

Kucinich, Sharpton and the WSWS: letters and a reply

13 October 2003

Several WSWS readers have written letters criticizing an article on the Democratic presidential candidates' debate in New York City last month, by Patrick Martin, posted on the WSWS September 29. ["Democratic candidates back Bush's Iraq war spending bill"]. These correspondents support the campaigns of Democrats Dennis Kucinich and Al Sharpton, and urge the WSWS to cover them more favorably. Below we publish excerpts from these letters and a reply by Patrick Martin.

Dear Patrick,

I think your article is great and it is important to point out how much the Democratic Party has sold out to capitalistic and imperialistic values in dominating the world with greed. Obviously, if not changed it will lead to the loss of our Earth itself and if not a planet so hellish it will not be a desirable place to inhabit. However, you do not give enough credence to Dennis Kucinich, who refuses to take any money from big corporations and has consistently supported openly sending home the troops, pulling out as a military occupation in Iraq and cutting the bloated Pentagon budget. Dennis actively voted against the war and protested it. He has continued to lead the fight for an independent investigation on the Bush lies and making Bush and his cronies accountable for them. Dennis Kucinich truly is our peace candidate. Despite his lack of funding, due to his no corporate interest groups need apply for donations, I sincerely believe he has a great chance of winning.

As Bush and company's lies continue to be exposed and the situation with unemployment and economic disasters happen, under-funding of Americans' basic needs and Homeland Security brushed aside to pay for these crimes in Iraq and abroad committed by our current administration, the will of the people will rise up. When the people come to their senses and realize that voting is free and so are grassroots endeavors, their survival instincts within our collective conscience will emerge. When that happens, Americans will realize that Dennis is the only candidate who will help us turn our swords into plowshares. We will then end this insanity of violence and greed that is destroying our very Earth. Please report more on Dennis and his efforts for peace. He needs all the support he can get for the courageous stands he has taken. Keep telling your truth as well about the decay of democracy. The truth will set us free and out of the decay and rot of our current times and administration, we can fertilize a new garden of peace...

OB

29 September 2003

In Patrick Martin's article dated September 29 he claims that none of the candidates oppose the Bush administration's requested increase of \$87 billion, and that none of the candidates propose bringing the troops home. I did not see the debate because I do not have cable, but I know for a fact that Dennis Kucinich is speaking out strongly against Bush's request for funding and proposes turning over complete control of Iraq to the UN and withdrawing American troops.

Mr. Martin's tone implies that he does not appreciate the way candidates are deemed viable in this country—that they must have sufficient corporate backing and enough funds to feed the media millions

in ad campaigns before they will pay any attention to the candidate, yet he falls into the same trap. There is a real alternative running this time—we need the WSWS and others to give him the attention he is so often denied in the corporate media culture.

Thank you,

JG

Phoenix, Arizona

29 September 2003

Patrick,

Am really disappointed in your article analyzing the Democratic debate last week. You consistently failed to take into account Dennis Kucinich's consistent policy of being against the war, funding the \$87 billion request and stating unequivocally that for him "supporting the troops" means bringing them home and letting the UN replace them. No other candidate has such a consistent record. Is it because you don't consider him a "major" candidate? Well, I do and so do a lot of other supporters. Anyone else is just a makeover of the same "trash" we have now.

Have a great day! Love and peace.

GK

29 September 2003

I just finished reading your article "Democratic candidates back Bush's Iraq war spending bill" by Patrick Martin and was left with the impression that you also believe that Al Sharpton and Dennis Kucinich are irrelevant to the process.

I can understand for example the bourgeois press giving quotes in terms of what the eight "viable" candidates said about supporting the bill, but unforgivable that a pro-working class medium such as yours would leave out what Sharpton had to say.

The bourgeois media make Sharpton irrelevant by ignoring him, but a working class journalist cannot fall in with the bourgeois media. It was a big disappointment for me not to be able to learn through your report what Sharpton had to say, and if there are many more like me out there reading your report then I guess they would also be disappointed and no wiser as to where Al Sharpton really stands and where he differs from the other Democrats. It was not enough to merely say that he was opposed to the bill. I believe that what he had to say would have been far more enlightening than what the eight had to say. This may very well decide whether Sharpton gets working class votes or not, but working class people must have an opportunity to decide.

I hope you accept this criticism in a positive way and become more aware as you try to cover the debates.

LD

29 September 2003

Patrick Martin replies:

The specific criticism from several of these readers, that the WSWS article misrepresented Kucinich's position on the war and did not distinguish his views (and those of Sharpton) from those of the other Democratic presidential candidates, is simply mistaken. The article posted September 29 clearly stated, in relation to the Bush administration's plan

to spend \$87 billion on the occupation of Iraq, that “All but Kucinich and Sharpton indicated that they would support the request...”

This is followed by quoted or paraphrased comments from the other Democratic candidates—Dean, Clark, Gephardt, Lieberman, Graham, Kerry, Edwards and Moseley Braun—demonstrating that these eight all endorsed the continuing US occupation of Iraq, even those who criticized the means employed by the Bush administration to launch the war. It was not necessary to quote Kucinich and Sharpton in this context, since the purpose of the article was not to report on the remarks of each and every candidate, but to analyze the significance of the consensus among all the leading Democrats that the continued occupation of Iraq was legitimate.

Although these criticisms are based largely on a misreading of the article, the letters from readers nonetheless provide an opportunity to explain the attitude of the SEP towards the more “left”-sounding candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination. We don’t maintain that there are no differences between Kucinich and Sharpton and the other Democrats, or, for that matter, ignore the conflicts among the more “mainstream” Democrats themselves. In other articles we have examined those differences and commented on the significance of the rise and fall of various Democratic presidential hopefuls. [See US Congress passes \$368 billion for Pentagon war machine, Democratic Party leaders embrace Bush’s war of aggression, Leading Democrats line up behind Bush on Iraq war]

The issue is one of political principle: the central task facing the working class is to break from the political tutelage of the big business parties and begin to organize itself as an independent political force. This necessitates a complete break with the Democratic Party and a ruthless struggle against illusions that this corrupt bourgeois institution can be transformed into an agency of political reform or progressive social change.

Even if Kucinich and Sharpton were well-meaning, sincere progressives, wholly devoted to advancing the interests of working people—which as we shall see, is hardly the case—their presence in the Democratic Party would serve only a cosmetic purpose, providing a “left” face for a fundamentally reactionary political instrument of corporate America. As it is, knowing very well the real nature of the Democratic Party, Kucinich and Sharpton most resemble the crooked stockbrokers who peddled worthless dot-com stock to unsuspecting buyers. Like them, they are engaged in “putting lipstick on the pig.”

JG suggests that while criticizing the media practice of judging the viability of candidates based on their bank accounts and corporate support, I fall into the same trap by pointing out that for Kucinich, Moseley Braun and Sharpton, their “lack of financial backing renders them irrelevant to the outcome of the contest.” I stand by that assessment: Kucinich, Moseley Braun and Sharpton are indeed irrelevant to the selection of the nominee. None of the three has the slightest chance to win, or even to exert much influence on the final result. But that is not to say these campaigns have no significance. Far from it.

Kucinich and Sharpton personify two political strands of the petty-bourgeois left, whose influence the SEP has long combated: the radical protest politics of the 1960s, now allied with a section of the trade union bureaucracy; and black nationalism, in a particularly degenerate and corrupted form.

Take Kucinich first. As mayor of Cleveland in the late 1960s, he represented one of the most “left” elements in the Democratic Party during the heyday of the radical protest movement. He was closely allied with the Stalinists of the CPUSA, who still had significant influence in the working class of Cleveland, particularly in such unions as the UE and UAW. With the collapse of the protest movement and the shift to the right in American bourgeois politics, Kucinich was driven out of political life for two decades, before returning to office as a state legislator and ultimately winning a congressional seat.

In his presidential campaign, Kucinich has advocated immediate withdrawal by the US from both NAFTA and the WTO, staking out a position as the most strident opponent of the free trade policies pursued by the Clinton administration as well as by Bush. He has embraced the nationalist politics of the trade union bureaucracy, especially in the old industrial unions like the United Steelworkers and United Auto Workers, calling for protectionist measures to prop up American manufacturing industries, in the name of “saving American jobs.”

Neither free trade nor protectionism can defend the interests of working people, in the United States or internationally. These are different tactics for the defense of corporate interests, pursued at different times, depending on the viability and competitiveness of the particular industry. In general, outmoded and declining industries seek protection, while successful and growing industries advocate free trade. In either case, the interests of workers are subordinated to the profitability of the corporate employers.

The WSWS rejects both forms of capitalist trade policy, and advocates a radically different strategy: the unification of the working class on an international basis, in a common struggle against all the nationally-based corporate exploiters. American workers should not line up behind either the free trade or the protectionist wing of big business, but must find their true allies among the workers of Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa. This strategy of international unity requires a flat-out rejection of the chauvinism of the union bureaucrats and Democrats like Kucinich, who split the working class along national and ethnic lines and inevitably set the stage for immigrant-bashing and a new round of imperialist wars.

GK hails Kucinich’s position on the war in Iraq, writing that “for him ‘supporting the troops’ means bringing them home and letting the UN replace them. No other candidate has such a consistent record.”

The WSWS rejects calls to replace American troops in Iraq with an occupation force drawn from other countries and run by the United Nations. How would this serve the interests of the Iraqi people? Is it better for the Iraqis to be shot by Turkish, Pakistani or South Korean soldiers, rather than by Americans? Nor would this serve the interests of the working class youth recruited into the various imperialist and mercenary armies. Is it better to have boys from Bombay, Frankfurt or Tokyo blown up by roadside bombs or killed by snipers, instead of boys from Atlanta, New York City or London?

Kucinich’s position on the war in Iraq, despite the rhetoric of peace, is saturated with the same national chauvinism as his position on trade: let others die, not Americans; let others be laid off, not Americans. And contrary to his celebration of the UN as an instrument of peace, this organization is one of the main instruments of imperialist oppression.

The only principled position on the occupation is to demand the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops, whether American, British or Latvian, whether their helmets are grey or blue. Kucinich would perhaps argue that without some outside military force, Iraq would fall into chaos. But the chaos, one must remind him, is itself the product of outside intervention: wars in 1991 and 2003, and the intervening 12 years of economic blockade which devastated what was once the most advanced economy in the Arab world.

For those with a historical perspective, such arguments reverberate with echoes of Vietnam. There too, the devastation caused by the American military presence was cited as a reason for continued warfare, or at least, for gradual rather than immediate withdrawal. The crimes committed by the occupier became the justification for still more crimes, in a horrifying downward spiral.

Al Sharpton is a different kettle of fish. He represents, not so much a political or ideological trend, as a definite social type: the cynical con man or hustler. A former child preacher and FBI narcotics informer, Sharpton’s political and moral corruption were displayed most grotesquely in the Tawana Brawley affair. He first came to national notice

championing the transparently false claims of a disturbed black teenager, who said she had been raped by a gang of white racists including a local prosecutor. Sharpton, Brawley's "adviser," and her two attorneys, Alton Maddox and C. Vernon Mason, were ultimately found guilty of 10 counts of defamation in 1998.

This proved only a minor setback in Sharpton's emergence as one of the most prominent self-proclaimed spokesmen for the black community. He ran for US Senate and for mayor of New York City, and Democratic candidates in New York, including Hillary Clinton in 2000, courted his support. Among the Democratic presidential candidates, Sharpton is the cleverest speaker, and the most streetwise, one of the few who knows how to connect with a working class audience.

But his program is nothing more than self-advancement. He aims to be recognized as a power broker, promising to deliver some portion of the black vote in return for political perks. He represents not the continuation of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, but its cooptation and degeneration: the corruption of a middle class layer that has abandoned any struggle for democratic rights, in favor of appointments, contracts, in a word, cash.

A knack for left-sounding demagoguery does not make a candidate either praiseworthy or progressive. On the contrary, we fully subscribe to the opinion voiced by Lenin long ago, that a demagogue, precisely because of his ability to persuade and mislead, is "the worst enemy of the working class." What the American working class needs are not clever wisecracks or rhythmic cadences, but relentless analysis and criticism of the existing order and a political program based on overturning the profit system and replacing it with a society based on genuine social equality.

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