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USA

The Case for an Alternative

- IV Online magazine - 2004 - IV361 e-Supplement - Autumn 2004 -

Publication date: Saturday 16 October 2004

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The following is excerpted from the concluding section of the US socialist organization Solidarity's pamphlet "Bush's Wars, the 2004 Elections and the Movements".

THE STRATEGY OF "the lesser evil" hasn't worked, and less than ever will it work today. The loyalty of labor, racial minorities, women, LGBT people and other progressives - expressed in massive campaign contributions and large numbers of votes - comes at a very low cost for the "New Democrats", who know perfectly well that no matter how far to the right they move, the advocates of "the lesser evil" remain their captives.

Accordingly the Democratic leadership continues to move right - opening the way for an ever more right-wing Republicans. During this long era of political stagnation - essentially since the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment and the mid-'70s effort for labor law reform - the institutional leaderships of the AFL-CIO and oppressed groups have sparked few if any important political initiatives.

The demand for reparations for African-American slavery is a partial exception, but it has been embraced only by the most progressive fringes of the leadership.

For the most part, efforts to defend past gains have foundered on multi-million dollar lobbying efforts, while "hold your nose and vote" campaigns have not brought in large numbers of new activists to reform struggles.

The most important force opening space for radical politics in the past decade, until the recent development of mass antiwar mobilizations, has been the global justice movement. The ability of this movement to mobilize hundreds of thousands in the struggle for "another world is possible" is rooted, to a large extent, in its political independence from both corporate capitalist parties.

Building mass, direct street actions against the WTO, World Bank, and other organs of the transnationals in Seattle, Washington and Montreal, the global justice movement created vital space for the 2000 Nader campaign.

For the first time in more than half a century, a candidate independent of the capitalist parties won significant support for a left populist platform, denouncing corporate dominance of domestic and international politics, and defending the organizations and struggles of working and oppressed people.

Winning three percent of the popular vote, despite vicious attacks from the AFL-CIO leadership and other Democratic Party liberals, the Nader campaign proved that there was a potential audience for radical progressive politics in the United States.

Realizing Our Potential

Today, the antiwar movement that was able to mobilize hundreds of thousands in U.S. cities against Bush's invasion of Iraq has the potential of pushing politics significantly to the left. However, much of that potential could well be dissipated as the movement is again pulled into the Democratic Party "lesser evil" in the 2004 election.

LGBT or "Queer" activists, for a generation, have used grassroots organizing to change the character of the country. Through teach-ins, creative direct action, and millions of conversations at work, school, family, and church, this movement has altered the political landscape. In most sectors of the country, outright bigotry and discrimination is much less tolerated and acceptance of Queer folks has never been more mainstream.

While repression and discrimination remain serious, the recent Supreme Court decision striking down sodomy laws illustrates our point: Movements can remodel the country and lay the groundwork for continued struggle - no matter who holds positions of official power.

If lesser-evil electoralism narrows the breadth and depth of organizing, what is the practical alternative in 2004? We believe that continuing to mobilize against the U.S. occupation of Iraq, forming alliances with the global justice movement, workers' struggling against the corporate offensive - and an independent global peace and justice presidential campaign - are the key elements of the alternative.

The Lessons of 2000

During the 2000 presidential race there were often heated exchanges between supporters of Nader's Green Party ticket and those who said that to vote for Nader was to "waste your vote".

The outcome of the 2000 elections is instructive. Gore won the election, in the old-fashioned sense of getting the most votes. He beat Bush by better than 600,000 votes - votes that were counted - and thereby hangs a tale (and a chad).

Due to the reactionary nature of the U.S. electoral system, it was necessary for Gore to win not the popular vote, which he had, but rather the Electoral College vote. Which he also would have, had the election not been flagrantly stolen in Florida.

Most of us are all too aware of the drama of the refusal to count thousands of paper ballots, effectively disenfranchising tens of thousands of voters in Florida counties with heavy African American populations. This is not counting the huge numbers of Black voters who disappeared from the rolls, or were stopped at police roadblocks ordered on Election Day by Governor Jeb Bush.

Finally, despite all evidence that Gore had won a clear majority of the votes in Florida - as he had across the country - the US Supreme Court appointed George W. Bush as the President of the United States, ending three months of suspense and political instability.

Al Gore personally presided over that session of Congress as president of the Senate. Gore personally ruled out of order repeated attempts, mostly by Black members of the House of Representatives, to challenge the Florida electoral vote. Not a single member of the Senate - not one - was willing to join the members of the Black caucus in registering at least a symbolic protest against this fraud.

It wasn't the small minority that voted for Nader that "wasted" their vote. There is no bigger waste of your vote than to give it to someone who won't defend your right to have your vote counted.

As the Florida election fraud unfolded, Al Gore had a clear choice: he could either explain what was happening and

call on working people, and especially the Black community, to demand an honest count, or he could go through the motions of limited recounts in Dade and a couple of other counties.

Gore chose to be loyal to the corporate ruling elite in the hope that they would reward him by saying all votes should be counted, and thus allowing him to occupy the office he had won. The alternative was to encourage mobilizations against the fraud. There is no evidence Gore ever considered this option.

Impact of Mass Mobilizations

In the climate of fear and intimidation the rulers whipped up in the wake of September 11, we were told the entire country was solidly united behind the Bush administration's "War on Terrorism".

But as soon as significant mobilizations against the projected Iraq war started, millions of people lost their fear because they realized the media was lying, they were not alone, and so protests took place all over the country.

In some places, demonstrations were bigger than any held during the movement against the war in Vietnam. People could see with their own eyes, and from the reactions of their friends, neighbors and coworkers, that the media claims of overwhelming support for Bush's projected war were lies.

Undercover attempts by Texas-based Republican radio monopoly Clear Channel Communications to manipulate people into supporting an invasion of Iraq by staging "Support our Troops" rallies in the name of individual DJ's fell flat on their face, despite extensive publicity from their own radio stations, Fox News, CNN and other corporate outlets.

What's more, the effort fueled a backlash. These corporate interests received a kick in the face when they tried to ram through the FCC rule changes to allow them to further extend their control of radio and television broadcasting.

There was a tremendous outpouring of opposition, provoked to a large degree by anger over the corporate media acting as the mouthpiece of the Bush Administration. Opposition was so great that both Republican-controlled houses of Congress and the Republican-controlled judiciary moved to placate the opposition by canceling the rules changes.

As these examples show, our real power lies our own independent mobilization and organization. Activists in the labor and social movements looking to use the electoral arena to promote our politics must never lose sight of this reality. The election campaigns we need are ones that seek to promote our real strength, which is outside the two-party-monopoly electoral arena.

Ralph Nader's Green campaign in 2000 shows that there is today in the United States a mass audience willing to consider breaking with the two parties of the rich to support a party that will challenge corporate rule.

The California Experience

The 2003 California gubernatorial campaign, where Green Latino candidate Peter Miguel Camejo got more than 5%

of the vote, is further confirmation.

As a result of that showing, California news media were compelled to treat Camejo as a major candidate in the special 2003 recall elections, routinely including him in polls and debates and covering his campaign events, thus helping him reach millions more.

Camejo's campaigns addressed the big issues in that state as well as national and international questions. He called for reversing the trend towards a regressive tax structure by proposing raising taxes on the richest Californians to close the budget deficit. He championed the cause of Latinos, Blacks and other "minorities" who make up the majority of the state, and especially of undocumented immigrants.

Camejo denounced the marijuana prohibition that is used to persecute young Blacks and Latinos under the rubric of a "war on drugs". He has demanded the United States get out of Iraq now, and used his campaign to promote antiwar protests. His California campaigns - like Nader's in 2000 - point to real alternative politics for Latinos, African-Americans and all working people. These campaigns break with the corporate two-party system and offer an electoral alternative.

The Green Party is growing precisely because it is a party that fights against the corporate rule and in support of the labor, antiwar, global justice and other social movements. Its potential mass impact was shown by Matt Gonzalez's San Francisco mayoral campaign - which forced the Democrat into a hard-fought December 10 runoff, and took 47% of the vote despite being outspent ten to one.

The Greens have not asked activists to give up organizing mass, militant actions against the corporate rulers - as have every "progressive" Democrat since Eugene McCarthy in 1968. In 2000, Nader and the Greens campaigned as the candidate and party of the global justice movement - showing videos of the Seattle demonstrations against the WTO at all the "Super Rallies".

In 2004 we need an independent peace and justice presidential campaign that presents itself as the electoral voice of the antiwar, global justice and social movements. We in Solidarity will work together with other socialists, Greens, radicals and activists to help organize such a campaign.