Howie Hawkins for Governor: A Step in the Left Direction

written by Dan La Botz | October 16, 2018

I write this largely for my comrades in the Democratic Socialists of America but also for all who are interested in building a more democratic, egalitarian, and just society. I argue here for voting for Howie Hawkins for governor, the only progressive candidate for that office on the ballot in New York State, and the only open socialist.

I am convinced that any future mass working class or socialist party in the United States will arise largely out of developments in the Democratic Party.

The Democratic Party is after all the largest party in the country and still has the loyalty of a majority of working people, African Americans, Latinos, and women. While few Democratic Party legislators are leftists or even progressive, most people who consider themselves Democrats believe that the country should be more democratic, more equitable, and more egalitarian. And today a majority of millennial Democrats consider themselves socialist. So Democratic voters are in the long run absolutely key to our future.

At the same time, virtually none of us on the left would deny that, like the Republicans, the Democrats are a capitalist party, that is, a party of, by, and for the class of bankers, corporate executives and the vast army of businesspeople that surround that capitalist core. At the very top, the Democrats remain connected not only to the banks, but to the generals and admirals, and to the professional politicians, and to apparatchiks, mostly lawyers, who rotate between business and government. Few on the left any more harbor any illusions about taking over the core apparatus of the Democratic Party, dominated as it is by various fundraising committees and the advertising groups that work with them, as well as by corrupt politicians. While many on the left may still hope to pressure and influence the Democratic Party and push it to the left, there is also pretty widespread recognition that we have hardly had any influence over the years in doing so. And even lately the results have been—while sometimes quite stirring for those on the left—still pretty modest (as a variety of publications from Brookings, Atlantic, Huffington Post, and NPR have suggested). The Democratic establishment remains stronger than the progressives, and it is not clear that the latter are gaining much ground.

Many argue that with Donald J. Trump in the presidency we must vote the straight Democratic Party ticket in the general election, voting not only for socialists and progressives, but for mainstream Democrats and even for conservative Democrats. They argue that we need every possible Democrats in office to stop Trump. Yet we know that it was the Democrats—the Clintons and Barack

Obama—who bear responsibility for delivering us into the hands of Trump and the Republicans. We know that the Democratic Party has become a party of neoliberalism and austerity. And we know that despite many fine people in the Democratic Party—some legislators, some government officials, and many lawyers—who are resisting, we are being defeated. We are being defeated because the Democratic Party establishment which remains in control does not have a strategy to mobilize the American people to defeat the Republicans, nor can they be expected to come up with such a strategy since a mass movement from below would threaten to rock their boat and even knock them out of it.

Yet, under enough pressure, and the pressure is building, the Democratic Party will one day split and there will emerge from it a mass labor or left party. The question is what will it take to make that happen? And what can we do to contribute to it? As socialists, our job is both to encourage and to contribute to the breakup of the Democratic Party and to help to establish an alternative pole of attraction to its ideology and its politics. So that means in part being willing to support genuine socialists and some more radical progressives who run as candidates in the Democratic Party, thus breaking the stranglehold of the financial and political establishment over their party. But at the same time we need to support independent candidates to the left of the Democrats who put forth the kind of socialist working class ideology and politics that represent an alternative direction for the country.

Where Will Change Come From?

The big changes in American society and for that matter in any society always come about as a result of powerful forces that shake the tectonic plates of the nation: economic or political crisis, and war. Such events have the potential to set millions in motion. Social movements in the past brought about all of the progressive developments of the previous generations: the labor upheaval of the 1930s, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the anti-war movement of the same era, the women's and LGBT movements that followed. All of those movements—often locked in struggle with the Democratic Party as in the cases of the civil rights and anti-war movements—had the social power to force political change. But they failed either to rupture the Democratic Party or to create a major split to build a viable independent party (though there were some interesting experiments such as Peace & Freedom and La Raza Unida).

We recently saw other examples of crisis leading to social movements and political change. The economic crisis of 2008 created both the Tea Party movement, attacking President Barack Obama as a "socialist," and the Occupy Wall Street movement, arguing that "We are the 99%" facing off against the 1% who put their money into controlling politics. Out of those movement came both the leftwing populism of Bernie Sanders, a self-declared "democratic socialist" (though really a New Deal liberal) and the rightwing populism of now-President Donald J. Trump (really an authoritarian, racist, and misogynist). What we did not get as a result of the 2008 crisis was a working class prepared to engage in class struggle. We have had a slew of impressive moments: immigrants (2006), Occupy (2011), #BlackLivesMatter (2014), taking a knee (2016-17), teachers' strikes (2017), and #MeToo (2017), and most of those were either working-class or took up working-class issues, but we still have the lowest level of unionization, strikes, and consciously working-class activity in decades. Only a higher level of class struggle can bring about the break-up of the Democratic Party that we wish and also begin to give substance to the independent candidacies of the left that represent the future we desire. We cannot create such a working-class upsurge, but we must encourage and support all developments in that direction.

The Great Historical Example

The great historical example of the kind of process that leads to an actual political realignment was

the struggle over slavery in the nineteenth century. The radical abolitionists of the 1830s, divided into many small organizations, experimented with a variety of strategies and tactics that gradually created important organizations and a regional anti-slavery consciousness in the North and Midwest. While many abolitionists opposed any form of political action, a section of the American Anti-Slavery Society broke away in 1840 to form the Liberty Party, absolutely opposed to slavery at the federal and the state level. The Liberty Party, which won virtually no offices, used elections to educate people about the evils of slavery and the necessity of its abolition.

When the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846-48 ended with the United States taking half of all Mexican territory and incorporating it as new U.S. territories, the question was, would those territories be slave or free. That debate intensified the struggle over the issue of slavery. In 1848 a group of Liberty Party abolitionists joined forces with people who opposed slavery in the U.S. territories seized from Mexico but did not necessarily call for its abolition. Both the Liberty and Free Soil parties ran candidates in educational campaigns in the late 1840s and early 1850s, winning only a small proportion of the vote. The abolitionist and broader anti-slavery movements, nevertheless, provoked a crisis in the Whig Party and forced its breakup in 1854. Soon after, former Whigs and even some Democrats joined with the Free Soil and Liberty parties to create the Republican Party, which nominated Abraham Lincoln who won the presidency, leading to the secession of the southern pro-slavery states. That in turn triggered the Civil War, a mass exodus of slaves from southern plantations toward Union lines, emancipation without compensation, and finally the outright abolition of slavery.

When we look at this most important of all American political developments, we can see that a political crisis over slavery led to the creation of the Republican Party as a result of two developments. First, the abolitionist movement contributed to the split of the Whig Party, and second the existing Free Soil and Liberty parties joined with former Whigs to create the new Republican Party. Without the breakup of the Whigs, the Liberty and Free Soil Parties would have remained small, unsuccessful third parties. But without the Liberty and Free Soil Parties, the Republican Party would not have taken such uncompromising positions on the limitation of slavery or prosecuted the war towards its abolitionist conclusion.

Lessons for Today: Vote Howie Hawkins

Virtually everyone writing about the current economic situation agrees that we are heading for another economic recession, and perhaps even another depression like that of 2008. An economic crisis will lead to an even deeper political crisis than the one we face now with Trump and the Republicans dominating the federal government and a majority of state governments.

We are the abolitionists of today, standing for the abolition of racism, sexism, and capitalism, for reversing climate change and ending imperialist wars. Through our social movements and our support for socialist and radical progressive candidates in the Democratic Party, we contribute to dividing that party and eventually breaking it up so that its left can become free. At the same time, we must support candidates outside the Democrats who represent our socialist alternative. We need to do both of these at once. And that's where Howie Hawkins of the Green Party comes in.

Howie Hawkins, for many years a truck driver and Teamsters union member, is an open socialist running for governor against Andrew Cuomo on the Green Party ticket. Howie has run for governor before, winning 5 percent of the vote in 2012, an achievement that maintained the Green Party ballot line. While the Green Party remains a small, progressive party that receives only a small percentage of the vote in national elections, its party platform—focused on the environment, peace, democracy and economic justice—is far to the left of the Democrats. Howie himself, a member of the socialist group Solidarity, stands for the abolition of capitalism and the creation of a democratic

socialist society.

Andrew Cuomo represents the worst of the Democratic Party establishment, having worked for years to frustrate many progressive developments in the state legislature, including supporting a group of independent Democrats who have collaborated with the Republicans. Cuomo's insistence on a 2% cap on the growth of the budget frustrates all who seek to improve the lives of working people throughout the state. Many on the left who despise Cuomo's politics supported Cynthia Nixon, the progressive candidate who was defeated in the primary. Some expected to be able to vote for her in the general election on another ballot line, but the Working Families Party, which is oriented to strengthening the Democratic Party, has scratched Nixon from its ballot line and replaced her with Cuomo. Hawkins remains the only progressive on the ballot and he is an outspoken socialist.

Let's continue to support every candidate on the left in the Democratic Party who will really fight against the establishment and thus contribute to the break-up of the party, and at the same time, let's vote for Hawkins and his running mate Jia Lee to bring to the public debate the socialist alternative in which we believe.