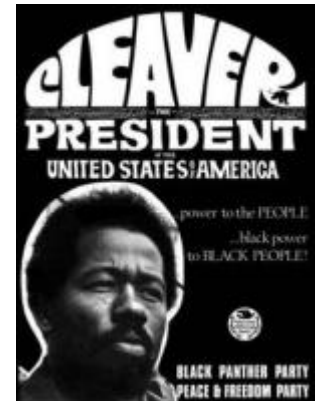


Third Parties—My Personal Experience

October 27, 2016



I joined the Peace and Freedom Party under the guidance of leaders of the International Socialists (IS), including Mike Parker and Jack Weinberg, in 1967-68. This was my only real involvement in a third party. It was not only long ago, it was a different context: there was a large, lively left movement, which at the time appeared to be still growing (we hoped).

Thus the P & F was conceived of—and briefly was—a *movement* party. That's why it may be worth a look back.

To get the party on the ballot in California, we had to get people to change their party registration, via a registrar, often from Democratic, to P & F. Some 107,000 did so in California, which was remarkable. The same year George Wallace used the same procedure to get an almost exact number of registrants for his party.

I recall an IS member, J.B., said to me "I just wish we had his demographics!" So true.

The IS view was that P & F was a party that expressed a movement, mainly the anti-war movement and the student radical movement more broadly. In fact the IS got the P & F to make its name not the official name, P & F Party, but the P & F *Movement*. It was the expression of a movement. That was the punchline of the project.

This was true, if only for a few months. P & F could call marches, etc. Prominent radical leaders became a few of its candidates for California offices.

They wanted to capture the Eugene McCarthy movement into the P & F. It was called "the second wave" for P & F. McCarthy would be shut down at the Democratic Convention, and his followers, or a good bite of them, would move toward P & F. That was the goal.

It did not happen at all. He was shut down hard, partly by the infamous Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago, but no wave came for P & F to surf. Hindsight is 20-20, but it was a worthy goal (or hope) at the time.

P & F was thus confined to the far left. The party was allied, mostly on paper and on the ballot line, with the Black Panther Party. But the BPP was already starting to deteriorate and "black power" was playing out.

P & F, lacking any alternative, nominated Eldridge Cleaver for President. He was not yet 35 years

old, so California would not even put his name on the ballot. The party was fading, and it got worse.

[Aside: Cleaver's worst side was coming out. He was constantly high, making horrible sexist speeches and then withdrew in favor of Pigesus, a pig that Jerry Rubin carted around in a cage. A bad ending indeed. (Cleaver himself went nowhere but down from there... and in his end-game he endorsed Reagan for president, became a Mormon—recall they had a special heaven for whites-only—and invented Penis Pants...but I digress.)]

But getting back to the point here: P&F was aimed at being the PARTY OF A MOVEMENT. Movement leaders would be candidates. Civil rights, black power, anti-war leaders. Their dream really was to have Martin Luther King run for president. "*King-Spock in '68!*" said the stickers.

This made sense at the time, when there was a left movement of note. The civil rights movement had moved the country, and the anti-war movement drove President Lyndon Johnson to stand aside and not run for reelection.

Without that element, a third party is just a "protest vote," such as a vote for the Socialist Workers Party (or another small socialist party) or P & F or the Green Party.

Movements can pull the political debate to the left. So can candidates, if they have a constituency. Bernie Sanders sure did. But can protest votes?

Later Efforts - Protest Voting

Some on the left advocated never ever voting for Democratic Party candidates, so they supported protest votes in elections (or non-votes?) for the Socialist Workers Party or other small leftist parties.

Except in 1980. Something called the Citizens Party ran Barry Commoner for President. I attended a meeting with maybe 400 people, the high water mark. Commoner raised issues of the global environment, which was very wholesome, but this party never got near to being a movement party. And it was soon forgotten. Nothing was built from it.

In 2000, Ralph Nader ran a vigorous (if individualist) campaign against corporate globalization and got a couple million votes—huge for a leftist third party. He had big rallies in liberal and university towns, drawing out real enthusiasm, albeit briefly. It was inspiring.

But then he was blamed for the loss of Al Gore to George W. Bush, and the experience is now recalled with a very sour taste. Michael Moore, who toured with Nader, later wrote that he secretly asked Nader to withdraw in battleground states; even his best buds turned on him, and on the effort to get him 5 percent of the total presidential vote.

The notion that such efforts pull the debate to the left ... that did not happen here. If anything, the opposite happened, in the biggest protest movement of the past generation.

So in my experience, protest votes by the left have not built a movement, nor have they pulled the debate to the left.

My experience is that movements built quite aside from electoral politics have built grassroots power, moved people to the left and helped shape the debate. The environmental movement, the gay and lesbian rights movement, and others. They did best when they were outside the electoral arena. Protest-vote parties have not contributed to movement building.

Of course I am talking here of my experience in national elections, in our two-parties-by-design electoral system. Good activists running local candidates, who actually have a chance to win, play a different ballgame and can indeed help build movements. (Especially because most local candidates can run in non-partisan races.)

2016

Now, again, there is the Green Party. It is not the party of a movement. Also, its national candidate says Wi-Fi will harm children's brains, from the radiation.

This last tidbit may not be just a quirk. Because there may be more screwballs who believe things about Wi-Fi radiation than there are activists in leftist movements, sad to say. So the candidate appeals to an important element of her constituency: conspiracy theorists.

All my political life, I have had to combat conspiracy theory in its working-class manifestations. It is a major impediment to building a working-class movement.

The Green Party, not being rooted in any movement, has conventions that I hear resemble shopping malls of such anti-science conspiracies. It seems to be held together by persons who are third-party die-hards. They may be good people (I know a couple of them) but are not rooted in mass movements.

If someone wants to vote for the Green Party as a "protest vote" that is fine. I think I voted for 1-2 of their candidates a week ago (by mail). I'm not sure, as my partner votes for me.

But they will not build a movement. And they will not pull mainstream political debate to the left. Movements pull the debate to the left. Big left electoral efforts like Sanders' can do it, and did do it. The Green Party, not.

And if the Green Party draws enough votes to tip the election to Donald Trump, the left will suffer for years (not to mention the country and perhaps the world, with Trump as president).