Rip It Up and Start Again

written by Chris Maisano | January 26, 2011

THE CURIOUS THING about the 2010 midterm elections is that their results were totally unsurprising and highly illuminating at the same time. They were unsurprising because they confirmed what we all expected would happen. The voters who propelled Democrats to power in the two previous elections in 2006 and 2008 stayed home. Voters dissatisfied with the status quo turned out in droves to support the party out of power as the economy plunged into its worst crisis since the Great Depression. While two short years ago it seemed as if the GOP was ready to be consigned to history's dustbin, it turned out that they were incredibly lucky to be expelled from power at the exact moment economic misery began to descend upon millions of Americans. It allowed them to place the blame on the other guy, and the American electorate, with no viable electoral alternative to support, ratified this argument with varying degrees of enthusiasm. While much has been made of the ascendance of the Tea Party as a supposedly transformative force in American politics, a majority of voters have nearly identical (largely negative) attitudes toward both the Democratic and Republican parties. This wasn't a "wave election" or a mandate for the Republicans to pursue their agenda full bore. The ruling party almost always loses seats in a midterm election and when economic anxiety prevails. Considering the confluence of forces, it is hardly surprising that the Democrats did so badly and the Republicans did so well. Anyone with a modest grasp of the broad contours of American politics could have seen it coming from a mile away.

While it's easy to greet the midterm results solely with a knowing shrug of the shoulders, they also illustrate starkly the confusion and disorientation that defines the current conjuncture. One would think that an economic crisis that is so clearly the product of a rapacious, predatory capitalism would boost the political fortunes of the left, broadly defined. It has not, both in the United States and in Europe. It has quickened the consolidation of center-left and center-right parties around a program that accepts the ongoing legitimacy and inevitability of capitalism (embodied here in the United States by the Obama administration's inheritance and extension of the Bush administration's bank bailouts), while the main current of opposition to the status quo springs not from the radical or socialist left but from the extreme right.

Considering the circumstances we find ourselves in, this development is nothing short of disastrous. While the rise of political formations like the Tea Party should not be overblown because they remain fragmentary and inchoate, it's undeniable that they have exercised an alarming degree of influence over the discourse concerning what the appropriate political responses to the current crisis should be. The default language of discontent in the U.S. still is and always has been a pre-modern, petite-bourgeois pseudo-radicalism that is woefully incapable of addressing the problems that define life under 21st century capitalism. If implemented in any significant fashion, the program advanced by the emboldened right would do nothing but deepen the crisis and increase the misery afflicting the unemployed and the foreclosed. And as the last two years have so amply demonstrated, Democratic control of the White House and Congress does little to ensure that adequate action to address the problems we face will be taken, especially when the labor movement and the radical left are too weak to push the party in a more progressive direction.

Under these distressing circumstances, one is reminded of Antonio Gramsci's assessment of the state of affairs between the two world wars: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." In light of the situation we find ourselves in today, can there be any doubt that he was speaking about us as well?

The stark truth is that there currently is no real left to speak of in American politics. While there is much progressive activity around a wide variety of issues and campaigns, including electoral efforts within and independent of the Democratic Party, there is no organizational vehicle capable of uniting these various strands around a common programmatic agenda. Perhaps more importantly, there is no significant anti-capitalist ideological orientation within what today passes for the broad left. The vast majority of the labor movement as well as the organizational remnants of older iterations of the American left have given up on the possibility of socialist transformation, redefining their goals within the coordinates of a basically capitalist system, albeit with the roughest edges sanded off.

Yes, we are all likely better off in the immediate term with Democrats rather than Republicans in power. But the continued commitment of what might be called the "actually existing left" to Democratic electoral success has long since succumbed to the law of diminishing returns. As Adolph Reed, Jr. argues in a recent issue of *New Labor Forum*, as time passes this constrained ideological and political orientation "will be able to do little more than negotiate the best possible terms of defeat in a revanchist regime of upward distribution that is the practical logic of neoliberalism." Considering the exceedingly grim future that awaits us if a radical challenge to capitalism is not reconstructed, none of us should be satisfied with widespread accommodation to this defeatist logic. New radical political formations, as well as the ideological resuscitation of anti-capitalism within the labor movement and the broad left, are urgently needed.

Faint glimmers of hope for reconstruction can be found in the modest electoral successes enjoyed by left candidates and parties in certain races around the country. Socialist Party candidate and longtime activist Dan La Botz garnered over 25,000 votes in his campaign for one of Ohio's seats for the U.S. Senate, despite being shut out of debates and having little electoral machinery to speak of. In my own state of New York, Green Party gubernatorial candidate Howie Hawkins received well over 50,000 votes while running on an unabashedly left platform, restoring the party's ballot status that it had lost in 2002. And while the labor-backed Working Families Party (WFP) seriously disappointed many leftists by endorsing pro-austerity, anti-union Democrat Andrew Cuomo in his victorious campaign for governor, the party received well over 100,000 votes on its line. This ensures that it will keep its ballot status and move up to a higher line on the ballot in future elections as well.

While these electoral efforts are somewhat encouraging, they are not nearly enough. They also put the cart before the horse. Independent electoral campaigns tend to be ephemeral affairs and do not significantly contribute to the long-term organizational and political reconstruction necessary to ensure sustainable electoral success. Significant barriers also confront the development of fusion voting based efforts like the WFP. Fusion voting is legal in only a handful of states and regularly practiced only in New York. A state-by-state effort to legalize fusion would likely be a waste of precious time and resources. Also, as the WFP's endorsement of Cuomo in New York has shown, a fusion party backed by organized labor is crippled by a fundamental contradiction. It seeks to be a third party and a labor caucus within the Democratic Party simultaneously, and since its constituent unions are still dependent on their relationship with the Democrats it can't credibly threaten to end that relationship (or at least put it on a temporary hiatus) when the chips are down. The WFP has been instrumental in winning modest but important victories such as a hike in the state's minimum wage, but it may have run up against the limits of its fusion strategy. Similar projects in other places would likely confront the same problems.

Instead of a narrow and premature focus on electoral mobilization, leftists would be wise to attempt a different approach that has the potential to reconstruct a radical challenge to capitalism from the ground up. In their 2009 book *Solidarity Divided*, labor intellectuals Bill Fletcher, Jr. and Fernando Gapasin propose the creation of what they call "working people's assemblies" to serve as

the primary vehicle for a long-term process of left political renewal. As they describe it, such an organization would pursue organizing and ideological work within a specific geographical area (a city or a metropolitan region) to bring together struggles in communities and workplaces and begin the process of building a common political agenda for the left and eventually spread outward. It would be composed of local labor unions, worker centers, tenants' organizations, non-sectarian left organizations and parties, and any other social forces interested in building an alternative to the status quo. An assembly would begin by focusing on the problems that most concern people living in the area and crafting strategies to deal with them, as well as advancing an ideological analysis of why those problems exist. As the assembly grows in strength, it might then decide to engage in electoral politics in a manner it sees fit. On this point, we should be tactically flexible on a case-by-case basis. If the relationship of forces is such that supporting a Democratic candidacy or running a candidate in a Democratic primary for local or state office would advance the goals of the organization, then that is what should be done. If supporting or mounting an independent candidacy at the local or state level is a viable option that can really contribute to building an organization in the longer term (not just an ephemeral protest candidacy), then we should not hesitate to follow that course either. While the electoral arena should likely not be the primary focus of the organization's activity, if engaged with properly it can contribute much to the rebuilding of left movements on a local level.

Over the last year, activists in Toronto associated with the Socialist Project group have helped to lead the process of building such an assembly in their city. The early outlook for the Greater Toronto Workers Assembly seems promising. They have managed to bring together a wide array of labor, left, and community organizations that might not ordinarily work together and have begun building local campaigns for free mass transit and against cuts in public services. It is an exciting project that could potentially serve as something of a model for leftists elsewhere to emulate.

The political reverberations of the economic crisis should have demonstrated once and for all that it's well past time to, in the words of the great early 1980s Scottish post-punk band Orange Juice, "rip it up and start again." The Keynesian social accord between labor and capital is long gone, but the organizational and ideological shibboleths of what remains of the postwar left live on like zombies that refuse to die. The Shachtman-Harrington project of realigning the Democrats into a labor/social democratic party is an impossibility under current circumstances, and independent electoral efforts in the absence of a mass-based radical left are similarly futile. What remains is the long-term, painstaking reconstruction of a radical left capable of posing a serious challenge to a capitalist system that might very well be approaching its economic and ecological limits. In these desperate times, we would do well to heed Lenin's injunction to "be as radical as reality itself" and be willing to experiment organizationally and ideologically. We can't afford not to try.

Footnotes