Should the Green Party Stand Down in 2020?

written by Howie Hawkins | May 5, 2019



We can expect much commentary on why the socialist left should unite behind the Democrats in 2020 to get rid of the dreaded Trump. The Green Party will be told to stand down in the 2020 presidential campaign.

The quadrennial attacks on the Green Party will come from the usual whiny liberals like Eric Alterman, Jonathan Chait, Katha Pollitt, Michael Tomasky, and Joan Walsh in publications like *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and *The Daily Beast*. They are already recycling their 2016 attacks on Bernie Sanders for being too left to beat Trump.

There will also be arguments against an independent left approach to 2020 coming from self-identified socialists who support Bernie Sanders and—in the end—any damned Democrat who is nominated to run against Trump. An early submission to this genre is "A Left Strategy for the 2020 Elections and Beyond" by Carl Davidson and Bill Fletcher, Jr., which is now making its way around the left blogosphere.

This article is not another cranky diatribe against the Green Party. It doesn't even mention the Green Party, although some comments on it have attacked the Greens. The article is a rational argument for supporting Democrats to defeat Trump and the ultra-right Republicans. But rational doesn't mean right if the premises are wrong.

Their starting point is "The defeat of Donald Trump and the ejection of his right-wing and white supremacist populist bloc from the centers of political power is a tactical goal of some urgency not only for Democrats but also for leftists." The independent left should have no argument with that goal.

Their next premise is "Given how unlikely Trump's resignation or impeachment is, the election of the candidate running on the Democratic Party line seems like the likeliest path toward his removal." Here there is certainly room for argument.

Why not demand Trump's impeachment right now? The hesitation of the Democrats to impeach Trump is the first reason why the left should not count on the Democrats to defeat Trump and the ultra-right.

The many grounds for impeaching Trump are plain to see for anyone who cares to look at the news: self-enriching emoluments and nepotism; abuse of power, obstruction of justice, and contempt of Congress; constant lying, racist tropes, and incitements to violence; demonizing the press; surveillance and harassment of journalists, immigration lawyers, black and Muslim groups, and anti-Trump protesters; felony campaign hush-money payments; and seeking and welcoming campaign support from Russians, Saudis, Emiratis, and Israelis. The circumstantial evidence is overwhelming for many Trump crimes committed before taking office, including sexual assault, racial discrimination, money laundering, bank fraud, insurance fraud, tax evasion, wage theft, and failing to pay contractors and creditors.

Only a rich white man could expect to get away with this in America. The Republicans would have impeached Obama instantly for any one of these offenses. But the Democratic leadership seems cynically intent on leaving Trump in office as a villainous foil for fundraising.

Speaker Pelosi has said impeachment would "divide the country." But Trump's whole political strategy is to divide the country racially in order to consolidate his "white supremacist populist" electoral base. That bloc of voters is a minority of the country that has only prevailed because Democrats like Pelosi cow before it. The left cannot depend on the Democrats to defeat the ultra-right. The surest and quickest way to beat Trump is to beat him up now and cripple him politically with impeachment proceedings.

Fighting to impeach Trump should be part of the "war of position" that prepares the "war of movement" that Davidson and Fletcher invoke: "The election-of-the-day looks a lot like the Gramscian 'war of movement,' mobilizing forces quickly for the taking of a strong point of power. The other protracted base-building campaigns are more like the 'war of position,' gathering strength, taking or winning over stronghold by stronghold, concentrating our forces on the weak spot to make a breakthrough."

Gramsci posited the wars of position and movement as the way to build a socialist counterculture to the hegemony of capitalist ideology that convinces so many people to accept their exploitation and oppression without much force and violence. With respect to impeachment, the proceedings are the war of position, exposing Trump's crimes for all to see and debilitating him politically, as well as the Republicans who defend him. The war of movement is taking Trump out by a Senate conviction or by crushing him in the 2020 election because he is irreparably damaged by the impeachment process.

This useful wars of position and movement framework makes a better case for independent left politics. Positioning inside the capitalist Democratic Party obscures the socialist left's distinct identity and muffles its radical message. Supporting the most progressive Democrats on the party's left fringe only makes the Democratic Party look better to progressives than it really is. If the point of the war of position is to build mass organizations rooted in an oppositional socialist culture, supporting the candidates of the one of the two capitalist parties obviously undermines that objective.

The war of movement for the Green Party is building up its power from below in elections by increasing its votes and its elected officials. The US Census of Governments reports over 87,000 local and state governments with more than 500,000 elected offices. The Green Party has over 100 elected officials, but that is just a drop in the bucket of what is possible and needed to challenge the two-capitalist-party system. Building a bench of elected municipal officials will create the foundation for electing Greens to state legislatures and Congress and becoming a socialist force in American government. The Greens can't wait to do this until after 2020. Climate collapse won't wait. Millions of working families who deal with crises every month paying for food, rent, utilities, medical bills, and/or tuition and student loans can't wait either.

In order to execute a strategy of building from below, the Green Party still needs to run statewide and presidential tickets in 2020 because in most states these elections are the only way the Green Party can secure ballot lines for use by its local candidates in the next election cycle. The war of position for Green statewide and presidential campaigns is to put solutions into the public debate that the major parties want to ignore. The war of movement in 2020 is to win state ballot lines.

The classic socialist case for independent working-class politics was stated by Karl Marx in 1850:

> Even where there is no prospect of achieving their election, the workers must put up their own candidates to preserve their independence, to gauge their own strength, and to bring their revolutionary position and party standpoint to public attention. They must not be led astray by the empty phrases of the democrats, who will maintain that the workers' candidates will split the democratic party and offer the forces of reaction the chance of victory. All such talk means, in the final analysis, that the proletariat is to be swindled. The progress which the proletarian party will make by operating independently in this way is infinitely more important than the disadvantages resulting from the presence of a few reactionaries in the representative body.

Marx made this statement in the wake of the failed democratic revolutions of 1848 where the workers' coalition partners, the liberal business owners and professionals—the "democratic party" in the quote above—sold out the workers when property owners, but not workers, were granted voting rights and economic reforms. Most of these liberal governments soon fell as the reactionary landed elites reasserted their exclusive rule through military dictatorships. The analogy today is the Democrats compromising with and thereby enabling the Republicans' upward redistribution, institutional racism, court packing, executive authoritarianism, and militarism.

Davidson and Fletcher nevertheless propose supporting Democrats, but through progressive organizations not formally embedded in the structures of the party or its candidates' campaigns. "… the way we should participate in electoral politics is through our existing organizations rather than simply jumping into an official campaign…. Socialists shouldn't work 'within the Democratic party,' but with one of its clusters, the Congressional Progressive Caucus, especially its DSA/WFP/PDA left wing and its mass allies."

Except for DSA, none of these organizations profess to be socialist. This war of position does not spread socialist ideas. It submerges the differences between socialists and liberals. Worse, the logic of working inside the Democratic Party in this way leads to supporting any damned Democrat, as Davidson and Fletcher acknowledge: "We should not abandon working within campaigns of non-left Democrats….The left forces under the Dem tent will be tempered by the need for wider left-center unity to defeat far-right measures and candidates, but we will wage our 'war of position' nonetheless."

The logic at work here is not only leftists being compelled to support centrist candidates in hopes of defeating far-right Republicans. Support for centrist candidates is required of leftists in order to simply be accepted into even the progressive organizations that support the Democratic Party.

I agree with Davidson and Fletcher that "election campaigns are … at the center of our work. We use them to make our local base communities stronger, more connected and more aware. Through electoral campaigns, our mass outreach can be magnified tenfold or even more." But I would argue this mass organizing is only effective in winning changes if the masses have an independent left political alternative. Without that, social movements are reduced to ineffectual lobbies on the Democrats, who take them for granted because they have nowhere else to take their votes. The independent alternative gives the movements leverage over Democrats who then have to meet demands or lose voters.

In the end, Davidson and Fletcher are actually for a left party. “But the work begins under the Democratic tent as a largely inside job. Once you get over 100,000 or even 200,000 new DSA members from the organizing and base-building of backing Sanders on the Democratic line, you’ve created at least one key component of the large bloc needed for a new First Party.”

The problem is you can’t get there from here. It has been tried many times before. The farmer-labor populist movement died after its People’s Party cross-endorsed Democrat William Jennings Bryan in 1896. The socialist left disappeared as a distinct and influential force in American politics after the Communists’ Popular Front policy led most of the left into the Democrat’s New Deal coalition in 1936. The New Left of the 1960s melted away as much of it went into the Democratic Party with the McGovern campaign of 1972 and most of what was left of it with the Jackson campaign in 1984.

In the absence of a strong independent left since the 1930s and especially since the 1970s, the Democratic Party has moved steadily to the right on economics and foreign policy. Behind the two capitalists parties’ public bickering, a bipartisan consensus prevails in support of neoliberal capitalism and the endless wars of the US empire. The Democrats’ discourse is certainly more socially tolerant than the old Democrats when their southern Dixiecrats controlled congressional committees. But the symbolic tokenism of diverse representation at the top of the Democratic Party has not stemmed the rising tide of economic and racial inequality for the working-class majority.

It is self-defeating for socialists to lose their distinct voice and message in electoral coalitions with the Democrats. The concrete practice of such coalition politics—whether the goal is to take over the Democratic Party or to split it—is to submerge the differences between liberals and radicals. In the heat of campaigns, the socialists must downplay their radical program in order to concentrate on electing liberal and centrist Democrats. Public expression of the socialist critique of capitalism is dropped in order to be accepted as coalition partners by the Democrats and their satellite organizations. Instead of heightening the contradictions between progressive and corporate Democrats, the left obscures them and disappears as a socialist alternative.

The Greens won’t convince many progressive Democrats of the efficacy of independent left politics until there is a stronger Green Party. Actions are more persuasive than words. It is up to the Green Party to become a strong enough political force to be a viable home for progressives and socialists who tire of losing their demands inside the Democratic coalition, from the Green New Deal to Medicare for All. In the meantime, one can hope that progressive Democrats will focus their attacks on the Trump Republicans to their right instead of the Green Party to their left—and join the Greens in demanding that the Democrats impeach Trump now.