

Karen Lewis and the Long Arm of Lesser Evilism

October 8, 2014

The article by Scott Jay that follows was published on our website several days before the public learned that Karen Lewis was suffering from brain cancer. We are sorry to hear of her illness and offer our sympathy to her and to her family and friends. We leave the article on our website as a matter of public record and because the political issues that it raises remain important, even though she has now decided not to run for mayor. We wish Ms.Lewis a rapid and full recovery. – Editors



As the president of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and the leader of the Chicago teachers' strike of 2012, Karen Lewis has become one of the most popular opponents of the city's Democratic Party machine. However, it currently appears likely that she will run for mayor of Chicago as a Democrat.

Accepting the lesser of two evils, usually in the form of supporting the Democratic Party, has led many social movements to their own graveyard. Accepting the logic of supporting candidates who preach against our interests has led many movements to soften their voices, limit their demands, and even disappear rather than embarrass their candidate. However, many on the Left who have been quite clear about this have not always been so clear that lesser evilism does not stop at the voting booth. The issue is not only whether we can build a resistance to the blatantly neoliberal Democrats like Obama but also whether we can stop our own allies from accepting the lesser evil and keep themselves from being pulled in along with them.

The problem is not one of ideological purity. On the contrary, we can be as pure as we want about never voting Democrat, but if we uncritically promote allies who are dragging others down this road, we are hardly building an alternative to lesser evilism. It is one thing to compromise our demands downward in order to build a larger coalition to fight for them, it is another thing entirely to advocate for things that we oppose. Austerity is often carried out by our "friends," which weakens our ability to resist these measures because nobody wants to embarrass their friends. After all, the thinking goes, if we fight concessions carried out by our allies—who are generally less evil than the opposition—we will only help bring the reactionaries back into power.

This thinking is suicidal for the labor movement but it is all too common. The Democratic Party has long been the primary tool of liberalism to facilitate lesser evilism. However, the long arm of lesser evilism reaches far beyond the immediate scope of those who endorse Democrats and often touches their allies and their allies' allies as well.

Fighting the Democrats or Supporting Them?

The impending mayoral campaign of Karen Lewis is a minefield littered with many aspects of this

very issue. It would be ridiculous to describe Lewis as “evil.” Rather, she is highly popular precisely because of her role in leading the teachers’ strike. Since then, Lewis and her union have been among the most visible forces of opposition to Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s neoliberal agenda. She is an extremely appealing figure who would be a great champion for labor and its allies. As a candidate, she could carry the banner of a fighting labor movement into the race and provide a voice for working people and people of color that would not otherwise be heard in this election. There are few candidates with the potential and ability to galvanize class politics the way she could

Unfortunately, Lewis has taken a right-turn in recent months as described in a sharply critical article by Lee Sustar and Brian Bean in *Jacobin*. While in the past Lewis has spoken eloquently about the effects of racism, she has suddenly begun pushing pro-police rhetoric, commenting on the “tired, demoralized” Chicago police force and calling for more cops to be hired. Additionally, “Lewis spoke approvingly of an agreement between Illinois Governor Pat Quinn and Emanuel to bring in forty state troopers to help Chicago police officers.” This in a city in which police tortured false confessions out of over 100 Black men, sending many to prison and even Death Row.

Even worse, Lewis has sunk to pandering to racial resentment among middle class ethnic white voters. When Emanuel announced a plan that would give hiring preference in the police and fire departments to graduates of Chicago Public Schools—the schools that her members teach in—she shot back. “Lewis claimed,” Sustar and Bean write, “that this mild affirmative action proposal smacked of religious discrimination—and even racial bias against whites—because many white cops and firefighters send their kids to private Catholic schools.” This is dreadful stuff coming from somebody as promising as Lewis, as Sustar and Bean document quite well.

What they are less clear about is the fact that—even though the mayoral race is non-partisan—she is campaigning as a Democrat and has been doing so for some time. Rather than just continuing to hope that she will run as a left-wing independent, we need to deal with the far more likely scenario—that she will continue on her current course, which has already been harmful to the labor movement.

Lewis recently pushed CTU to endorse Governor Pat Quinn for re-election, stating that he “believes in public schools and I know he will fight to make sure every child has a great education.” This is the same Quinn that signed SB 7, a law that attacked teachers’ seniority and their right to strike. The bill was also endorsed by Lewis. “We’re going to encourage every CTU member to turn out for Governor Quinn in November,” she said in a press release. If the Left is going to build an alternative to lesser evilism, it must oppose this—not just Quinn, but Lewis’s efforts to push labor into his arms.

Before moving toward her own candidacy, Lewis showed her enthusiasm for Democratic Party Alderman Bob Fioretti, the other major candidate in the mayoral race. She even helped Fioretti with fundraising, suggesting the likelihood that she will throw her support behind him if she is not able to proceed. The Chicago Sun-Times has suggested that an alliance with Fioretti could be a powerful tactic to bring down Emanuel, though Lewis hardly needs their advice on this. She is also encouraging her supporters to donate money to her exploratory committee via ActBlue, a fundraising platform for Democrats. Her fundraising page describes her as a “Progressive Democrat.”

The Chicago Mayor’s race may technically be non-partisan, but we cannot seriously expect to find solace in the gray area of electoral technicalities. Lewis has embraced the strategy of working within the confines of the Democratic Party some time ago and the fact that she has done so in a far more appealing manner than others does not make it better. In fact, it makes it worse. She will be far more effective at bringing her supporters to the right than anybody else in the labor movement or in Chicago politics. Whether or not this is her actual goal is irrelevant when compared to the

consequences of her actions.

Many will see Lewis's campaign as an opportunity—though an opportunity for what exactly is not clear. The Chicago teachers' strike and Lewis's leadership of it opened an opportunity to build a fighting opposition to the Democratic Party. That opportunity is rapidly being closed by Lewis herself. This poses a number of real problems for the labor movement. Lewis is being pressured by Emanuel's supporters to step down from the CTU leadership in order to show that she has no conflict of interest as she would be negotiating a raise for her members while defending the taxpayers' interests. This is, of course, business-speak for not being too generous to the working-class. Whether or not she complies, we can expect this rightward pressure on her campaign to continue and potentially affect the CTU as well.

The American Federation of Teachers has promised \$1 million for Lewis if she runs and has suggested they would launch a Super PAC to help her campaign. For a candidate without Emanuel's big-money backers, \$1 million is a substantial sum and one not likely to be kept available if her fiery rhetoric turns too militant or her campaign takes on a fight with anti-labor Democrats like Quinn.

Furthermore, Lewis recently gave an interview to the editorial board of Crain's Chicago Business and suggested her willingness to compromise on the ongoing pension negotiations, which the pro-capital paper described as "an uncharacteristic peace gesture." Will she accept a worse deal for her members in order to ease the concerns of Chicago taxpayer groups, or even just to get the issue off the table? Will anybody oppose her on this?

The pressure on Lewis and her allies in CORE will be enormous as such a compromise would probably make for good mainstream electoral politics. However, it would make for horrible class politics. We do not know whether the negotiations will go in this direction or if they will simply continue sputtering endlessly without an agreement. But if Lewis goes down this road, the Left in CORE and CTU cannot support this, regardless of whether she runs as a Democrat or a socialist or an insurrectionary anarchist. This would not be class struggle unionism or social justice unionism but good old fashion Democratic Party machine politics. If Lewis can compromise on this issue without a fight then she can compromise on far more. A labor Left that cannot be clear about this is hardly a labor Left at all.

Providing an opposing voice to this direction will be highly unpopular in some quarters *but that is precisely why it is so important*. The Democrats succeed in co-opting the most popular figures in social movements so as to make their party more appealing to liberals. This is exactly why Lewis's direction is so damaging for the labor movement—hardly anybody will want to oppose her, even when she is cutting deals and throwing around rhetoric that labor militants cannot possibly support. The fact that Lewis is such a strong figure and is probably totally well-meaning does not change the consequences of her actions one bit.

The Left is uniquely positioned in the CTU both in the rank-and-file and in the elected leadership and some of them may find this interesting or even awkward. Yet, this position is presumably exactly what they always wanted when they got involved in union politics in the first place. We all know well the many stories of union leaders who sell out their members for any number of reasons. The value of having the Left active and even elected in unions is to resist these efforts, not to abide by them or even defend. If the Left cannot lay out a clear strategy to oppose Lewis's current trajectory—in a clear and comradely way, but clearly opposed to her political strategy—it will find itself in the graveyard of social movement regardless of whether they endorse her as a Democrat or not. A labor Left that does not have a clear sense of purpose and strategy around these issues will find that it has no sense of purpose at all, other than to wait for a better leader or a better Left to come along and do it for them.

A similar challenge is facing the campaign of Jorge Mújica, an openly socialist candidate for Chicago alderman running in a largely Latino neighborhood against a Clinton Democrat, as Dan La Botz described recently. By many accounts, this campaign provides a great place for the Left to unite in a non-sectarian platform that can project its politics to working-class people. That is still true, but the Karen Lewis campaign poses a whole new challenge. Back in August, Mújica expressed his enthusiasm for Lewis entering the race. And why shouldn't he have? But as the weeks have gone by it is less clear that socialists can endorse her, and the potential problems this could cause in the campaign are real.

There will likely be many in the campaign, not to mention the electorate, who will want Lewis to run *even as a Democrat*. Nobody will want to disagree with the enthusiasm of people who want to support the most popular labor figure in Chicago, and possibly the country, but downplaying this problem is a concession to the suicidal politics of lesser evilism. Quietly accepting the direction in which Lewis is taking her supporters, while doing nothing to challenge her from the Left so as not to alienate important allies, cannot be an option. If the goal is to build an alternative to the politics of lesser-evilism, then the campaign must have clarity around this, otherwise it is just the Left holding hands and patting themselves on the back and feeling good about being socialists. This stark description should in no way be taken to be a prediction of what exactly this campaign will do or a judgment on its many hard-working supporters. This is simply a statement of a very difficult problem which the Left has stumbled over many times in the past and that, hopefully, the Mújica campaign can overcome.

The Dead End of "Future Opportunities"

There is a clear opportunity now to have out a debate in the organized labor movement about the role of the Democrats. The fact that one of the US labor movement's greatest champions is embracing the second party of American capitalism should not be seen as an awkward problem that we hope will go away. On the contrary, it is an historic opportunity—even if a very difficult one—to build an organized, political grouping within labor that understand the anti-union role of the Democrats. There are many radicals in CORE including in the leadership who are now uniquely situated to carry out a political campaign around this issue, but avoiding the debate in the hopes of not alienating valuable allies will mean that it simply never happens, or it happens when it is too late and nobody is paying attention.

There are so many opportunities for the Left, but often these are misunderstood. There is always some future opportunity that the Left does not want to lose sight of and therefore difficult problems now are avoided in order to carry out a much more powerful struggle in the future. But those struggles rarely come, because the real fight is usually the one just before us, the awkward fight with our compromising allies that just may break up the alliance we have worked so hard to build. On the other hand, the fight in front of us today just might build the clarity and organization that labor actually needs to carry out those bigger battles.

Karen Lewis's campaign poses problems not just for her supporters but for the allies of her supporters; her supporters may allow her to go down this road so as not to alienate the allies who follow her. But every challenging problem provides the small kernel of a solution. The Left today that can resist the pull of the Democratic Party, even coming from a figure as admirable as Karen Lewis, will be hardened for even greater challenges down the road.

Scott Jay is a writer and activist living in Oakland, CA, where he has been active in the Occupy movement, the fight against police brutality and solidarity with port workers.