The Struggle for Power Continues

written by Bill Fletcher Jr. | July 11, 2020

The presidential campaign of Senator Bernie Sanders has been one of the most exhilarating moments in recent U.S. political history, irrespective of his not capturing the Democratic Party nomination. The mobilization capacity as well as the ability to shift the national discussion has had—and will continue to have—a lasting impact.

In the interest of time and space, I here identify certain important takeaways from the campaign and then offer recommendations on a possible road forward.

The narrative. The Sanders campaign successfully articulated a narrative describing and explaining the declining living standard of the vast majority of the people of the United States. It expanded from its relatively narrow framework in 2016 to address foreign policy. It also expanded its discussion about race, though at key moments it continued to come across as an "add-on" as opposed to an integral component.

Mobilizing youth. The campaign was, once again, successful in inspiring youth, including youth of color. Youth became central to the campaign, including in staffing. At the same time, the campaign leadership misestimated its ability to bring into the campaign previously nonvoting youth (and nonvoting elders). This misestimation may have led the campaign to underestimate the strategic importance of the South.

Still did not get the South and movements of people of color. Perhaps one of the greatest weaknesses of the campaign, and a weakness of much of the U.S. left and progressive forces, was the lack of a Southern strategy. This was linked with, though autonomous from, a larger weakness regarding an underappreciation of the strategic significance of racist and national oppression as central to the operation of U.S. capitalism (and of the corresponding movements opposing such oppression).

The lack of a Southern strategy is very curious considering the deficiencies in this arena in the 2016 Sanders campaign. While one might be able to argue that in 2016 Sanders and his core were never prepared for the response that they received and, therefore, had not appreciated the significance of the U.S. South, in the 2020 campaign there was no such excuse. Since 2016 Sanders has had plenty of time to "move South" and unite with the various movements in that region, most especially the African American movement. Inexplicably, this did not happen, with the South Carolina primary demonstrating what can happen when the South is ignored.

We are now in a post-Sanders moment and not only have to assess the campaign but also look at our immediate and long-term challenges.

The most immediate, and surprisingly controversial (within left circles), task is the defeat of Trump. This has become controversial in part due to a lack of a dialectical (and historically grounded)

electoral strategy within much of the left as well as a tendency within the left to define acceptable electoral politics in terms of "who is close to us." Let me propose an alternative framework by way of analogy.

The partisans of what became known as the New Right in the late 1960s, for instance Richard Viguerie, were deeply ideological right-wingers who debated whether to form a third party, in part due to the popular response received by the campaigns of Alabama Governor George Wallace. Instead they opted to work both inside and outside of the Republican Party and, in 1968, allied with an individual they despised: Richard Nixon. Surprisingly to some, the New Right—which existed as a fusion of right-wing populists (secular and religious) and economic conservatives—perceived Nixon as a political liberal. Nevertheless, they were prepared to unite with him as a means of advancing their agenda. What form did advancing their agenda take? Through measures such as court appointments, use of the media, appointments to agencies, and a greater role in the Republican Party, the New Right expanded its influence. The New Right seized on Nixon's so-called Southern Strategy to build the Republicans as the nonblack party, indeed, to build it as the right-wing party of the white republic.

But the New Right had an outside element as well. They seeded and helped to instigate mass movements around guns, abortion, busing, and the Panama Canal, frequently uniting the cores of said movements. They took on court battles against affirmative action and abortion (and women's rights generally). And they identified and trained candidates to run for office in both partisan and nonpartisan races.

None of this demonstrated any love for the Republican Party on the part of the New Right. They recognized the Republican Party as a battlefield within which they could engage and a battlefield where they were more likely to win rather than going the third-party route that Wallace had once suggested. Through a long-term struggle, they chased liberals out of the Republican Party and effectively turned it into a hard right-wing party.

Within the left, we are a bit more confused. Due to an understandable hatred of the capitalist leadership of both parties, many of us assume that the answer to the electoral dilemma for the left resides in the construction of a third party, a party that will—hopefully—be progressive. Our strategies for the actual construction of such a party are largely nonexistent, take the form of assertions rather than strategy, or are based on one-time independent runs or relatively low-level or nonpartisan campaigns. What is characteristic of far too many of our electoral efforts is that we engage depending on how close we see a candidate being to our politics rather than making an assessment as to whether a particular candidate or campaign can advance a progressive agenda that we are helping to articulate.

It is this disconnect that makes it difficult for many progressives to understand the support from large segments of the right that someone like Donald Trump can receive despite his many foibles. The right-wing theocrats are clear, however. They recognize his weaknesses, but they see all of us as sinners, as one young Catholic leader said in 2016, or believe that Trump exists as a blunt-force instrument to advance the agenda of their movement. In that sense they care little for the candidate's strengths and weaknesses and are completely hypocritical when, for instance, they attack a progressive for lack of so-called family values but will stand by and ignore the lack of those same so-called family values on the part of someone, who will go nameless, who advances their agenda.

In addition to strategic confusion and differences, many of us on the left have different appreciations of this historical moment and the social forces in play. Using arguments such as "Democratic center-rightists laid the basis for Trump" (an incomplete truism) or that "a non-Sanders Democrat will

simply capitulate and fail to carry forward a progressive agenda," many leftists are proposing to take a pass on voting in November or to vote third party, effectively contributing to Trump's reelection.

What is missed is the nature of the mass movement that Trump represents. We are not dealing with a simple conservative politician who advances reactionary stands, yet plays by the rules of bourgeois politics. We are dealing with an administration that is thoroughly corrupt, on top of which it encourages a broader right-wing populist movement—including but not limited to neofascists—that is revanchist in nature and seeks to obliterate much of what was won in the twentieth century. They also have an armed wing. This is no hyperbole, as anyone looking soberly at that which the Trump administration has advanced since 2017 can attest.

Whether Trump is, himself, a fascist is secondary to an understanding of the objectives of the larger movement. This movement is deeply rooted in U.S. history and, as such, does not require one to look to European 1930-ish fascism to find a model. The U.S. South, during the era of Jim Crow, and the Southwest, during the same timespan, were excellent examples of highly repressive, one-party, white supremacist, anti-women, anti-worker, xenophobic regimes. Trump and his base are as "American" as cherry pie, to borrow from the former H. Rap Brown (now Imam Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin).

To understand what the right-wing populists seek to win, one need only look at contemporary Hungary, Poland, Turkey, or, for that matter, Russia. The aim is to smash dissent and to ensure that even if there are the outer appearances of political democracy, the essence of the State will be right-wing authoritarian rule. And that rule, one should add, though using the guise of populism, advances the objectives of capitalism, be that a transnational capitalist/domestic capitalist alliance, or in the case of the more fascist element, a hoped-for national capitalist resurgence.

Thus, our immediate task is the forging of a broad front to defeat Trump. Defeating Trump necessitates that the Democratic candidate win. This does not mean simply voting against Trump. It means that Trump and the Republicans in Congress must be soundly defeated.

Which leads us to a second short- and long-term task: down-ballot races. Much of the left only focuses on elections during presidential years. This means that we have no strategy but instead, as we would say in New York City when I was a kid, we engage in the "selling of woof-tickets," that is, woof-woof.

Electoral strategy necessitates electoral organization and not just program. That said, the left would be in a much stronger place if it helped in the construction of a working people's agenda that was developed through the direct involvement of members and activists from within the movements of working people in the United States. I am talking about labor unions, tenant groups, food cooperatives, social clubs, and so on that are rooted within the working class. The development of working peoples' agendas in local and state settings helps to codify a certain level of political consciousness and "common sense." The working people's agenda becomes the instrument or litmus test when identifying political candidates. But such an agenda cannot be the work of one group of leftists alone, regardless how strong they happen to be (or think that they are). It must be a political task that is addressed in a thoroughly anti-sectarian manner.

Thus, there is a need for two levels of organization in order to build an independent, progressive people's movement. One, a national left project. Two, a mass, electoral initiative capable of working inside and outside of the Democratic Party.

The National Left Project

The fragmented U.S. left lacks organization to address the scale and scope of our tasks. By polling estimates, there may be as many as 70 million people in the United States who are open to alternatives to capitalism. Even an organization with the size of the Democratic Socialists of America is dwarfed by such a challenge. And the problem is not simply that most of our organizations are small (or now extinct!) but that we think of organization on a small scale. To build an organization capable of tapping into at least 70 million people, we are talking about moving toward a mass, radical, left political organization that, whether it calls itself a party or not, becomes the political home for thousands of activists engaged in various social movements. But as a home, it must have a strategy rather than being a way station, otherwise it runs the risk of being a brain-dead confederation.

A national left project will, by necessity, be multi-tendencied and will have to accept that not every contemporary and historical question will be able to be answered immediately. But it must have sufficient unity in order to operate effectively in the real world. This means a sound electoral strategy, a recognition of the nature of the U.S. capitalist state, an unwavering commitment to opposition to racist and national oppression, an unwavering commitment to opposition to male supremacy, a practice of firm internationalism, and a deep belief in the importance of the "united front" at both the strategic and tactical levels. It certainly must be an organization that is democratic and promotes debate, but is capable of marching in a common direction when decisions are made.

What is critical about such a project/organization is that it operates in multiple social movements, attempting in each case to build an anti-sectarian left pole in said movements that is capable of leading said movements. Whether operating among the unemployed, building worker cooperatives, fighting police brutality, engaging in struggles for land rights, supporting a woman's right to choose, advancing a Green New Deal, or supporting oppressed peoples in foreign lands, this organization must put its brand on the work.

Yet this is not enough. Progressive, mass electoral formations are also essential. Organizations such as the Working Families Party, New Virginia Majority, California Calls, New Florida Majority, and Progressive Democrats of America are all examples of formations engaged in work inside and outside of the Democratic Party. These are not organizations of the Democratic Party but what could almost be described as "nonparty parties," or independent political organizations, that have or are developing clear constituencies and base areas and through that, moving a progressive, majoritarian agenda. The Democratic Party is only a battlefield rather than the final goal.

The Sanders campaigns of 2016 and 2020, much like the Jesse Jackson campaigns of 1984 and 1988, inspired millions with the vision of an alternative politics and an alternative political practice breaking from both cynicism and traditional political liberalism. Regardless of the outcome of the November 2020 elections, the tasks identified here must be fulfilled, otherwise the U.S. left will continue spinning, this time into the heart of the maelstrom.