What Is The Next Left?

written by Johanna Brenner | July 20, 2016

At this moment I find myself swinging between optimism fueled by the previously unimaginable appeal of Bernie Sanders' "socialism," the energized base of young people attracted to his campaign, this evidence that the neoliberal consensus is dead, and despair about the HUGE gap between this political opening and the organizational capacity of the revolutionary socialist left. Like many others, I'm asking: can anything be done?

Mainstream forces are already organizing to pivot Bernie supporters to a "STOP TRUMP" campaign (Van Jones). The broadly progressive "left" (e.g. National Nurses United, ex-Occupiers, Grassroots Global Justice Alliance) hope to capture the momentum of the Bernie campaign to build a more permanent national organization around a social-democratic platform (The People's Summit, Chicago June 17; The People's Revolution, Philadelphia, July 27).

While a national network organized around a social-democratic "platform" is appealing — and I would say certainly worthwhile — I am not sure that the social-media and email fueled network that the Sanders campaign has accomplished is sufficient for creating the kind of organizational infrastructure necessary to turn political ideas into on-the-ground movements that can build power.

In my conflicted state, I am more intrigued by the possibilities of a local electoral political front based in grassroots movement organizations. There is no question that electoral politics is potentially a useful arena of struggle — but the very thing that makes electoral politics attractive is also electoral politics' weakness.

The big advantage of an election is of course that there is the possibility of winning and that it is a relatively short-term effort with a clear end. Election campaigns can therefore energize people who otherwise are not already politically active.

Some people engaged with campaign work do move on into issue-based activism, but they mostly drift away once the election is over. Although Bernie showed that a relatively left set of policies can gather wide and deep support, elections (where the goal is actually to win) also tend to put a certain limit on how radical the messaging can be.

Even more problematic, in campaign mode there is little time for political education of activists or for engaging activists in thinking through how we can connect demands that immediately resonate with the public (e.g. raise the minimum wage) to longer term and more radical ideas (e.g. basic minimum income).

Recognizing these limitations, many revolutionaries counterpose electoral work to "building

grassroots power." My experience here in Portland (OR) around legislation (at city and state levels) is that we have built relatively strong movements around particular goals (minimum wage, paid sick leave, defense of the houseless). But once we gain enough traction the campaigns are (to a greater or lesser degree) derailed by big organizations — most notably the unions and NGOs that are so well-connected to the Democratic Party. And this is true even for local organizing in relation to a city government that is putatively nonpartisan.

Missing Political Instrument

One of our biggest frustrations is that our grassroots organizations do not have our own political instrument with candidates emerging from our movements and office holders who have gotten into office based on grassroots fundraising and committed volunteer efforts.

In the long run, only an "on-the-ground" activist organization ready to build and lead movements — organizations that educate, mobilize and disrupt — will shift the political balance of forces. But I'm not convinced that grassroots movements are undermined when they organize their own electoral expression.

The outcome depends on how that electoral organization works, how it draws its horizon of possibility, and how it seeks to penetrate and open up government once its members are in office. (Consider for instance, participatory budgeting established by the Workers Party in Sao Paulo, Brazil; or the experiments in democratizing governance by radicals engaged in the London Council Government headed up by Ken Livingstone).

I think it is going to be very difficult to build national organizations that function under the control and as an expression of grassroots movements at this point; however, I think there is some real possibility for accomplishing this at the local level. And if we start locally we could also from the beginning support and call for similar efforts in cities within our region and state, with the longterm goal to leverage the power of multiple city governments at the regional and state level.

The other advantage of working at the local level is that we have more of an opportunity for committed revolutionaries to collaborate in a project broader than ourselves. No matter how many individuals may be recruited to existing revolutionary groups, the vast majority (and it is growing) of people who are anti-capitalist have not been and will not be attracted to existing left organizations.

I think the possibilities to build something new for the revolutionary left — whether we think of that as new forms of revolutionary organization and/or new kinds of politics — are much greater at the local level. Certainly working within a local project that is broader than ourselves, we are more likely to create the relationships of respect, trust, and appreciation that I believe are crucial for the left to break free of our baggage and boundaries.

I think also that at the local level it is more possible to develop the creatively intersectional politics that has been lacking in national campaigns. It is not surprising, for example, that a radical Black activist organization with intersectional politics, like the Black Youth Project 100, was not part of the originating groups for the People's Summit and the People's Revolution.

Organizers say they are committed to bringing organizations like BYP 100 into the planning and hopefully they will. Still, real tensions between discourses of class and race politics have been an ongoing problem. (See for example Sanders' stumbles on reparations, and struggles at Occupy). Local organizing built on acts of solidarity are necessary to overcome this tension in practice, as in the Chicago Teachers Union's engaged defense of schools that face closing in Black/Latino communities.

Positive Examples

An organization capable of mounting an effective and principled electoral campaign will not be built overnight. It will not be built through immediately going out to run individual candidates for office.

Instead, we on the left could help to establish urban coalitions that are based in existing grassroots organizing, where activists from the base run for election not as individuals with the right politics but as representatives of a platform that they pledge to implement in office.

There are several efforts we can learn from. Just two are Richmond Progressive Alliance in Richmond CA, and Guanyem Barcelona in Spain.

Richmond Progressive Alliance was formed in 2004 as a collaboration between the local Green Party and progressive Latinos from the Democratic Party. Since then, RPA has organized to elect members to the city council and organized many successful issue campaigns that span environmental, social and economic justice. At the moment they are organizing a ballot measure campaign for a rent control/just cause eviction ordinance.

RPA will not endorse any candidate accepting corporate funding nor do they accept any for their organization. RPA functions with a fairly minimal framework of political agreement; supporters may be members of any party. It draws its strength from members of local grassroots organizations who are part of the Alliance as well as engaging individuals as members of RPA. [1]

In May, 2015 Barcelona en Comu (Barcelona in Common) won the mayor and 11 positions on a 41-member city Council. Capturing the energy of both the M15 movement and social justice organizations. It employs a horizontalist organizational model and its original "platform" emerged from a neighborhood-by-neighborhood and sector-by-sector process through which each group outlined its ideas for action based on its arena of organizing. When the 2015 elections rolled around, the radical left party Podemos chose to support the candidates of Barcelona en Comu rather than running.

The Guanyem Barcelona platform is both practical and visionary. It calls for a transformed city, ecologically sustainable, focused on the needs of the people, and radically democratic in its political structure. The shorter-term urban policies and governmental changes Guanyem Barcelona advocates link to these broader goals.

In their founding call, Guanyem Barcelona captured some of the optimism and determination that we on the left might draw on to take a leap into heretofore uncharted territory:

"Our most successful experiences show us that, if we organize around specific objectives and practices, we can reach goals that may have seemed impossible."

While the economic crisis has been tough, a historic opportunity has opened up that we can't and won't let pass by. We are living in an exceptional time that demands brave, creative initiatives. If we are able to imagine a different city, we will have the power to transform it.

[1] See www.richmondprogressivealliance.net

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