

The People's Summit, June 17-19, 2016, Chicago: Movements + Elections = Progress

June 22, 2016



Three thousand Bernie Sanders supporters from all over the US gathered in Chicago to share ideas, hear about each other's movements, learn about becoming "down-ballot" candidates, and collectively grieve. The Summit started by acknowledging that the Bernie Sanders for President movement suffered a loss: he will, very likely, not be running for President of the United States in 2016, either on the Democratic Party ticket or any other. While the Summit celebrated the joy of the movement, having a candidate to actually believe in, the shared energy of working so hard on concrete tasks like phone banking and door-to-door canvassing, meeting new friends and building new alliances, the big question hanging over the crowd was "Where do we go from here?"

While corporate media coverage of the People's Summit framed the effort as a bash-Hillary fest, a defiant group of Millennials and old lefties crying in their hand-crafted beers,[1] the zeitgeist in the massive auditorium and many workshop sessions was a dedication to the work ahead. The overarching question was, "How can we focus both on the social movements—Black Lives Matter, the Fight for \$15, Immigration, Climate, LGBTQ, Labor, Students, anti-poverty, anti-war, anti-bigotry—and on winning electoral power?" Over one hundred speakers and many breakout sessions gave examples of what that might look like and how it is happening right now on the ground. We talked about how to build power when all the social movements are united and in solidarity, when we become a multi-issue, multi-racial movement working together to change the world.

Over and over speakers said that the Bernie phenomenon could not have happened without the inspiration, organization and solidarity of the social movements already in place. The movements existed before Bernie and they will continue long after the 2016 election cycle. That this "Magical Moment"—another phrase often repeated—of synchrony between the social movements and left wingers running in the Democratic Party should be embraced and protected. But the unaddressed question hanging over the proceedings was, "What organizational form will shepherd this precious movement so that the momentum, solidarity and power are not dissipated?"

Who Was There?

The large gathering in swanky downtown Chicago's McCormick Place was sponsored and, we assume, paid for by the National Nurses Union (NNU), Citizen Action, United Students Against Sweatshops, and People for Bernie. Other Bernie organizations, e.g., Black Men for Bernie, Latinos for Bernie, Asian Americans for Bernie, Native Americans for Bernie, and movement groups, e.g. 350.org and Food and Water Watch, sponsored as well. Speakers, especially in the largest gatherings, reflected that leadership, though special care was taken to include the "Stories from the Field" and "The People Speak," particularly in early morning sessions. These short stories were moving, highlighting mostly young people of color, activists whose lives were turned around and empowered by being part of vibrant movements of many sorts. They weren't as much a set of

“Bernie testimonials” as ignition points for grassroots movement activists. These were stories where the audience gained insight and remembered what people said.

Broad participation from those gathered was well-organized: everyone was assigned a table number on their registration materials and two separate small discussions were held and facilitated by activist leaders at the tables. The questions identified by the top leadership of the summit to be discussed were very focused on electoral issues but, at least in the discussion group that I was in, the conversation quickly turned to movement building.

While there is no way to know how typical my table was, it included two NNU nurses from California, one black and one white, two steelworker staffers also from California, both Latinx, and the rest white folks: three retired unionists, one economist, one single payer staffer, and one legislative staffer. My guess is that two were two under 35, two more under 50 and the rest over 60. From what I could see, that was a typical demographic slice of the total attendees. The hour-long discussions each allowed participants to spin out their concerns and ideas for steps forward including having supporters of the Bernie movement meet monthly to share work and solidarity, creating a website to share ideas and activities, developing a national alliance of the social movements that could act in solidarity with each other, perhaps with a shared issue-oriented campaign or two, developing a short program to which potential “Bernie movement” candidates could support and be held accountable to, creating education programs to spread the message.

Opening Night

On Friday night, a thoughtful panel of speakers addressed the main concerns. RoseAnn DeMoro, President of the NNU, called out neo-liberals for swapping public and human rights for property rights, changing the meaning of “free” from liberation to the market and turning their backs on human misery. She talked about “sacrifice zones” of fracking, drilling and black and brown bodies.

Author and activist Naomi Klein sounded the call to heal racism and sexism as we heal the planet. She talked about the movement in Argentina that said “Our dreams don’t fit on your ballot” and emphasized the role of Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, the fight for \$15, Dreamers, Keystone, and fracking as central to the success and genesis of the Bernie movement. She referred to Bill McKibben’s warning the “we have a deadline” of climate change and we have to meet it.

Juan Gonzalez, *Democracy Now!* host and *New York Daily News* columnist, provided a warning from his days in the Young Lords and Columbia University student strike of 1968 where the slogan was “Vote with your feet, vote in the street.” He criticized that position because it contributed to Richard Nixon’s election and warned the crowd not to make that mistake again. John Nichols, author and *Nation* columnist, enthused about the resurrection of the “S” word—socialist—now quite acceptable in US political discourse and reminded us that no idea gets lost. (Thank you, Bernie.) He looked to the future of labor that has already arrived: robotized, automated, privatized, digital, tossing out the needs of workers entirely. “If there is less work then we need to re-distribute the wealth through a social welfare state as the necessary transition to the next economy. The only thing that will work is if it works for all of us.”

Rosario Dawson, actress, fresh from meetings at Bernie’s Vermont home, emphasized the importance of unity, of movement building, and avoiding getting trapped in defending your own organization over solidarity with others. She insisted that the Bernie movement made people feel alive and generating that spirit means the campaign did not lose. She reported that Bernie has 130 million names and contact info on the campaign’s list; he’ll use that list to support specific candidates but won’t turn it over wholesale to the Hilary campaign or the Democratic Party. It is an important bargaining chip. She warned us not to see Democratic Party Chairperson Debbie

Wasserman Schultz as the enemy but to pull back the curtain and see that Wall Street, Schultz's backer, is the enemy. She warned that the corporate media counts on the people doing nothing to challenge the status quo so the elites decide how to interpret the world for the rest of us. But the Bernie fundraising and organizing strategy was a game changer empowering people with information and agency.

RoseAnn DeMoro closed out opening night by saying, "The Democratic Party didn't want me on the Platform Committee because they knew I would say that the Affordable Care Act was inadequate. They wanted me to say that the Democratic Party fought hard enough but in reality it didn't. When you make a compromise on health care you are writing a death sentence for hundreds of thousands of people." The biggest applause of the night went to DeMoro when she said, "When I appeared by Skype before the Committee, I could feel the Bernie movement's power. I could feel the 58% of the American people who support single payer healthcare. We need to get those people out in the streets and make it happen in Congress. "

Sessions and Speakers:

There were lots of breakout sessions [2] on Saturday. The two I attended were very different in flavor, speakers and process. "Energy Democracy and Climate Justice" was a traditional panel with excellent speakers and analyses emphasizing mass action, a just transition for workers and communities most affected by climate change, and using environmental justice policy as solutions to problems of unemployment and a just order. Much more emphasis could have been given to how people can be engaged right now. It seemed curious that while a mass demonstration for Clean Energy is being organized for the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia on July 24, there was only a short mention of it, almost as an after-thought. With well over 100 activists at that session it seemed a wasted opportunity to organize for something concrete.

For the second breakout session I attended "How to Get Big Money Out of Politics"; it included a much younger set of speakers, mostly people of color, with a much more participatory approach. Speakers denounced big money as almost always coming from white men and turning the attention of politicians, required to do enormous amounts of fund raising, to problems and concerns of the white and wealthy. Public financing of elections can be a tool to make it more possible for people of color and people with working class and poor people's concerns to run for and win office. The Working Families Party in 13 states was held up as an example of independent politics that works best when there is public funding of elections, e.g., New York City and Connecticut, whereas it works less well in states with campaign finance by the wealthy, e.g., New York State.

One impassioned speaker from the audience, a nurse from Oakland, California, reported on some of the problems of the Affordable Care Act, in part developed by her employer, Kaiser-Permanente, which is, by the way, making a fortune from it. They are an example of influence pedaling. Kaiser-Permanente is refusing lots of patients and denying nurses the resources to provide care for them. She said that nurses are so politically active because they have to look in the eyes of the people who are dying as the health care corporations deny care. Getting money out of politics would empower the 99% and disempower the 1%. I left that session feeling encouraged that there were so many terrific, mostly young people of color, out there from Demos, Working Families Party, Cause Illinois, Reclaim Chicago, Common Cause, Citizen Action, serving the movement together.

In other sessions, speakers in the big auditorium emphasized working on a local level and building power, e.g., Jesus "Chuy" Garcia, former insurgent candidate for mayor in Chicago. Nina Turner, former Ohio State Senator and Bernie surrogate, jumped down from the stage to walk around the huge auditorium and bring people to their feet urging people to keep up the organizing, go for power, become doers of the deed not just speakers of the deed. Sunday's big session on Racial and

Economic Justice, featuring Heather McGhee of Demos and others, made central the importance of looking at all our work through a racial and economic lens.

For the sake of brevity, I will list some of the better known speakers in a footnote^[3] and dip into some of their remarks that seem to strike deep chords. But the names and organizations the speakers represented are important to know in order to get an idea of who was in the house and who will be in the movement that should follow. Frances Fox Piven, renowned researcher of poor peoples' movements and sociology professor, indicated that, as much as we might not like Hilary, we need to vote for her to prevent the misery that Trump would create. She warned that electoral politics sucks the energy out of movements and that keeping the movements strong was our best insurance policy against the institutional pull to the right. Tobita Chow, of The People's Lobby, said that our job was to create an alternative to the scary racist right and that building for elections and strengthening movements can be synergistic. Dominique Scott, United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) leader from University of Mississippi, was very discouraged between what she called a "rock and a hard place: Trump is a rock and Hilary a hard place." She got a standing ovation when she said, "The presidential candidates won't solve all our problems. We must continue to take our fights on the ground as we always have. We are building power and making things happen with our hands and our minds. I am sitting in a room of power. We are finally in the same room and trying to figure out what we do next."

Labor for Bernie

I attended a 7 am (!) Sunday morning meeting of Labor for Bernie with more than 50 other unionists including APWU, ATU, CWA, NNU (Cal. Nurses Assn.), NYSNA, and UE, all endorsers of Bernie. Also in attendance were people from the AFT, SEIU, IBT, UAW, UNITE-HERE, AFSCME, OPEIU, IAM, NEA, AFGE, Carpenters, NALC, NUHW and a number of workers centers and AFL-CIO state or city affiliates. The reports from the field were truly impressive: the development of lots of alliances and new leaders, filling the initial void of leadership and outreach in the Bernie campaign, engaging union members in phone banking, member-to-member outreach, workplace meetings and communications, and outreach to specific racial and ethnic groups. They counted nearly 30 states that had state-specific facebook pages for Labor for Bernie, over 40,000 supporters across the US, and more than 29,000 "likes" on the national Labor for Bernie page. The group was strongest in New Hampshire, New York, Indiana, California. They also highlighted how undemocratic many unions are in their endorsements, leaving member opinions completely out of the decision-making process.

The discussion turned to how amazing it was to have a candidate who actually stood up for the working class. Bob Master, of CWA, which just won an important a strike against Verizon, said, "The best way to go out on strike is to do it at the same time as a socialist is running in your state primary and is supporting your strike." He described the effects of Bernie's discussion of the Verizon strike at the televised debate in Brooklyn, NY and what Bernie's going to the picket line meant to the workers and to the outcome of the strike. This was seen as an ideal synergy between labor activism and progressive electoral politics. Plans were discussed for future work, mostly on local levels, to keep the momentum of the campaign going and advancing the ideas, alliances and organization created by Labor for Bernie. Labor for Bernie also plans to be active at the Democratic Convention. Report backs on the People's Summit are scheduled and/or planned in many locales. The labor movement's work on the Bernie campaign exemplifies the "inside-outside" game. Master suggests that the 20 years of experience of the Working Families Party, now in nine states and DC, provides a template for continuing such work.

State by State Organizing

State-specific breakout groups were established on the last Sunday morning. I went to the New York State group and there was lively discussion of how to keep connected in the near and far future. People encouraged others to join with Bernie people in their locales in order to have report back meetings on the Summit, to support local candidates, to share educational and action-oriented work. Networking was the main outcome of that, with little concrete leadership forming groups for the future. A sign-up sheet went around and we shall see what has come of it.

Comments and Conclusions:

Like all electoral campaigns, the Bernie campaign was top-down in nature. Petitions had to be signed and collected, phone banking and canvassing lists had to be adhered to and implemented, campaign ideas and strategies were made at the top. But because the Bernie campaign was so inexperienced in national elections and because it could not rely on the Democratic Party infrastructure, it had to rely on the grassroots groups that sprung up or already existed in other incarnations before the official Bernie campaign came to town. That meant that the campaign, while top-down in politics and organization, maintained a decidedly grassroots reality throughout. Those local Bernie groups are still out there, still wanting to be effective, still doing political work. How will this organization and energy be harnessed? What will be its politics and its future?

While the energy and determination and the beautiful array of people in the summit was truly inspiring, it fell short in several ways. The elephant in the room was “next steps forward,” structures and organizational forms to move the talk into a more systematic future. It kept bugging me that so few of the main speakers addressed this issue and then it struck me: maybe this plan is being reserved for Bernie to announce, for Bernie to conjure into existence. If this is true, will we have to wait until after he gives the concession speech at the DNC? Will it be part of what he says in his address at the convention? What does Bernie have in mind for his supporters at the DNC? Will he call for demonstrations, civil disobedience, direct action? While I have little doubt that Bernie will ultimately endorse Hillary, likely based on what kind of concessions he can get on platform, rules and leadership from the DNC.

What will Bernie ultimately offer as “marching orders” to his supporters, especially the young ones most smitten by the candidate and most negative about Hillary? From what I could see and hear at the Summit, I would guess that about 10-15% will refuse to vote for Hillary and that half won't work for her election. But that still leaves a lot of support, if very reluctant support, for Hillary post-convention. If Hillary supporters want to see more support forth coming, they should back off from demanding it and make those needed concessions at the DNC. Those young Bernie supports, especially, need to lick their wounds, talk with their friends, look at the alternatives and vote with their heads and not just their hearts. They know that Trump will be disastrous and that Hillary will be 4-8 more years of Obama. While the status quo is not at all what we need now, a Trump presidency will be a very dangerous step toward fascism. Even the Koch brothers know this.

What was clear from the crowd at the Summit is that there is an imperative to act now. Over and over speakers on every level spoke to the need to save the planet for the future generations. Reverend Yearwood of the Hip-Hop Caucus said that anyone under 13 is going to suffer mightily unless we move on climate change and clean energy right now. It is our collective responsibility to the next and future generations. But how do we do that? By joining all the social movements together in solidarity. By electing progressive candidates who will work for the people. By building power on local levels in many ways possible. By advancing racial, economic and gender justice in all our work, regardless of the specific issue. By learning from each other. To me, all of this is part of what we must do to build the power we need for change but we can do that more effectively if we have a structure, an alliance of some sort, with a name and an identity, that can unite the social movements and perhaps run candidates for office. But without that structure much less can move

forward.

What does the Summit mean for leftists and socialists who want to see these dreams come true? Different people and groups will come to different conclusions but it seems to me that there is quite a lot of room in this big tent, if it is carefully built with some structure and focus. The fact that race, gender and class are all part of the core principles of every discussion is an important step forward. That youth and people of color are central players. That multiple modes of organizing—grassroots, unions, community, advocacy, policy, direct action, and electoral—are seen as mutually compatible, makes room for many of us.

RoseAnn DeMoro closed out the Summit by saying that there will be demonstrations in various locales in February 2017 demanding a peoples agenda. She said that there will be a next Peoples Summit, next time with 6,000 people. But she didn't say when and under whose auspices. She didn't attempt to speak for Bernie. Perhaps she too is waiting for him to speak to us. The crowd assembled is waiting too.

[1] Yamiche Alcinder, "Bernie Sanders Die-Hards Gather and Try to Look Past November", *New York Times*, June 19, 2016.

[2] Breakout sessions: Media and the Movement; Energy Democracy and Climate Justice; The Digital Political Revolution; Ending Voter Suppression, Mass Incarceration, Deportations and Gender Inequality; Democratic Socialism in a New Time; Agroecology, Grassroots Food Grown to Save the Planet; Building Independent Political Power; Healthcare Not Warfare: It's Time for Global Peace and Justice; #15onCampus—Students and Workers United to Raise Wages, Not Tuition; The Next System: Changing the Rules of the Game; Organizing for Healthcare Justice; and The Robin Hood Tax Campaign.

[3] Rev. William Barber, Moral Mondays Movement & Repairers of the Breach; Dante Barry, A Million Hoodies Movement for Justice; Linda Sansour, MPower; Allysha Almadad, NNU; Bobby Tolbert, VOCAL NY; Tara Houska, Honor the Earth; Andrea Flores, USAS; Becky Bond, Senior Advisor to Sanders 2016; Michael Lighty, NNU; Winne Wong, People for Bernie; Mehrdad Azemun, People's Action; Tulsi Gabbard, Member of Congress, Hawaii; Donna Smith, Progressive Democrats of America; Breanna Champion, BYP 100; Deborah Burger, NNU, Moumita Ahmed, Millennials for Bernie; Debbi Adams, Michigan United; Mark Schlosberg, Food & Water Watch Action Fund; Sandy Barnard, Student Action; Erika Andiola, Dreamer; Joseph Geevarghese, Good Jobs Nation; George Goehl, People's Action; Jim Hightower, Hellraiser. An additional 50 speakers presented at topic-specific breakout sessions. Go to www.thepeoplesummit.org for more information.