

Cornel West for President? What Does the Left Think? Part 1

June 12, 2023



Prof. Cornel West

UPDATE - June 14 - Just a little more than a week since he announced he wanted to run for president as the People's Party's candidate, Cornel West has changed his mind. He now says he wants to be the candidate of the Green Party, wants to participate in its internal nomination process. He has chosen the Greens and distanced himself from the People's Party he says because of all the the "charges and squabbles inside the People's Party," presumably referring to the sexual assault charges against PP leader Nick Brana. The Greens were also on 33 state ballots in 2020, while the People's Party is on the ballot in only one.

[June 12] Cornel West, the prominent Black public intellectual, philosopher and theologian, professor at Yale, Princeton, Harvard, and the Union Theological Seminary, and an outspoken progressive advocate of social justice, announced last week by Twitter that he will seek to be the presidential candidate of the People's Party in 2024.

"I have decided to run for truth and justice, which takes the form of running for president of the United States as a candidate for the People's Party," West announced on Twitter. "I enter for the quest for truth. I enter for the quest of justice. And the presidency is just one vehicle we pursue that truth and justice."



PEOPLE'S PARTY

The Movement for a People's Party, led by former Bernie Sanders staffer Nick Brana, was formed in 2017 as a leftist pressure group aimed at getting Bernie Sanders to leave the Democratic Party and run an independent political campaign. When that effort failed, the People's Party became an independent political party. In December of 2020, the PP announced that both West and media personality Jimmy Dore had joined the new party. The party claims to have 150,000 members, but it appears on the ballot of only one state, Florida. The American journalist Chris Hedges has said that he will arrange a meeting between West and the Green Party to see if they might back West. In the 2020 presidential election the Green Party was on 31 state ballots.

To say that West's campaign on the PP ticket is a long shot vastly exaggerates its possibilities. Yet what its impact will be is not yet clear.

West's candidacy will take place in the left lane of American politics usually occupied by other groups such as the Green Party and the Democratic Socialists of America. The Green Party, founded as a party concerned with the environment and social justice, runs candidates for president and vice-president every four years. The Democratic Socialists of America backs both some Democratic Party and some independent candidates. In 2016 and 2020 DSA endorsed Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Party primary and many DSA members worked for him. But in both 2016 and 2020 DSA declined to endorse the Democratic Party candidates, Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden, though some DSA members worked for and voted for them. We spoke to leaders of both organizations to see what they thought of West's bid.

A View from the DSA



Justin Charles, DSA NPC

Asked about his view of West's decision to run for president on the People's Party tick, Justin Charles, a Black New York City activist and a member of DSA's National Political Committee (NPC),

said, "I'm glad that he's running, though I wish he wasn't running on the People's Party, because my experience with them has been that they're not serious. They don't seem all that serious about party building. Jimmy Dore, who is associated with them, is like a snake oil salesman."



Jimmy Dore, Media Personality

Charles is perhaps too kind to Dore. Dore, a stand-up comedian and media personality, has been a promoter of various conspiracy theories, such as that Syria did not carry out chemical weapons attacks on its civilians; he suggested that the Democratic Party National Committee was responsible for the death of Seth Rich, a DNC employee; and he has spread misinformation about the COVID pandemic.

Asked how he thought DSA would react to the campaign, Charles said, "A lot of people in DSA have respect for Cornel West. He can speak to this moment with more insight than Biden. And that's a good thing."

Yet Charles thought it unlikely that DSA would endorse West. "His candidacy will have an effect on things we do and so it certainly warrants a discussion. I'm all for a discussion, but I don't think it's likely that the NPC would take any action on it. I don't think DSA will endorse anyone for president. I will not be on the NPC when this issue comes up; my term will be up."



Howie Hawkins, Green Party
Presidential Candidate 2020

A Green Party Take on West

Howie Hawkins, the Green Party presidential candidate in 2020 who is still deciding whether to run in 2024 was quite critical of West and the People's Party. "Cornel West shows poor judgment tying himself to Nick Brana's online grift, the People's Party. They have no organized base to do ballot access petitioning. It is doubtful he can raise money to pay for petitioners in up to 50 states and DC."

Hawkins thinks that West will not be able to stand the heat of an election campaign. "I doubt whether West will stick it out as the anybody-but-Trump (or the next far-right Republican) pressure mounts. He's been flip-flopping on this question for years. After supporting Ralph Nader [Green Party candidate] in 2000, he was an outspoken opponent of Nader's 2004 run as an independent candidate in part because of the left-liberal backlash against Nader and the Greens for supposedly electing George W. Bush.

"After supporting Sanders in the primaries, West flipped to Jill Stein in the general in 2016. In 2020, he flipped back to the Democrats, publicly opposing my run and calling for a vote for Biden because of the left-liberal backlash against Stein and the Greens for supposedly electing Trump. He's never had a principled commitment to independent working-class politics, or been part of an organization trying to do that. Always more a figure in letterhead coalitions, from Michael Harrington's Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC, predecessor of DSA) to various top-down NGO or academic issue campaigns. For him, inside or outside the capitalist Democratic Party has always been a question of immediate tactics around candidates, not a question of building independent working-class organization and power."

Hawkins also criticizes West's platform. "He has not been consistently anti-imperialist and in solidarity with Ukrainian people's fight for independence and survival. He has supported Medea Benjamin's approach of demanding U.S. imperialists impose a ceasefire and settlement negotiated with Russian imperialists for land-for-peace to carve up Ukraine between Russian and Western spheres of influence. His neutrality between Russian aggressors and Ukrainian self-defense is morally bankrupt complicity in Russian imperialism. Not a good look for a Christian preacher."



Nick Brana, People's Party leader
in 2020

Nick Brana and the People's Party

The People's Party maintains its progressive program, but it has taken some stands and suffered some internal conflicts that call its ideals into question. The PP recently made a move to the right, forming an alliance with the rightwing Libertarian Party for demonstrations—Rage Against the War Machine—held on the first anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine calling for an end to U.S. military support for Ukraine and a stop to Ukraine's war for its sovereignty against the Russian aggressor.

Party leader Brana wrote on Twitter on Feb. 20, 2023, "Rage Against the War Machine was incredible! Thousands of people rallied and our march stretched several blocks. We brought left and right together to stop this war in Ukraine. The anti-war movement is BACK!' This is what is sometimes called a "red-brown" alliance, nominally leftist parties joining with rightist parties, now a disturbing phenomenon around the world. Whether the PP will establish closer ties with the Libertarians or other rightwing groups is not clear.



Paula Jean Swearingen

Brana, who has led the party since its founding, has also faced serious charges. Last year he was accused of sexual assault against Zana Day with Paula Jean Swearingen saying she had witnessed the event. All three were PP leaders. With Brana still leading the party, a ten-member investigative committee was formed (Brana and his father were members). One of the committee's members says that several on the committee, "believed the accuser," but then three of its members were expelled from the party. So far as we know, no legal charges appear to have been filed against Brana.



Zana Day

Zana Day, the alleged victim of the assault, wrote on Twitter on July 10 last year, “The Board majority, staff, and Vols [volunteers] were removed to cover up. Multiple stories, with even audio recordings, show the People’s Party and the abuser lying about the investigation.” The People’s Party has posted statements claiming that the allegations against Brana were part of a smear campaign and an attempt at a liberal takeover of the party. Whatever may be the truth, the handling of the matter was far from ideal.

Brana and the PP now turn to the work of building Cornel West’s campaign, getting him on the ballot in the 49 states where the PP is not yet on the ballot, raising the millions of dollars or finding the tens of thousands of members it will take to get petition signatures, and then fighting to have their views heard and to make West a strong candidate. It will be all uphill from here.

Part II of this article will compare Cornel West’s PP campaign to that of other Black politicians on the left such as Shirley Chisholm, Angela Davis, and Jesse Jackson as well as looking at the larger political questions such a campaign raises.