The Failures of Lesser-Evilism in Chicago

written by Scott Jay | April 10, 2015

Once again, a major election in the US has brought out the specter of lesser-evilism–the call to vote for the least bad option–and once again this strategy has been a complete failure, regardless of which candidate actually wins. Usually it is a Republican against a Democrat, although in Chicago in 2015 it was a neoliberal Democrat, Rahm Emanuel, against a slightly less neoliberal Democrat, Jesus "Chuy" Garcia.

There will be many analyses of how Garcia failed to beat Emanuel, such as Micah Uetricht's piece in *Jacobin* which noted that "Garcia as a candidate was mediocre at best, and was far from the best candidate for Chicago's current moment." His campaign promise of putting another 1,000 police on the streets, at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement and in the midst of yet another Chicago police scandal, was unconscionable though not surprising.

But Uetricht looks on the bright side, commenting that "progressive unions and community organizations have formed a new political organization, United Working Families, that seeks to train and run long-term movement activists as candidates and create a political home for themselves outside of the Democratic Party." This is an odd conclusion, as the UWF and really the entire labor Left, including many independent local campaigns, were fully behind Garcia, a pro-austerity, pro-police Democrat. Rather than breaking from the Democratic Party, these efforts helped redirect independent political aspirations back into it.

With the end of the Chicago election season, it is worth reviewing not only Garcia's weaknesses but also the ongoing inability of even the left-wing of the labor movement to break from the politics of lesser-evilism, and the damage it does to struggles for social change. We need to have an honest and blunt assessment of the damage that has been done, because otherwise there can be no path forward. And while many of those involved have been and will continue to be comrades in struggle, some serious mistakes were made that must be accounted for.

From social justice unionism to lesser-evilism

It is hardly possible to promote the lesser-evil without lying about how evil they actually are and, therefore, disarming oneself. What was astonishing to watch were the efforts of the leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union—the people who led a polarizing and powerful strike against austerity just a few years back—taking the lead in Garcia's campaign. It is nothing less than a disaster that CTU President Karen Lewis, who in years past was a figure who could mobilize the labor movement around broad social issues and against neoliberalism and racism, spent the last few months assuring everybody that a candidate openly in favor of attacking workers was in fact their friend. We should not pretend that this is a minor disagreement among comrades. The once inspiring promise that the current leadership of the CTU might lead a new path for the labor movement lies in tatters after this

debacle.

Karen Lewis and her Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) came to the leadership of CTU in 2010 offering the promise of social justice unionism and, potentially, a new page in the history of US labor struggles. They delivered a popular teachers strike in 2012, but there have been many difficulties since. After the strike, they were unable to stop nearly all of Emmanuel's school closures, but Lewis and CTU Vice-President Jesse Sharkey are now minor media stars and power brokers in Chicago.

Karen Lewis nearly ran for mayor herself but, unfortunately, became seriously ill. Instead, she anointed Garcia her successor, and he was introduced at an annual CTU dinner by Sharkey as "the next mayor of Chicago" along with a surprise video from Lewis. The CTU membership had little say in any of this, as the endorsement was rushed through just days later.

In short, their wheelings and dealings now need not have any direct relation to the needs of their members. Lewis and Sharkey are powers unto themselves. The leadership can make its own decisions and the membership is merely expected to follow, rather than the other way around.

One of the most cynical moments of the Garcia campaign orchestrated by the CTU leadership took place in late March, with Garcia and Sharkey holding a press conference in support of a fifteen dollar an hour minimum wage for all Chicago Public School workers. Certainly this was a perfectly good demand to raise. The problem is, it was already obvious that Garcia was not committed to it at all and his actions following it made a mockery of the demand.

The very next day, according to a *Chicago Tribune* reporter, Garcia described his actual plans for Chicago public sector workers in a televised debate with Emanuel. If he could not get additional funding from the state of Illinois, then "we have to sit down with the teachers' union and have a difficult discussion with the teachers," he said. Garcia also responded to a question from Emanuel about whether he was beholden to the public sector unions. Assuring his commitment to austerity, Garcia responded, "Given the state of affairs you have put the city in—the fiscal free-fall—I'm gonna tell the unions a lot of bad news because the situation is so dire."

It was a classic lesser-evil moment which earned Garcia high marks. In short, what he was saying is, I will cut wages and benefits, and I am going to blame it on Rahm Emanuel. Unfortunately, the lesser evil—the "nice guy"—is often much better at carrying out the evil than the "bad guy." In fact, Garcia's promise was precisely that he would deliver the bad news in a nicer tone of voice. Nonetheless, immediately following these comments in the debate, Garcia was greeted by a rally sponsored by United Working Families.

"No gravy"

The next week Garcia reiterated this theme of lean budgets. There will be "some very tough conversations for some tough medicine to be swallowed by all of the partners," he said. "So there's no gravy to go around." The difference between his administration and Emanuel's is that his "approach will be collaborative."

So what was Garcia actually promising–a wage to $15 per hour or budget cuts? Well, this might be shocking to hear, but it looks like this politician may just have been lying about his promises to the workers.

The CTU leadership should have known better than to believe Garcia was really committed to wage increases and not austerity, and they probably did know, but their prominent position as power brokers in Chicago has now overtaken their better judgement. They no longer need to worry about

what their members or any other workers think while they fight for a seat at the political table.

As representatives of public sector workers, they are literally promoting the person who they hope will be the new employer and who they know will do so as a budget-cutter. As always with this strategy, it is a win-win situation for everybody but the workers, and the fact that many (though certainly not all) rank-and-filers also support Garcia does not make the work of Lewis and Sharkey any less damaging.

Within hours of the election results, Sharkey announced that the CTU was looking for a quick deal to extend the current teachers' contract for one year. This is a stark about-face from just two months previous when Lewis insisted that CTU was not going to extend the contract and they were prepared to strike for it and, yes, it would cost the city some money. Having put all their eggs in Garcia's basket, they are now reeling and they only have themselves and their failed strategy to blame for it.

It is certainly unconscionable under these circumstances that some unions actually backed Emanuel, *the greater evil*. Former staffers and volunteers of UNITE HERE in Chicago have signed an open letter criticizing their union's decision to endorse Emanuel, as they certainly should. But that leaves us with the basic question–what about Garcia? Endorsing Emanuel is a betrayal of working people, but endorsing Garcia would not be much better.

As for the CTU, there was a fight over the endorsement of Garcia, although much of it was pushed by people who supported Alderman Bob Fioretti, a more liberal and consistent ally of Chicago teachers. In a perfect twist of fate, Fioretti, the lesser of three evils, eventually endorsed the greater evil Emanuel. Even lesser-lesser-evilism is a dead end.

Which begs another, more important question–what remains of the Left in the CTU? Considering the hopes that many had that the CORE caucus could pave the way for the future of the labor movement, it would seem that there ought to be a group of Chicago teachers who could openly disagree with their leadership's undemocratic and dishonest promotion of a budget cutter. There is no less of a need to build rank-and-file opposition against the lesser of two evils, in fact this is often the more important task because it is through the lesser evil that evils are often carried out.

What we are seeing is that social justice unionism, without a clear analysis and strategy around the Democratic Party, will stumble over the same roadblocks that labor has always stumbled over, regardless of how left-wing the elected leaders claim to be.

Some would argue that mobilizing rank-and-file opposition to Garcia in these circumstances would be premature, or better yet "ultra-left," but if the unions are going to oppose austerity then they need to do it consistently, or else we will end up in the same morass we currently find ourselves in. When our friends support our enemies, we need to be honest about what dangerous ground we are on.

Similar problems apply to the various left-wing electoral campaigns that were notable over the past year, and this is especially true in Chicago where a number of rank-and-file teachers ran against pro-Emanuel candidates. The nature of their opposition was sometimes less clear, however. Tim Meegan, for example, is a Chicago teacher who ran an independent campaign for Alderman that came close to forcing a runoff. Nonetheless, Meegan endorsed Garcia. This begs yet another question–what does it mean for an "independent" campaign to endorse an austerity-promoting Democrat?

A decade ago, there were battles throughout the (now moribund) Green Party, led by the late Peter Camejo, about whether they would endorse Democrats. In other words, for people like Camejo, *actual independence was the entire point of the effort*. If left-wing electoral campaigns are going to

support and promote Democrats, what is the point of the campaign?

These are difficult questions to ask and are offered in a spirit of solidarity, but they must be asked and the Left needs to have a frank discussion about them, because if this electoral work does not challenge and weaken the status quo and in particular weaken the hold of the Democrats over the Left and the labor movement, then it is not clear what it is attempting to accomplish.

The labor movement is not going to break with lesser-evilism in one fell swoop all in unison, but rather through a protracted and ugly battle that will be opposed by people who have made their careers negotiating compromises. Those who stick out their necks will be slandered and isolated by the mainstream union apparatus. Meegan would have lost a substantial number of votes if he ran against Garcia, but if the goal was to create a political organizing space that can fight lesser-evilism, then it would have been more than worth it. However, it would have been extremely unpopular and would have been met with widespread hostility by most of the labor movement.

Independent organizing will not be not easy. There will be a massive pushback from the Democrats and their hangers-on. In other words, there will be an open struggle and many convenient alliances will be broken, but at least we will fight for what we actually want and need, instead of continuing to fight for what we don’t want.