

Independent Politics for a Green New Deal

April 29, 2012

It is time for the Left to be realistic about how it is going to build the power we need to make the changes we want.

The immediate solutions the left is calling for are not controversial. They are widely shared across the broad spectrum of progressive politics, from liberal reformers and left populists to radical ecologists and democratic socialists. Medicare for All. Public Jobs for the Unemployed. End the Wars. Clean Energy for Climate Stabilization. Debt Relief for Homeowners and Students. Tuition-free public higher education. Public Campaign Financing. Proportional Representation. Restore Constitutional Rights. End the Drug War and Mass Incarceration. Tax the Rich.

None of these and other popular demands for reform are even discussed by the candidates of the two big corporate-funded parties. For progressives to support the Democrats as the lesser evil is to silence their voice, bury their program, and defeat themselves before the election is even held. Abstention has the same effect. Education, lobbying, and demonstrations for progressive reforms have little leverage in the U.S. electoral and political system in the absence of independent progressive candidates. Without independent progressive candidates competing for votes, the Democrats take progressive voters for granted because progressives have nowhere else to take their votes.

I am campaigning for widely supported progressive reforms under the theme of a Green New Deal for America, starting with an Economic Bill of Rights featuring the rights to job at a living wage, to quality health care through Medicare for All, and to tuition-free public education from pre-school through graduate school. We aim to unite independent progressives with those progressives still hoping against all the evidence of the last 35 years that the Democrats will return to a program of New Deal style public jobs, social insurance, and market regulation. We want to recover the best traditions of the old New Deal. But we also want to update and go beyond it with a *Green New Deal* designed to build an economy that is democratic and ecologically sustainable.[1]

The centerpiece of our Green New Deal is a direct public employment program in public works and public services. It aims to create living-wage jobs for all of the 25 million unemployed and underemployed Americans. We believe 16 million public jobs will stimulate the creation of another 8 million private sector jobs as consumer demand rebounds. It will be federally-funded, locally-planned, and democratically-controlled much like the New Deal's Works Progress Administration. It will more than pay for itself in reduced safety net expenditures, increased income tax revenues, and a sustainable infrastructure that will be productive for decades to come.[2]

Climate jobs building clean energy, mass transit, and the other sustainable infrastructure are emphasized to address the twin emergencies of persistent high unemployment and pending climate catastrophe. We also include public service jobs in order to meet critical community needs and make public jobs accessible to all un- and under-employed people, not only workers skilled in the construction trades. Public service jobs are needed to revitalize our public sector provision of social insurance programs, child care and elder care, education, and recreational, youth, and cultural programs. Our full employment program poses a sharp contrast with the pro-corporate trickle-down austerity agendas of the Obama Democrats, the Romney Republicans, and Americans Elect, the third pro-corporate austerity presidential ticket backed financially by a small coterie of super-rich hedge fund managers.

We believe a majority of Americans support our Green New Deal. We know from public opinion polling that most of the progressive demands I listed at the outset have majority support, usually upwards of 60%.[3]

Breaking Out of the Two-Corporate-Party Trap

The failure of the American electoral and political system is that these majoritarian progressive public values do not get converted into progressive public policies. The two-party-system of corporate rule is where progressive programs go to die and the corporate policy agenda prevails.

The choice in the two-party system of corporate rule today is a choice between Center-Right Democrats and Ultra-Right Republicans. The Republicans play a particular role in capturing progressive voters for the Democrats. The Republicans' function is to scare the hell out of progressives to get them to vote for the other corporate party out of fear.

The two-party-system of corporate rule is a trap for the Left. It captures progressive voters without having to take those voters into account when it comes to policy making. The structure of the U.S. electoral system, based on single member districts and the winner-take-all rules, encourages this co-optation of progressive voters into voting for the status quo. How can the Left spring this trap?

The dominant strategy on the broad Left since the 1936 election has been to campaign inside the Democratic Party. After more than 75 years, we have plenty of evidence to see that this approach has disempowered and, indeed, disappeared the Left as a distinctive voice and force in American politics. Corporate New Democrats, not liberal New Deal Democrats, have dominated the Democratic Party for decades now. Democratic Party progressives have been reduced to campaigning for the Democrats' pro-corporate agenda with the uninspiring argument that the Republicans are even worse.

The reason for the impotence of the reform Democratic strategy is plain to see. Progressive Democratic activists must support the Democrats nominated in primaries, no matter how conservative, if they are to have any standing in the Democratic Party going forward. They are trapped into supporting the Democrats' corporate agenda.

Lessons from Third Party Movements

To say that independent politics has failed is to ignore U.S. history. The Liberty, Free Soil Party, and then the Republican parties displaced the Whigs to give abolitionism, land reform, and the other progressive demands of the day a voice and power in government. The independent parties of the populists and socialists in the late 1800s—Greenback-Labor, Anti-Monopoly, Peoples—gave expression to popular demands concerning the money question, the emerging corporate monopolies, the rights of workers, farmers, blacks, and women, and led to progressive reforms. The Debsian Socialists, the LaFollette Progressives, and the Farmer-Labor parties of the early 20th century first raised the many social insurance, labor rights, and market regulation reforms that were finally realized during the New Deal.

Independent politics has not failed since the mid-1930s. It has not been tried. The vast majority of progressive movements, organizers, and activists have spent 75 years trying to move the Democrats to the Left, which has enabled the Democrats to move Right as they take the progressive vote for granted. The lesson from the pre-1930s eras is that independent parties did move the political debate and win reforms. While they only won control of a small number local and state governments, their ability to win significant votes forced the whole political spectrum to move their way to

compete for their voters. That is the power of independent politics, the power that the progressives surrender when they enter into coalition with the corporate powers that set the agenda for the Democratic Party.

The Green Party, which has been running campaigns since the mid-1980s, has learned a few lessons about how to build an independent progressive party in our time. We have learned that we cannot build a party from the top down out of a single presidential campaign. We have concentrated on building local and state parties that can compete in local elections and secure state ballot lines. We have learned that waiting to run until you know you can win means never running. We have demonstrated that we can build up a growing base of voter support in a district over several election cycles to become a force that cannot be ignored. We have demonstrated that the Green Party can win elections, with 133 elected officials in 24 states currently holding office.

The Green Party has also learned the lesson of uniting around independent politics for immediate demands, rather than an all-encompassing political ideology. The Greens believe that the basic problem progressives need to address today is not liberalism versus socialism, but independent political action versus the two-corporate-party system. We need an independent mass party of the progressive majority. We need a big tent party on the Left where we can discuss the important questions of ideology and analysis while we unite to fight for the immediate reforms we all want. We need a broad party of progressives, not competing sects.

A Party-Building and Movement-Building Campaign

My campaign is focused on party-building and movement-building. As we take the campaign across the country to Green Party primaries, caucuses, and conventions, we are making a special effort to support, participate in, and build alliances with local Occupy movements, the student campaign for erasing college-loan debt and making public higher education free, the anti-foreclosure movement, and labor, environmental, and anti-war demonstrations and campaigns. We are devoting a major portion of our resources to support ballot access drives to secure our place on the ballot in more than 45 states. We expect to meet the requirements for federal primary matching funds, a milestone that will double the cumulative contribution of every individual up to \$250 until the Green National Convention in Baltimore, July 12-15.

My path to independent politics and a presidential candidacy with the Green Party is similar to the path of many progressive issue-oriented activists. I am trained as a medical doctor and was a general practitioner. I saw in my day to day work that for-profit medicine didn't work and was getting worse. So I advocated for single-payer Medicare for All. I saw how toxics in our air and water, and the corporate food system were increasingly harming my patients and public health. So I campaigned for environmental health measures. It came to dawn on me that the elected legislators and executives I was lobbying were not responsive. The Republicans were not interested and the Democrats just took me for granted as another progressive who would vote for them whether they did anything or not.

So I joined the Green-Rainbow Party of Massachusetts, a merger of the Green and the Rainbow Coalition parties of Massachusetts in 2002, and ran for a series of offices, including Governor in 2002 and 2010, State Representative in 2004 (with 21% of the vote in a three-way race), Secretary of State in 2006 (with 18% of the vote in a two-way race), and Lexington Town Meeting Representative in 2005 and 2008 (elected both times). In the 2002 race, I debated Mitt Romney in a televised debate where newspaper pundits called me the "debate winner" and "the only adult in the room."

That experience does not make me a household name who can command immediate attention

nationally. However, it has prepared me for running a presidential campaign where, if nothing else, the Green Party will come out of it bigger and better organized than we went into it. As I campaign around the country, the disenchantment among progressives with Obama and the Democrats is palpable. We aim to translate that discontent into a Green Party campaign for president, in concert with Green congressional, state, and local candidacies, that will achieve another of our campaign objectives: to force popular progressive reforms into the national political debate.

Real solutions can't wait. Time is running out on the climate emergency and the other planetary ecological boundaries that our civilization is breaching with catastrophic consequences for human survival. We must radically transform our productive systems in the next decade to have any hope of a sustainable society.[4] Meanwhile, a whole generation of Americans encompassing half the population—the majority of the working class—is being marginalized by high unemployment, foreclosures, debt-slavery, union busting, corporate globalization, and privatized health care, schools, and other basic public services. The working class majority is being consigned to the ranks of the working poor by the bipartisan corporate policy consensus. The corporate parties bluntly oppose ready solutions to these ecological and human problems. Only independent political action can raise the solutions in a way that the U.S. electoral and political system cannot ignore.

Notes

1. See a fuller statement of our Green New Deal.
2. Our full employment program draws on the history, analysis, and financial projections by Rutgers professor of law and economics, Philip Harvey, in “Learning from the New Deal.”
3. 3. In evaluating public opinion, one should go beyond self-labeling polls for liberal, moderate, or conservative (although progressive is the most popular term today and socialism is receiving surprisingly high favorability ratings). Where the progressive majority has revealed itself consistently for decades is in polling about specific policies. See Noam Chomsky's discussion of public opinion and public policy in *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy* (2006), pp. 214-236.
4. 4. The scientific consensus on this climate and ecological emergency calls for urgent action. See Rockstrom et al., “A Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Nature*, September 24, 2009, and Kevin Anderson and Alice Bows, “Beyond ‘Dangerous’ Climate Change: Emission Scenarios for a New World,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* January 2011. The Republican leadership denies the science. The Democratic leadership acknowledges the science but lacks the courage to act on it.

Dr. Jill Stein is a mother, housewife, physician, environmental health advocate, and candidate for the Green Party nomination for U.S. President.

[This article is part of a symposium on the elections organized by *New Politics*.]