US third party debate presents no alternative for working class

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Four candidates met in Chicago last Tuesday for what was billed as the first Third Party Presidential Debate. The event was moderated by former CNN host Larry King and Christina Tobin, founder and chair of the Free and Equal Elections Foundation. It was streamed live online at Ora.tv and also broadcast by CSPAN.

The debate was sponsored by the Free and Equal Elections Foundation, a non-profit group closely associated with libertarian and taxpayer association groups. It included third party candidates who represent a range of bourgeois political perspectives, but excluded socialist candidates.

Online participants posed a variety of questions to Jill Stein of the Green Party, Rocky Anderson of the Justice Party, Gary Johnson of the Libertarian Party and Virgil Goode of the Constitution Party. Stein is a physician from Boston. Anderson is a former Democratic mayor of Salt Lake City, Utah; Johnson, a former Republican governor of New Mexico; and Goode, a former Democratic and Republican congressman from Virginia.

Questions focused on the subjects of drones, student loans, the National Defense Authorization Act, and the so-called "war on drugs."

Stein and Anderson present themselves as progressive advocates of social reform. Johnson, in similar fashion to Republican Congressman Ron Paul, combines isolationism in foreign affairs with a policy of unfettered free market capitalism and the destruction of social welfare programs. Goode spouts the far-right program of radical fiscal austerity and anti-immigrant racism.

What was most striking about the debate was the inability of the ostensible progressives, Stein and Anderson, to challenge the domination of all aspects of American economic and political life by the corporate-financial aristocracy. The absence of a socialist and working class perspective skewed the debate and gave it, despite the context of a desperate economic and social crisis, a banal and lifeless character.

While Stein and Anderson referred to the growth of poverty and unemployment, the debate was largely taken up with issues that preoccupy more affluent sections of the middle class, such as the legalization of marijuana use.

The organizers of the debate rejected a request from the Socialist Equality Party to include its presidential candidate, Jerry White, in the event. They did so on the grounds that participants had either to register above 1 percent in national polls or be on the ballot in a sufficient number of states to potentially win the Electoral College vote and become the next president.

In setting these conditions, the Free and Equal Elections Foundation in practice embraces the anti-democratic framework of the US electoral process, which effectively prohibits socialist and working class parties from gaining ballot status in most states by setting absurdly high signature requirements and erecting other legal obstacles. The media play their role, providing virtually no coverage of socialist candidates.

The inclusion of the Justice Party in the debate is noteworthy. The party was established in November 2011 for the purpose of placing its founder, Rocky Anderson, on state presidential ballots throughout the country. It is a self-proclaimed "progressive" party that runs on a platform of increasing taxes on the wealthy, expanding social services, and opposing corruption and corporate personhood. It appears that, like Anderson, other party organizers are former Democratic politicos.

Though both Stein and Anderson spoke of eliminating student loan debt and providing free health

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care and post-secondary education for all, they gave no indication how these demands could be realized without a struggle against the monopolization of wealth and the means of production by the corporate-financial elite.

Their middle-class perspective surfaced at various points in the debate. One such moment came as Justice Party candidate Anderson was responding to a question about the war on drugs. “Right, left, it doesn’t matter about partisanship,” he said. “[W]e need to demand an end to this war on drugs.” Anderson went on to credit President Bill Clinton for decisions made regarding drug policy.

Tellingly, the candidates lingered on the question of marijuana legalization for over ten minutes. The discussion bordered on absurd at points. Libertarian candidate Johnson referenced the deceased performer Whitney Houston in an argument in support of legalization, and Anderson proclaimed that “we need to rise up as one and say: ‘legalize industrial hemp now!’”

As the debate moved on to the topic of drones, Green Party candidate Stein called on the United States government to “lead” the world by proposing an “international treaty and convention to permanently end the use of drones.” She did not explain what she hoped to accomplish by asking the world’s main perpetrator of drone violence to lead the world in ending drone use.

In response to a question challenging the candidates to stipulate an amendment to the Constitution they would propose if they could be assured its passage, Stein said she would propose an amendment stating that, “money is not speech and corporations are not people.” This summed up the Green Party’s toothless and delusionary perspective of reining in corporate power, rather than ending corporate domination and reorganizing economic life on the basis of public ownership and democratic control over the major corporations and banks.

This underscores the essential political role played by the Green Party and other liberal third parties such as Anderson’s Justice Party. They serve as lightning rods for the growing discontent and alienation from the two major capitalist parties, channeling this opposition into a perspective of applying pressure on the Democratic Party. They thereby serve as auxiliary instruments of the American ruling class to block the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class.

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