Electoral Politics is a Socialist Priority, But It’s No Common Denominator

written by Michael Hirsch | July 3, 2017

Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) is singular on the left as being both a broad radical socialist organization, encompassing left social democrats, Marxists and even a smattering of anarcho-syndicalists, combined with a strong face toward electoral politics. But an electoral orientation per se is not and cannot be the common denominator of our work. It is true that without an electoral face, any political organization is hamstrung and those on the left who argue that support for any Democrat anywhere is treasonous paint themselves into a corner. Electoral politics on the level it can be rationally conducted is worth doing. That, for me, is not in dispute. Its place in our work is what is problematic. Thinking in terms of power is about more than electioneering.

Joe Schwartz, in the most recent *Democratic Left* (Summer 2017) makes a compelling case for working for progressive candidates and building an independent DSA as the best exemplar of a robust resistance. He is also cognizant of the fact that, at some 22,000 members, DSA is still a relatively small organization, given the need for resistance not only to Trump and the GOP majority in Congress but to every neoliberal Democrat, too, and small given the pressing need to lead in a fight-back. While he cautions rightly that we can’t play king-slayer in national politics, Joe still leans here toward prioritizing electoral politics over movement building.

Despite writing that “DSA trains effective organizers and strategists who can operate as a visible socialist collective with mass movements,” his article valorizes building “a ‘farm team’ of viable socialist electoral candidates.” Movement building for any other reason is absent in the piece, yet the two I believe are in general inextricably linked and of equal merit. Yes, no movement can succeed without an electoral face—revolutionary syndicalists internationally and here at home learned this to their sorrow—but no electoral effort that isn't purely propagandistic can last without a base not only supporting it but growing outside of the electoral arena and in many instances and moments of necessity not even conjoined with electoral action. Consider the paradigm as a Venn diagram: two separate but interdependent forces with strong overlapping interests and conditions.

If Joe’s perspective as enunciated in the article is taken at face value—and he may have been bending the stick for effect—the function of the movements is primarily to grow a cache of voters, themselves active only in so far as they can influence and further the goals of their electeds. This collapses categories in civil society that overlap but must also be distinct. For example, Joe rightly praises the work of Brooklyn comrades in helping build tenants organizations. But the strength of tenants’ groups doesn’t come primarily from their capacity to turn out the vote—as necessary as that is—but to take their fight in multiple forms to the landlords, too. In New York statewide it means contending with the notorious landlord lobby, the Real Estate Board NY, not only in the legislature but in the neighborhoods. Rent strikes, mutual housing efforts, tenants’ associations, eviction battles, building takeovers and other mass actions don’t necessarily have electoral analogues.

In trade union work, DSA's task is not only to defend and build unions but also to ensure that they are rank-and-file led (the work of *Labor Notes* and comrades in the Marxist organization Solidarity, for example, are models for this). A revived labor movement would engage not only in campaigning for left candidates but promote what used to be called "industrial action," including strikes, slow downs and "work-to-rule," without necessary regard for the timing or even the needs of the electoral cycle. Workers' control and developing cadres of workplace militants are as much a part of a radical heritage as is electoral work, and so are workers' cooperatives (with all the dangers inherent in workers prizing their own enterprise over other similar operations) a step in empowering the powerless.

So too are people's assemblies, a modern analogue to soviets (the workers, peasants and solders councils of revolutionary Russia and Germany in 1918-19).

These and others are the institutions in which racism and sexism can be effectively combatted and turned back. The creation of centers of "dual power" is as much our goal as is radical electoral reform. In an advanced capitalist country like the U.S. they can work in tandem. They *must* work in tandem. Intersectionality, or the ability to have politics reflect the complete panoply of personal experience and everyday life, can't be reduced to electioneering and legislative reform. The endgame can't be the singular goal of growing the clutch of radical politicians. Our mandate is broader than that. Strong radical movements are also a hedge against reformism and political opportunism.

DSA doesn't yet use the term "socialism from below," but it should, not to adopt it only as rhetoric or to make our educational work shine but because, in the words of the *Internationale*, "We want no condescending saviors to rule us from their judgment halls…let each consult for all." It is the essence of socialism that working-class people liberate ourselves. It also is the essence of what we need to bring to our educational work. DSA is wise enough to understand that electoral politics is a key instrument for building a socialist current in U.S. politics and everyday life, but it's not a first among equals.

As the poet Shelley wrote in the coda to his "Masque of Anarchy," a commemoration of the 1819 massacre by the British government of a Manchester workers' rally whose public manifestation was for radical reform of parliament and the overturning of the Corn Laws (which exploded the cost of food stuffs and lead to mass starvation): "And these words shall then become, Like oppression's thundered doom, Ringing through each heart and brain, Heard again—again—again—'Rise like Lions after slumber, In unvanquishable number—Shake your chains to earth like dew, Which in sleep had fallen on you—Ye are many—they are few.'"

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