

FIGHT FOR OUR CLASS, NOT FOR OUR BOSS

EXPANDED VERSION OF A SPEECH THAT WAS GIVEN TO
AN ANTI-WAR RALLY IN HARTFORD CT.

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Fight for Our Class, Not for Our Boss

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The following is an edited and expanded version of a speech that was given to an anti-war rally at Trinity College.

Thank you for inviting me to say a few words to this important demonstration.

I AM SPEAKING TODAY AS BOTH AN ANTI-WAR ACTIVIST AND ARTIST. Along with being a political muralist, I'm a member of the scenic artists union. We work in the entertainment industry - television, movies, and in the theater. We create imaginary worlds, we let you suspend your belief and take part in theater.

In corporate America, unfortunately, the job for most artists (if you're lucky enough to be employed) is to sell either commodities or ideology.

In the first case, it is the designers, filmmakers, illustrators, writers and musicians who get people to buy things they don't want or need. We convince people that this or that automobile will make them cool, or that wearing the right jeans or shoes will make them irresistible to their romantic interest. We give life to inanimate objects. We get people to buy drugs or cigarettes or booze.

But today I want to talk about the second case - selling ideology for the ruling class. It is the sound engineers, make up artists, lighting designers and actors that create the fake news. Film editors cut video to deceitfully show Palestinians are dancing when planes crashed into the World Trade Center on 9/11. We write the scripts, develop the racist stereotypes and frame the scenes so Arnold Schwarzenegger can dehumanize and mow down Arab terrorists. Graphic designers create the jumpy texts that make you an army of one.

Of course we don't really think of it in these terms, any more than a machinist can dwell on the end result of machining parts that will be used in a bomber. We think "Hey - look at this cool thing I designed." We take pride in our work. We don't have a choice about what we produce.

Reality Check

So when I'm looking at one of the so-called reality shows, I am thinking about the crowd of people on this side of the camera, how the editing was done, how it was made to make you think it is unscripted - all that kind of stuff. And today, I'm watching the greatest reality show of all: the elections.

To sell the elections, you put the artists to work to create an entirely fictional world. You take Sarah Palin, who believes the victims of rape or incest must bear the child of their rapist - and you make her funny and cute. A person who represents the most ignorant, anti-scientific and superstitious ideas - is made to seem just folksy.

You take someone like John McCain. Unlike working-class youths who were drafted and had to fight in Vietnam, McCain volunteered to do so - he chose the vocation of dropping hideous weapons of mass distraction

on inno-cent people. He was bombing civilian targets when he was shot down over Vietnam. But he's transformed into a hero.

These candidates are not stupid - they are just good actors. They are chameleons, unrestrained by moral qualms. They are representatives of a ruling class in decline – a class that has no future, a class without pride or vision. They read their lines and follow direction.

The Republicans are the strong right arm of the war machine. They unabashedly denigrate community activists for trying to improve their neighborhoods. They openly proclaim that wealth should not be shared. They cam-paign around contemptible racist attacks directed against Barak Obama.

So what happens? You are so repulsed by these characters that you run to the left arm of the same creature – tens of thousands of you. Tens of thousands of people who are completely opposed to the war - instead of marching to bring the troops home, they are off rooting for the handsome young hero-actor. This is despite the fact that he will not only support the continuing occupation of Iraq, but is even more vociferous in his saber rattling to extend the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Con is On

It's a con game and we are the victims. And it's such a brilliant con, that even knowing you're being swindled, you still give money to the criminals. Off you go, running to support the "lesser evil."

It's as though a couple of con artists were trying to sell you oceanfront property in either Nebraska or Tennessee. You know that both states are landlocked and the salesmen are crooks - but you're told to give your savings to the Tennessee guy. What else can we do, ask the union officials, as they turn over millions of your dues dollars. At least it's closer to the ocean!

The Democratic and Republican politicians would be laughing all the way to the bank, if they hadn't already loot-ed the banks and dumped the remains on us.

So why do American workers do this? It's because all of the resources of the bosses, all the artistic talent they control, all of the tens of millions of dollars but they spend, all of the hundreds of hours of media exposure that they have, all of the pressure of all of the institutions in our society: the church, the university, the government - all of that is used to get you into the voting booths.

The capitalist-controlled press, rich celebrities, big-name artists, preachers, college professors, union officials, civil rights leaders, the women's movement's notables - all of them are telling you to stop demonstrating and put your efforts into electing so-called progressive candidates. They will admonish you if you do not vote for one of the two ruling class candidates. They will brand you as divisive or apathetic - as though abstaining from voting for con art-ists means you don't care about social issues.

And because workers aspire to a better world, because they want to show that they are against racism and for peace, because they do not yet see an alternative - they will go to the polls and vote for Barak Obama - the wrong act for the right reasons.

Real Democracy

From the day we are born, we are taught that elections are the barometer of democracy. But elections are not a democratic process, only a mechanism for the two ruling class parties to sort out their minor differences. How could a government of millionaires, with not one representative of working people, be democratic? How can it be democratic when third parties are kept off the ballot?

Real democracy is a daily struggle, not a yearly ritual where you get to vote for the left hand or right hand of the same beast. Democracy is in the streets – it is working people fighting for their own interests and future.

The elections are a fake reality show on a grand scale. They make you to think that you have to vote for one candidate because the other candidate is going to screw you even worse than the first candidate. But the prob-lem is much more than a small clique of know-nothing right-wing politicians like the Bush administration. It's not just the two-party system. Our fundamental problem is a false belief that voting can solve the growing economic and social crisis. But if we restrict ourselves to electoral activity, nothing will change.

So all of this pressure is brought to bear - you should go out and campaign for these candidates and not be in the streets demonstrating because that might embarrass the Democrats.

Militant Traditions

And yet, here we are. A sizable group here on this campus, and similar gatherings all across the country, saying that we are going to stay in the streets, exercise our power and fight to end the war. We are not buying your oceanfront property.

You know, there is a lot of nostalgia for the 60's – we remember it as a time of radicalization and it was a great moment in history. But the young leaders of the movement today are a lot more together than we ever were. You are more insightful, more internationalist, more inclusive and less divided by race, sex or sexual orientation.

You are part of a great tradition of militant and revolutionary activity on the part of a working class that has one of the most militant traditions of struggle in the world. It is here that sit-down strikes and rebellions gave birth to mighty industrial unions. It is here that African-Americans built a civil rights movement that conquered a racist power structure and inspired liberation struggles throughout the world. It is here that millions of women took to the streets to inspire their counterparts all over the world to demand their rights - beginning with the right to control their own bodies.

It is also here that we built a massive student movement that in May 1970 shut down the universities of this coun-try to demand that the troops be brought home from Vietnam.

That historic event helped usher in one of the most remarkable chapters in the history of the working-class – the GI anti-war movement. If you want to see some real hero's, some soldiers who were heroes, then look no further than the rank-and-file working-class soldiers of US military that organized so effectively that the United States was forced to withdraw its forces from Southeast Asia.

From the ground up, led by African-American and Latino GIs, these workers created something unprece-dented in modern times - a peace movement within the armed forces during a shooting war. Despite being

faced with jail and victimization, they fought on to victory and set an example for the rest of the world.

It is this militant past that serves us well nowadays. Because today the capitalist class of the US is far weaker than it was during Vietnam. They are unable to wage the kind of war that they would like to in the Middle East because global competitors and anger against the war restrain them. They are weak and we can defeat them.

Potential Power

Today's working class is far more centralized and has far greater potential power than ever. As weak and small as our unions are, any one of a number of them has the power to stop production and bring the war to an end. Rail-road workers in Japan, Italy, and the UK have conducted symbolic strikes against the war in Iraq. West Coast longshoremen in the United States have done the same thing. If those symbolic actions become sustained, it will bring the war to an end – you cannot conduct a war if workers refuse to ship war materials.

We have only to fold our arms and the country will grind to a halt. I believe that could happen very soon and I'll tell you why.

February 15, 2003, was the largest antiwar demonstration in human history. Without working-class parties, without mass organization, from the bottom up - we organized the most massive antiwar demonstration in history - before the war even began. Nothing that the war makers have done since then has turned that opinion around - in fact, antiwar sentiment is far deeper today than it was then.

May Day 2006 was the largest class-conscious workers demonstration in the history of the United States. Millions of immigrant workers said to the world: "We are workers we are not criminals!" What an amazing day. Now ask yourself this: what is going to happen when these two gigantic movements come together? And what will happen when you add to that mix the anger that people have from the bank bailouts?

When people predicted, before May of 1970, that a national student strike would shut down all the universities in this country, people said we were crazy. But politics, real politics, does not happen by slow curves, it happens by leaps and bounds. So ask yourself - what would happen today if there were another mass Mayday demonstration – how would other workers react?

I believe that they might join in this incredible demonstration. We are sitting on a pressure-cooker - we are not that far away from a general strike or similar event in this country. That is why the ruling class may select Barak Obama as our next President – they believe he is better equipped to diffuse and misdirect such a social explosion – he's eagerly proving his loyalty to them today.

Stay in the Streets

Real change comes from the actions of millions of people - it does not come from elections. If you look at the his-tory of the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the organization of industrial unions, the antiwar move-ment, or any other social struggle - you will see that we won because we stayed in the streets to demand our rights.

Today it is critical that we engage in visible actions. It is critical that antiwar soldiers see us marching- so that they have the confidence to fight against the war like their Vietnam-era predecessors. It is critical, that we mo-

bilize to demand justice for immigrant workers, who are leading the working class today as they have always done in this country. Immigrant workers need to see that they are not alone - that their brothers and sisters are ready to act in defense of their civil and human rights.

The collapse of the world's financial system has placed us on the verge of a great new social struggle. As working people and as student allies of working people, we have the potential power to end the war and even to create a new world. The only thing that stops us is our own uncertainty - the wall around our own minds. As Steve Biko said: "Nothing is more powerful in the hands of the oppressor than the minds of the oppressed." We have only to recognize that the emperor has no clothes. We have only to refuse to produce and the world is ours to save from certain destruction.

Nothing fundamental will change after this election – the wars will grind on and the plunder of our wealth will continue. We must not accept their massive brainwashing that we are helpless and that we cannot change the world. We can and will end these occupations. We will do it through mass marches and by demanding that the troops be brought home now.

WE HAVE TO FIGHT FOR OUR CLASS, NOT VOTE FOR OUR BOSS.