

Indiana Moral Mondays

October 12, 2014

Moral Mondays has been established in Indiana. At a founding meeting in Indianapolis in mid-September, the organization adopted a “five-point agenda” similar to those of Moral Mondays movements in other states:

- Secure pro-labor, anti-poverty policies that insure economic sustainability;
- Provide well-funded, quality public education for all;
- Stand up for the health of every Hoosier by promoting health care access and environmental justice across all the state’s communities;
- Address the continuing inequalities in the criminal justice system and ensure equality under the law for every person, regardless of race, class, creed, documentation or sexual preference;
- Protect and expand voting rights for people of color, women, immigrants, the elderly and students to safeguard fair democratic representation.

On September 20, a rally was held at the State House at which the Rev. William Barber, head of the North Carolina NAACP and a leading spokesperson for the Moral Mondays movement, gave an impassioned speech to some 400 people. I was present myself at the rally, and also briefly interviewed Purdue professor, long-time activist, and Indiana Moral Mondays steering committee member Harry Targ on the politics and potential of the organization.

Rev. Barber opened the rally with a powerful speech in the oratorical style of the African American church, heavily emphasizing morality and the moral implications of the political issues involved, and how this moral concern drove the sense of correcting injustice and reinvigorating politics that fueled the Moral Mondays movement — a movement that has now appeared in 13 states following its origins as a protest against the legislative activities of the Republican-controlled North Carolina state legislature. At the rally it was emphasized that Indiana was now the second state to have clearly established Moral Mondays as an organized force. Whatever one might think as a secular socialist of the politics involved, Rev. Barber’s moving speech, like African American gospel music, was a real treat. Masterful in its oratorical cadences, it drew in and swept away the audience with its eloquent passion and vivid imagery, drawing mightily on the tradition of the Black church. Aesthetically, it was a tour de force.

When I spoke with Targ, he emphasized the nature of Indiana Moral Mondays as articulated by Barber: an individual “state-oriented” political approach that would rely heavily on “fusion politics” to draw diverse constituencies into participation on the key “interconnected issues” of labor, education, healthcare, women’s reproductive rights, and gay and lesbian rights. “The only way progressives can make a dent,” noted Targ, “is if we can work together and look at the interconnectedness of all these issues.” Moral Mondays would be strongly oriented at “pressing” the Indiana General Assembly, the state’s two-house legislature, and the Governor’s office — both presently dominated by Tea Party-leaning Republicans — on the issues, as well as undertaking education and voter registration and working also for alternative candidates for office. Nevertheless, Targ stressed, Indiana Moral Mondays “is not primarily or exclusively an electoral movement.”

Conceding that little could be done by the upcoming 2014 elections, Targ underlined that Moral Mondays was looking toward a long-term strategy and presence, and perhaps would be more able to flex its muscle by the 2016 elections. Education and “working class” economic issues such as inequality, poverty, low-paying jobs and persistently steady unemployment would be emphasized, and that pushing for the right of workers to form unions would be “just one part of a broader effort”

to reach out to that 90+ percent of Indiana's workforce that was non-union. As part of "fusion politics," outreach to white workers that educated them on the shared commonalities they faced with African American workers would be an important component of Moral Mondays' work. As Targ stated, "All workers are experiencing increased exploitation and immiseration." Indeed, outreach to the "white working class," long an electoral base for the Republican Party in heavily Red-state Indiana, was stressed by several speakers at the September 20 rally.

Much the same was articulated by Joseph Varga, Assistant Professor of Labor Studies at the main campus of Indiana University in Bloomington. Varga, a self-professed "labor activist and LGBT activist" who is also active in South Central Indiana Jobs with Justice, was enthusiastic about Moral Monday's potential for "coalition building," as he saw that "the only way we're going to stop the reactionary movement in this country is through numbers." Son of a Hungarian immigrant factory-worker father, Varga grew up with a blue-collar identity and saw that his fellow white worker cohorts would support social safety-net and populist measures out of self-interest, even as they "stayed away from labels of what we call liberalism and leftism in this country." Varga feels the United States is in a "state of emergency" for poor and working people, emphasizing that "working people and poor people have no representation whatsoever; they are getting destroyed." He added, "I don't think workers vote against their self-interest if we have a Democratic Party that's not doing a damn thing for them." He thinks "actions are going to speak louder than words," and that workers will be attracted to, and join, a movement that is in "the places where goods and services are transported and being moved and clog that system up so badly that it cannot operate until our concerns are addressed." Civil disobedience was, of course, a hallmark of the North Carolina Moral Mondays, and was also mentioned by Rev. Barber in his speech here in Indianapolis.

Admitting to feeling a "little bit skittish" with Moral Mondays because of the moralistic emphasis and active presence of churches and Christian religious believers (at the rally, e.g., I saw no discernable Jewish or Muslim presence, and certainly no overt atheist, agnostic, or secular humanist one), Joe Varga emphasized that the activities in Bloomington were strictly secular and, as for overt religious influence, the best course was to "just ignore it."

In an article he wrote, Harry Targ emphasized that Moral Mondays, in the 13 states in the South and Midwest where it has a presence, *has "begun to build a new fusion movement that draws together workers, women, young and old, black, brown, and white people, documented and undocumented, environmentalists, people of faith and atheists, and the LGBT community based upon 'moral' and 'constitutional' agendas."*

It certainly is true that at present Moral Mondays has galvanized a sizeable element of the radical imagination. But can it succeed, especially here in Indiana, based so fervently as it is on moralism little backed up with concrete program? Or will it go the way of Occupy, which was similarly based on fervid moral indignation with little, or no, attempt to develop a program of concrete action, and thus became only a fond memory for many radicals, having left nothing discernable in its wake? Probably the only realistic answer at this time is: Only time will tell, as Moral Mondays begins articulating its vision and building coalitions, drawing new people into it, and thus over time becoming more concrete and programmatic in its approach. And perhaps the success of Moral Mondays movements will vary from place to place, which seems the most likely. But despite the publicity and activity of the original in North Carolina, it seems to have had little deterrent effect on the Republican supermajority in control of that state's legislature. Yet despite this, Moral Mondays there has certainly not closed up shop. Indeed, far from it—to continue the marketing analogy, the franchise has only broadened and set foot in new locales.

But in terms of Indiana, I'd have to say that Targ's and Varga's optimism is based on both of them living in bucolic college-town islands where left political activity is far more the norm than it is

elsewhere in Indiana, and where the rest of the state is more a fetid swamp than it is a haven for such activity. That is especially my jaundiced take on the potential of Indiana Moral Mondays here in Indianapolis where I live, where I'm afraid the prevalent overweening religious pietism and religiosity will turn Moral Mondays here into yet another clique of the "peaceable religious progressives" who will hostilely exclude anyone not of their religious persuasion. Because I've seen too much of that happen before: in the derailing of a promising, more broadly-based and secular peace movement here in the mid- to late-1980s, when key people instead turned it into an exclusively religious pacifist clique that focused solely on "symbolic protest" and did no mass outreach; and in the destruction of the Solidarity Books/Paper Matches youth collective here a decade-and-a-half ago, where a group of feisty anarchist youth tried to set up a truly viable non-sectarian left bookstore, and were driven out in frustration and disgust by the "respectable religious progressives" who were incensed over these youths' revolutionary rhetoric. Which has left Indianapolis, a major metropolitan area, completely bereft of any radical bookstore whatsoever.

Also, statewide movements in Indiana have never been able to sustain themselves during my 34-year stay here. The Indiana Green Party tried, but disbanded, and the only movements here that have been able to sustain themselves over a long run have been regional ones based preponderantly in certain major cities and urban areas: Gary/Northwest Indiana, near Chicago; Lafayette/W. Lafayette, where Purdue University is; Bloomington, where Indiana University is; Mishawaka/South Bend, where Notre Dame is; and Indianapolis, leaving large swaths of the state without any active progressive or liberal, let alone any leftist or radical, presence whatsoever. Except for the northern, more industrialized part of the state, the rest, preponderantly rural, is home to the Republican and Tea Parties, and these two have dominated Indiana politics easily now for many years. As for the Democratic Party, it's more a vote-gathering machine which sees "moderates" and "conservatives" having the best electoral chances.

Further, Indiana is staunchly socially and culturally conservative, even hidebound, and in this is more akin to the Old Confederacy than to the Midwest of which it is geographically part. Indeed, Indiana, because of its cultural conservatism and lack of significant urbanity, even in its cities, is the great sleeper, the great stealth juggernaut, of Red-state politics that's consistently overlooked by the national media. (For an excellent journalistic portrait of this hidden aspect of the state, see Bryan K. Bullock's "The Ultra-Right-Wing State Nobody Mentions," .) Perhaps Indiana Moral Mondays will succeed where others have failed in the past. Perhaps. For Indiana Moral Mondays appears to be off to an auspicious start—but I'm afraid it will take more than moralistic fervor to make it a consistent go.

George Fish is an anti-authoritarian socialist writer living in Indianapolis, Indiana, whose work has appeared in several left publications. He has also published extensively on blues and other pop music, has published poetry, and does Lenny Bruce/George Carlin-style stand-up comedy. He may be reached at georgefish666@yahoo.com.