

Nader in Detroit: watered-down reformism and an appeal to the Democrats

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Ralph Nader brought his independent presidential campaign to Detroit Sunday night, taking questions at a press conference and then addressing an audience of about 150 at a Unitarian Church near the campus of Wayne State University.

The consumer advocate, who has run for president three times previously, outlined a program of limited social reforms and a shift in US foreign policy, while making it clear that the real aim of his campaign is to pressure the Democratic Party to embrace a more liberal agenda.

Nader, who was joined by his vice-presidential running mate, former San Francisco supervisor and Green Party activist Matt Gonzalez, said the two would gain ballot status in 45 states and called for greater access for third parties to the electoral process. For eight years, Nader has been scapegoated by the Democratic Party and elements of the left-liberal milieu for Al Gore's defeat in the 2000 election of 2000, by virtue of his very presence on the ballot.

Nader, like all other presidential candidates besides Obama and McCain, is being shut out of the national debates and the mainstream media's coverage of the election. In spite of this, Nader said that he is polling above 5 percent in a number of states. In an obvious attempt to curry favor with the Democrats, he assured his audience that the polls indicate he is drawing more support away from McCain than Obama.

Nader outlined a four-point electoral platform. First, he called for universal health care. This would be a single-payer set-up based upon "private delivery" of medical goods and services. He pointed to the irrationality of the US health care industry, which he said costs twice as much per capita compared to Canada and Switzerland.

Second, Nader called for what he termed a "living wage." He was not specific about just what this would be, but he seemed to suggest that the current minimum wage should be based upon an incremental increase of the 1968 minimum wage adjusted to subsequent inflation. This would put the figure at nearly \$11 per hour, he said.

Third, Nader called for a "massive expansion of law enforcement against corporate crime." He pointed to the gutting of the regulatory agencies of the federal government as a basic cause of a number of problems, including workplace accidents and environmental degradation.

Fourth, he proposed a shift in US foreign policy in the Middle East. Nader called for the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq within six months, and derided Obama's proposed "withdrawal" that would leave 50,000 US military personnel and permanent bases in Iraq. Nader spent more time, however, discussing the Israeli-Palestinian question. He called for a two-state solution, and criticized Obama's fervently pro-Israeli position as a betrayal that he sees arising from the power of the pro-Israeli lobbying group AIPAC (American Israeli

Public Action Committee) over US politics.

Nader's agenda is that of a reformist who hopes to save US capitalism from its own excesses. He does not advocate, and in fact bitterly opposes, revolutionary change that would reorganize society, placing industry under the democratic control of the working class.

Nonetheless, even from the standpoint of reformism, the severe limitations of Nader's platform are striking. Indeed, he portrays it as such himself, although not in so many words, presenting his demands as eminently reasonable and sensible from the perspective of the preservation of US capitalism, and really not all that costly.

The call for universal health care has been advanced by bourgeois politicians since the days of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and is increasingly championed on the grounds that it would make US-based corporations more competitive against their foreign rivals.

But when one speaks of "universal health care," the devil, as the saying goes, is in the details. In fact, Nader does not call for a nationalization of the health care industry. He is proposing a system of insurance modeled on that of Canada, but in both his press conference and speech he hastened to add that this would be coupled with "private delivery" of services. In other words, the profit system in the greater part of the health care system would be left untouched.

While, the US undoubtedly boasts the least developed social safety net of any of the Western industrialized nations, Nader's idolization of conditions in Canada and Europe depends upon and promotes the ignorance of his audience. For in all the "Western countries," as Nader calls them, social welfare systems—the hard-won gains of generations of working class struggle—are under attack and being dismantled.

Likewise, Nader's demand for an increase in the minimum wage to a "living wage" sounds radical only when measured against Washington's recent historical record. If the minimum wage would have been adjusted in line with inflation since the 1960s, Nader said, it would now be \$10.91 per hour. Yet under Nader's proposal, a full-time minimum wage worker would earn just over \$24,000 per year—prior to withholdings. He is proposing, in other words, that this portion of the working class be given a modest raise that would remain inadequate for the necessities of modern life.

Nader's running mate, Gonzalez, criticized the US war in Iraq and Washington's policy toward the Israel-Palestinian crisis from the standpoint that both have been detrimental to the "national interest." They do not view the war as a product of US imperialism; a manifestation of the crisis of capitalism, but rather as a terrible mistake. Nader's position on these foreign policy questions, in other words, is different in degree, but neither in kind nor principle, from those sections of the ruling elite who have criticized the Bush

administration over precisely the same questions.

Nader calls for the complete withdrawal of all US troops within six months—not immediately. Significantly, he calls for the “limited autonomy” of Iraq’s Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites from Baghdad. This position represents an adaptation to the utterly false US propaganda that has foisted the blame for the sociocide that has ravaged Iraq from the US invasion and military savagery onto the supposed “ancient rivalries” among Iraq’s religious and ethnic communities—in other words, onto the Iraqis themselves.

Additionally, Nader calls for UN-supervised elections. But the UN has been complicit in the occupation of Iraq. It retroactively gave its stamp of approval to the US invasion. Nader condemned the destruction of Iraq, placing the blame at the feet of the Bush administration, and called for continuing “US humanitarian aide.” But he did not call for the prosecution as war criminals of the Bush administration officials who planned and carried out the illegal war.

Nader’s world view reflects the position of a petty-bourgeois layer that feels threatened by a political process dominated ever more openly and ruthlessly by a tiny financial elite. Standing in the ideological tradition of liberalism and economic nationalism, he portrays all the problems the confronting US capitalism as a matter of mistakes and bad ideas that have compromised Washington’s standing in the world.

For example, for Nader, the auto industry is on the verge of bankruptcy because of “bad management.” In large measure, he presents this as a matter of the auto executives not listening to proposals that he, as a consumer advocate, began making in the 1970s. All that is needed, he claims, is “top-flight management to compete with the Japanese and Europeans.” Nader opposes the proposed bailout of the Big Three unless guarantees are made to taxpayers and management is replaced. And Nader’s explanation for the financial crisis engulfing Wall Street is even more facile: “They gambled too much,” he said. This is no different than Bush’s own position, that “Wall Street got drunk.”

Of course, because there are so many mistakes and bad ideas, Nader is forced to search for a cause. This he doesn’t find in an objective crisis of American and world capitalism, but in the disproportionate “power of corporations” which have “no allegiance to this country” yet control the government. “Corporate greed” and “bad management,” terms he used several times, are presented as the main culprits. It follows that better and more far-sighted managers—i.e., people like Nader—could limit the power of big business and rectify some of the mistakes.

How will the reformers gain power? Certainly not by overturning the two-party system. Nader hopes to enlist “citizens”—he carefully avoids any reference to social classes—in order to put pressure on the Democratic Party so that he can cut a deal. “We want to push the two parties, give them a pin prick, so that maybe before November 4” they will start to consider parts of Nader’s platform.

During the press conference, *World Socialist Web Site* reporter Larry Porter noted that in the 2004 elections, when Nader ran for the reactionary Reform Party, he demanded a meeting with Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry. However, the Democratic Party continued to lurch to the right. What had Nader concluded from this experience?

Nader’s response reveals the hollowness of his political perspective. He agreed that his position then and now is to put pressure upon the Democrats, but that in reality it hadn’t worked—“the tug is stronger” from corporations, he admitted. He said, however, that his pressure

has “changed their [the Democrats’] rhetoric” and that “lip service is the first step” toward more substantive change.

“We want to support some of the real Democrats,” Nader said, naming Kucinich, Feingold, Wexler, and Kennedy (as opposed to all of those phony Democrats who happen to control the party!) On the question of impeachment, he referred to his “old friend John Conyers,” the Democratic congressman from Detroit and chairman of the House Judiciary Committee. Nader said that Conyers, “in his heart” wants to start impeachment proceedings against President Bush, but he is “unable to shake the power of Nancy Pelosi.” Another mistake, no doubt.

Nader would like to turn the clock back, declaring that if “the Democratic Party was as good as it was in the 60s, we would have national health care” and a higher minimum wage. But Nader conveniently ignores the fact that the Democratic Party of the 1960s was also the party of Vietnam, of liberal anti-communism, and Jim Crow segregation in the South. Neither these elements of Democratic Party politics, nor the collapse of liberal reformism in the 1960s and 1970s, were mistakes. Rather, they were early manifestations of the contradictions and crisis of US capitalism, a process that has now advance for 40 more years. There will be no revival of reformism because there is no objective basis for it.

In defending his candidacy, Nader twice referred to Eugene V. Debs. Gonzalez also invoked Debs’ legacy. But neither Nader nor Gonzales mentioned that Debs was a socialist, or that Debs - who ran four times as the Socialist Party candidate for president, the last one from prison — advocated revolutionary change, a position that Nader bitterly opposes.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party support Nader’s right to be on the ballot. However, his candidacy does not offer a genuine alternative to the two-party system and its defense of capitalism. On the contrary, Nader and such “third party” pro-capitalist formations represent political traps, aimed at diverting radicalizing workers and students from the critical task of forging an independent class movement of working people, based on a socialist and internationalist program.



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