s proposal to “fix the broken immigration system” in the United States.

Her proposals were entirely within the framework of the right-wing attack on immigrants. She called for the government to “toughen and tighten border security” and said it was necessary to develop an electronic and internet-based system to “keep track of people.” This could only mean a vast system of domestic surveillance and monitoring that would involve a massive attack on democratic rights.

Clinton went on to discuss various deportation scenarios in a perfectly serious tone and without a hint of irony: “I’ve thought to myself, how would we deport 12 million undocumented workers?” She then explained that it would be too expensive to physically undertake the task and that it would ultimately be too much of an invasion of privacy for “documented workers.”

Clinton then proposed a vague alternative that would require

undocumented workers to register themselves and deport those who have a criminal background. Immigrants would be required to pay a fine, pay back taxes, and learn English. This would put them on a “path to legalization,” one that would place extraordinary demands on foreign-born workers.

These comments reflect the basic contempt with which big business views workers, both immigrant and US-born. If it were practical and profitable, the Democrats would not object to the deportation of millions of people from the United States.

The entire campaign event was orchestrated and undemocratic. Since the event was advertised as a “town hall meeting,” it would be reasonable to believe that Clinton would address questions from the crowd. However, no questions were allowed and the students were instead treated to a 45-minute stump speech.

This is an increasing tendency in the political life the United States. The language of democracy and deliberation is retained while the actual unfolding of these events reveals their carefully scripted character.

The “town hall meeting” at San Diego State was briefly interrupted midway in response to a silent protest from two young men standing and holding a sign reading “Nepotist tyrant: Hands off Iran.” Only official signs provided by the Clinton campaign were allowed in the venue. The protestors’ sign was promptly ripped from their hands by event security and Clinton supporters, and police escorted the protestors out of the venue.

Though small and quickly suppressed, this incident is significant, particularly because it comes on the heels of similar events on college campuses. In September 2007, a student was tasered in the presence of John Kerry while asking a pointed political question at another “town hall meeting.” Last November, a college student confessed that the apparently free and spontaneous question she asked Senator Clinton at a public meeting was in fact given to her by people in the campaign.

Against the background of these recent events, this incident should remind students that the Democratic Party will not object to the use police power to silence dissent, even when, as was the case at San Diego State, this dissent is not expressed in a disruptive manner.

Clinton’s speech highlights the need for an alternative perspective based on the political independence of the working class against the profit system and its representatives. Members and supporters of the newly founded International Students for Social Equality at San Diego State University were present at the event to hand out literature and to discuss the political issues described in this article with those in attendance. They will continue this work in the coming months.



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