

Flush With Cash: Will Buffy the Bernie Slayer Win in Pro-Sanders District?

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In a political culture shaped by big money, entrepreneurial candidacies, single-issue campaigning, and union dis-unity, you can run but not hide from crowded fields of Democrats. In many current primary races, they are all claiming to be “progressive,” even as they raise and spend millions of dollars competing against each other—money that might have been better spent on actual movement building?

Eric Draitser and Nick Pemberton described this phenomena well in several recent *CounterPunch* pieces. My own case study below comes from the left-liberal precincts of California Assembly District 15, where I’ve been a registered voter (Green or no party preference) for the last six years.

Our East Bay constituency has one of highest levels of Democratic Party voter registration in the state. Two years ago, many residents of AD 15—Berkeley, a slice of Oakland, Richmond, and several adjoining communities—were ardent supporters of Bernie Sanders in the statewide presidential primary won by Hillary Clinton.

Sanders strong following here may not herald a permanent “political revolution,” however. When the first stage of an election to replace our current Assembly member is completed next month, one of the top finishers could be someone who was nicknamed “Buffy the Bernie Slayer,” when she directed Clinton’s 2016 California primary campaign.

In our state’s “jungle primary” system, legislative candidates are lumped together—regardless of party affiliation—in the first round of voting. Buffy Wicks’ first-time run for office benefits from a crowded field of twelve (which includes a single token Republican) and, most importantly, national Democratic Party donor networks. Wicks is a newcomer to AD 15. She had little local name recognition and no track record of service on any city board, council, or commission before announcing her candidacy.

But she did direct the pro-Hillary Super-PAC, Priorities USA Action, serve in the Obama Administration, and work on both Obama presidential campaigns. Her past experience as a high-powered political operative makes her a magnet for the wrong kind of money in politics today.

Rock Star Organizer?

Wick's campaign cash register started ringing last year with donations from Washington, DC pals like John Podesta and David Axelrod. Their former White House colleague David Plouffe, now on the board of Uber, sent out a fund-raising letter calling Wicks "a rock star organizer" with "the commitment, experience, and political savvy to drive a progressive agenda" in Sacramento. In the Bay Area, her contributors soon included the founders of Craigslist, LinkedIn, and the Gap.

Wicks pre-primary haul now totals more than \$600,000, about 40% of what's been raised by everyone in direct contributions. As Wicks critic Doug Ricketson reported in a local blog, she has raised "more than twice as much as her closest rival, Berkeley School Board member Judy Appel at \$221, 873 and three or four times the amounts raised by locally-based candidates," who include city councilors from Richmond, Berkeley, El Cerrito, and Oakland. (See www.berkeleyside.com/)

A third of Wick's donors come from out-of-state. Among Buffy's in-state fans is "Govern for California," an independent expenditure committee "largely funded by hedge fund managers and venture capitalists." East Bay DSA researchers estimate that \$34,000 worth of her campaign cash has come from "neo-liberal Democrats—PACs and individuals—dedicated to closing public schools, busting public employee unions, and stealing public pensions." And local advocates of tenant protection are alarmed that Wicks has taken \$4,400 from Warren Spieker, Jr. a former Mitt Romney and Marco Rubio supporter, whose family real estate firm spent nearly \$50,000 trying to defeat rent control measures in multiple Bay Area cities.

Such financial backing doesn't trouble top Democratic office holders backing Wicks. They include a similarly funded Gavin Newsom, who hopes to move up from Lt Governor to Governor, and our junior US Senator Kamala Harris. Their pictures (and Obama's) adorn Wicks' website and fill the glossy, full-color mailers now filling our mailboxes. The 40-year old candidate has re-branded herself, like a young Obama, as a "community organizer" who rose from humble origins in a working class family to the heights of national policy making, where she mobilized "progressive constituencies to help pass the Affordable Care Act."

In Hillary Clinton fashion, Buffy markets herself as the candidate of "Progressive Values, Real Results." (Hillary, not surprisingly, hasn't appeared in any Buffy material so far.) In a just released video, Wicks instead boasts of her "100 organizing meetings in living rooms across the district" and legion of volunteers. She explains how she is "trying to run [her campaign] like a real grassroots movement" because that's the only way to bring about "sustained change in the community." If you go out and build such a movement, she says, "that lives far beyond any election cycle and far beyond election day," citing as examples, the 2004 presidential primary campaign of Howard Dean and Obama's more successful effort four years later.

Of course, with regards to two of the most important grassroots movements in California at the moment—for single payer healthcare and expanded tenant protection—Wicks is MIA or worse. She favors "moving our state towards a stable single-payer health care system"—but won't back SB 562, a bill designed to do that. She also stands out for her unwillingness (along with Assembly Democrats) to support repeal of Costa-Hawkins, a state law limiting the scope of rent control in AD 15 cities like Richmond, Berkeley, and Oakland.

The "Corporate Money Free" Alternative

Like Ricketson and East Bay Democratic Socialists, I've put my time and/or money into the "corporate free" AD 15 campaign of Jovanka Beckles. This two-term Richmond city councilor is a black Latino Lesbian Teamster county worker, with a real track record of movement building and little inclination to become part of "business as usual" in Sacramento.

As I reported in *Refinery Town: Big Oil, Big Money, and the Remaking of An American City*, Beckles and her Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA) allies overcame heavy corporate spending against them in 2014 and 2016, because they championed refinery safety, rent control, campaign finance reform, and independent politics in Richmond.

Four years ago, Bernie Sanders came to town to support RPA candidates and they reciprocated by backing his 2015-16 presidential bid. RPA is now affiliated with Our Revolution, the post Sanders campaign network of activist groups around the country. OR has endorsed Beckles' race in AD 15, bringing its national president Nina Turner to Berkeley last month for a rally with several hundred supporters. In addition to OR backing, Beckles was won endorsements from the Working Families Party and her own union, plus SEIU, ATU, UPTC-CWA, and NUHW (which made a dual endorsement).

Beckles has been embraced by environmental justice and citizen action groups like the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment, Communities for a Better Environment, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, and two local Green Party chapters. Her individual fans include Danny Glover, former Berkeley Mayor Gus Newport, ex-Black Panthers like Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins, and some of the Bay Area's best known LGBTQ community leaders.

But being based in one of the poorest cities in AD 15, with no personal wealth and few deep-pocketed donors nearby, has left Beckles with a campaign budget smaller than the five other "electeds" in the field, not to mention Wicks.

Beckles' main competition to the left of Buffy includes a self-described "education candidate" who has served ably on the Berkeley School Board and counts Van Jones and California teachers' unions among her staunch supporters; an "environmental candidate" backed by the Sierra Club, who serves on the Oakland city council, and drafted the city's ban on coal shipments; a labor and environmental attorney, who sits on our regional Utility District board and campaigns for workers' rights; a city councilor in Berkeley, elected just two years ago, but already trying to move up with help from its former Congressman, Ron Dellums; and an African-American RN who recently won election to the El Cerrito city council and then was encouraged to run for Assembly by the current holder of our AD 15 seat, Tony Thurmond, who is now seeking state wide office.

The Single-Payer Candidate?

In her AD 15 campaigning, California Nurses Association (CNA) member Rochelle Pardue-Okimoto highlights the importance of passing SB 562 and preventing Sutter Healthcare from closing a Berkeley hospital where she works—two causes embraced by Beckles as well. As *Beyond Chron* editor Randy Shaw points out, not "many voters feel they have to elect a nurse to keep Alta Bates open." In its assessment of her candidacy, *East Bay Express* concluded that Pardue-Okimoto should have been encouraged "to build her resume in the East Bay for a few more years" before trying to succeed Thurmond in the California Legislative Black Caucus (CLBC) in Sacramento.

Instead, a leading pro-Sanders union in 2016, now organizational ally of Our Revolution, and past supporter of the RPA is undercutting the OR candidate in the race, a black female union member with broad left support. The CNA has spent more than \$110,000 on mailers and billboards for Pardue-Okimoto through an independent expenditure committee called Nurses, Patients, and Guaranteed Healthcare Advocates. ("Rochelle's one of us," a CNA operative explains. "We're in it all the way.")

If the white corporate Democrat in the race finishes first or second on June 5 and Beckles does not, the spoiler role of CNA's candidate will be partially responsible. But don't expect the CLBC to regret

that outcome either. When Beckles paid a courtesy call on Black Caucus members in Sacramento last summer, she got a chilly reception. Having taken corporate money themselves, some African-American solons reacted defensively to the Richmond city councilor's past criticism of Chevron and other big political spenders. They frowned on Beckles' plan to run "corporate free" for the Assembly because this implied that existing members (including those in CLBC) were beholden to business interests.

Meanwhile, CLBC member Thurmond stepped up his efforts to enlist Pardue-Okimoto as a candidate, a move rewarded by CNA support for his own campaign for state superintendent of public education. At an AD 15 candidates' forum just a few weeks ago, Pardue-Okimoto expressed her eagerness to join the CLBC and work with its leaders (five of whom have contributed to her, via their own campaign accounts). Like the rest of the AD 15 field, except Beckles, Pardue-Okimoto was signaling that being a "team player"—in a corporate Democrat-dominated legislature—was a top priority for her, rather than rocking the boat of big money in politics, there or anywhere else.

Draining the political swamp in Sacramento is no easy task, under any circumstances. The costly left-liberal free-for-all in the East Bay may end up adding to that challenge, instead of helping networks like Our Revolution overcome it. But the AD 15 race does demonstrate what too much candidate-driven campaigning and independent spending—combined with not enough real organization building—can produce, even in Sanders country, when municipal reformers all try to move up at the same time.

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