Socialists, Democrats and Political Action: It's the Movements that Matter

written by Michael Hirsch | January 21, 2010

The following is a slightly expanded text of remarks given at a pre-election debate on the topic, "Is a Progressive Democratic Party Possible." Michael Hirsch, representing the Democratic Socialists of America, spoke for the affirmative, as did Al Ronzoni of Progressive Democrats of America. The negative argument was given by Howie Hawkins of the New York State Green Party and Danny Katch of the International Socialist Organization. The event was held at New York City's Judson Memorial Church on Nov. 3, 2006.

YEARS BACK, THE LEFT WAS RIVEN over two intractable questions: "What is the class nature of the Soviet Union?" and "Should radicals work to realign the Democratic Party?" Well, today we're down to one question.

That's some sort of progress.

The question before the house tonight is this: Is a Progressive Democratic Party Possible? At the risk of having you, the audience, think you were invited under false pretenses, I want to say that that is the wrong question. Of course it's possible to turn the party left. So is making the Green Party the second party in America. With advances in gene splicing, even pigs could fly.

What *either* effort needs to do is take the fight to the center-right neo-liberals — the bloc that controls the Democratic Party now.

So the debate is over what electoral path has the fewest diversions. It's over where those who want to bring the various progressive movements for social change together in a coherent anti-corporate fight can situate themselves to do that best. Where is the electoral location where neo-liberalism and global capitalist politics can be defeated or at least beaten back?

Tonight you will probably hear multiple stories about how awful are the Democrats. I imagine I'll agree with most of them, and add a few, too. That's not what's in contention. What is up for debate is what political work in the electoral arena makes sense for the left now.

SO MY FIRST PROPOSITION IS: It doesn't matter so much if we succeed or fail in moving the Democratic Party left; it's the fight against the neo- liberals and the outcome of the fight that counts. The fight has to be taken to the neo-liberals, and it can only happen in the first instance in a cooperative relationship between the left and the better forces inside the party. And these forces — largely the social movements and the liberals — can't now find their electoral expression through what is called "independent political action." That formulation valorizes an abstract independence — a third party — at the expense of stressing where political action has taken and does take place, irrespective of our wishes.

Proposition 2: What inhibits the Democratic Party from being an anti-corporate opposition party are precisely the weaknesses of the social movements. Those weaknesses will hamstring any third party effort, too, unless the social movements grow.

Absent "street action" then, it's careerism that will predominate, whether in the Democratic Party or in any left alternative that aspires to be more than a sect or a fraternal association. It'll be the influence of big money and the agenda setting by parochial institutional players that will matter. It will be staff domination, the capacity of electeds to go off on their own, and the influence of campaign consultants and professional fundraisers that will shape what the party says and does.

No third party is immune to these influences, especially if there isn't a fired-up social movement watching what its political representatives do. Absent those movements, the minute a third party looks as if it may be in a position to elect more than a handful of candidates is the minute the jackals descend.

The goal of the left is about confronting class power, about wealth redistribution, about neutralizing the state if not actually making it partisan and user friendly. It's about a more-inclusive ideology that reflects and reinforces a politics of class struggle. So it is the fate and the fortunes of the movements, not the web spinning of the parties, that matters.

Proposition 3: No matter how often the term independent politics is incantated, politics is about coalition building as much as it is base building. Anything a third party can do can be done better and easier in alliance with the center-left of the Democratic party. And that electoral alliance for good or ill will happen whether it's cobbled together before an election — the U.S. model — or after an election, as is the case in nations such as Germany and Italy with multi-party systems.

We all know the institutional impediments to third party efforts in the U.S. There's "first past the post voting," winner-take-all elections. There's no preferential voting, no instant runoff voting, no proportional representation. There are capricious and restrictive state-by-state ballot access laws. There's the lack of public financing — New York City has it (at least for local elections), but who else does? There's the cold reality that only seven states allow cross-party endorsements. These roadblocks won't be removed easily. And a movement that CAN get those changes enacted — and they should be enacted — is a movement that can take over a major party, too.

So instead of asking "is it possible" — and Howie Hawkins's and my generation was the one that insisted we "be realistic and demand the impossible," — a better way to frame this debate and our differences is to ask: how best can movements for social change express themselves electorally in the present period? Where is the terrain on which social and economic justice movements — of feminism, ecology, antiwar, labor, anti-sweatshop efforts, and the battle against white nationalism — can find a political expression and seek commonalities?

If we don't know that, then working inside or outside of the Democratic Party is a matter of consumer choice. I would call it a matter of individual taste, but that phrase. used by Molotov about fascism to justify the Hitler-Stalin pact, still has nasty connotations.

Final proposition: The marginalizing of the Congressional progressive caucus, the lack of a genuine, militant opposition party in Congress and the pathetic Democratic response so far to the 30-year corporate offensive is the outcome of corporate advances, not its cause. That means leaders of movements can't be swayed to abandon the coalitions they operate in now, because the alternative — political irrelevance — is worse.

Consider the labor movement. The unions — and historian Paul Buhle and others have written extensively on just how insular and badly led those movements were — could not break with the Democrats institutionally. Certainly not since the 1930s, a decade after the demise of the last labor party initiatives and after the industrial union movement and the Communists threw in their lot with the New Deal.

Yes, the unions could have asked for more in the succeeding years. They could have acted as critics of the Cold War in the 1940s, as opponents of McCarthyism in the 1950s, and as social unionists in the 1960s, as welcomers and not opponents of black liberation and feminism — and not wait until labor's back was against the wall to discover they had allies. But no amount of suasion or hectoring or appeal to ideals could have built a labor party at any time in the last 50-70 years. That's a sad reality radicals can't change, no matter how passionate the appeal to ideals.

And, to the degree that politically active unionists and shop stewards, black community leaders and feminists are involved politically, it's as Democratic Party activists. It's not a lack of courage that keeps these activists tied to existing political networks. These folks do not see an alternative electoral expression, and hot housing one is not an alternative. Insisting on one risks alienating friends for whom politics is not an avocation or an ideological jaunt, but an arena of struggle.

When and if that ceases to be true — and it can only be true after the movements grow, are reconstituted and put up a fight — then an alternative party could be viable. It's not a pole of attraction now.

CRITICS OF DEMOCRATIC PARTY work refer to it as a "corporate" party, something the social movements, especially the unions need to "break from." I fondly remember the old radical slogan, "No to the Elephant, No to the Ass; Build a party of the working class!" Well, nothing is that instrumental.

The Democratic Party is barely a party; it's a series of shifting coalitions in 50 state organizations and some 3,000 U.S. counties. In many states, the center-right controls it. In city and county politics, real estate and banking interests dominate the local councils. But that doesn't make it a corporate party.

What I want to argue is that the Democratic Party is controlled by a center-right bloc that effectively freezes out the left. Just as the GOP can command more resources and media than can the Democrats, the party's center-right has access to corporate giving that can be trumped only by the kind of popular upsurge that will likely be seen in miniature next week in the voting that takes control of Congress away from the far- right. The goal is to reshuffle the cards, creating a center-left coalition that can pose on an electoral level what the movements pose in the streets and in the workplaces. That's what needs to be done.

Yes, there is no question that the policies of the Democrats are in the main pro-corporate. But so are the policies of most unions. Unions don't want to destroy the corporations; they want to tame them. It's we socialists who want to destroy them, and we should — the problem is, we don't have a lot of friends helping.

Neither is it purely the fault of a wily Democratic Party poised to co-opt movement leaders. That's a wrong reading of the dynamic. NARAL, which backs Republicans, too, is not co-opted; it simply pursues too narrow an agenda.

The labor movement is not co-opted into the Democratic Party. Its sins are its own.

And we should be clear about just what are those sins. Working with Democrats and getting too little in return is a problem, not a sin. It's a symptom of weakness, not a cause. Take for example what the teachers unions are doing in this election cycle — I offer it only because as public sector workers whose bosses are in effect public officials — teacher unionists must have an electoral game

face. They're also fighting state-level issues like the "65 percent solution." That's a particularly nasty scam that, under the guise of directing at least 65 cents of each dollar in school funding toward classroom instruction, fails to boost funding overall; it just calls for a specific ratio of funding to the classroom. No surprise that the unions and PTAs say such measures are zero-sum gains that would mean cuts in every other school program.

And on the federal level, fully funding the No Child Left Behind law and providing federal college grants and loans mean Congressional elections are critical, too.

Is it co-optation to understand why in Ohio, the state Federation of Teachers contributed $20,000 to Rep. Ted Strickland's gubernatorial race? In part it's because he's been a strong supporter of early- childhood public education. That and the fact that his opponent is Republican nominee Ken Blackwell, Ohio's secretary of state and the man who stole the 2004 presidential election for George W. Bush.

Is this really a stretch to understand why the unions would want to ice Blackwell? Or why even NARAL — now little more than a single-issue, one-dimensional pressure group — would cut a deal with New York State Republican Majority Leader Joe Bruno to endorse his party's endangered incumbents?

My argument has been that the fight over the Democratic Party's direction is the only consistently progressive form electoral politics can take in this period. Electoral politics, or reform politics is — with notable exceptions — Democratic Party politics, and Green politics is protest politics.

Sometimes you need to protest, and when neo-liberals hold the whip-hand, protest is not just honorable; it is necessary. When both *Crain's New York Business* and Rupert Murdoch's *NY Post* endorse Hillary Rodham Clinton, it's time for a protest vote.

But protest voting is the exception, not the rule.

I don't just say that the fight is in the party. The neo-liberals recognize it, too. Rahm Emanuel and Chuck Schumer used their Democratic leadership campaign committee funds like hammers to pound back progressive primary candidates in this election round, and not because their own chosen centrist candidates were more electable. They know the fight is in the party. Why don't we?

Yes, the Democratic Party routinely breaks our hearts and our hopes and our spirit as its neo-liberal leaders grease the skids for global capitalism to victimize whole populations and exploit working people around the world. They vote for measures that increase income inequality and facilitate financial plundering, front for corporate interests, play their own part in making political discourse classless and shallow, and vie to be the more rational purveyors of an irrational social system.

And I'm probably as annoyed as are any of you by the be-true-to-your-school Democratic Party pom-pom waving from the liberal blogosphere, the typists who know everything about political intrigue and nothing about social relations.

LET ME CLOSE with some observations on what I think are hopeful political signs for change in the party.

Matt Gonzalez's independent run for San Francisco mayor — in a city that has nonpartisan

elections — was something Democratic Socialists of America supported actively. And I'm proud we did. And since the end of the Jonathan Tasini Senate primary campaign, I've been urging a vote for Howie Hawkins — and I'll continue doing so unless he pisses me off tonight. [*Note: He did not!!!*]

But these are the welcome exceptions. Meanwhile things are happening at the grass roots of the party. The Wellstone Clubs in California are creating an institutional base for an anti-corporate offensive and are a reflection of the union power that led to the defeat of Gov. Schwarzenegger's ballot proposals last November.

In Massachusetts, the Mass Alliance and Neighbor to Neighbor identify progressive primary candidates in districts where they can actually win. As a result, the progressive group of legislators in the State House went from a tiny, embattled and marginalized group to what one observer called in a private letter to me "a significant power block, whom the new Speaker had to include in his coalition to get elected, and who in consequence have better access to power, some significant committee chairmanships, etc. "There's also the downside," this writer notes. "They have become subject to, and sometimes vulnerable to, the kind of arm-twisting that the leadership expects to use on its allies."

I would call that a better problem.

Just as I would call Democratic control of the U.S. House and Senate a better problem.

In New York, the Working Families Party is poised to be the third largest party in the state, and at a time when it isn't likely the Greens will even win their ballot position back. Some of us in WFP couldn't swallow the Hillary endorsement, which is why we worked so hard and so enthusiastically for Jonathan Tasini, but that party's overall strategy seems sound.

HOWIE HAWKINS BEGINS HIS BOOK, *Independent Politics*, with a wise quote from Dr King:

> Cowardice asks the question, "Is it safe?" Expediency asks the question, "Is it politic?" But conscience asks the question, "Is it right?" And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular but because conscience tells one it is right.

To me the key words for this discussion — because they are the least hortatory and the most easy to miss — are "there comes a time."

Because I think Dr. Marx had something to say that's worth remembering, too, about timing and context and conjunctures and the historical conditions required to turn ideals into facts on the ground and the need for an opposition party into a reality.

"Men make their own history," Marx wrote in his study of the failed French revolution of 1848, "but they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."

Footnotes