

Life After Bernie: People's Summit Searches for the Movement's Political Future

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The mood among the 3,000 Bernie Sanders supporters meeting in Chicago McCormick Place was improbably optimistic this past weekend, with many of the speakers proclaiming to cheering crowds that the movement has been victorious—even though Hillary Clinton, the presumptive nominee of the Democratic Party has received a majority of the popular votes and a majority of elected delegates and super-delegates, as well as the endorsements of President Barack Obama, Vice-President Joe Biden, and Senator Elizabeth Warren.

That disjuncture—between the Sanders' movement's belief that we have achieved something quite important and Clinton's clear victory in the primary—provides the contradictory context for this conference of progressives, radicals, and socialists searching for the way to the future, I among them.

Vision—Not Organization or Strategy

Held in the cavernous McCormick Place convention center, the plenary sessions taking place in an enormous hall large enough to hold 3,000 seated at large round tables, with several huge screens magnifying the image of the speakers many fold, the conference resembled a union or political convention. Virtually every minute of the conference was organized and planned down to the last detail; the speakers and the conversations were timed to fill each session. Participants could access information and respond to surveys through an app created for the occasion. Such a format offered limited space for discussion except in the few table discussions and breakout sessions. And there was no place for the spontaneous and the creative, or for a suggestion or a proposal. If the Occupy movement had inspired Bernie's movement, it had not inspired the Summit.

Political cultures contrasted if they did not clash as the National Nurses United's union staff and union members and People's Action community and political organizers guided the Sanders grassroots activist through the highly structured agenda. Yet even in this framework, there was a spirit of independence. The Sanderistas who had come from all over the country, California to New York, Minnesota to Texas, averaging perhaps 40 years old—many aging baby-booms and lots of millennials among them and about 15 percent people of color—remained, despite Sanders' apparent

defeat, filled with enthusiasm and anxious to move on with the “political revolution” and the fight against the “billionaire class.”

While the conference reflected the breadth of outlooks of the Sanders movement and offered opportunities for discussion and participation, it was—to the disappointment of some—never conceived as a democratic, decision-making body. The conference was intended to reflect the movement and to raise some more radical political ideas, but it was not intended to provide a direction for the future, and it didn't. It was about vision, not organization or strategy.

Vote for Hillary? Work for Progressive Candidates? Build the Movement?

Throughout the conference many of the plenary speakers' implied—but did not state outright—that we should vote for Hillary, work for Bernie's candidates, and build the movement. But it was not clear that everyone would accept the advice. When Dominique Scott, a student at the University of Mississippi, speaking on a plenary panel, said that neither Trump nor Clinton reflected her movement or her values—suggesting that she wouldn't vote for Hillary—the crowd erupted in wild applause and cheers. Many of those present either won't vote for Hillary or will vote for her virtually against their will, and will leave the voting booth with a profound disgust at the Democratic Party which has put them in that position.

Offering options, some of the speakers suggested that whether or not one votes for Hillary, people should support Bernie's candidates—he now claims there are 7,000 of them—and other local progressive candidates, or, if activists preferred, they could work in the movements. From the beginning, the Sanders' campaign emphasized volunteerism, autonomy, and confidence in activists to do the right thing, and that sentiment prevailed at the Summit as well. No one was being told what to do next—which was both a strength and a weakness.

In a conference like this, which is not the founding convention of anything, the spirit and the meaning can only be captured in the speakers' talks, audiences' response, the back-and-forth in the break-out sessions, the organized table discussions among the participants, and the chatter in the halls. There is no manifesto or proclamation, there are no motions or resolutions, so what we're listening for is the sound made by the *Zeitgeist* passing through the meeting rooms and the halls, brushing up against us, making its way, sometimes gracefully, sometimes clumsily, to the future. So what did it look, feel, and sound like?

A Braiding of Movements

The Summit reflected the movement in the diversity of speakers on all of the important issues of our society: racism, patriarchy, the LGBTQ movement, labor, and the environmental issues, above all the carbon-based economy and climate change. The conference organizers clearly intended to give the Sanderistas a sense that all of the social movements needed to come together to create one larger political movement with a comprehensive program for social change, a notion that suggests the need to create a political party, though that was not where things were going.

The plenary session on Friday night, was opened by RoseAnn DeMoro, the executive director of National Nurses United, the principal sponsor of the Summit, whose talk, seemingly inspired by the young Karl Marx and David Harvey but delivered in the down-to-earth manner of someone who spends her life talking to nurses, focused on the way in which the neoliberal political economy has destroyed the humanity of our society as it has put everything up for sale, had turned everything into commodities, not only our labor and our consumption, but even our leisure time. Her discussion of neoliberalism and its impact on the economy was without a doubt the most sophisticated discussion of political economy by a labor union leader in many decades. And DeMoro also found time to

mention that “liberals are usually bad, they usually sell you out when you think they’re with you, so, beware” and that we had learned in this campaign a lot about the “massive political corruption in the Democratic Party.”

Juan Gonzalez, co-host of *Democracy Now!*, then introduced the panelists by referring to his own experience as a young Columbia University student activist at the 1968 Democratic Party Convention at a time when “the country seemed to be on the verge of civil war.” “We in SDS refused to vote,” said Gonzalez. “We wouldn’t support McCarthy. We wouldn’t support Humphrey. Our slogan was ‘Vote with your feet. Vote in the street.’ I’m here to tell you, the slogan was right, the tactic was wrong. In retrospect there would not have been a substantive change, but there would have been a positive change had Richard Nixon not been elected. Hopefully we learn from our mistakes, a new generation learns from the mistakes of the past.” Gonzalez’s remark, implying the need to vote for Hillary Clinton, set the tone for the panel. The crowd was not necessarily having it. When he concluded saying we are here to ask, “Where do we go? Do we reform? Do we transform? Or do we overthrow and replace?” the thousands in the auditorium cheered the last phrase. They were taking the idea of “political revolution” seriously.

Naomi Klein, author of *The Shock Doctrine* and *This Changes Everything* suggested that it was very significant that nurses, whose lives are about caring for and healing people—the very opposite of a commodified economy—should be at the forefront of this political and social movement. Both she and activist and actress Rosario Dawson suggested that many of those present were nursing wounds suffered in the primary, and the nurses were helping to heal them. They not only heal their patients, Klein told the crowd, but through their sponsorship of this conference, they were making it possible to advance a humanitarian agenda that could heal the wounds of the planet and of our society. The alternative to neoliberalism, said Klein, is our movement’s “holistic, intersectional” ethos. She told the crowd that the Sanders campaign has raised the idea of socialism, had “moved Hillary to the left, and forced Donald Trump to talk about free trade.”

John Nichols told the Sanderistas—with no explanation of why or how—that the movement was “going to rise.” Nichols made the old argument that Socialist Party candidates Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas had run for the presidency several times, raising the argument for socialism, so that when Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected to the White House many of their socialist programs had become government policy. “We always win, because we always rise,” Nichols concluded bombastically and at twice the volume of other speakers. He had ignored the equally venerable counter-argument that Roosevelt had saved capitalism and had taken the nation into the Second World War; that government, capital, and labor had become fused into one during the conflict and had emerged from it in a partnership that created the system of corporate domination we now faced. But he had demagogically told the crowd what it wanted to hear, namely that they had won and would go on to win, presumably by forcing Clinton to carry out their program as another generation had forced Roosevelt to do so.

That was certainly the view of Frances Fox Piven, City University of New York professor and author with Richard Cloward of the famous *Poor People's Movements: Why they Succeed, How they Fail* (1977). She argued, as she has since that book was published, that people should vote for the Democratic Party but build a movement that can force through an agenda of reform. “They need us to cooperate,” she said. “We have to threaten not to cooperate.” It is this view that differentiates her outlook from the small number of far leftists present, who, like myself, are not interested in alternately “threatening” and “cooperating” with a corporate party, but building a working peoples’ party that can, as Juan Gonzalez put it, “overthrow and replace” the existing economic and political order.

While mostly reflecting the movement, the conference panelists also raised some ideas that had not

been part of the Sanders platform and may have been new to many of the Sanderistas. Tobita Chow of the People's Lobby, for example, disagreed with Bernie Sanders' call to break up the big banks, arguing instead for the nationalization of the banks and of other large corporations. We need, he said, "democratic control" over the financial industry and other corporations. He also suggested that the Sanders movement needed to see itself as and to become part of a worldwide working class movement against neoliberalism, together with workers in Bangladesh, Vietnam, and China.

Doing Politics

Several elected officials spoke: Jesus "Chuy" Garcia, Cook County Commissioner; Nina Turner, former Ohio State Senator; and Tulsi Gabbard, Congresswoman from Hawaii. While Garcia and Turner, each in their distinct styles, laid out progressive positions on current political issues, Gabbard brought something new to the conference, strongly criticizing and condemning the U.S. role in Iraq and her powerful anti-interventionist speech, while in line with Sanders' condemnation of regime change, was particularly aimed at opposing any U.S. military moves in Syria. There's a problem here though, as Gabbard is an Islamophobe: pro-Israel, pro-Sisi (Egypt) and pro-Assad (Syria) and pro-Modi (India).

Throughout the conference the Peoples Action speakers, many of them leaders of NGOs (501C3 and 501C4 as well as of local PACS) pushed the idea that the future of the movement was in supporting local candidates. The have in mind backing Democrats, it seems. But the down ballot option is also appealing to all sorts of other activists from the environmental to the labor movement and from LBGTQ to Black anti-incarceration activists. Some might take up the suggestion for independent or socialist candidates as was done in Chicago's last election where several school teachers ran for office and where a Latino community activist, Jorge Mujica, ran as a socialist candidate.

Who Was Not There?

Surprisingly the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), one of the most militant unions in the country whose strike a few years ago and on-going militant demonstrations of thousands that continue to confront Mayor Rahm Emmanuel and the city's political and corporate establishment—battles a war over whether money should go to children or bankers. Conference organizers had attempted to include CTU president Karen Lewis, but when because of other commitments she could not attend, they failed to work with the union leadership to find a role for CTU at the Summit. So the union was not present, though no doubt some Chicago teachers were.

It was also curious that the Communications Workers of America (CWA), which had endorsed Sanders wasn't either a sponsor of the event or given a place in it. After all, the CWA is another militant union that has just emerged from an 18-day strike against Verizon. NNU nurses has joined CWA picket lines during the strike, but somehow the Verizon workers didn't make it to the Summit. If in addition to the nurses there had been present a few hundred Chicago teachers and a couple score of CWA workers it would have given the assembly a different character.

There was a Labor for Bernie meeting, though organized at the last minute and held at 7:00 a.m. on Sunday morning, it was practically an independent event. The 40 or so union leaders who attended discussed plans for the future mostly around building local political organizations. With Bernie out of the race, even the six national unions that endorsed him and the six that were under pressure to endorse nobody will no doubt end up with the rest of the labor movement working for Hillary Clinton. Though among Bernie's union supporters as among the rest of the movement, not everyone is going there. Chuck Zlatkin, Executive Assistant to the President of the American Postal Workers Union (APWU), said, "The AFL-CIO has become an adjunct of the Democratic Party and our members are as fed up with the Democrats as with the Republicans. Both parties fail to serve us.

After Bernie, how do we form a working class party—for we are the working class movement, whether it's a third party, a labor party, or a party of the 99%?"

Labor for Bernie built an impressive national union network to support Sanders. Many in the group hope it can transition to meaningfully engage labor in continuing the "political revolution." However that broader mission will clearly be much more challenging.

The Far Left at the Peoples Summit

The weakness of the far left at the Summit was striking. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) had brought 100 of its members—many of them young, new members—to the conference and held a several-hours long meeting with them on Friday before the event began. DSA's main goal was to incorporate these new members into the organization and to have a presence, though it offered no strategic suggestions about where the movement should go.

Seattle City Councilperson Kshama Sawant was present, though her group Socialist Alternative, which has been highly involved in the Sanders campaign, sent only a handful of members and did not their usual highly visible presence. They did, however, hold on the fringe of the conference what seemed to be an unofficial meeting of twenty or thirty people to discuss alternatives to Hillary. The International Socialist Organization (ISO), which had not supported Sanders in the primary, had a booth and a few members, but no organized intervention in the conference. There were members of other socialist groups such as the Communist Party USA and Solidarity, though they had no organizational presence.

DSA had taken the initiative to organize a breakout session titled "Democratic Socialism in a New Time" at which they featured Sawant, Bhaskar Sunkara of *Jacobin* magazine, and Debbie Medina of Brooklyn, a DSA member running for the New York State Senate. But Medina fell ill and was replaced by Frances Fox Piven. Sunkara argued that we should draw on the rich socialist tradition to develop a political program and to build a large-scale socialist movement. And while Sawant argued for independent political action, talked about her group's petition to get Bernie to run as an independent candidate, and raised the alternative of Jill Stein of the Green Party, Piven suggested that people should vote for Hillary and work to build a movement that she could not ignore. As other socialist groups entered the debate, it became fractious and as one young man told me, it unfortunately "ended on a bitter note."

Where Do We Go From Here?

The Summit organizers were not prepared to suggest the organizational form to carry the movement forward that was so fervently desired by the movement activists, but suggestions did arise at various points in the conference. At the breakout session on independent politics, Bob Master, a leading figure in both the CWA and the Working Families Party, suggested that the National Nurses United and the other sponsoring organizations should create a national coordinating committee. In the New York regional meeting, Nancy Romer, a union and environmental activist, argued that we needed to create an alliance of organizations and a couple of national campaigns, perhaps around such issues voter rights or campaign finance reform.

All of us recognize that with each new political step—the Democratic Party Convention, the election of a new president, the inauguration of the new president—the movement is likely to lose its shape, its energy, and its adherents. Everywhere one heard the cry for national organization—yet whether or not that will happen remains unclear. The People's Summit did not point the way forward—perhaps the alternative will arise out of the demands in the convention in Philadelphia and the protests outside.

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