

Green Party presidential candidate at the University of Michigan

For what social forces does Ralph Nader speak?

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In recent weeks US Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader has spoken before large rallies in Portland, Minneapolis, New York City, Oakland and other cities. His public speeches have drawn considerable numbers of college students concerned about social inequality, corporate domination of the political system and environmental problems. This reporter covered one campaign stop at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Speaking to the largely student audience, Nader insisted there were no significant differences between the Democratic and Republican parties, both of which, he said, served as political instruments of the most powerful corporate interests. The Green Party candidate denounced Al Gore's populism as an election ploy, saying the Democratic candidate was beholden to the same big oil, big insurance and big drug companies he now claimed to be fighting. "They have eight years of surrendering to these big corporations and now they need you for one day every four years, so they give you populist talk. It's all a charade and we have to see through it and get serious," he told the audience.

To the extent that Nader makes the obvious point that both the Democrats and Republicans are dominated by corporate interests, he is asserting a political fact. However, his critique of the two-party system is schematic and superficial, as well as inconsistent. Like many liberals who have been disappointed by the right-wing trajectory of the Democratic Party, Nader combines denunciations of the Democrats with appeals to its so-called progressive wing, and holds out the hope that the party can be pressured to return to the politics of liberal reform.

At the heart of this inconsistency is Nader's denial of the class basis of politics in general, and the two parties of the American political establishment in particular. This leads him, insofar as he attacks the two-party monopoly, to either deny or leave unexplained the existence of relative, but real and at times very sharp differences between the parties—differences that reflect conflicts within America's capitalist financial and political elite.

These conflicts have assumed immense proportions, as in the Republican impeachment drive against Clinton, which amounted to an attempted coup d'état. Nader, like many radical critics of Clinton, lined up behind this reactionary and anti-democratic conspiracy, publicly stating that, had he been in the Senate, he would have voted for Clinton's removal from office. This reflects, among other things, a gross underestimation of the extent to which bourgeois democratic institutions in the US have degenerated, and a complacent attitude to the threat posed to the democratic rights of the American people.

As for an analysis of the roots of the two-party monopoly and a perspective for opposing it, Nader's remarks at the University of Michigan revolved around three major themes: the role of the state, the impact of globalization, and the viability of national reformism in general

and the AFL-CIO trade unions in particular.

In relation to the state, Nader suggested that it was essentially a neutral body that could be pressured by citizen-based "grass roots" movements to keep corporate interests in check. He spoke of his campaign as an "authentic political movement" linked to a "civic movement" of citizen groups fighting poverty, environmental damage, low wages and the decay of mass transit. Such a movement was necessary, he said, "because the political arena is now dominated by two corrupt parties that are increasingly freezing out citizens groups in Washington and around the country from having a chance to shape public policy for a more just society and world."

Nader said his campaign was a "drive against the corporate extremists who have corrupted our government." It was aimed at restoring "the sovereignty of the people" over "the sovereignty of the corporations." Throughout, Nader advanced the notion that an active and involved citizenry could win "our government" to its side, without overturning the present economic order.

In arguing for the viability of this perspective, Nader referred to the past. He spoke of the Populists, the opponents of child labor, women suffragettes, sit-down strikers and civil rights activists. With these struggles, he declared, America said "too bad for your corporate profits, if you are going to make children work in the factories. Too bad to you banks and railroads, if you are going to charge high interest and freight rates and hurt the small farmers and all those who made up the great Populist Movement. And too bad to you auto companies, if you are going to prohibit workers from joining unions and fighting for their rights."

This version of history, however, is very far from the truth. It is a grotesque distortion and oversimplification, meant to back up the notion of the state as an essentially neutral body by contrasting to the corrupt present a mythical past.

In the first place, even in periods of social reform, including the New Deal of the 1930s, the state remained at bottom an instrument of the most powerful corporate and financial interests. It was never independent of them. It functioned then, as always, to defend the essential interests of the ruling elite, above all, its ownership and control of the means of production. It did so in that period, in part, by means of social reforms.

Precisely because the state remained, as it must under the profit system, an instrument of the dominant economic interests, the reforms initiated by Roosevelt in the 1930s and Johnson in the 1960s remained partial and stunted, not even reaching the level of the social benefits enacted by Western European governments after World War II. Most of these social programs have, moreover, proven to be temporary.

Secondly, the social gains associated with movements such as the CIO unions in the 1930s and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s were not the product, as Nader suggests, of benevolent governments. They

were the result of mass struggles involving millions of working people, in many cases led by socialists, which posed to the ruling elite the question: to be or not to be. Under conditions of massive pressure from below, the most astute capitalist politicians, including Roosevelt, understood that it was necessary to make certain concessions to the working class and other oppressed social layers to save the profit system from the threat of social revolution.

Liberal defenders of capitalism have always pointed to periods of reforms as a refutation of the Marxist conception of the state as the instrument within class society of the economically dominant class. But even in periods of social reform, the essential character of the state has been demonstrated in the form of violent repression against the working class whenever the ruling elite's basic interests were endangered.

There was no lack of such instances under Roosevelt, including the bloody Memorial Day Massacre of striking steelworkers in 1937. The postwar period witnessed the repression of the civil rights movement and the violent reaction to the urban riots and antiwar movement, to mention but a few examples. The same is true for the more recent period, as the postwar economic boom unraveled and both parties shifted to a direct offensive against the working class, starting with Carter and Reagan and continuing into the present. This involved government backing for the union-busting campaign of the 1980s and 1990s, including the firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers, the use of state troopers and company goons to break strikes, and the revival of labor frame-ups and picket-line killings .

Nor is the domination of big business over the government and the two political parties something new, as Nader suggests. It has been an essential feature of American politics for more than a century. If in the US this monopoly operates more nakedly than in other countries, it is because the American workers movement never took the elemental step of building its own political party.

Nader's denial of the class character of the capitalist state has reactionary implications for the policies he advocates. While calling for a reduction in US military spending, Nader defends the claim that the military exists to defend the interests of the American people, not US imperialism.

The US Green Party platform takes a similar line, declaring that the US "must maintain a viable American military force, prudent foreign policy doctrines, and readiness strategies that take into account real, not hollow or imagined threats to our people, our democratic institutions and US interests." Based on this same outlook, the "pacifist" Green Party in Germany, which participates in a coalition government, has adopted an openly pro-imperialist policy and supported NATO's war against Yugoslavia.

Nader advances similar views in relation to the police and the courts, claiming they are part of "our government," not the instruments of class oppression. In Ann Arbor, Nader complained that police brutality and scandals were "bringing disrepute on law enforcement and the police force." He continued, "If we are ever to have a nation under law, we have to have public respect for the law enforcement people in our country."

Economic nationalism

Insofar as he gives any explanation for the shift to the right of the big business parties, Nader places the onus on globalization. He identifies the increasing domination of transnational production and exchange with certain trade agreements and institutions, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

"The WTO," he told the Ann Arbor audience, "subordinates America to the dictates of international trade." Globalization, he said, led to the "subversion of our local, state and national sovereignty to closed-door courts in Geneva, Switzerland," which establish international labor and environmental standards that "we can't appeal in our own courts." Nader accused the WTO and other institutions of carrying out a "creeping coup d'etat" against the US.

This is an out-and-out appeal to American nationalism. As we reported during our coverage of the Green Party's nominating convention last summer, Nader has quite consciously sought to make an appeal to those attracted to Reform Party presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan, who similarly condemned trade deals with Mexico and China for violating American sovereignty.

In his Ann Arbor speech, Nader suggested that American society was more democratic and egalitarian in an earlier period, when the dominance of world economy over the national market was less pervasive. With globalization, he said, the WTO and various trade agreements operated on an entirely different principle than that which supposedly prevailed in the US, i.e., they put corporate profit before the needs of the people. These global institutions dictated that the US "harmonize" its standards with countries that have "even less of a democratic infrastructure than we have," leading to falling living standards and the subversion of the American people's rights.

Nader's remarks have more than a whiff of American arrogance and superiority. The notion that the great problem facing ordinary people in the US is that they lack the same access to the WTO that they have to American institutions is absurd. What input do American citizens have on the decisions of the US Federal Reserve Board, an unelected body whose decisions on interest rates and money supply have a direct bearing on the jobs, wage levels, mortgage rates and general economic well-being of millions of working people? As for Congress, Nader himself admits that as a body it is virtually for sale to the highest corporate bidder.

Nader evinces the political malady of parliamentary cretinism, suggesting that democracy is synonymous with the existence of elections and parliaments. He has, as well, an inflated and unduly grandiose concept of the legal profession and the courts, which he claims can redress in a fundamental way the grievances of society. This is not surprising, given Nader's long career as a corporate whistle-blower and watchdog.

As for the WTO, it is largely controlled by US-based corporate interests. The problem with this and similar institutions, from the standpoint of working people, is not that they are insufficiently under the control of the US. The problem is that they are controlled by the capitalist class.

What Nader laments is the fact that globalization has undermined the perspective of national reformism, upon which the trade unions, civil rights organizations and liberal pressure groups have long based themselves. Transnational corporations today are less dependent on a national pool of labor and less restricted to national markets. They are able to shift production more easily overseas to find the lowest costs and highest returns. This process has sharply reduced the social weight of the trade unions, which have lost millions of members, representing today only a small percentage of the workforce.

As the viability of a national reformist perspective has been undermined, Nader has sought to hold more tightly to the unions, civil rights groups and liberal lobbyists, and obscure the economic processes that have led to their disintegration. He hearkens back to a semi-mythical past, when the nation-state supposedly guaranteed economic security and democratic rights. It is not surprising that in this respect he shares essentially the same outlook as the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy.

Nader and the Greens go even further, advocating "community-based economics" and glorifying local and small businesses. Nader wrote that the government should encourage "smaller scale operations," which, he claimed, "are more easily subjected to democratic control, less likely to

threaten to shift their operations abroad, and more likely to perceive their interests as overlapping with community interests” (quoted from *GATT, NAFTA, and the Subversion of the Democratic Process* by Ralph Nader and Lori Wallach).

In the age of the Internet and global production, Nader and the Greens call for a return to a small-scale, locally-based economy. This is a reactionary utopia—an attempt to reverse human progress and drag the productive forces back within the confines of the nation-state and even more primitive and provincial political forms. While Nader and the Greens paint an idyllic picture of pre-industrial or early industrial society, the reality for the masses of working people was anything but idyllic.

Social inequality, poverty and economic insecurity are not the product of the global integration of the economy as such, but of the subordination of the globalized economy to capitalism. The vast changes in world economy of the last two decades vindicate Marx’s analysis of capitalism as inherently international and expansionary, and vindicate as well the international orientation of the socialist movement, going all the way back to the Communist Manifesto and its famous dictum, “Workers of the world, unite.”

The process of globalization has brought hundreds of millions of workers into a common struggle against the transnational corporations, and created an unprecedented opportunity to break down national barriers and elaborate an international socialist strategy. The technological and productive advances associated with globalization, if placed under the control of the world’s producers, make it possible for the first time in history to guarantee jobs, decent living standards and democratic rights for all people all over the globe.

Socialism takes as its starting point the development of the productive forces, which Marxists insist is the prerequisite for the creation of a genuinely egalitarian and humane society. The Greens, to the contrary, tend to view economic development itself, not capitalism, as the greatest danger facing humanity, and seek to reassert the nation-state as an antidote to the global development of the productive forces.

Promoting illusions in the AFL-CIO and the Democrats

The inviability of Nader’s perspective is underscored by the institutions he upholds as “progressive.” Included are the AFL-CIO trade unions, which, after decades of betrayals, collaboration with management, corruption scandals and suppression of the rank and file, have increasingly lost credibility with broad sections of the working class.

Although he clashed with the United Auto Workers (UAW) when he exposed unsafe automobiles, and supported legal action against the corrupt leaders of the Teamsters, over the last decade Nader has sought to establish an alliance with the trade union bureaucracy. Earlier this year he appealed to both UAW President Stephen Yokich and Teamsters President James P. Hoffa for an endorsement. Both union officials praised Nader for supporting their chauvinist campaigns against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the China trade bill.

Nader’s appeal to the AFL-CIO bureaucracy raises a significant question: how deep can his opposition to the Democratic Party be, if he aligns himself with the trade union bureaucracy, which is one of the major pillars of that party? In fact, Nader’s concluding remarks at the University of Michigan demonstrated that the Green Party candidate, far from leading a genuine break with the Democrats, sees his role as influencing the two capitalist parties.

Nader said he hoped to win enough votes for the Greens to attain “majority status [ballot status and access to federal matching funds], and in that way become a watchdog to these two corrupt parties in

Washington, to hold their feet to the fire.” He reiterated this point in a letter to the *New York Times* on October 27, when he said, “We seek long-term political reform through a growing party that pushes the two parties towards reforms.”

According to Nader, one result of his campaign will be the strengthening of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, which will be emboldened to wrench control of the party from the right-wing Democratic Leadership Council. Speaking to the *Baltimore Sun*, he said, “After the election is over, you wait and see how respectful the Clinton-Gore-Lieberman Democratic Party will be to the progressive wing,” Nader said. “Because they know the progressive wing now has a place to go.”

What progressive wing is Nader talking about? The so-called progressives and liberals in the Democratic Party have lined up behind every reactionary policy of the Clinton years, from the elimination of welfare, to the launching of imperialist wars, to law-and-order attacks on civil liberties, to the administration’s pro-business fiscal policy. A moderate Republican of 30 years ago would have a hard time associating himself with the policies of these so-called progressives.

Just as Nader denies the class nature of the capitalist state, he denies that parties represent social classes. The right-wing trajectory of the Democrats, he would have us believe, is the product not of the shifting demands of the capitalist market, but simply the outlook of Clinton, Gore and company.

Nader is capable of identifying and denouncing the more obvious evils of capitalism. But he suggests that these are only abuses and injustices in an otherwise workable economic and social order. On the basis of different, more just ideas, reforms can be introduced to meet the needs of all the people. Nader and the Greens reject the notion that the interests of the working class and those of the capitalist class are irreconcilable, and that the class struggle is the most fundamental fact of modern life.

His entire career has been based on appealing to the enlightened self-interest and philanthropy of the ruling class and its representatives. On this basis, Nader rejects the struggle for the political independence of the working class from the two parties and capitalist politics in general.

Nader’s politics correspond to the outlook and position of definite social strata. He articulates the anger and opposition of layers of the middle class—small farmers, shopkeepers, middle managers, academics—and the owners of more backward sections of industry, who are being squeezed by the predominance of large-scale industry and globalization. His perspective is government intervention to preserve more primitive economic relations and those classes that depend on them.

The political wishful thinking, the eclecticism, the internal contradictions of the Greens, their lack of a consistent and scientifically grounded political perspective—these are hallmarks of middle layers of society that are being squeezed and destabilized by big capital.

A party based on the middle classes is incapable of elaborating a consistently independent program. In the final analysis, these social layers can only play an intermediary role between the two great contending classes of society—the working class and the capitalist class.



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