

JOHN EDWARDS' WAR ON POVERTY

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Tikkun commentator Peter Dreier analyzes John Edwards' focus on eliminating domestic poverty in his bid for the Presidency. Plus, a dissenting voice.

John Edwards' War on Poverty
By Peter Dreier

"Can we still really call America the land of opportunity when hotel workers who work full time for profitable hotel companies cannot afford to make ends meet?" John Edwards said at a rally last year sponsored by the hotel workers union. "This is not just unjust. It is immoral, and we need to do something about it."

For the past several years, Edwards, 53, has been criss-crossing the country speaking at union rallies, joining picket lines and campaigns to raise the minimum wage, visiting homeless shelters, job-training programs, and low-income housing developments sponsored by community nonprofit groups, and showing solidarity with labor, consumer and senior citizen groups pushing for universal health insurance.

This is hardly the typical path to the White House. But Edwards has charted a bold course for the presidency: He wants to lead a moral crusade against persistent poverty and widening inequality in the world's wealthiest nation.

This is Edwards' second try. After serving one six-year term in the U.S. Senate from North Carolina, Edwards ran for President in 2004 focusing on the nation's growing economic divide between the rich and everyone else.

"When I spoke on the campaign trail about the two Americas," Edwards said at a conference on poverty last year, "people called it a downer." Once his Senate colleague John Kerry of Massachusetts had won the Democrats' presidential nomination and invited Edward join his ticket as his vice presidential running mate, Edwards had to downplay what some pundits called his "class war" rhetoric.

Now Edwards is back on the campaign trail, vying for his party's nomination. He has positioned himself to the left of the two other leading candidates, Senators Hillary Clinton of New York and Barack Obama of Illinois, as well as about half a dozen second-tier contenders. He's still talking about the "two Americas," but his stump speeches are both more hopeful and more specific than they were in 2004. Plus, economic conditions are even worse.

"We need our leaders to be willing to ask the American people to be patriotic and sacrifice about something other than war," Edwards now says at almost every campaign stop.

In November 2005, before the tide of public opinion had turned against the war in Iraq, Edwards admitted, in a column in the Washington Post, that he was wrong to vote to give President Bush the authority to invade Iraq. He has called for bringing U.S. troops back from Iraq and wants to refocus American on fighting a new war on poverty and economic insecurity.

It's been over 40 years since President Lyndon Johnson declared a national "war on poverty." But while Johnson's "Great Society" domestic programs significantly reduced poverty, especially among the elderly, they were derailed by the Vietnam War and, later,

by an effective business-sponsored rightwing attack on "big government" social spending. Americans are now once again ready for change.

Now here comes Edwards, calling poverty "the great moral issue of our time" and challenging the nation to cut poverty by one-third within a decade and end it within 30 years. Edwards says that poverty has become a "very personal" issue. "It's what I care most about besides my family."

Since George W. Bush took office in 2001, the number of Americans living in poverty has climbed from 33 million to 37 million people. Today 12.6% of the population -- 20% of children under six -- live below the poverty line, about \$20,000 for a family of four. About 47 million Americans -- 17% of the population -- lack health insurance, a record high.

He recognizes, however, that to win the presidency he must address the concerns and fears of a growing number of middle class Americans who face economic security and are worried about their jobs, their pension, and their health insurance. Wages, for example, now make up the lowest share of national income, and profits have grown to the largest share, since the federal government started collecting this data in 1947. The fastest growing jobs include janitor, hospital orderly and cashier.

A growing number of private employers are dropping health insurance from employee benefit plans or requiring employees to pay premiums they can't afford. The number of Americans in debt is escalating. More and more homeowners are at serious risk of losing their homes to foreclosure. The shredding of social safety nets like health insurance and welfare leave more families confronting high medical bills or job losses without unemployment compensation.

Meanwhile, news headlines about outrageous compensation packages for corporate CEOs and business scandals like Enron and WorldCom have focused public attention on another troublesome trend -- the increasing concentration of wealth and income among the richest 1% of Americans. According to research by economists Emmanuel Saez of the University of California and Berkeley and Thomas Piketty of the Ecole normale Supérieure, the share of income going to the top 1% families has doubled from 8% in 1980 to 16% in 2004 while the federal tax burden on those families has declined from 44.4% in 1980 to 30.4% during that period.

The images of poor people trapped by Hurricane Katrina -- and the Bush administration's failure to respond to the disaster victims -- has made poverty "impossible to ignore," Edwards says. He announced his presidential campaign standing with Katrina survivors in the backyard of a hurricane-damaged house in a low-income area of New Orleans, a city he's visited several times in the past year, working with community groups.

After his defeat as the Democratic vice presidential candidate in 2004, Edwards founded the Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity at the University of North Carolina. Since then, in between allying himself with labor unions and community organizing groups like ACORN, he has been meeting with academics and grassroots practitioners to develop a policy agenda to address America's economic divide.

Work is at the core of Edwards' vision. Work should lead to personal and tangible assets including home ownership, savings for retirement, and a college education for one's children. Work must pay fairly. And it should strengthen families, a proposition that Edwards's hopes will make it harder to label him a knee jerk liberal. He proposes greater protections for middle class families from the insecurities of corporate downsizing and outsourcing, and more federal subsidies to help families pay college tuition. He consistently lashes out against the greed of big tobacco, big pharmaceutical companies,

big insurance companies, and big oil companies.

At each campaign stop, Edwards says, "I am strongly committed to moving people out of poverty and into the middle class," and "one of most important things we can do is help families earn more money at work."

Edwards wants to strengthen labor laws that now make it almost impossible for workers to unionize. Employers illegally fire employees for union activity in at least 25% of all organizing efforts, and view the meager fines for these labor violations as a cost of maintaining a "union free environment." He supports the Employee Free Choice Act, cosponsored by Sen. Ted Kennedy and Cong. George Miller, which would restore some balance to federal labor laws, and is priority #1 for the nation's union leaders.

"The best anti-poverty strategy," Edwards frequently says, "is a strong labor movement."

But Edwards also wants the federal government to invest in a large-scale public works program that will create at least one million "stepping stone jobs" in the public and nonprofit sectors -- such as cleaning up rivers and parks -- to put people to work while doing good. He has called for increasing the federal minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour -- where it remained since 1997 -- to \$7.50 an hour, higher than the Democrats in Congress are now proposing. He wants to expand the Earned Income Tax Credit (an income supplement for the working poor), add one million housing vouchers for low-income renters, and build federally-subsidized housing developments that don't ghettoize the poor but provide housing for a mix of income groups.

Like most Democrats (and even some Republicans) these days, he thinks its time for the U.S. to have a universal health care plan. He hasn't decided yet whether he favors a single-payer approach -- in which care is provided by private clinics but paid for entirely by the government, what some call "Medicare for all" -- or some version of the current complex and expensive mix of private insurance companies and government.

How would Edwards pay for these and other programs? In common with some other Democrats, Edwards wants to repeal Bush's tax cuts for the richest 2%, which would generate about \$80 billion a year. But so far Edwards is the only candidate to candidly acknowledge that paying for these investments should take priority over reducing the deficit.

Edwards' policy ideas come closer to a European-style social democratic agenda than any major candidate for President has proposed in years. Although Edwards is now a multimillionaire, he constantly reminds his audiences that he is the son of a millworker. He worked his way up through college and law school. He made his millions not as a corporate attorney, but as a trial lawyer representing working-class people in lawsuits against doctors, insurance companies, and other big corporations.

Can Edwards win his party's nomination at its August 2008 convention, and then take the White House the following November?

Hillary Clinton is currently leading in the national polls among Democratic voters with 41%, followed by Obama (with 17%) and Edwards (with 11%). But with the first nominating contests still a year away, much can change. In fact, despite Clinton's current fundraising advantage and the media frenzy surrounding the newcomer Barack Obama, the immediate political roadmap -- the obstacle course of Democratic state primaries and caucuses -- seems made to order for an Edwards victory.

Edwards is currently leading in the polls in liberal and strongly anti-war Iowa, where the first test will take place in January next year. Next comes Nevada, a strong labor state --

Las Vegas' tourism industry is heavily unionized -- which gives Edwards an advantage. The third state, New Hampshire, allows "independent" voters to cast ballots in either the Democrat or Republican primary. Sen. John McCain's presence in the Republican primary could draw middle-of-the-road independents away from the Democratic ballot, leaving the remaining Democratic primary electorate much more progressive.

The fourth battleground is South Carolina, which Edwards, a Southerner, won in 2004. If Edwards can win two or three of these contests, he will bring considerable fundraising and media momentum into the bigger states with more Electoral College votes. If California -- one of the nation's most liberal and pro-union states -- moves its presidential primary to February 2008, as its political leaders are talking about, Edwards will be in a good position to win the Electoral College's biggest prize of all.

A January 17-18 Newsweek poll found that 49 percent of registered voters say they would prefer to see a Democrat take office versus 28 percent who would favor a Republican. In various potential match-ups between the leading Democratic and Republican candidates, only Edwards among the Democrats beat both McCain and former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

Either way, his campaign carries an important message. Americans are tired of Bush's noblesse oblige prescriptions for addressing poverty -- like encouraging people to donate to charity and volunteer at homeless shelters and soup kitchens. In contrast, Edwards is seeking to define the next New Deal in an era of globalization -- a new social compact requiring people to work if they can, corporations to act responsibly, and government to both invest in people through job training, education, and health care, and to protect people during tough times with a stronger safety net.

Some political consultants, editorial writers, and Democratic Party corporate funders warn Edwards that resurrecting the moral idealism associated with Bobby Kennedy is no way to win the White House. But it's exactly what's needed from the next president of the United States.

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