

Response to Jay and Sustar & Bean

October 15, 2014

The following article by Adolph Reed, Jr. responds to an article that appeared on the New Politics website a week ago. Sadly, since then we have learned that Karen Lewis has been afflicted with brain cancer. We offer our sympathy to her, her family, and her friends and wish for her rapid and full recovery. While she has withdrawn and will not be a candidate in the mayoral race, we believe that the issues raised in this article remain important.

I recently read two quite similar calls for concern about Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis's possible campaign for mayor: Scott Jay's "Karen Lewis and the Long Arm of Lesser Evilism" in *New Politics*—<http://newpol.org/karen-lewis-and-long-arm-lesser-evilism> and Lee Sustar and Brian Bean's "Don't Back Down" in *Jacobin*—<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/09/dont-back-down/>. I admit that I was a little surprised to see that this flavor of the left has already lobbed its charges of selling out before she's even declared her candidacy.

The *New Politics* piece is just simple-minded and wrong-headed all the way through, pro forma stuff that Jay could have phoned in from and about anywhere. No one except maybe he and his political buddies ever imagined that she'd run as anything other than a Dem in the first place. And why should she in a race that's officially nonpartisan anyway? The only effect would be to increase the degree of difficulty in what would already be a steep uphill fight. (I was especially taken with Jay's declaration that he's not demanding ideological purity, which he follows by raising the bar of ideological purity in arguing that it's not enough that we avoid the sin of voting Democratic but that we need to take care that our actions not only don't lead anyone else to vote Dem but that they don't lead anyone to lead anyone else to do so. This brings to mind my fourth grade Catechism teacher.) He criticizes Lewis for supporting Illinois Senate Bill 7, "that attacked teachers' seniority and their right to strike," which certainly would be an odd move for the CTU president. In fact, she contingently supported the version of SB7 that passed over the worse one that had been proposed. He also attacks her for supporting Pat Quinn's re-election as governor, a move that Jay understands, consistent with his brand of sectarian fantasy, to expose her as a stooge for the Democrats. Of course she supports Quinn over kazillionaire privatizer (and Friend of Rahm) Bruce Rauner. Much as I dislike Quinn's earlier moves on public pensions, etc (and I think Lewis's argument is at least plausible that he gambled on backing a proposal that was so extreme the state legislature wouldn't accept it, which is in fact what happened), I sent him some money because Rauner promises to privatize as much of state government as possible and destroy public education. That's also why the CTU endorsed him, not some shadowy "pressure to stay within the Democratic Party fold," as Sustar and Bean contend.

There's a flavor of Trotskyist that brings to mind a line from a truly horrible late 1970s Paul Schrader film, *Hardcore*, in which the stereotypical young hooker with a heart of gold who is helping upper Midwestern Calvinist George C. Scott find his daughter who was spirited into the sex industry on a Disneyland trip, remarks to him that their views about sex are fundamentally similar. When he looks at her like she's nuts, she explains that he cared so little about it that he didn't do it at all and she cared so little about it that she'd do it with anyone. The parallel in this domain is with Dems and their antagonists of that sort on the left. Both tend, as a matter of hallowed principle, to overvalue the significance of electoral action and to reduce electoral engagement to a matter of supporting Dems or not; they just take different sides on the question. But voting for a Dem or not is not the end all and be all of politics; whether or not to do so is fundamentally a tactical or strategic question, not a matter of principle. It is high principle for those leftist types because they operate within a mythology—not unlike mental illness—according to which, if we could just get the people to stop

voting for Dems, they'll come to see the necessity for socialism, or the crazier-still version, that the masses already are pleading for socialism, but the elite gatekeepers in the labor movement, etc., keep duping them into supporting Dems. Sustar and Bean are no better than Jay in this regard. Like Jay, they imagine that a mass movement is already out there waiting to be called together, if only Lewis would demonstrate her independence from the Dems and adopt the proper laundry list of lefty proposals. For them that means:

from raising the minimum wage, to a tax on financial transactions, to higher taxes on the wealthy. The fight against racism will have to be front and center. She will have to highlight underfunding in schools, residential discrimination, and the lack of genuine economic development—not gentrification—in black and brown neighborhoods. Such a campaign would also have to confront the reality of police brutality, from Ferguson to Chicago. Immigrant rights should be a major focus, too, in a city in which a growing Latino population faces a dramatic rise in deportations, as well as racism and poverty.

All those sound good as talking points (and Sustar and Bean note that Rahm supports increasing the minimum wage), but they generally lack content. What, after all, are the warrants of “the fight against racism” and what does it mean to make it “front and center”? How can we tell what counts as “genuine economic development—not gentrification”? What can the mayor of Chicago do about police brutality in suburban Maywood or Evergreen Park, much less in metropolitan St. Louis?

Both these pieces betray a really naïve or underdeveloped understanding of electoral action, its costs and benefits, the unavoidable messiness of engaging in it. And, by the way, the same messiness applies to all efforts to build and maintain broad alliances, all of which require finding ways to navigate locating points of agreement and looking the other way at least temporarily at potentially serious differences and contradictions. Jay's essay is puerile in this regard, but the *Jacobin* essay isn't much better; both fall to the level of facile exposé—Lewis calls for more cops on the streets even though the FOP fundraised for Darren Wilson and the CPD has a history of racist brutality!!—and they fail to understand that you can't build a movement around an election campaign, which requires an approach to organizing built on thin and broad, diffuse even, appeals because the standard of success is tied to % of the vote received. And the logic of electoral campaigns is inexorable; it brings to mind an old college friend's quip about acid: once you buy the ticket, you have to take the ride.

And as for the “Lewis's turn to the right” line, and the need for “the fight against racism [whatever that is concretely] to be front and center,” it's important to keep in mind the really existing black politics in Chicago, which presents a much more complicated field of action than either essay takes into account. There's a venerable history of black (and nonblack) aldermen and other politicians pledging to back the insurgents and then putting their troops out on election day to turn out for the machine. For the preachers that sort of duplicity is in their basic job description, and then you have the “community leaders,” who're likely to be on the administration's teat either directly or via the nonprofit industrial complex. Then there are whatever remains of the South Side nationalists and Jesse Jackson's operation to which those “activists” are loosely linked. That element has its own history of cash and carry politics, and its minions have habitually found a way to denounce or quietly reject the insurgent candidates for some arcane political incorrectness and cut deals with the machine or in state politics with the GOP in exchange for working to demobilize around the edges. South Side “activists” did that when liberal Dem Dawn Clark Netsch ran against GOP incumbent Jim Edgar for governor in '95. They determined that they were affronted that she hadn't supported Harold Washington in the Dem primary in 1983 (though she did in the general election and again all the way in 1987). So they got some Edgar money. They also worked tirelessly to preempt the emergence of a serious progressive contender against the Lesser Daley during his reign by insisting that only a black challenger could embody the legacy of the Harold Washington coalition.

And another thing that lefties don't understand, especially to the extent that they harbor essentialist fantasies about "the black [or Latino] community," is that it's such institutional nodes that actually mobilize voters and turn them out. That's also why a Lewis campaign would need support of whatever unions and other organizations with political capacity it could get. Sustar and Bean's belief that the positions a Lewis campaign adopts would by themselves turn out voters, working class or otherwise, against an entrenched political apparatus is wishful thinking, and a particular species of wishful thinking at that, an electoral version of the Myth of the Spark that will condense the spontaneous mass demand for socialism. Yes, there are tradeoffs that have to be made; that would be true even for a serious protest candidacy. Such tradeoffs have to be made carefully and judiciously through collective processes, but they have to be made. I don't see a hint of recognition of that fact anywhere in either of these articles. To that extent they're not much more than political posturing and dilettantism. They don't engage at all with the specificities of Chicago politics—electoral or otherwise—and offer only cookie cutter proposals transcribed from those laundry lists so routinely cobbled together by the activist left and parsed endlessly on the internet and in Brooklyn coffee houses.

Finally, the problem in Chicago isn't the need for a break from the Dems; it's the need to build a broad alliance against neoliberal policy and, it is to be hoped, beyond that. A Karen Lewis mayoral race could be a significant step in building such an alliance; if it is to be, it'll be a tough struggle that will require broad appeals and wide and deep mobilization. At the same time, I doubt that there are many people more acutely aware than I of the dangers—including the potential contradictions of success—that can come from winning a mayoralty. Some people think that, taking those dangers into account, Lewis might be more effective politically by remaining outside City Hall and agitating to broaden a base within the labor movement and among other constituent groups. That's ultimately a practical question and one to which there may be no clearly correct answer; nontrivial tradeoffs accompany each course. (However, Lewis's sudden health complications may be serious enough to render debate about her possible mayoral campaign moot.) That's the problem with real politics; it's messy, laden with contingencies and uncertain outcomes and, of course, odd bedfellows. It's ironic that the political element that is now prepared to denounce Lewis for capitulationism was also among the loudest voices urging her to run in the first place. I see now that what they had in mind, as these critiques make clear, is the sort of purist and pointless suicide mission that is the hallmark of their ideological tendency.

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<http://nonsite.org/editorial/response-to-jay-and-sustar-bean>