

# Toward a Positive Socialist/Left Electoral Movement and Program

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We on the socialist left really do need to build a broad-as-possible socialist/left/progressive electoral movement. I know this will be anathema to many of the self-styled "revolutionary left," or, if advanced and advocated, only paid lip service. It is, however, the only way to establish a positive socialist and honestly progressive political presence in the United States today. Moreover, it is crucial because, for all serious political activists, the electoral road which certainly dominates our political discourse every four years in the Presidential elections, is the dominant road traveled. Further, a serious movement that combines meaningful (not merely symbolic) electoral activity with grassroots mobilization and organizing is the only way to break the stranglehold on "progressive" politics in the U.S. held by the Democratic Party. At this time in the U.S., where the franchise is widely available and utilized, it can also effectively bring about needed social change. Only where voting is largely discredited is the electoral road not worth pursuing. Even such an all-out "revolutionist" as Che Guevara admitted this; he wrote in *Guerilla Warfare* (Monthly Review Press, 1961, p. 16):

"Where a government has come into power through some form of popular vote, fraudulent or not, and maintains at least an appearance of constitutional legality, the guerilla [or other revolutionary or insurrectionary—GF] outbreak cannot be promoted, since the possibilities of peaceful struggle have not yet been exhausted."

Further, the workers and progressive sectors of the U.S. population themselves, and their leading organizations such as unions, are themselves firmly committed in their vast majority to the electoral road. Even among the 90 million people eligible to vote who did not plan on voting in 2012—because they felt powerless or that their vote didn't count—were by no means committed to some insurrectionary alternative. Historically, ever since the Chartist Movement in England through the struggles for women's suffrage and for empowering African Americans to be able to exercise their (theoretically) legal right to vote, the struggles for extending the franchise have always been major advances for emancipation from the yoke of property, capital and aristocratic privilege. Further, it has been integral to the fight for political democracy and social equality. As Scott Gordon wrote trenchantly in his *Controlling the State: Constitutionalism from Ancient Athens to Today* (Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 296), after noting that the United States did not have a hereditary nobility:

"But if the criterion of 'democracy' is that all adult citizens have the right to vote and to stand for election to office, then America was not a democracy, and did not become so, even in law, for two centuries thereafter. Slaves and women were excluded, as were white males who could not meet the prescribed requirements. [Usually property ownership—GF]"

Gordon further pointed out that universal white male suffrage did not occur until 1825 (p. 296, n. 18). (In my state of residence, Indiana, the state Constitution that was in effect in 1852 contained the following provision: "No Negro or Mulatto shall have the right of suffrage." No "Hindoo" or "Chinaman" either.)

It should further give pause to those "revolutionaries" who discount the usefulness of electoral struggle that the mass movements against austerity in Europe today, very notably Syriza in Greece, all have strong electoral components, and the workers utilized the recent elections there to express their dissatisfaction. Also, while France has had 11 general strikes since 1936, of which at least two of them, in 1968 and 1995, could have toppled the established government and formed a new government of the workers themselves, the French workers did not do so, but settled only for reforms within the established governmental framework. These are but some of the reasons why the "revolutionary" left in the West has been waiting for the paradigm Workers' Revolution to come about longer than the protagonists of Samuel Beckett's famous play have been waiting for Godot! Electoral struggle in the Western capitalist democracies isn't even close to being played out; and no serious socialist can honestly say it is, or that electoral results are irrelevant. Lois Weiner's recent blog on New Politics online bears this out, where she notes the "fear" that governed the 2012 Presidential election; "fear" of who wins the Presidency is not something that dominates an "irrelevant" electoral process—nor does the great relief so many of us justifiably felt when Romney/Ryan was defeated! (Which is *not* cause to celebrate, in and of itself, the re-election of Obama/Biden.)

So, a deliberate move to adopting a strong left-wing social-democratic approach in the U.S. is not only necessary, but a bearer of many more positive fruits to come. Otherwise, the left will cede that the Democratic Party is the only real alternative to the Republican/Tea Party right, as left third-parties are doomed permanently to ineffectiveness and marginality, expressing "protest" only, with no discernible effect on government legislation and policies. The Democrats will continue to do as they wish, or are able to do in the face of Republican opposition, and take the "progressive" vote for granted.

Perhaps revitalizing the Green Party is the best vehicle for achieving this new electoral movement. Jill Stein was on the 2012 ballot in all states except Oklahoma (and only as a write in in Indiana and Georgia), though they are not an active presence in all states. But such a movement must also reach out to include those elements of the Justice Party and the Peace and Freedom Party who fell out with the Greens, and be as broad-based and unified as possible. It would also be nice to bring in those elements of the Socialist Party willing to work in a broader electoral forum. It is most unfortunate, as was noted by Michael Rubin and Linda Thompson in *Against the Current* 160, that both Roseanne Barr and Rocky Anderson had fallings-out with the Greens, and chose to run rival Presidential campaigns. The Greens have the best organization so far of the various left third parties (which isn't saying much), but maybe what is needed is a new organization that can bring all these rival formations together, or at least significant portions of them, and could also appeal to others on the left, such as elements of DSA and Solidarity, and also attract many from the disgruntled non-affiliated. Such a movement would also need to be able to attract those who voted for Obama reluctantly, given that the alternative of a Romney Presidency was seen as much, much worse. In any case, the broader the better; and we on the left had better learn to understand those who could be attracted to such a third-party formation, but hang on to the Democrats as being "realistic" and "relevant," because they *do* have a valid point: "American exceptionalism."

Simply put, while "American exceptionalism" is a bad word on the left, it *is* a reality. In many ways the U.S. is different from Europe, and nowhere does that difference show up more than in the political systems. Unlike European (and Canadian and Israeli) parliamentary systems, there is no coalition building in U.S. politics—it's winner-take-all, and losers or also-rans are just not recognized; in fact, they can be ignored when convenient, even if they represent 49% of the vote. Also, thanks to the "genius" of the Founding Fathers, who feared direct democracy, there is the Electoral College to consider, because the Electoral College is the one who actually elects the President, not the voting public. The Bush-Gore contest of 2000 made this abundantly clear. And, as

we know from his record in office, George W. Bush paid no mind to the 48.38% of the electorate that wanted Gore instead of him; and certainly not to the 2,882,955 voters, or 2.74% of the electorate, who voted for Ralph Nader, showing clearly that they wanted neither Bush nor Gore. That's the nice thing about winner-take-all for the winner—you can absolutely ignore your opposition and essentially do whatever you can get away with, and smirk at those who protest, "Tough beanies, losers!"

Ralph Nader, of course, was sullied as a "spoiler," and not just by Gore-supporting Democrats and liberals, but by elements of the left also. They claimed that the Nader vote put Bush in office because, had it not been for Nader, the 2.74% of the electorate that voted for him would've voted for Gore, thus clearly giving Gore the Electoral College votes he needed. Of course this ignores that at least some of those who voted for Nader might not have voted at all in 2000, but rationalizations and recriminations have no room for logical subtleties.

No third party or independent Presidential electoral challenge since early in the 20th Century has ever broken through the magic 3% barrier, i.e., getting 3% or more of the total national vote; most of the time it's been less than 2% and often less than 1%. In 2012, the total third-party vote was only 1.7% of the total vote cast, and included in that total is not only votes for left-wing third-parties, but also right-wing third parties such as the Libertarians and the Constitution Party.

Failure to break through the 3% barrier was true not only of Nader in 2000, but even for the actively-organized and widely-publicized run of Henry Wallace as the Progressive Party's Presidential candidate in 1948, which garnered 2.4% of the vote—same percentage of the vote as the segregationist States Rights Party Presidential candidate, Strom Thurmond, garnered that year, but with fewer votes than the States Rights Party. The last third party to become a major party in the U.S. was the Republican Party in 1860, but only because the two major opposition parties in the traditionally two-party American system, the Whigs and the Democrats, had either disintegrated (Whigs) or split (Democrats, with one Presidential candidate in the North, and another in the South), due to the highly divisive issue of slavery. This is another aspect of that much-maligned on the left, but factually true, "American exceptionalism."

That is why, if we are really serious about establishing an effective third party of the left, we should begin by building electoral movements at the local level that run candidates for local public office as well as for local school boards. Local offices are not necessarily powerless—they are the ones who implement state and federal laws and policies at the local level, and in the case of school boards, can even override principals and administrators. Such an electoral movement must not confine itself solely to electoral activities, but must also organize grassroots movements and coalitions to pressure politicians, call for certain legislative initiatives, and agitate for changes in certain laws. We must be about effectiveness as much as protest. And many of the changes the left wishes can be achieved at present only through the legislative process, by enacting or rescinding legislation. This is intimately related to the electoral process and is part and parcel of the hoary "punish and reward" political process—for effective politics will mean pressuring politicians to do what we'd like them to do, and it will only be in rare cases at the present that we will actually be able to elect people to office. That means we will have to reach out to and win over vast numbers of non-socialists as well as be willing to work with Democratic politicians without being subsumed into the Democratic Party—much in the way the independent socialist Senator from Vermont, Bernie Sanders, works with progressive Democrats and participates in the Senate Progressive Caucus (and who received 71% of the state's popular vote in his bid for re-election in 2012).

We will need to do this at the local level, the state level, and at the national level. But we will be most effective if, from a strong local base, we can move then to a statewide base, and then concentrate on establishing a base at the national level; though we need to work on all three simultaneously. I see this as a process much akin to the successful building of the broad-based anti-

Vietnam War movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, which brought together many disparate forces in a working unity that was noteworthy and effective; but was consistently attacked by ultraleftists as "Popular Front," "right opportunism" and "sellout." (The most colorful of these ultraleft broadsides was the Progressive Labor Party's labeling of the mass antiwar movement as the "TLRB Alliance," where "TLRB" stood for "Trotskyite-Revisionist-Liberal-Pacifist"!)

Certainly, things that can only be addressed legislatively at the state and national level are:

- Rescind both Right-to-Work and Work at Will laws at the state level, as well as state cuts in unemployment benefits. (All three of these prevail in my present home state of Indiana.)
- Guarantee by law the right of state and local government employees the right to collectively bargain, especially since this is vigorously under attack in many states, and is outlawed in some, including Indiana.
- Change the highly restrictive laws on ballot access to third parties that prevail in many states. Once again, my home state of Indiana has one of the most restrictive laws in the nation on this, which is why Jill Stein was only able to run as a write-in—there simply was no way to garner the over 30,000 county-clerk-validated signatures from registered voters to actually put her name on the ballot.
- Even though we on the left would broadly agree that Obamacare is too limited, we must demand that all the state governors and legislatures accept and implement the provision of Obamacare that Medicaid be available to all persons with incomes below 133% of the federal poverty level. Once again, Indiana is a "leader" in stinginess, allowing Medicaid eligibility (aside from a few special cases for those who qualify for federal disability payments) only to those whose annual income is under 24% of the federal poverty level!
- At the national level, we must support the demand for a new WPA to put the unemployed to work rebuilding our crumbling infrastructure, and other needed works programs.
- Also, abolish the anachronistic and undemocratic Electoral College and have the President elected by the majority of the popular vote.
- Put into practice a new stimulus program that puts people to work and enhances consumption, such as called for by leading progressive economists such as Nobel Laureates Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz, as well as Dean Baker, Robert Reich, and Jared Bernstein.
- Demand that there be no cuts to Social Security, Medicare or Medicaid.
- Heavily tax the rich while not raising taxes on ordinary middle-class and working-class persons, enact a financial transactions tax, and regulate the presently ill-regulated financial sector whose unregulated recklessness was the proximate cause of the recession we've had since 2008.

Other demands certainly can be raised, and this programmatic list is by no means exhaustive. But I say it's a significant start, a constructive one, and a good place to begin.

Certainly *New Politics* readers have no Obamillusions, though that certainly can't be said across the board of all who would consider themselves leftists, progressives, or liberals. I need not dwell on all the flip-flops, rotten compromises, broken promises, and even dangerous moves Obama has made since he became President—just pointing out his support of NDAA, use of lethal drones in Pakistan, compiling a "hit list" of persons targeted for assassination, advancing no serious jobs or economic recovery program, and the refusal to even consider single-payer in the healthcare debate will suffice. As has now long been pointed out, Obama, far from being even a liberal, is a pro-business centrist who clearly supports Pax Americana and regards the Wall Street crooks and big business CEOs as "savvy businessmen" (as he once stated) whom he wants on his team; and of course, surrounding himself with Wall Street types, Clintonites and Democratic Party flacks as advisors, key aides, and cabinet members while driving out, or forcing out, all those of a more progressive bent who originally came on board. But on the positive side, such as it is, he is ending active U.S. military

presence in Iraq and has set a deadline for U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. And though there is strong and concerted opposition to Obama's policies from the left, the overwhelming opposition comes from the *right*, especially from the hard right, and has often been overtly racist in character. His re-election gives us on the left an opening that would not have existed had Romney won; instead what would've happened was what happened after the election and then re-election of George W. Bush: not increased militancy, but demoralization, fear and passivity borne of this fear. (That is one reason why I think Occupy Wall Street occurred during Obama's first term instead of during George W. Bush's tenure.)

Simply put, while Obama and almost all Democrats are bad, very bad, the Republicans are worse, even much, much worse. And while it is true that there is *little* difference of substance between the Democrats and Republicans, it is sheer hyperbole to say there is *no* difference, especially given the open support of the Tea Party and corporate money for the Republicans; and it is accurate to say that, on issues of concern to the left, while the Democrats usually waffle and often strongly disappoint, the Republicans advance a clear far right political and social agenda on all these issues, from civil liberties to foreign policy, economic and jobs issues to gay and women's rights, that we on the left can consider truly dangerous, especially if enacted. Moreover, too many of the anti-Obama left not only cavalierly dismissed the threat of Romney and the Tea Party-backed Republicans, they actually portrayed Obama as somehow worse than Romney, a greater danger to the left and to meaningful progressive social change than Romney. This smacks me as indulging in a blind ultraleftism reminiscent of Germany in 1932, when the Communist Party denounced the Social-Democrats as "social fascists" worse than the Nazis, were openly dismissive of Hitler and the Nazis as a mere flash in the pan, and advanced as their chief political slogan, "After Hitler, our turn!"

This was brought home personally for me when I stated that *I might* hold my nose and vote for Obama, or *I might* vote for Jill Stein as a write-in. (How I voted would've made no difference in Indiana anyway, as the state was a shoo-in for Romney; but as it was, I voted for Jill Stein on November 6.) For this I was excoriated by one Ed Griffith of the New Progressive Alliance, a pro-third party of the left group that *did* consider Obama a greater threat than Romney and talks openly of the Democratic and Republican "uniparty."

This is a concrete example of how ultraleftism can derail a movement more than "right opportunism," and how ultraleftism will keep people in the Democratic Party, wed them to Democratic Party politicians as automatic "lesser evils," and lead them to completely tune out the left. This will continue to render the left ineffective and marginal, as we have now been for more than three decades. After all, if everyone to our right is our enemy, who but ourselves will we have to talk to? And how will we get anything done except wait for a millenarian Workers' Revolution to solve it all, much as fundamentalist Christians wait for the Second Coming of Christ?

In short, a good part of our immediate task is to pressure Obama, not simply to ignore him and then say, "I told you so!"

Aside from all I've written above, I would urge in building this electoral movement that the left use humor as well as earnestness and seriousness in making our appeals to the great mass of people out there. And while we should certainly utilize Facebook and other social media, we need to also use "old-fashioned" means of reaching out such as writing and distributing flyers; writing newspaper articles, letters to the editor, and setting up our own online and hard-copy newspapers; and sponsoring public demonstrations and rallies. Above all, we should follow the advice of the civil rights song, "Keep your eye on the prize, hold on." And not be satisfied to talk only to ourselves, but reach out beyond the circles of the already-converted. And not be afraid to compromise on tactics, and be willing to mute our left rhetoric while not compromising our principles.

The 2012 election clearly showed how debased our U.S. political dialogue can be, and how much our fellow citizens are prepared to accept uncritically. Part of our task will be to raise that level of dialogue—but of course we can't do that if we only talk to ourselves. That's why politics, even left politics, is the art of compromise as well as the clear articulation of principles. Go where the people are, talk to them (but not *at* them!) where they're at politically, and win them over. Electoral politics is the best way now to do that. Seriously. With seriousness.

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