

After Bernie—Electoral Strategy for the Left in 2016

June, 2016—Now that Donald Trump, an overt racist, has wrapped up the Republican nomination for US President, a chorus of voices is proposing a “left strategy” which can “defeat Trump” by electing the more covert racist, Hillary Clinton, whom the Democratic Party will almost surely be nominating. See:

Linda Burnham (<http://portside.org/2016-04-25/notes-election>)

Max Elbaum (<http://portside.org/2016-05-09/trump-racism-and-left-2016>)

Bill Fletcher (<http://www.alternet.org/election-2016/why-progressives-need-national-electoral-strategy-and-fast>)

Bob Wing (<http://portside.org/2015-07-20/battlelines-are-drawn-rightwing-neosecession-or-third-reconstruction#sthash.w95cp1fX.dpuf>)

There are two premises which underlie this viewpoint:

* It is better for the left (for the progressive community, for working people and other oppressed layers, for those who favor social change) when the head of US empire pursues a less blatantly racist agenda, and when those in power are willing to make the occasional concession to the needs of the 99 percent.

On this point we agree.

* The way to ensure that this is the policy which will be pursued by the individual who occupies the Oval Office after January 2017 is to turn out the largest vote possible for the establishment politician (Clinton in this case) who espouses such a softer-imperial policy, thereby repudiating Donald Trump and his overtly racist agenda.

Here we disagree. A victory, with our support at the ballot box, for someone who espouses a less-blattantly racist imperial agenda still strengthens the hand of the imperial rulers of this country, and of the state which upholds their interests. This electoral tactic/strategy has been tried often. It has not once led to a leftward shift in the establishment political discourse as its proponents consistently insist that it will, not even when the candidate they call on us to vote for wins and takes office. Indeed, any such “victory” tends to simply compound the problem by making the calls by the rabid right even more strident. Note, as a clear example, the emergence of Trump after eight years of an Obama administration. Some of the same voices who are now calling on us to cast a “defeat Trump” vote insisted eight years ago, and then again four years ago, that the election or re-election of Obama would help to transform politics in the USA by striking a blow against racism. It didn’t, however.

The reason for this is quite simple. The mainstream Democratic assumption, which Obama shares and which he implemented while in office, is in fact the same as the right-wing assumption: that growing inequality and cutbacks are unavoidable. So during the Obama administration this assumption has become even more deeply entrenched as the accepted ideology of government, and of the mainstream political discourse, at all levels in the USA. And the more entrenched this collective ideology becomes the more attractive power the right-wing appeal to racism has for far-too-many white voters—the idea

that Black people or immigrants are getting “too much” so their “entitlements” are what ought to be cut back.

The left therefore needs to conceive of a counterstrategy which can, instead, contribute to the weakening, ultimately to the dismantling, of US imperial rule by insisting on an alternative to the program of cut-backs/increased inequality in all of its forms.

We would like to begin this comment by noting that no self-respecting leftist would imagine helping to elect Hillary Clinton to any office, let alone to the presidency, given her track record—except that she will be running against someone as repulsive as Donald Trump. That fact, by itself, ought to make us think twice, even more than twice, before developing the kind of “strategy” that is being proposed by the authors listed above.

Ruling class offensive, not just the “extreme right”

There is another theme that runs through all of the “Defeat Trump” contributions: Look at the terrible things the Republicans are doing when they get control of government at the state and local level. Think how bad the situation will be if they gain control of the White House as well as of Congress in 2016.

We do not want to downgrade or ignore this concern. It’s important, and we will consider it further as we develop our viewpoint below.

But something else is even more important in our judgment, something we have already made reference to: The right-wing Republican agenda does not arise in a vacuum. It is consistently nurtured and encouraged by a prevailing, reactionary, establishment “political consensus” in this country, which mainstream Democrats are just as much responsible for as Republicans. The end of welfare (conceived and implemented during the administration of Bill Clinton), undermining social security, denying adequate funds for public education and promoting charter schools, mass incarceration/criminalization of Black and Latino youth, a racist and exclusionary immigration policy, all this and more has been just as much a part of the Democratic Party Establishment program for the USA today as of a Republican program. Democrats who are part of implementing this program (like Hillary Clinton) pursue an agenda, when they are in power, which is only a bit less reactionary than the Republican agenda. Putting such Democrats in power, in order to keep the Republicans from doing all the terrible things Republicans want to do, will only help further consolidate the strangle-hold that a racist and reactionary ideology has on mainstream politics, thus emboldening the most extreme right-wing elements, not disarming them.

What the left faces most acutely in 2016, it should be clear—and what should therefore be the starting point for our strategic conversations—is a campaign waged by the entire ruling class of the USA (the one percent) against the 99 percent, a campaign to drive down social expectations, reduce living standards and eliminate what are called “entitlements.” No strategy for the left, electoral or otherwise, can be intelligently developed which does not start its assessment by focusing on this key question: What class interests are driving the broad right-wing offensive at the governmental level—in both its more overt (Republican) and less overt (Democratic) forms? Yet our “defeat-Trump-by-voting-for-Clinton” advocates offer us an analysis from which the question of class, and of class interests, is completely absent. Those who are urging us to get out the vote for Clinton in 2016 to defeat Trump simply ignore the bi-partisan character of this reactionary campaign, presenting their analysis as if the Republicans, and the Republicans alone, are the source of the problem. Bob Wing is typical:

The negative policies and missteps of the Obama administration are often the target of progressive fire, and rightly so. But these take place in the context of (and are sometimes caused by) an extremely perilous development in U.S. politics: an alliance of energized rightwing populists with the most reactionary sector of Big Business has captured the Republican Party with what even American Enterprise Institute conservative Norman Ornstein denounces as ‘the unabashed ambition to reverse decades of economic and social policy by any means necessary.’

For Wing, only the “alliance of energized rightwing populists with the most reactionary sector of Big Business” is “perilous.” We disagree. Obama’s “negative policies and missteps” were not just individual mistakes, but reflect his loyalty to the agenda of the Democratic Party Establishment. That policy of the Democratic establishment, in its turn, is just as perilous for us. “The unabashed ambition to reverse decades of economic and social policy by any means necessary” is shared by both the more- and the less-reactionary sectors of the bipartisan cutback alliance. It is, precisely, the programmatic point that unites them, and which therefore unites mainstream Democrats and Republicans. The issue that divides them is, simply, what means are truly “necessary” to reach that goal.

Why does this ruling class political consensus exist today?

The bi-partisan campaign to move an establishment (ruling class) political discourse in the USA to the right was initiated in the mid 1970s. It was not always the reality of politics in this country, however. From the end of the second world war until the mid 1970s there was a different division between Democrats and Republicans on questions of domestic policy—as national parties (we set aside the racist role of Southern Democrats during this period). The Democrats were the party of a bolder progressive social agenda, while the Republicans were the party calling for a more modest version of the same thing. Consider: Arch-reactionary Richard Nixon pursued a more progressive domestic policy during his presidency (1969-1974) than the “liberal” Bill Clinton did (1993-2001). It is also instructive to look back at the programs Lyndon Johnson proposed as part of his calls for a “great society” and a “war on poverty.”

Why the difference between then and now? The most decisive factor was the end of the post-war economic boom. During the boom years of the 1950s and ‘60s it was possible for US corporations to grant concessions to working people without cutting too deeply into their own profits. Tax revenues were sufficient to fund more substantial social programs. But the intense competition which has characterized the global economy since the mid 1970s turned all of this into a luxury the rulers of the USA could no longer afford. So they initiated a policy of enforcing cut-backs and demanding give-backs. Similar shifts in the politics of other nations occurred around the same time, and for the same reason. The rise of Thatcherism in Britain is a well-known example.

Another factor also needs to be considered: levels of mass struggle. During the 1960s and early ‘70s youth, oppressed nationalities, women, gays and lesbians, were consistently mobilizing to demand their rights—and to support the struggles of others who were also demanding their rights. The official labor movement, while not particularly combative during this time, still maintained at least a significant potential power flowing from struggles that had taken place during the 1930s to form the CIO. And there was a substantial upsurge in rank and file actions, such as wildcat strikes.

We should note, and not just in passing, that the 1930s were also years in which capitalist profitability was severely challenged. But the mass combativity which developed among industrial workers in the USA meant that it was also a period when at least one wing of the capitalist class chose to deepen a

policy of concessions, in the form of Roosevelt's "New Deal." So the role of mass struggle can be decisive in determining what social policy ruling-class politicians will pursue. Economics is not the only factor.

The first cut backs in the mid 1970s were relatively modest, measured by today's standards. When they were met with little or no resistance, the next round was just a bit more severe. As labor and other previously-combative sectors responded to each round with a retreat, the cut-back agenda became increasingly bold—in both its Republican and its Democratic versions.

Interestingly, at every stage of this process mainstream Democrats consistently represented a less-intense, softer version of the collective ruling class cut-back agenda. If there really were no difference at all between the two parties then the system would quickly lose its power to trap the oppressed into voting for pro-establishment Democrats. But the most important question—"how deep will the cutbacks and attacks go?"—was never actually decided at the ballot box. The ballot box was merely a place where the relationship of forces could be measured to see whether the attacks might be safely pursued more or less vigorously. And at each stage, while the degree of difference between the mainstream Democratic and Republican platforms remained pretty-much constant, thus giving the appearance of a choice even if it was a bad choice, the overall establishment political consensus moved steadily to the right. Thus the choices offered to us by the Democratic Party also tended to move to the right, to become worse and worse with each election cycle.

We will never reverse this state of affairs by voting for a Democrat like Hillary Clinton in the name of defeating Donald Trump. We will only deepen the process, because getting workers and others to vote for the less-intense reactionary agenda of Clinton and her wing of the Democratic party is precisely the point. So long as this ruling-class strategy is successful it will continue to be pursued, and the "alternative" offered by these Democrats will continue to get worse and worse. The Republican right will always raise such a dreadful specter that we will, if we continue to see the choices offered by the two major parties as our only choices, decide that we have no choice at all except to vote for Clinton if we don't want Donald Trump to be president. But there is, in fact, a different kind of alternative if we begin to think beyond these two possibilities.

What is the alternative?

If we think, as we should, about our opposition to "the right" as encompassing not just the most rabid and reactionary Republicans, but also the entire rightward shift of the establishment political consensus over the last four decades, then voting for one wing of that consensus to defeat the other is clearly not going to be a winning strategy. Instead of this we need to look back to times like the 1930s, or 1960s, when the entire configuration of establishment politics was different from what it is today. How can we move things more in that direction given the economic and social realities of the 21st century?

The left has no control over the condition of the economy. We cannot re-create a super-profitable capitalist moment such as the decades immediately following the second world war even if we wanted to. So one of the two key variables that we talked about above is pre-determined for us as we consider our strategy today.

We can, however, work on the other variable: the development of independent struggles such as those that were taking place during the 1930s among industrial workers, or during the 1960s among youth, oppressed nationalities, women, gays and lesbians. It is these struggles which created the climate in which the one percent felt compelled to implement substantial reforms. Similar struggles, if we can

regenerate them, can do the same today and there does seem to be a move in the direction of regenerating this level of struggle, for example with the “Black Lives Matter” movement and the “Moral Monday” actions in North Carolina. It is by extending and deepening struggles of this type that the left can both combat the danger of the ultra-right and have the biggest effect on the outcome of the electoral process, not by accepting the terms of that process as set for us by either of the two establishment parties.

Why do independent struggles have this effect? Because they create a danger that significant segments of the population will begin to deepen their engagement in a kind of politics that cannot be controlled by establishment forces. When such a danger emerges there is a strong impetus for those in power to actually propose reforms—reforms that are relatively safe for their system, but which can at least partially address and therefore potentially disarm the disaffection which is driving the protest movement.

There is an obvious irony here: To the extent that we continue to be loyal allies of the Democrats no matter who they nominate, ignoring their reactionary agenda and seeing them as an “alternative” to the still more reactionary Republican agenda, to that same extent they have no need to give us anything, because we represent no threat to their system of rule. To the extent that we credibly threaten to break significant layers of the population free from their political control, however, to that extent there will be the imperative for those in power to actually grant us some favorable concessions.

Indirectly, we believe, the active rejection of Clinton and promotion of an independent alternative by the left can therefore contribute to a defeat for Trump even in this election cycle at least as effectively as trying to mobilize a vote for Clinton, probably more effectively. This is true because there are, as we know, individuals with money and power over the mass media who have myriad ways to influence the outcome of a presidential race. When, in their overwhelming majority, this class decides that it does not want a particular candidate elected, as happened with George McGovern in 1972 for example, they make sure that the candidate in question will not be elected. If the left can demonstrate that this class now has something to fear from us should a radical-right agenda register gains during the 2016 election cycle, then they are considerably more likely to use their influence—which on an electoral level is far more powerful than ours—to assure the election of Hillary Clinton.

So whether we formulate our goal as reversing the decades-long rightward drift of the ruling class consensus, and thereby marginalizing the rabid right wing within that consensus, or just influencing the outcome of the 2016 vote, the winning strategy we should adopt must reject any support for any politician whose platform represents the more moderate right-wing agenda of the Democratic Party Establishment.

Our vote in 2016 and long-term strategy

How, then, should we vote in 2016? The authors of this article unite around a call to support the likely Green Party presidential nominee: Jill Stein. We are not of one mind about whether this is just a protest vote for this year, or a strategic vote that might help the Greens to become a viable alternative for the future. But we do agree that it's the best choice during this Presidential cycle.

In the longer term we also agree that whatever strategy segments of the left might develop, the goal must be some kind of independent electoral formation that can challenge the Democratic Party Establishment equally with the Republicans.

The “Defeat Trump by voting for Clinton” supporters consistently fail to even consider this possibility. When they talk about alternatives to voting for Democrats, the only one mentioned in any of their articles is an abstention from the electoral process. But the reality is that many, indeed probably most, who reject voting for mainstream Democrats gravitate toward some kind of alternative candidate whenever one is available.

At the same time, however, it's probably not practical to suggest that in 2016 we try to unite around a single perspective to pursue the goal of independent political action. There are, simply, too many opinions on the left about how to go about it.

We have already alluded to the different attitudes toward the Greens and other existing third-party efforts. This reflects, at least in part, another disagreement: about what role might be played by politicians who attempt to buck the Democratic Party Establishment from the left, while still using the institutions of the party itself—Bernie Sanders being the most prominent of these at the moment. Are such individuals just stooges who have been or will inevitably be captured by the Party Establishment? This is one view, of course. Or is there really some potential for them to maintain and build an independent political influence using the institutions of the Democratic Party? That strategy has also been advocated/pursued. Then there are those who suggest that even if the Democratic Party and its institutions cannot be effectively used, a phenomenon like the Sanders insurgency might still become the most practical launching pad for a breakaway, for an independent electoral formation that both represents the 99 percent and actually has some influence/viability.

Complicating the strategic division still further are different assessments about how realistic it might be to call for independent electoral politics to be initiated by some significant social force that is already engaged in non-electoral forms of struggle, such as the labor movement or prominent leaders in the Black community.

We will not here, therefore, try to sort out or take sides in this extremely complex discussion. We will simply note that a vote for Hillary Clinton makes no sense strategically for any of the viewpoints we have just enumerated.

Is an independent electoral alternative practical?

Those who reject the idea of an independent electoral alternative will often tell us that it simply isn't practical. For example: Waleed Shahid, a spokesman for the Working Families Party, repeats among other claims the common assertion that Green Party candidates who gain any significant vote simply play the role of “spoiler,” thereby aiding a victory for the right (<http://www.organizingupgrade.com/index.php/strategy/labs/2016-elections>). We believe, however, that our essay illustrates why voting for Democrats, even “tactically,” represents the impractical choice, aiding the victory of the right even more acutely.

Further: the “spoiler” argument has been effectively debunked by Matthew Jones in an insightful essay (<http://disinfo.com/2010/11/debunked-the-myth-that-ralph-nader-cost-al-gore-the-2000-election/>). Jones explains how many or most who cast votes for an independent left alternative would have simply abstained had that alternative not been on the ballot. They would not have voted for the Democrat instead. And among those who select the independent option but who might have voted for one of the mainstream candidates, individuals are drawn away from both Republicans and Democrats. Jones's entire analysis is worth a read.

Yes, if we look at possibilities only at the level of a presidential race, or winning other national offices, the potential for a breakthrough by the Greens or by some other independent candidate is slim to none. But the Green Party has succeeded in electing dozens of local officeholders across the country and this, too, represents a blow, even if only a small one, against the reactionary ruling-class political consensus.

Imagine, therefore, what might be achieved by an independent political effort with even broader support than the Greens are able to muster at the present moment—such as a Sanders campaign for President as an independent in 2020 (it is already too late to qualify for the ballot in every state this year, even if Sanders decided he wanted to run as an independent), or a “political revolution” party led by Sanders which would run its own candidates in local races, something that could begin this year in at least some states if Sanders wanted to do it. We have already referred to the idea of independent electoral activity by the labor movement, or by the Black community. Yes, we know that none of these things actually will happen in 2016, and most likely not in 2020 either. But if we don’t begin to act in ways that prepare a future in which they can happen, we simply help to guarantee that they never will.

The more those of us on the left raise this idea, the more we explain all of the reasons why voting for the Democrats over and over in hopes that they will somehow stand up to the right-wing assault—when in fact they are part of the right-wing assault—is a dead-end strategy, the more likely such a genuine breakthrough for independent politics in this country becomes. The upcoming “People’s Summit” meeting, June 17-19 in Chicago, is one place where the vision developed here should be raised for a collective discussion by forces which have been focused on the Sanders candidacy. Isn’t the idea of moving toward the development of an independent alternative far more likely to inspire an ongoing insurgency in this milieu than the idea of getting out the vote for Hillary Clinton?

We insist, therefore, that the left should reject a “strategy” of voting for Hillary Clinton to “stop Trump and the ultra-right.” The best way, indeed the only way, to really defeat the most reactionary racist Republican forces is to begin pulling the overall political discourse in this country back to the left, away from the reactionary consensus that has come to dominate it. And the only way to do that, in turn, is to reject voting for the Democratic wing of this reactionary consensus, to work toward creating an independent political power that will struggle for what we really want—in both electoral and non-electoral ways.

Signers (organizations for identification only):

Naomi Allen—Brooklyn For Peace, Jewish Voice for Peace
Riad Azar—New Politics
Rahel Biru—DSA
Steve Bloom—Old and New Project, Solidarity
Robert Caldwell—LeftElect Network, American Indian activist
Saulo Colón—LeftRoots
Arun Gupta—Independent journalist
Gabriel Kilpatrick—DSA
Sandra Lindberg—Solidarity
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