

The Left Should Declare Its Independence from the Democrats

Obama's 2008 promise of "change" has been so outrageously contradicted by three and a half years in office that it almost looks like deceit. The domination of financial elites is now more absolute than ever. To the relentless grinding down of working people under years of Republican and neoliberal Democratic rule has been added the misery of millions of who have lost their jobs and homes and been left by the government essentially to fend for themselves—that, and a vicious assault on public employees, enabled and sometimes spearheaded by Democratic officeholders at every level. Arguably, U.S. foreign policy is even more militarized, more arrogantly imperial than it was under Bush. David Bromwich has suggested that Bush and Obama have both presided over a new historical stage in U.S. governance, one with particular characteristics: vastly increased "force projection" abroad and a powerfully enhanced national security state of secrecy, surveillance and indefinite detention. At home, "redistribution of wealth and power more than three decades in the making has now been carved into the system and given the stamp of permanence. Only a Democratic president, and one associated in the public mind (however wrongly) with the fortunes of the poor, could have accomplished such a reversal with such sickening completeness."

This was not a timid capitulation to corporate and military big shots, or an opportunistic appeal to conservatives and centrists for electoral advantage. Obama was and probably still is, personally, a liberal, of an exceedingly moderate Wall Street type to be sure, but not at all a hard-bitten reactionary like George W. Bush and his circle. He does not share the primitive prejudices of Romney,

Gingrich, Santorum and their ilk. Obama's job, however, is to provide leadership for and to protect a heartless *system* that has its own grim logic and its own inexorable demands, of which corporate profitability is number one. Being a racist, homophobe or misogynist is not a requirement for this job. However troubled he may be by all the suffering his policies cause, Obama fancies himself a "realist." The corporate-dominated system may be unfair; but Obama, like other Democratic Party politicians, basically believes as much as Margaret Thatcher that There Is No Alternative.

And now that the election approaches, and all but a very small part of the left are preparing to vote, even to campaign, for a president about whose policies there can no longer be any illusions, the question needs to be seriously faced: is there in fact no alternative? Because if there isn't, we may as well give up on a national system of free healthcare, a massive jobs program through public works, environmental policies that urgently address climate change, a major revival of the labor movement by organizing the unorganized, an end to bloated military budgets and bloody foreign interventions.

Liberal magazines like *The Nation* and pundits like Paul Krugman and Robert Reich insist that we can win these things if progressives just try harder to build pressure on the administration and continue fighting to "reclaim" the Democratic Party. But do they really believe it? Attempting to change the Democratic Party—which is controlled lock, stock and barrel by corporate power—is a total, colossal waste of time, energy, and resources, worse than that, a disastrous misadventure for every progressive current in our society. Without an independent political party of the left, pressure can potentially extract only the most modest and insufficient concessions from a corporate-minded administration. Has the fact that the Progressive Caucus is on record in favor of single payer had the slightest impact on Obama? Can anyone

reasonably imagine the Democrats putting the health insurance industry out of business—unless, perhaps, there were a real electoral rival on their left?

If progressives continue to vote for Democrats, continue to cling to the belief that hidden somewhere inside this party—which is not a mass membership party but a conger of lawyers, operatives and corporate and political notables—there is a "soul" that can somehow be made to care more about the welfare of the Ninety-Nine than the One Percent, then we can not only forget about Medicare for all, radically cutting military spending, stopping imperial interventions, or making the rich pay; we will not even be able to prevent Social Security from being gutted.

The issue of climate change poses the problem in its starkest form. As Naomi Klein has pointed out, real solutions to the climate crisis—not merely recycling and buying green products—are antithetical to "free market" dogmas, to which the Democrats cling as much as the Republicans, albeit "realistically" rather than enthusiastically. Klein explains that only collectivist measures might make a difference: heavy investment in rail transportation, large-scale development of renewable energy, and, above all, planning based on the common good, not profitability. That would mean a major assault on corporate "rights" and priorities, an assault that obviously would be fiercely resisted and probably could be overcome only by nationalization. The Obama administration's treatment of the banksters and hedge fund managers should make it pretty clear that a serious challenge to corporate prerogatives—let alone nationalization—is simply not on the table for the Democrats.

So where does that leave us? The Wisconsin uprising, the struggles in Oakland and Longview, show that vast numbers of people are fed up and willing to fight. Last year, Occupy Wall Street electrified the nation and the world and won the sympathy of many millions. The day before I finished this

article, a gigantic May Day march—perhaps the largest in U.S. history—proved that the Occupy movement is alive and growing. But what Occupy lacks, as do the unions, the environmental, antiwar and other social movements, is an electoral extension—a political party of the left. Such a party would not be a substitute for mass protests, occupations and civil disobedience, but rather an invaluable weapon, a means of organizing for political power. After all that has happened in the past two years, this is the next logical step. It is nothing less than a tragedy that progressives, workers, Blacks, Hispanics, feminists, LGBT rights organizations, civil liberties groups, etc., continue to support, even while "holding their noses," a political party that represents the interests of the their enemy: the One Percent.

As Matt Taibbi put it, the Democrats "are not a progressive political party, not even secretly, deep inside. They just play one on television." The party has always had some sort of "progressive" wing, and its function has always been, as Barney Frank once put it, to "go out and calm down the left." Today, that role is evidently being played by something called the 99% Movement, a creation of MoveOn, the SEIU and Rebuild the American Dream. As Arun Gupta explained, "The 99% Movement employs the ideas and language of Occupy Wall Street towards ends diametrically opposed to it: support for Democratic Party candidates up to and including President Obama." Van Jones, the cofounder of Rebuild the American Dream, advises Occupy activists to abandon talk of class war: "The real enemy is not the one percent."

So a political vacuum exists. There are Green Party candidates on many ballots, as well as other independent progressives running for office, and people should certainly support them, if only as a protest vote. But the Greens cannot begin to mobilize the forces that are needed for a creditable third party movement.

At the same time, though, we cannot simply wait for a new

groundswell. The initiative needs to be taken now, not to immediately proclaim a new political party but to begin laying the foundation for it. In the first place, that means challenging the myth that supporting Obama and the Democrats in 2012 is a practical way to defend the Ninety-Nine Percent and promote a progressive agenda. A great many progressive Americans sense that the Democrats offer no way out, but they are not yet numerous enough to form a left electoral alternative to the Democrats that could win the support of masses of people. Their numbers are far from negligible, however, and they should not let the 2012 election pass by assuming that it is pointless to oppose Obama and the Democrats when so many are in the panicky grip of lesser-evilism. On the contrary, it is during presidential elections, when fear of the Republicans and a concomitant progressive passivity toward the Democrats are at their height, when lesser-evilism is most effective at undermining the combativeness of oppositional movements, that it is most imperative to make a *political demonstration* against the two-party system and most likely that such an action will actually attract some attention and get people thinking about what needs to be done in the near future.

What is needed is a *declaration of independence* from the Democrats, one that points the way forward toward a new, broadly-based political party of the left. With as much support as it is possible to garner from trade unionists and social movement activists, such a declaration would announce to the public that at least a portion of the left has decisively rejected the idea that progressive change can come from the Democrats and intends instead to challenge them, as well as the Republicans, for political power. It should forthrightly state the need for political *opposition* to the Democrats, not just technical organizational independence in the manner of New York's Working Families Party and other "fusionist" initiatives, which almost always end up urging their followers to vote for Democratic candidates either

directly or on an independent ballot line.

We should be clear. Political opposition means, once a reasonable amount of popular support has been mobilized, running candidates *against* Democrats (and Republicans, of course). The natural constituency for a new party of the left would be workers and unions, minorities, feminists, the poor, LGBT people, and progressives in general—those who have traditionally given their votes to the Democrats. In other words, a progressive third party can be built only at the expense of the Democrats, even if this allows Republicans to win in the short run. The growth of the British Labour Party in the early 1900s had as a direct result the reduction of the British Liberals, who had traditionally won the bulk of the working-class vote, to a small third party, and a political realignment of class forces—with the bulk of the capitalist class lining up behind the Conservatives. Should a popular anti-corporate party emerge here, something similar would doubtless occur. Our de facto one-party system would become a two-party system in reality, with Big Business on one side and working people on the other. Then, at long last, we can have an open political contest between the right and the left in this country.

All the resources—money, phone banks, doorbell ringers—that labor lavishes on electing Democrats, in return for essentially nothing in terms of legislation or political support, could be devoted to a party controlled by labor and its allies, a party from which corporate and financial elites were excluded. Labor and progressives hesitate to break with the Democratic Party partly because they believe that without the support of at least a sector of the capitalist class they cannot build a new, potentially majoritarian party. This, far more than retrograde electoral laws, is what really stands in the way of independent political action. If labor and its allies could somehow overcome their timidity, their extremely low expectations for winning over a majority of the American

public, they would rely on their own numbers and resources, form a new party and go all out to get those electoral laws repealed.

Of course, even many of those who have no illusions in the Obama administration will still say that Romney is so dangerous that this is "not the time" to consider political independence. The same thing was said about McCain in 2008, and Bush in 2004 and 2000. But isn't it certain that the Republicans will put up somebody as bad as, or more likely worse than, Romney in 2016, 2020, and so on? Because the Republicans can only get worse, and the Democrats will inevitably follow in their wake, the prospect before us seems to be perpetual political enslavement to a rightward-moving Democratic Party. This downward spiral must be stopped. Even if Obama wins, the far right will continue to grow and indeed flourish, nurtured by the bitter fury of a plundered, ruined and manipulated population. If an independent left does not emerge to offer radical, anti-corporate solutions, people will turn more and more in desperation to bigoted nativism and ersatz radicalism of the Tea Party and kindred movements.

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