Kim Moody Replies

February 7, 2018

Reply to Dornbush, Elliott-Negri, and Lewis

DORNBUSH, ELLIOTT-NEGRI, AND LEWIS are right that ideology is not enough and an analysis of "the actual, material terrain" is necessary. Simply repeating the well-known realities of the first-past-the-post U.S. electoral system that favors the two-party duality is not such an analysis. It's old news. Not altogether wrong, but still yesterday's political science. So is the argument that the official electoral set-up can't stop you from running in the primary and possibly even winning, and that the party structures can't control the voters. The other side of this coin, however, is that the party "members"; that is, the atomized registered Democrats and party voters, have no power over the hierarchical structures of the party or its elected officials since it is not a democratic organization in any sense.

This not only means that a Corbyn-style revolt is impossible, but is one reason why the vast majority of Democratic officeholders follow the commands (and compromises) of their legislative leaders and, further up the party hierarchy, their corporate paymasters rather than the sentiments of most Democratic voters. It is also one reason why, in turn, the self-styled progressives among these Democratic officeholders invariably compromise with the mainstream and why only a handful of them supported Bernie Sanders in the 2016 presidential primaries.

In national and most state-wide elections, the "spoiler" effect is a deterrent to third-party campaigns. But this is not the best place to seek a mass base and start building a new political force in any case. In city council, state legislative, and even congressional districts in almost all U.S. cities, the spoiler effect isn't a factor because the Republicans are so marginal. Given that the Democrats have presided over the decay of the cities for over half a century, they are vulnerable from the left. Independents can become the second party from which to build a majority base over time. This is the strategy I would advocate.

The ballot line isn't just a label, as some argue. For those seeking office and those supporting them, it's the entry point into the maze of dead ends, false starts, and compromised hopes that is the Democratic Party even at the local level. Once "past-the-post" as a Democratic officeholder, there are, in fact, many ways that the organizations of the party at various levels, including the official legislative party caucuses, can and do discipline or isolate would-be rebels and "progressives," quite apart from withholding campaign funds.

Historically, although it appears "open" at its base, it is also the case that the Democratic Party in its various interconnected structures and social milieus is far better organized, funded, and structurally tied to big business and the wealthy today, at almost every level, than at any time in the past—and that is saying a lot. This is not just a matter of corporate contributions to campaigns, but of the overwhelming presence of corporate and other capitalist money, agents, and ideological bedfellows of capital throughout its structures. Hillary Clinton comes to mind, but there are many more. At the campaign level, virtually all Democrats, by the time they get to Congress, take at least some corporate money, including Elizabeth Warren and the new head of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, Mark Pocan.

Alongside the official party organizations, operatives, and officeholders are the related think tanks,

PACs, dark funds, lobbying institutions, and the revolving doors among these and political office. This entire constellation of party and ancillary organizations is made possible by direct links and contacts with the capitalist owners of the billions of dollars that flow into and through the complex of institutions that is the Democratic Party.

In material class terms, what underlies all of this is the balance of class forces *within* the Democratic Party's interlocking structures, which still reflects that in society. If anything, this imbalance has grown much worse in the last forty years or so as labor has lost what little influence it once had, the African American vote has continued to be taken for granted, and big-business bucks have grown exponentially. It should be noted as well that the recurring crises of capitalism since the 1970s have subdued any serious redistributive instincts Democratic liberals might still have. I have addressed these questions and those above, along with a deeper analysis of the structural, social, economic, institutional, and ideological realities of the Democratic Party, in considerable detail in my new book, *On New Terrain* (Haymarket, 2017), so I won't try to summarize what is a somewhat complex analysis here.

Sorry, but the past also matters. Materialist analysis without attention to history isn't materialist. Some socialists have used the Democratic ballot line or party structures for many decades, using the same arguments as Dornbush, Elliott-Negri, and Lewis, in part due to the discouraging record of third parties. Nothing new about that. Furthermore, this turn toward liberalism and the Democratic Party was the result of the historic *defeat* of socialist politics in the United States following World War II. While it has long been possible to win elections as "progressives" or even a handful of socialists, as some did this November, there has *never* been a successful attempt by socialists of any variety running on the ballot line or working within the structures of this "party" to influence it significantly, push it to the left, block its nearly half-century-old movement to the right, or much less move the national political context to the left—quite the contrary. Equally important, it has *never* proved possible to use the Democratic ballot line, structures, or political offices to build a viable mass socialist movement in the United States. Permeation isn't just bad politics; it's poor strategy.

To be sure, Sanders had an impact on Democratic voters and stirred things up, but the party elite has simply returned to its old ways. The Democrats, of course, did well in November due to an anti-Trump backlash and may well take Congress in 2018. But the huge role of the suburban vote in Virginia, New Jersey, and on Long Island has been seen as a confirmation of the Dems' middle-class electoral strategy and the moderate politics that go with it, despite marginal gains made by DSAers and Our Revolution-backed candidates in some local and state elections. In any case, once again no independent political alternative will have emerged around which labor and social movement activists can coalesce.

From the time of Marx, the major position and task of the socialist movement has been to enhance the power of the working class and oppressed through their independent economic and political organizations. For all its growth, DSA is not that and cannot be that by itself, although it could play an important role in developing such an alternative. Much less can it, by itself, create a political majority. And so, old questions remain.

Is the independent organization of the working class and oppressed still a goal? If so, how does running in the Democratic Party further this goal? Alternatively, in the face of the barriers to third parties, how do we build a new independent mass political organization broad enough to include working-class people, activists from the social movements, and socialists? Or are we just concerned with building our own socialist organization? These are questions that will continue to be debated among socialists.

P.S. By the way, because of its unique nature, I agreed with those in the political tendency I identify

with who supported Bernie Sanders' primary run, particularly via Labor for Bernie. So much for my ideological purity.

Reply to Michael Hirsch

My biggest objection to Hirsch's criticism is what seems to me his world-weary determinism concerning labor and social movements in relation to the Democratic Party. Did the CIO leaders and activists who pushed beyond "lobbying" (using massive pressure from below) to incorporation into the Roosevelt administration really have no choice? Well, many in the movement were unhappy with Roosevelt's first-term performance and thought they did. The first United Auto Workers convention voted against endorsing Roosevelt in 1936 and for a labor party—until Lewis read the riot act. Others even far beyond the socialist left felt the same. They lost, but things in 1936 didn't look the same as they do in 2017. The *political* question, then as always, was, "Which side are you on?" Which side would Hirsch have been on in 1936? The CIO, it should be noted, didn't enter the Democratic Party in its old age, but in its infancy—one factor in its increasingly conservative direction. Not even liberal historians of the CIO deny that.

The civil rights movement won its gains by disruption and pressure from below. Did they negotiate with the powers that be? Sure. But there was debate among socialists and other activists about what was to follow. Would Hirsch have sided with Bayard Rustin and those who pressed hard for permeation of the Democratic Party, or with Draper and the many others on the left who disagreed?

Concerning history, I question Hirsch's simple dismissal of the role of the Democrats in the political retreat of the Populists, who were defeating Democrats across the South in the lead-up to 1896. Much the same goes for the various social movements of the twentieth century. He seems to see the Democrats as passive receptors rather than political actors with their own agenda for those movements. Bernie Sanders might have something to say about just how passive they were toward him. Unfortunately, what I see in Hirsch's arguments is a willingness (most certainly unintentional) to turn the defeats of yesterday into a political perspective for today. Independent politics always lose, the Democrats always win, end of story. I hope not, because there are many in DSA who, I am told, want an independent direction for electoral action. So, once again, the question is in this debate, "Which side are you on?"