Beyond The Democratic Primary: A Reply to Daniel Moraff

written by Kim Moody | March 28, 2017

In his article calling on socialists to run in Democratic primaries, Daniel Moraff argues that some of the barriers to running candidates in Democratic primaries, such as money and incumbency, also apply to third parties. So they do. He points to the fact that socialist and community organizer Debbie Medina got 40.56% of the vote in the 2016 NY State Senate race in Brooklyn's 18th District as opposed to 13% for a Green candidate for mayor in Baltimore. So, it's easier to run as a Democrat.

Yes, but in 2016 Medina lost the primary for a second time to an incumbent party hack facing a scandal who takes real estate money, and who still got over 59% of the vote in a typical low-turnout primary. Nothing was gained, nothing new organized. It's not the candidate's fault, it's the set-up. To most of the public, these primaries are just one more internal dog fight, which is one reason why so few vote in them. But what if she had won?

In addition to all the structures and money behind the Democrats at all levels and the reality of party discipline in most legislative bodies there stands the mass of elected Democratic Party office holders. While Bernie Sanders got nearly 13 million votes from rank and file Democrats, his support among Democrats in office was marginal even among self-styled progressives: 10 out of 232 Dems in both houses of Congress endorsed Sanders; 5 of the 75 of his fellow members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus; 91 out of 3,170 Democratic state legislators; 3 of the 48 Democrats in New York's city council; only two of that council's 19 Progressive Caucus members; and so on.

Here was a real test of left possibilities within (or through) this party and all but a handful of the thousands who held political office in its name stuck with the neoliberal mainstream. In other words, win and you find yourself outnumbered in unfriendly territory—and, once again, you will not have built anything new.

Furthermore, as Seth Ackerman, who Moraff cites, writes in *Jacobin* (No. 23/ Fall 2016), "electing individual progressives does little to change the broad dynamics of American politics or American capitalism. In fact, it can create a kind of placebo effect…" Instead Ackerman calls for "a national political organization that would have chapters at the state and local levels, a leadership accountable to its members, and electoral candidates nominated at all levels throughout the country." While I disagree with his "pick-and-mix" approach to ballot status—some Dems, some not—Ackerman at least points toward what is actually needed to change things: a mass democratic membership party/organization of the left with roots in the working class.

Third parties lose more often than not because they lack a social base and for the most part play by the rules, relying primarily on election-time mobilization. That by itself won't beat the well-funded,

organizationally-backed pros of the two major parties. A new party must be rooted above all in the workplaces, local unions, community organizations, and neighborhoods of today's predominately urban working class. It should organize and fight on relevant issues and back union organizing drives, strikes, and other struggles all year around. It should educate on how its politics are an extension of these social movement activities face-to-face, day-in-and-day-out not just every two or four years. Grassroots membership organization with a history of fighting on the issues can beat money and complicit Democrats as the activists of the Richmond Progressive Alliance in that "deep-blue" California city have shown (See Steve Early's *Refinery Town* for that story).

Urban-based Democrats at all levels of office are vulnerable to an outside grassroots challenge because with rare exceptions their neoliberal policies have left the cities' working class residents poorer, ill-housed, their schools in decay or closing, social services cut, unemployment rates high, and much more. At the same time, Democratic mayors and city council members grant huge tax breaks to developers and other businesses—Mayor de Blasio gives away more in city "tax expenditures" to developers, condo owners, etc, than Bloomberg did.

Democrats are vulnerable because they are losing voters everywhere, less to Republicans than to the "party of non-voters", who, surveys show, are on average to the left of voters on economic issues and about the same on social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. As Democrats reveal their inability to fight Trump and his billionaire cronies in more than symbolic ways, their vulnerability will become even clearer.

The Sanders' campaign and the new waves of activism in opposition to Trump and his policies are providing the initial troops for a bigger change and a new independent politics. Why squander this in the morass of Democratic Party infighting. In most cities, small or large, there is little or no "spoiler" problem because the Republicans are so marginal. Ballot access can take effort, but is not insurmountable. With a grassroots activist approach, over time a new party to the left of the Democrats can become the second party in city after city, altering the political balance of forces. And that would be something new.