The Working Class and Left Politics: Back on the American Radar

written by Dan La Botz | June 27, 2014

The American political system, so highly polarized between conservative Republicans and moderate Democrats, has experienced in the last year some interesting changes on the left-hand margin of the national political scene. From Bill de Blasio's victory in the mayoral election in New York City, to Kshama Sawant's winning of a city council seat in Seattle, from the late Chokwe Lumumba's popularly-based campaign in Jackson, Mississippi, to self-described socialist Bernie Sanders' talk of a run for the presidency, something new appears to be happening. Independent politics and socialist party campaigns, so long marginal to American political life and from discussion in the media, seem to be back on the radar again. This is all the more remarkable given our terrible election laws that make it so difficult in so many states to get parties and candidates on the ballot.

Surprisingly the Tea Party, the corporate-financed, populist, rightwing organization within the Republican Party, opened the door to the discussion by attacking President Barack Obama as a socialist in the spring and summer 2010—an accusation refuted by Billy Wharton, then co-chair of the Socialist Party, who like other socialists argued that Obama was actually working to protect the wealth of the top 5 percent of Americans. At about the same time, influenced by the conservative upsurge, an April 2010 NYT/CBS poll found that 52 percent of Americans believed that Obama was moving America towards socialism. Yet, surprisingly, a Gallup poll of February 2010 found that 36 percent of all Americans viewed socialism favorably, while an astounding Pew poll on December 11, 2011 found that younger Americans aged 18 to 29 favored socialism to capitalism by 49 percent to 43 percent, a finding that seemed, well, so un-American.

In November 2013, the statistics seemed to be confirmed by the stunning victory of socialist Kshama Sawant in Seattle that attracted the attention of both the U.S. left and the major news media. The victory of Socialist Alternative candidate Sawant seemed to suggest that something might be changing politically in America. Now, U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who openly calls himself socialist but is not a a member of any political party, says that he is considering a run for President of the United States, though he is not clear about whether he will run as an independent or a Democrat.

At the same time, we are seeing other innovative, progressive political campaigns developed by labor unions, community organizations, and social movements, some of them at the far left edge of the Democratic Party, some within the Green Party, and others which are simply independent. We had the African American Chokwe Lumumba's Democratic Party campaign for mayor of Jackson, Mississippi, and now Howie Hawkins' second Green Party campaign for governor of New York, Dan Siegel's non-partisan campaign for mayor of Oakland, Mike Parker's Richmond Progressive Alliance campaign for mayor of Richmond, California, the Central Labor Council of Lorain, Ohio's successful campaign for city council, and the Chicago Teachers Union's creation of an Independent Political Organization (IPO), which may end up backing some Democrats but also running independent candidates. Taken together, this is a remarkable collection of political campaigns and a development worthy of considerable discussion and debate.

Several questions are raised by these cases: Has the erosion of America's economic and political system reached the point that significant numbers of Americans are willing to consider new and possibly radical alternatives? Are the labor and social movements strong enough to push forward and sustain political movements, organizations, and candidates? Are we witnessing the driving of a left political wedge into the country's fundamentally conservative two-party system? Or are the victories we have seen and are likely to see more dependent on charismatic candidates, local conditions, special circumstances, and non-partisan races than on the economic crisis and social movements? Perhaps most important, does the election of candidates on the left actually encourage the growth and strengthening of social movements, so that we enter into a virtuous cycle of movements leading to political campaigns which in turn build the movements? The goal, after all, is to build a working class mass movement that can challenge fundamentally the existing economic and political system.

The Crisis, Austerity, and the Attack on Unions

The political changes taking place on the left margin are the result in part of the economic crisis and the austerity drive. The crisis that began in 2007-08, a financial crisis caused by the collapse of the housing bubble, brought about the failure of banks and insurance companies, stopped economic growth, and threw millions out of work. The official unemployment rate, which was below 5 percent in 2007, rose to 9.3 percent among all Americans, while in the African American community it reached 16.7 percent, and among Latinos 13.1 percent. The real unemployment rate if one included discouraged workers was said by some analysts to be twice that of the official rate. Altogether, even after the recover, there was a shortfall of 7.5 million jobs. The economic crisis thrust into the forefront of public consciousness the disparities between the wealthy, and the working class that has been growing over the last forty years. Suddenly we became aware that a handful of very wealthy people continued to prosper even during the recession while many Americans suffered, losing jobs, homes, and, as so often happens, self-confidence and self-respect.

Insult was added to injury. The economic crisis was accompanied by a new emphasis on austerity. Government attacked the people. President Obama froze Federal workers' pay, setting a model for squeezing public employees. Republican governors and legislatures, sometimes accompanied by the Democrats, pressed for reductions in state government accompanied by layoffs. Between April 2009 and June 2012 more than 700,000 state jobs were lost, as were many federal jobs as well. It was often African Americans and women who suffered most from the layoffs: 20 percent of African Americans worked in the public sector compared to 14.2 percent for whites and 10.4 percent for Latinos.

At the same time, there were attacks on public employees' collective bargaining rights. Scott Walker of Wisconsin succeeded in stripping government workers of nearly all of their collective bargaining rights, and other state governors and legislators moved quickly to emulate him. Many states removed worker protections, reduced wages and hours regulations, and curtailed various aspects of union representation and collective bargaining. In both the private and public sector employers moved to raid workers' pension funds, freezing or reducing benefits that workers had counted on for their retirement. Meanwhile the media took an interest and we learned that the rich were getting richer and the "middle class"—read "the working class"—was getting poorer in ways that were turning the country back toward the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century. Words like "plutocrat" and "oligarchy," usually reserved for the wealthy elites of Central America, suddenly took on new meaning for America. And then we suddenly saw the revival of another old word that became a shout: "Occupy!"

Occupy Wall Street!

The Occupy Wall Street movement that began in September 2011 turned the new reality into a slogan “We are the 99 percent!” That chant captured the national imagination. Throughout the country movement activists initiated the occupation of local squares and parks but were soon joined by ordinary working class folk of all sorts. In many areas local unions attempted to tap the energy of the new radical movement. In a few areas anarchists and socialists played a central role—anarchists in the mass actions on the West Coast and socialists in Chicago in Occupy’s labor committee.

We had for the first time since the 1960s and 70s a mass movement in America from coast to coast involving tens of thousands in occupations, marches, demonstrations, and mass direct action. The occupation of public plazas represented a symbolic threat to power, became a springboard to urban action, and threatened (as at the Oakland port) to affect production and profits and to undermine governmental authority. While not socialist or even explicitly anti-capitalist, Occupy stood opposed implicitly to the whole governmental and economic structure. Taking public squares and parks raised the idea that there was a commons and that there were public goods—housing, education, health care, the environment—that were more important than private property and profits.

Only in New York was there much of a show of solidarity by the unions and only in the Bay Area did the Occupy movement carry out powerful mass action shutting down the Port of Oakland twice. Though the occupations of the parks were not economically or politically powerful demonstrations—this was not some sort of pre-revolutionary situation—there was a smell of rebellion in the air, and many young people got a whiff of it for the first time.

The demand to occupy public spaces in order to speak out against the 1 percent, the corporations, and the role of money in politics soon led local government to demand that the occupations cease, followed by civil disobedience, mass arrests, and often violent police repression. Occupiers were pepper-sprayed, beaten, charged with serious crimes, and jailed for various lengths of time. The movement was crushed. Still, though swept from the streets by Democratic Party mayors and their police departments, Occupy had had an enormous impact, driving the Tea Party off the front pages of the newspapers and from the TV screen, changing the national debate to one about economic inequality, shifting the American consciousness to the left.

From Occupy to de Blasio

The Occupy movement receded and all but disappeared, but then suddenly found expression in electoral politics. With few left political options, the great beneficiary of the Occupy movement was, of course, the Democratic Party. Tired of the politics of Republican billionaire Michael R. Bloomberg—seventh richest person in the United States, thirteenth richest in the world—a mayor who had catered to the rich at the expense of the poor, New Yorkers rejected a Republican nonentity and voted in November for the Democrat Bill de Blasio running on a platform opposing the growing economic inequality in the city. A former activist who had been in Nicaragua as a supporter of the Sandinista revolution in the 1980s, de Blasio had long associated with unions like SEIU 1199 and community groups like Acorn. As city councilman and later as the city’s Public Advocate, the local ombudsman, he made a reputation based on his concern for public education, health, affordable housing, and the environment. While unions and Democratic Party clubs were divided in the primary, de Blasio received the support of some important clubs and of SEIU 1199, gained the support of the city’s multiethnic working class voters, won the nomination, and won a landslide victory in the November election. His opposition to stop-and-frisk—as well as the prominent display of his biracial family—accounted for the support he won among African American, Latino, and immigrant voters.

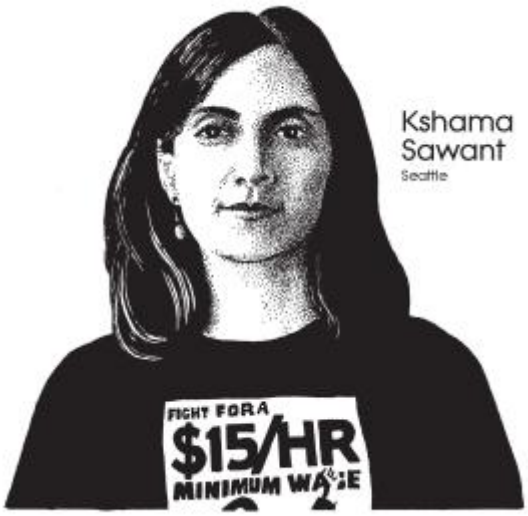
Speaking at his remarkably populist inauguration ceremony, de Blasio told his supporters, “We are called to put an end to economic and social inequalities that threaten to unravel the city we love.”

The cornerstone of de Blasio's political program has been his plan to tax the rich to provide pre-K education for the city's working class and poor communities, but—without the power to levy an income tax—he soon found himself in a struggle over funding for the pre-K program with the New York State Governor, Democrat Andrew Cuomo. Similarly on the fight over charter schools, de Blasio wants to slow their growth while Cuomo appears to support their expansion. The New York Democratic Party has divided over the issue of education between the more liberal de Blasio and the centrist Cuomo, raising questions about how this division might impact national politics. While de Blasio has taken up many important social issues—racial profiling, early childhood education, housing, and others—it remains to be seen if he can with the limited power of a mayor really affect the issue of economic inequality, that is the overwhelming power of capital in the world's preeminent financial center. To do so he would certainly have to break-up the long established relationships between the Democratic Party and the capitalist class, not something one mayor however well-intentioned can accomplish.

We see in the Democratic Party today what appears to be a new more liberal, more populist trend as represented by de Blasio and the woman who has been called "Hillary's nightmare," Elizabeth Warren, the U.S. senator from Massachusetts. "People feel like the system is rigged against them," Warren said, speaking to the 2012 Democratic Party Convention. "And here's the painful part: They're right. The system is rigged. Look around. Oil companies guzzle down billions in subsidies. Billionaires pay lower tax rates than secretaries. Wall Street CEOs—the same ones who wrecked our economy and destroyed millions of jobs—still strut around Congress, no shame, demanding favors, and acting like we should thank them." The question is whether or not such populism will be sufficient to set Democratic Party voters in motion, and whether radicals can use such sentiments to set workers in motion against the political and the economic system and ultimately against the Democratic Party itself.

Socialist Victory in Seattle

The Battle of Seattle of 2001 and the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011—interrupted by September 11, 2001, two wars, and a period of social quiescence—produced on the West Coast a hotbed of radical activism among the new Millennial generation of ethnically diverse young people, many of whom call themselves anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists, or left Communists. These young radicals, organized in loose networks or in collectives like the Black Orchid and Advance the Struggle, have been the moving force behind fights over environmentalism, racial justice, and workers' issues, the most important of these being the response to the transit police killing of Oscar Grant on New Year's Day 2009 and the two shutdowns of the Oakland Port during Occupy in 2011. By and large these young activists eschew socialist parties, abhor electoral politics, and—depending on their political theories—put their faith in either revolutionary shock troops or mass direct action. So it was a surprise when the West Coast left produced an astonishing left electoral victory.



In Seattle, Washington, in November 2013, Kshama Sawant, an economics teacher at a community college, a union member, and Occupy Seattle leader, ran for the Seattle City Council as an openly socialist candidate against Democrat Richard Conlin, a longtime council member. Sawant's campaign received endorsements from four major labor unions, environmental organizations, and many prominent individuals on the left. Similarly, Ty Moore, a former bus driver and a local community organizer, ran for the Minneapolis City Council with the backing of a major labor union, an LGBT organization, the Green Party, and a local group fighting evictions. Moore came within 229 votes of winning his election. Both campaigns were organized by Socialist Alternative, a Trotskyist socialist organization affiliated with the Committee for a Workers International.

Kshama's and Moore's strong showing in these elections is important because of the size and significance of the cities where they took place. Seattle has a population of 650,000 with 3.4 million in the metropolitan area, while Minneapolis has a population 400,000 with 3.3 million in its metropolitan area. Seattle is a major Pacific Rim city, tied economically to the U.S. West Coast, Canada, and Asia, while Minneapolis is a major economic hub of the Midwest, second only to Chicago. Consequently the socialists' impressive runs in these cities represented a matter of national significance.

Why did Sawant and Moore do so well? Both are personable individuals and well respected activist leaders in their communities who built strong campaign organizations. Both candidates raised issues of concern not only to their local constituencies, but to the country as a whole. Sawant, for example, called for raising the minimum wage from $7.25 to $15 an hour, for taxes on millionaires and corporations to raise funds for jobs, education, and social services, for unionization of low-wage workers, for affordable housing, for an end to racial profiling and police brutality, for a moratorium on deportations and for citizenship rights for undocumented immigrants, and for adequate funds for public schools with lower class sizes. Sawant and Moore talked not only about immediate local issues, but also about the need to replace capitalism with socialism. Sawant's site declared, "The only solution is to fight to change this system, and replace the profit-driven, exploitative system of capitalism with a democratic socialist society. Join us in the struggle for a socialist alternative, to liberate the world from poverty, exploitation, and war."

One might speculate that the persistent economic and social crisis in the United States since the crash of 2008, accompanied by government austerity programs, had finally in Minneapolis and Seattle led to a political response. Certainly there were neighborhoods in both cities with high unemployment and hundreds of foreclosed homes, but Seattle and Minneapolis were not blighted rust-belt cities such as the devastated Detroit. Minneapolis and Seattle were actually among the better-off cities in the country, with strong, diverse economies that had unemployment and poverty rates far below the national average. Seattle's unemployment rate at the time of the elections was only 4.7 percent, as was that of Minneapolis, while the national unemployment rate stood at 7.2 percent, and Detroit's at 18.8. Seattle and Minneapolis, while they have their problems, are doing pretty well among American cities.

What then could account for the response the Socialist Alternative candidates received? Economics plays a central role in any explanation of politics, but demographics and culture play important roles

as well. Both Seattle and Minneapolis are considered to be progressive cities that have a tolerant and liberal political culture. They also have cutting-edge economies and growing high-tech industries that attract well-educated young workers: a lot of geeks, nerds, and hipsters. Both cities made a recent CNBC list of the ten cities most hospitable to young people because of their green spaces, their diversity, their entertainment venues, and their "indy culture," that is, one encouraging to independent creative artists. Another list put them #4 and #5 for most livable for those under the age of 35, and they were also found to be on the list of the "gayest cities" in America, a statement about gay presence and acceptance.

What the Sawant and Moore campaigns may reveal is that the economic and social crisis are only part of an explanation of their success which also benefited from the changing attitudes of younger Americans who have become more critical of government and the corporations, more open to racial, ethnic, and gender diversity, and more concerned about environmental issues and the quality of life for themselves and for others. What we may be witnessing is the development of working-class consciousness together with the development of an anti-capitalist counter-culture. We saw something similar in the 1910s and 30s and again in the 1970s when radical labor and social movement coincided with the growth of counter-cultural movements.

That said, Sawant's victory was not a fluke. Socialist Alternative, fundamentally an activist organization, created in Seattle a professional electoral machine capable of reaching voters with its message, raising funds, and ultimately getting out the vote not only as well as but better than any other candidate in the race. Still, perhaps the most important factor in her election was the fact that the municipal elections in Washington State are nonpartisan, which meant that Sawant did not have to directly counter-pose herself to the Democratic Party's candidates, party organization, and funding. Had she been in a partisan contest, the results might have been altogether different. Since her election, Sawant has used her political office to organize the Fight for $15 campaign to raise the minimum wage.

Chicago Teachers Union

We have new political ventures in independent politics in the Midwest as well. One of the most interesting developments is the more independent role being played by unions. Historically the AFL-CIO and other labor unions have supported the Democrats almost exclusively and fought fiercely against any attempt by unions to move to the left, arguing that independent campaigns divide the left and lead to Republican victories. Yet in a few instances local unions have been willing to defy the AFL-CIO and their own national unions to support Green, socialist, and independent labor candidates.

In Lorain County, Ohio—just west of Cleveland—the local labor council decided to run its own candidates after the mayor overturned the city's agreement to use local, minority, and union labor. "It took us three years to negotiate this historic agreement, and it took them three days to kill it!" said Joe Thayer of the Sheet Metal Workers Union. Faced with betrayal by the local Democratic Party, the unions decided to run their own candidates. "This was a step we took reluctantly," said Lorain County AFL-CIO President Harry Williamson. "When the leaders of the [Democratic] Party just took us for granted and tried to roll over the rights of working people here, we had to stand up." With the support of the unions, an immigrant workers center, and a student group at Oberlin College, the labor slate won two dozen seats on the city council. "Running independent wasn't our first choice, but hopefully this can help bring the Democratic leaders to their senses," said Machinist Art Thomas. "If not, we've shown them that we can work with our friends and elect our own!" There is no evidence that such an independent labor slate will become a regular feature of local elections, nor has it so far spread to other cities, though other things are happening in the Midwest.

In the fall of 2012, the 26,000 members of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) struck, shutting down the city's schools that serve 350,000 children in the third largest city in the United States. The strike pitted the union against Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, the former chief-of-staff to President Obama, though in a broader sense it was a strike against Arne Duncan, Obama's Secretary of Education who has encouraged charter schools and pushed for "Common Core Standards" that call for standardized testing. Duncan was previously the CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, appointed by Mayor Richard M. Daley, the son of the famous Richard J. Daley who ran Chicago for the Democratic Party from 1955 to 1976, and was considered the king-maker who brought victory to President John F. Kennedy in the 1960 election.

Chicago's teachers rejected Duncan's education policies and stood up to Mayor Emanuel in a more than weeklong strike that won the support of other unions, community groups, parents, and student. It was, in effect—though no one said so at the time—a strike against the Democratic Party's policies by a union that had historically been part of the labor coalition that backs the Democrats and by teachers and parents who mostly vote for the Democrats.

While the CTU strike was impressive, it was not a total victory. Emanuel continued to close scores of schools. The CTU's new-found militancy, membership mobilization, and community alliances were not duplicated by any other area unions. With no other labor organization having undertaken the kind of self-transformation that had occurred among the teachers, the CTU found itself isolated in the Chicago labor movement. Yet the union had allies in the African American and Latino communities with which it might take on its political foes.

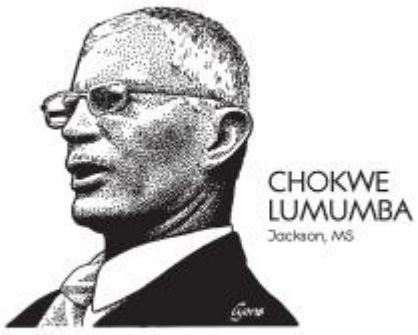
In early January the CTU voted to create an Independent Political Organization (IPO). The Resolution reads in part, "RESOLVED that the Chicago Teachers Union, along with key allies in the progressive labor movement and amongst progressive community organizations will launch an independent political organization (IPO) that is capable of leading strong electoral and legislative campaigns to benefit working families, our active and retired members, and our communities." The CTU's IPO calls for taxing the rich and raising wages, and it will endorse those who run on a social justice platform. These might be incumbent Democrats, new Democratic Party candidates, and possibly independent candidates, though who they might be is unknown at this time.

The idea of a major labor union in a big city breaking with wholesale endorsement of the Democratic Party and running its own slate of candidates—some Democrats and some independents—represents an important development. Throughout the country virtually all of the major unions endorse the Democrats, run the phone banks, do the door-knocking, get out the vote on Election Day—and get remarkably little in return. While it is not exactly clear what the CTU's new IPO will do, it is likely that the union will run at least one or two independent political candidates for office. If the union were able to recreate on the political level the solidarity it generated in the economic struggle and to run even one successful independent candidate, this could be a significant advance. Some have suggested that the CTU's president, Karen Lewis, should run for Mayor against Emanuel, though that is not on the agenda.

Interestingly, at the same time a group of about a hundred Chicago socialists from various organizations, inspired by the election victory of Kshama Sawant in Seattle, came together to organize the Chicago Socialist Campaign. The group met throughout the winter, forming committees to develop a vision statement, to write a platform, to assess possible races, and to find a treasurer and legal counsel. Like the Sawant campaign, the Chicago socialists' draft platform puts the $15 an hour minimum wage at the center of its demands. On May Day they nominated activist Jorge Mújica for alderman (city councilman) in the heavily Mexican-American near southwest side twenty-fifth ward.

Born in Mexico, the bi-lingual Mújica worked in print and broadcast journalism, before becoming an immigrant organizer for Arise, the faith-and-labor immigrant workers center. In 2010 he ran as the Democratic Party candidate in Illinois' third congressional district. Now, should he run as a socialist, he will be challenging Daniel "Danny" Solís who was first appointed to office by Mayor Richad M. Daley in 1996 and has remained the mayor's ally throughout his career. Danny Solís is also the brother of Patty Solís Doyle, former campaign manager for Hillary Clinton. If the socialists were looking for a real test of strength against the Democratic Party, they have found it. There is little chance of winning, but can they contribute to building a movement? Mújica's connections to Latino activists might at least provide the opportunity to do so.

Many radicals and leftists still believe that progressive social-political movements can and must be built within the Democratic Party. After all, getting new parties on the ballot is difficult, and just about anybody can run in the Democratic Party primary. In Jackson, the state capital of Mississippi, a city of 175,000, 80 percent African American, Chokwe Lumumba, a civil rights attorney and longtime black nationalist—a former leader of the Republic of New Afrika—stood for mayor in the spring of 2013. As an attorney he had represented Black Panther Assata Shakur and the late hip-hop artist Tupac Shakur. As vice president of the Republic of New Afrika, he had advocated for "an independent predominantly black government" in the southeastern United States and reparations for slavery. He also helped found the National Black Human Rights Coalition and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement.



Lumumba ran in the Democratic Party primary, but identified himself as representing the traditions of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party that in 1964 broke with the regular Democrats over racism. His mayoral campaign was built by the Jackson People's Assembly, itself a project of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM). The assembly's "Jackson-Kush Plan," developed by MXGM, called for participatory democracy, a solidarity economy built upon producer cooperatives, and sustainable development combined with progressive community organizing and serious electoral politics. Lumumba won five out of seven wards and defeated his closest opponent by 3,000 votes. His idealistic young followers talk of organizing producers' cooperatives as laying the basis for building a black nation in the South. While his campaign never mentioned socialism, the Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO) and others who supported him believed that it represents a step in that direction.Lumumba won the primary and went on to win the election.

Lumumba, in his short eight months in office before he died, pursued political strategies common to other mayors from the two major parties. Faced with the need to rebuild the city's infrastructure—and with no program or plan for squeezing money from the corporations— he passed a regressive 1 percent sales tax and raised residents' water and sewer rates. Wanting to encourage economic investment and deal with the city's food deserts, he welcomed anti-union Whole Foods, quoting *Fortune* magazine and praising it as one of the best companies to work for, though the United Food and Commercial Workers union has been fighting for years to organize its workers and improve their wages, benefits, and conditions. It is not that Lumumba was not sincere about his revolutionary, black nationalist convictions, and a certain conception of socialism, but rather that he had no strategy or at least not the organized forces to fight capital, and therefore had to seek a

partnership with it. Partnership with the corporations, dominated by the wealthy white corporate elite, may have been inimical to his radical black politics but proved to be integral to his practical management of the city in a period when there was no mass movement in struggle.

In a special election Chokwe Antar Lumumba, son of the deceased mayor, lost the election to Tony Yarber, a motivational speaker and city councilman, by a vote of 46 to 54 percent. The defeat was a blow to the movement the Lumumbas had built.

A Leftist Candidate for the Mayor of Oakland

There is also a new development in the San Francisco Bay Area where at the beginning of January Dan Siegel, a longtime leftist attorney and activist, announced that he will run for mayor of Oakland. Since the 1960s the San Francisco Bay Area has been one of the most radical regions in the country, whether one talked of labor unions, the LGBT movement, or militant ethnic communities. The current mayor of Oakland, Jean Quan, came out of the Maoist left and ran for office as a Democrat. When the Occupy movement took over a public plaza in Oakland, her police chief directed officers to clear it out using tear gas, rubber bullets, and flashbang grenades. Quan, who had been out of town (intentionally?), praised the police chief for his peaceful resolution of the situation, which led Siegel, an unpaid adviser, to break with her. Shortly afterwards he launched his own campaign, one of the first of sixteen candidates (as of April) in the traditionally non-partisan mayoral race including one endorsed by the Green Party, a couple of registered Democrats, a Republican, and various others.

His twitter home page described Siegel as a "Grown-up 60s activist and radical lawyer. Outdoors adventurer. Committed to ending the rule of capital." During his campaign announcement he was surrounded by labor union and community leaders who form the core of his constituency. Initially, Siegel made upping the minimum wage to $15 an hour the central plank of his platform, though by the time his website went up he was arguing that the first step to get there was an increase to $12.25. He has also called for making Oakland safe for its residents not by deploying more police officers, but by improving living conditions. He would make Oakland a "sanctuary city" for Latino immigrants too.

At the center of Siegel's program is the economy. His campaign web page—certainly the coolest web page of any campaign we have seen—calls in its "Vision" drop-down for a "21st Century Economy" based on "small business development," making the city attractive to "start up internet businesses by following the lead of Chattanooga, Tennessee," installing broadband and creating a municipal internet service provider, and for making Oakland "a leader in clean energy, solar financing, and green manufacturing." Finally, he wants to see "building, without public funds, a waterfront stadium for the Oakland A's."

In truth, as a young techy friend tells me, tech companies are already moving into Oakland—despite the recent proliferation of bumper stickers in the East Bay reading "Techie Scum Go to Hell!" and anarchist campaigns to trash yuppies' cars. Siegel's is an economic program for capitalist investment that might have been developed by Democratic or Republican party candidates.

Combined with Siegel's emphasis on diversity, this is a plan for making Oakland—already in a process of gentrification—a center of California's high tech economy that would lead to the city's transformation into a new Silicon Valley, accompanied by rapid gentrification, likely leaving little room for Oakland's large, working class African American population. Some other candidate from the major parties, without Siegel's leftist baggage, is likely to pick up his program and run with it all the way to the bank.

The Parker Campaign in Richmond, California

For eight years Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin of the Green Party, and the Richmond Progressive Alliance that backed her, have fought the Chevron Company, to keep the company from dominating local politics and to improve the quality of life in this largely industrial, working-class Bay Area community. McLaughlin has been termed out of the mayor's office under California law, so she is running for city council, while Mike Parker, long one of the leaders of the Alliance, is running for the office of mayor. Chevron can be expected to throw its weight into the campaign against Parker.

As Parker wrote a year ago, "Chevron plays hardball in the Richmond community. Not only does the community surrounding the refinery suffer foul smells and elevated asthma rates, but Chevron through its political power continually finds ways to contribute less to the city. It has kept its taxes low while its profits soar; it refuses to pay utility taxes at the same rate as Richmond households and is currently taking legal action to reduce its county property taxes and eliminate its contribution for hazardous waste inspections."

Parker, self-identified as a member of Solidarity: A Socialist, Feminist, Anti-Racist Organization, is running as the candidate of the Richmond Progressive Alliance and mounting a working class-based campaign on a platform calling for protecting the environment, fighting racism and gender discrimination, and supporting labor unions, neighborhood organizations, and social movements. Chevron will certainly do everything it can to defeat Parker and reassert its influence. Though, as Parker said speaking at the Labor Notes Conference in Chicago in April 2014, mayors have little power to affect the major issues of unemployment, which are largely determined at the federal and state level, though a mayor could use the position to agitate and organize. Parker's campaign is based on the idea that the Richmond Progressive Alliance's ongoing organization and fight for democracy and social justice is the movement of which his campaign is just one expression.

Howie Hawkins—Green Party Candidate for Governor of New York

In New York State, Howie Hawkins will be running again for governor on the Green Party ticket, against incumbent Democrat Andrew Cuomo and the Republican nominee. While a Green Party member, Hawkins runs as an open socialist, critical not only of his political rivals, but also of the banks and corporations and the capitalist system. He has run over the years for common councilor in

the City of Syracuse, for state representative and senator, and governor. In his 2010 gubernatorial race, Hawkins received 60,000 votes, enough to qualify the Green Party for the New York State ballot for four more years.

A fund-raising email letter to his supporters laid out Hawkins' program: "We support a Green New Deal—living wage jobs to all who need them by investing in clean energy sources that will make our economy carbon neutral in 15 years. Ban fracking and phase out nuclear power once and for all. Sustainable, organic local food. Mass transit and bike paths. A $15 an hour minimum wage. An end to student and housing debt. Legalize marijuana and end the war on drugs. Make health care a right with single payer. Universal child care. Action to end hunger, homelessness and poverty. Fully and equitably funded education. Revenue sharing for local governments. Power to the people, not the corporations." Hawkins no doubt realizes that he has little chance of winning the election, but he hopes to increase the Green Party vote to 5 percent and keep it on the New York State ballot.

Hawkins' biggest problem in the coming election could be the Working Families Party (WFP), created in 1998 by organizers from the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and ACORN as a progressive fusion party that would run both Democrats and independents on its ballot line. Running Democrats—including Peter Vallone, Andrew Cuomo, Eliot Spitzer, and Barack Obama—the party has since easily won up to three times the required 50,000 votes to keep its ballot status. As Ari Paul wrote in *The Jacobin,* fearing it would lose its ballot status, in 2010 the WFP decided, even as the unions remained neutral, to endorse Andrew Cuomo. "Cuomo insisted the party endorse not just him but his entire neoliberal platform, which included a wage freeze for state workers and a property tax cap. The WFP agreed." And, wrote Ari, the WFP recently allied with the Democratic Party to defeat Hawkins' bid for the common council in Syracuse. Should the WFP endorse Cuomo again in 2014, it could well lose its ballot status as progressives turn away, but it might also take enough votes away from Hawkins to hurt the Green Party too.

Bernie Sanders for President?

All of these various labor and left campaigns might seem to be rising and converging in a Bernie Sanders for president campaign, which may be in the offing. Sanders, senator from the nearly all white and very small state of Vermont (population 626,000—only Wyoming has fewer inhabitants), calls himself a socialist (he has never been a member of any socialist party) and is currently the only independent Senator in Congress. Vermont's odd combination of old Yankees, immigrants from other states, back-to-the-earth counter-culturalists, and a small but intensely active labor and progressive community elected the independent Sanders to the Senate in 2006 and 2012.

As mayor of Burlington, Sanders' rhetoric often irritated local businessmen and political leaders, but he frequently ended up partnering with them on city programs. And as Ashley Smith wrote, in *Socialist Worker* in 2006, he is an "all but declared member of the Democratic Party" who has been dependent upon financial contributions and political support from the Democrats, and caucuses with them in the Senate. In 2004, Sanders worked to support Democrat John Kerry and spoke out against the independent campaign of Ralph Nader, who had been the Green Party standard bearer in 2000 and had been accused by Democrats of being the "spoiler" who caused Democrat Al Gore to lose the presidential election to George W. Bush.

Sanders' voting record on U.S. foreign wars, the environment, labor, and social issues is among the most liberal in Congress. Women's organizations, environmental groups, labor unions, and immigrant rights groups give him their highest scores; most love him. His biggest financial contributors have not been corporations, but rather the labor unions and some liberal organizations. He is not beholden to the bankers and corporations that pay the bills for Republicans and Democrats alike. That's a real rarity.

At present, Sanders is considering the options of running as a Democrat or under some other label. He could run in the Democratic primary and, after losing there, run as an independent or a Green. Or he could simply run as a Green or an independent from the beginning. If he choose the independent path, the AFL-CIO, the National Organization for Women, and the inside the beltway African American and Latino organizations will all treat him as a spoiler who threatens the chances of the Democratic Party candidate. Unlike his situation in Vermont, he would receive virtually no union support, though with a sharp message he might win a significant portion of working class vote.

Could Sanders win the African American and Latino vote? While this does not at first seem very likely, we should remember that de Blasio—albeit with a different history—proved capable of winning the votes of people of color by speaking to their issues. It will be hard for Sanders to win the female vote. Politically active women will be overwhelmingly supporting Hillary Clinton or perhaps Elizabeth Warren. But Sanders might, if he can reach them, win support from working class and poor women. If he runs as an independent or as a Green, Sanders would be in a position to explain democratic socialism in popular language. He could criticize the Obama administration, the two party-system, and the capitalist and corporate domination of America. Such a campaign could have a significant impact on American politics and might move us a little to the left.

Building an Alternative to the Left

While it is gratifying to see the shift leftward represented by de Blasio's victory in New York City and the many creative and constructive efforts at politics at the left edge of or to the left of the Democratic Party, all of them aspiring to the political breakthrough we are waiting for, the question is: Can these political campaigns begin to interact with the social and labor movements in such a way as to inspire a virtuous circle of rising movements with militant strategies and more political challenges raising left political visions and programs? While it is not impossible for campaigns and candidates within the Democratic Party to initiate such a process, the organizational and political obstacles to building radical change as a Democrat remain enormous. At the same time, all of the more left campaigns we are discussing remain local and often marginal, and, while inspirational, even when victorious are quite fragile.

Big political shifts on the left have historically been powered by a combination of deep economic and social crisis, leading to shifts in consciousness, and the growth of mass social and labor movements. At the national level, the Great Depression and the rise of the industrial unions produced local labor parties but could not escape the gravitational pull of the Democratic Party, especially as the Socialist Party and Communist Party after mid-1935 generally allied with it. The social movements of the 1960s—the Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-Vietnam War Movement, and the Women's Movement—produced the Peace and Freedom Party presidential campaign of Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver in 1968 and Dr. Benjamin Spock, the famous baby doctor, in 1972. But most activists stuck with Democrats Hubert Humphrey and George McGovern. More recently Ralph Nader's 1996 and 2000 campaigns picked up energy from the global justice movement that arose in protest against globalization, international trade agreements, and the declining economic opportunities for working people in the United States, but even so received only 2.74 percent of the vote in 2000.

The current crisis in its economic, ecological, and foreign policy dimensions has still not produced the levels of discontent and social struggle necessary to propel politics to the left on a very large scale, though, of course, we will continue with whatever energy is available to put forward political alternatives. While only a democratic socialist reorganization of society will be able to deal with these issues, we should continue to support such efforts as several of those described here which lay out a political vision and program to the left of the Democratic Party, and which in some cases find

an electoral strategy for success. Every effort to build real political power to the left of the Democratic Party—particularly when it is linked to the social movements—deserves our support, whether it is carried out under the banner of the Green Party, a socialist organization, or some labor or independent flag. Still, the most important task is to put more steam in the piston, to increase the bandwidth, to build the social and labor movements, constructing the power to change politics.

Footnotes