

Fight the Right, Bernie or Bust? Slogans and Strategies

July 24, 2016

As the US primary season closes we are faced with a bitter choice between an uninspiring Democrat and a shockingly popular racist demagogue. As such, writers on the Left are bracing for the general election and lining up behind one of two supposed “strategies”: Fight the Right and Bernie or Bust.

Fight the Right

Max Elbaum makes his call to “crush the racist right” in this piece. Elbaum urges us that “thrashing the right is the immediate step needed to open a path toward more democracy ... and the reconstruction of an inclusive working class-based movement.”

In practical terms this means the Left should vote for and work to elect Hillary Clinton — even in safe states. The “thrashing” Elbaum describes refers to the need to “run up the score” against Trump (i.e. defeating him by huge margins) in order to thoroughly reject racist right-wing populism while isolating Trump and the racist far-right.

Though many leftists agree with this argument, from a socialist perspective it is limited in several respects.

First, Trumpism was largely fueled by the center-left’s inability to provide a meaningful improvement in the lives of millions throughout the Obama administration. A coalition with the center-left, in this case Clinton, in which Leftists work to “thrash” Trump at the ballot box, will only provide a short term (albeit important) solution: the immediate staving off of Trump. But unfortunately it will not prevent the long term issue of a rising racist Right. To do that we need to spend our time building genuine socialist electoral and social movement alternatives. Otherwise eight years of Clinton could easily end with another, perhaps more reactionary, candidate on the Right. Boosterism for Clinton relegates the radical Left to a cheerleader position rather than an oppositional and agitational pole.

Some “Dump Trump” advocates argue that a crushing electoral defeat would signal the downfall of the Right for decades. This isn’t borne out by history. For instance, far from destroying the Republican party’s electoral viability in his 1964 landslide defeat to LBJ, Barry Goldwater helped to forge a new, more conservative (and wilder more successful) Republican party capable of controlling the White House for three consecutive terms in the 1980s and early 1990s. Others point to the similarly devastating rout of Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern in 1972 and the subsequent decline in the Democratic Party’s Presidential fortunes as evidence that a defeat of this calibre produces profound and enduring negative effects on the losing party. In this case, however, it was much less the defeat of McGovern and much more skyrocketing inflation, anemic growth, a Democratic Party incapable of learning the appropriate lessons of the ‘72 campaign, as well as the now fabled onslaught of neoliberalism in the late 1970s that debilitated the Democratic Party until its third-way turn in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

When making any strategic decision we should take stock of our capacity (or lack thereof). We on the socialist Left are weak; we have neither the person power nor the organizational capacity to “Fight the Right” at the ballot-box right now. We have *maybe* 4,000 militant socialist activists in the country, so if we went all out for Clinton we would hardly move the needle an inch in her direction. If

this is the case why sacrifice our political independence and put our local organizing efforts on hold to stump for a candidate we don't believe in? If the socialist left commanded even 5% of the electorate the debate about our support would be a real one, right now it is mostly performative. In those relatively few cases where socialists in swing states indeed have a strong enough presence to make a substantive difference, the situation is different, but in the overwhelming majority of places this is not the case.

For many the force of the call to Fight the Right relies on a moral argument rather than a strategic assessment of where we are and how we develop a meaningful socialist alternative. For them, working against Trump and for Clinton is an end in itself that individuals concerned about racism and xenophobia should pursue regardless of the effects of doing so. From this perspective Trump represents such a threat to immigrants and communities of color that no insurance policy against his presidency (in the form of organizing, fundraising and the like) is too costly, even if upon rational consideration it appears to be a giveaway to a largely disreputable insurer (i.e. the Democratic Party with Clinton at the helm). We are as frustrated (albeit not shocked) by the success of Trump's misogynist and racist campaign as anyone else, but we don't see why this should lead us to forgo any semblance of strategic thinking in favor of an antiracist categorical imperative.

Others on the largely white socialist Left — though the two groups overlap considerably — see their role in the presidential elections as being good faith allies in the struggle to defeat Trump's racism. For them, campaigning on Clinton's behalf offers a chance to bolster their anti-racist bonafides and build deeper ties to organizations representing communities of color. Unfortunately, however, it is not at all clear that this strategy will yield its intended results. Simply "being in motion" with communities of color by attending canvasses and phone-banking sessions for the Clinton campaign does not seem to us to provide ideal conditions for building organic and lasting ties with communities of color. Further, most of the individuals we encounter through this work will be loyal Democratic party voters much less receptive to our ideas than the Sanderistas with whom we've been door-knocking over the last year. Organizing anti-Trump rallies and/or independent voter registration drives in communities of color hold greater promise than working directly through the campaign, but even these actions are limited in their efficacy relative to the alternatives we discuss below.

There is a real tension between campaigning for Hillary and building an anti-racist, feminist, and more racially and gender-diverse socialist movement. Unlike Fight the Right advocates we do not see how building Hillary's campaign represents a strategy for building our movement. If fighting the Right is a strategic decision for socialists it can only be so as a defensive posture against a dismal future, one that does not offer real opportunities to grow the Left. We would do well to acknowledge it as such. However, as discussed above even here a real assessment of our capacity limits our participation from a "defensive" position to the small set of swing states where socialists have enough electoral juice to influence the election's outcome.

Alternatively, advocating a Fight the Right position does risk alienating some of the most ardent Bernie supporters, these are the supporters we would like to see become socialist activists. Some of them are fantastic organizers and well respected in the grassroots movement for Bernie. That is a consideration Fight the Right advocates rarely acknowledge.

Bernie or Bust

On the other side of the debate Kshama Sawant appeals to those in the "Bernie or Bust" crowd. These Third Party advocates aim to show how terrible the Democratic Party is (on this most of us agree), and would like to see Bernie either run as an independent or endorse the Greens and Jill Stein. The problem is that here too a strategic question is posited as a moral choice: either we are

Bernie or Bust or we are hopeless reformists unable to see the existential truth that working within the Democratic Party in any way is fundamentally wrong (except, of course, for Bernie Sanders in 2016...)

Firstly, Bernie or Busters will likely represent a small minority of Sanders voters come November, and to suggest that they will singlehandedly usher in a new party is wrongheaded at best and deeply cynical at worst.

The cynical interpretation offered by Jill Stein suggests that “at least when Republicans are elected, people fight - when Democrats are elected, people are lulled into complacency and fall asleep.” This represents a tacit recognition that Stein knows she won’t win so voting for her is merely a means of punishing Candidate Clinton. Fair enough. But we should acknowledge (contra Stein) that a Trump presidency would not lead to an increased revolutionary fervor that could usher in a new era of radical organizing, but would more likely lead to increased political repression and demobilization. Further, under the Obama administration we saw both the development of Occupy and the Black Lives Matter movement, two of the most significant developments in American social movements in recent history. Are we to believe that under a Trump presidency Black Lives Matter would not suffer suppression? While we are critical of the general “Fight the Right” strategy, the millions of working class people who will vote for Clinton as a lesser-evil have compelling reasons to do so, and should not be chastised and reprimanded for their decision.

Stein’s argument uses the same magical thinking that the “thrash” Trump position employs: somehow by eating into Clinton’s voter base we can expose the Democrats and discredit them in future elections. But in the best case scenario this too is highly unlikely. In 2000 when Ralph Nader won the most significant Green Party vote in history (2.74%), and despite securing more ballot lines for the Greens in new states he did not succeed in establishing the Greens as a national political force (let alone building a mass working class party). In fact, the result was quite the opposite. Subsequent Green campaigns were subject to tremendous abuse by the Democratic Party machine and the national media, and the party has only ever secured a fraction of one percent of the vote since (topping in 2012 at 0.36%).

The more optimistic Bernie or Bust advocates assure us that their slogan represents a plan to break with the Democratic Party and build a new mass working-class radical party almost spontaneously. These advocates simply ignore sociopolitical reality in their call for a national Third Party today. Anyone with a basic understanding of the inherent biases of our national electoral system toward the development of two dominant parties, or of the extreme difficulties associated with mobilizing unaffiliated voters to a new party with no resources to entice them to do so can see that it’s premature to work for a national Third Party campaign.

This is not to say we don’t need an electoral vehicle outside of the Democratic Party, but rather that any effective Third Party effort will be the result of decades of local electoral successes that may eventually be parlayed into influence at the national level (perhaps through a regional strategy a la the Brazilian Workers Party or the Canadian Co-operative Commonwealth Federation — which would eventually form the nucleus of the New Democratic Party) rather than the spontaneous rejection of the two major parties in one single Presidential election.

Second, as Bernie has rightly and repeatedly noted, a Presidential candidate alone cannot lead a political revolution. Any of the reforms Bernie had fought for in his bid would not be actualized absent a mass movement (even if he were elected President). Socialists have long argued as much. Yet some in the Bernie or Bust crowd now suggest the exact opposite, that if only we vote for an independent Bernie run, or perhaps for Jill Stein we will get the social-democratic program that we wanted — a program that was thwarted only by the Democrats. In fact an independent run, due to

the inherently limited number of voters such a campaign would reach, has less of a chance to ignite the kind of broad electoral and social movements necessary to push through Sanderista demands. Part of the strategic brilliance of Bernie running on the Democratic Party ballot line was his ability to quickly and effectively reach millions of voters and ignite a groundswell of national support. With the somewhat sui generis exception of Ross Perot in 1992, never has a national Third Party Presidential campaign in the modern era matched his success.

Finally, Bernie or Bust advocates — like their Fight the Right rivals — argue that the Left should take a moral stance against Clinton. But again taking such a position does nothing to develop the capacity and the legitimacy of the Left (although it does make us feel better about our remarkable powerlessness). The Left today is weak but, thanks in no small part to Sanders, growing in importance for the first time in decades. It's critical that during this time of tremendous opportunity we move beyond the pathologies of moralism and self-righteousness that so often characterize ineffectual political movements — and unfortunately also much of the thinking both in the Fight the Right as well as Bernie or Bust camps.

A Way Forward for the Left?

Both “strategies” then, are born of a deep moral purity and/or strategic thinking that is misaligned with sociopolitical realities: many in the Bernie or Bust crowd know they won't win, but for them endorsing Clinton is simply beyond the ethical pale, whatever the consequences. Others mistakenly believe that a Republican presidency would actually strengthen the Left by somehow awaking a level of militancy among the population that would be absent under a Democratic presidency. For their part, much of the Fight the Right crowd insists that we must help Clinton win, despite knowing that our efforts toward that end will be largely symbolic, while others either conclude that working within the Clinton camp will open up opportunities for deepening their ties to communities of color and/or that a rout of Trump will usher in a prolonged era of Republican weakness at the national level.

If the Left wishes to maintain the credibility it has recently won through the Bernie campaign and help to defeat the far Right in the long term we should start building meaningful local alternatives where we can make a real impact. We need to prove to Sanders supporters — and many others who are potentially open to our politics — that we are indeed building electoral and social movement alternatives that they can see themselves being a part of. Neither a blank check approach to Democrats based on fear of the racist Right nor a Third Party approach lacking a coherent strategy is the best way for socialists to intervene in our long-term struggle for an anti-racist, feminist and anti-capitalist mass movement in the United States. A better approach would be to support strong socialist candidates down ballot and to deepen our engagement — as explicit socialists — with communities of color fighting against police brutality and illegal deportation, as well as fighting for affordable housing and high quality public education for all. In our view this is the best way to attract new folks to the socialist Left, both Sanderistas currently looking for a political home post-Bernie as well as thousands of other grassroots activists who weren't involved in the campaign but who are looking for a radical alternative to failed strategies of the past.

We place a particularly strong emphasis on local-level socialist campaigns, because such campaigns 1) offer an ideal context for building connections across varied communities that rarely have the opportunity to forge organic ties with each other, and diverse issue areas that are often considered only in isolation, 2) provide Sanderistas an electoral space — the political terrain where many Sanderistas feel most comfortable — to continue the political revolution, and 3) provide socialists with a highly visible and sustained platform to explicitly push an alternative vision from that offered by mainstream liberals to continue the political revolution. The goal should be to build a socialist electoral base and concomitant socialist organizations capable of offering a genuine alternative to

the politics of the liberal Left, and strategically flexible enough to operate within the confines of our current political system. Debbie Medina of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) is pursuing such a goal by running as a socialist for State Senate in Brooklyn. While our small numbers could barely impact a general election they would seriously boost the prospects of such socialists winning in their local races. We should make these and other socialist electoral bids widely known and we should work together nationally to build their local campaigns.

Let voters vote as they will come November, but the rest of us should be using this time to start to build a real alternative for the midterms and beyond by supporting democratic socialist candidates at the local level and building ties to communities of color by fighting against neoliberal education and housing policies, as well as our racist criminal justice system. Sanders lost the nomination but the Left need not lose its momentum either in a doomed Third Party run or an uninspiring bid to “thrash” Trump. The only way we can do that it by putting forward a strategic alternative and outline for how to transform Bernie voters into the Labor or Socialist Party militants of the future.

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Originally posted here.