

EDUCATIONAL OF THE YOUNG COMMUNIST LEAGUE

ELECTORAL STRUGGLE

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SELECTED READINGS

Excerpt from Dynamic Magazine

Marching Around in Vain? Why Elections Matter

by Dan Margolis

It would be a mistake to say that our demonstrations and protests have been useless—they haven't. We have seen that they have had some effect. Imagine what this country would be like if the people's movements had simply rolled over and played dead—thousands more probably actually would be.

The problem is this: we have been in defensive mode. The demonstrations and mass outpourings have been against things: against war, against Social Security privatization, against education cuts and against new attacks on immigrants. We have been in a defensive mode for years, and have won major victories. But these victories are mainly in stopping bad things from being done. We haven't had the opportunity to go on the offensive. We haven't yet had the chance to fight for more rights, instead of fighting only to protect what we have.

The problems of war, poverty, cuts to social services and inequalities in education are systemic—they are all part of capitalism, the profits-before-people system that runs most of the world today. But who's in power determines how easy or difficult it is to fight back and win immediate relief for working people.

Bush and the extreme right-wing dominate the Presidency, the Legislature and the Judiciary. This makes it harder for our demonstrations to have an impact – they don't have to listen. For example, in 2004 saw the biggest demonstration for women's rights—ever. And now we have an anti-choice Supreme Court.

Another example: There have been growing calls to censure or impeach Bush because he violated the Constitution and international law by bringing the American people into a war based on lies. But who is going to impeach him? Congress has to do it, and Congress is dominated by Bush allies.

There are some who say that electoral politics are useless, that this is merely a diversion. It is more important to do "revolutionary" work, whatever their version of that may be. They claim we should avoid fighting for immediate relief and instead "work for socialism."

Sure, we should work for socialism, but what does that mean? Writing about it and talking about it? And? There are lots of little groups and "parties" that have this perspective, but they are doomed to failure. Right now, the American people are in motion against the Bush administration and its crew in the other branches of government. This is movement towards deepening democracy, and, objectively, as it progresses, against capitalism. But, if you misjudge where people are at, you end up standing on the sidelines shouting slogans that no one pays attention to—as you might see many groups doing at major demonstrations.

And then there are those who reject electoral politics on the grounds that all politicians are corrupt, or that elections are a dead end. Instead they demand more demonstrations, more "action," more militancy, and so on. But this hasn't worked.

Demonstrations are vital – there's no doubt. But how can we turn these massive actions into offensive, instead of defensive, actions? It comes back to defeating the worst of the worst—the Republicans.

Who, then, should we work with to defeat them? There are all sorts of third-parties out there with very nice ideas—the Green Party and others, for example. However, with a few exceptions—like the Working Families Party—working to get candidates from these parties elected right now puts you into the same category as those who want to advocate for socialism right now: You end up standing on the sidelines.

The answer to the question of which political party to work with is, for now, the Democratic Party. Right now they are the vehicle to beat the extremist right wing given the current political realities in this country. The Democrats are the political party that has ties to all of the necessary forces for change – labor, women, people of color and youth. They also have contingents of environmentalists, LGBTQ, seniors and other communities that are working to challenge the extreme right's agenda. They are the political party behind which all of the groups that oppose the extreme right's policies can come together—from corporations with business interests that run counter to the right wing agenda to the peace movement to the working class. The Green Party, Socialist Party and most other third parties have virtually no connection to the vast majority of the people's movements. It is because of this fact alone that their politics lead to a dead end.

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The Democrats are a mixed bag. They will never be a revolutionary party. The corporations inside of it will never allow it to be turned into anything that could fundamentally transform society, or even to challenge corporate power. It's vital to remember to focus on developing political independence and power for the anti-corporate forces that operate both within and around the Democratic Party. But this can be done without giving up the potential to use the Democrats to defeat the extremist right and help to move that struggle forward.

Did you know.....

In 2004, 49% of youth went to the polls. In the 2006 mid-term elections, 10 million young people voted, making up 13% of the total electorate.

It's important to fight for the most progressive candidates possible, and the most progressive polices as well, but given the current situation, it is just as important not to dwell too much on the shortcomings of this or that candidate.

For example, some organizations have called for people to sign a vow that they will not support any candidate that does not take a position of withdrawing from Iraq rapidly. This is a mistake. What option does that leave for the well-meaning person who has taken the vow, but lives in an area where both the Republican and the Democrat are bad on the war? Either working for some third-party candidate who will not win, or staying out of the elections altogether. Either way, the Republican extremists gain.

While it's unpleasant to work on a campaign of a candidate who has bad policies, it may be necessary. It is important to not just work with progressive Democrats, or moderates, but even centrists. The reason for this is a look at the big picture.

We have to get out and defeat the Republican ultra-right, fighting for victories of Democrats, even the "bad" ones. Doing that will achieve a Democratic sweep; allow us to take at least one of the branches away from the extremist right wing. This would open up the possibilities of actually impeaching the president. While it would be a minor victory for a "bad" candidate here or there, it would be a major victory for all of

the communities and movements that are currently using the Democratic Party to advance the people's struggles.

And as for the demonstrations? All the better. Our mass demonstrations can go from being defensive—trying to hold the line against extremists—to being offensive, where we start to fight for the things that we actually want. When we've successfully beaten the extreme right we'll actually be able to solidify and move forward an independent, anti-corporate political agenda that won't tie us to working with any corporate party.

That is the way forward.

Exceptrs from *On The Road Again*
By Sam Webb

Are we in a transition from one stage of struggle to another? Are we moving from the struggle against the extreme right, which has dominated politics for more than a quarter century, to a new stage where the challenge is to radically curb corporate power as a whole?

How we answer this question – and we should do it collectively and soberly – will have a major bearing on what we do, over the next year and well beyond.

Here is what I think – yes, we are at the cusp of a new stage of struggle that has the potential to shift the balance of forces not incrementally and momentarily, but decisively and enduringly in favor of the working class and people.

Now, this is still as much a potential as a reality, but it would be a mistake not to see the possibilities of the present moment. While we do not want to overestimate this process (and in doing so get ahead of ourselves in a strategic and tactical sense), we don't want to underestimate it either.

And the latter is easy to do. After so many years of defensive struggles, a mood of lowered expectations had become widespread, and it was difficult to imagine a situation in which a labor-led movement set the terms, timing, and agenda of the struggle. In the wake of the 2006 elections, this mood began to dissipate, although not entirely. In fact, in some ways, this

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mood has found new grist for the mill in the turn of events since then.

Despite the 2006 election mandate, Bush didn't pull in his horns, by any means, increasing troops in Iraq and threatening military strikes against Iran, and vigorously resisting any restraints on his presidential power.

Meanwhile, he sits on his hands as millions stand to lose their houses and jobs and does absolutely nothing as African Americans are the objects of raw racism and immigrants are rounded up as if they are draft animals. He also vetoed children's health insurance plans, and defended his indefensible attorney general.

If this were not bad enough, the Democratic majority in Congress has been unable to completely deliver on its promises, thus making the skeptics, cynics, and leftists in our movement more dubious about the prospects of progressive change.

These stubborn realities can't be dismissed out of hand. But neither can they by themselves be allowed to define the nature of what is a complex political moment.

Communists, not to mention the larger movement, must be able to discern in the chaotic thicket of day-to-day events the larger patterns, and nurture the new shoots of struggle that contain the possibility of reconstituting politics along progressive lines.

Maybe it doesn't need to be said, but I will anyway: we are not going from a non-revolutionary stage to a revolutionary one, the latter being, to borrow Lenin's description, "when the old superstructure has cracked from top to bottom, when open political action on the part of classes and masses who are creating a new superstructure for themselves, has become an accomplished fact." (Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*, p. 57)

But, by the same token, a river is being crossed; a movement of potentially enormous scope and depth is in its early stages of formation.

That the process is filled with frustration and doubt is not surprising. Transitions by their nature interweave elements of the past and the future. They are neither smooth nor pre-programmed. Logic and history are two different things.

More than one promising societal transition has not materialized as hoped, either because of its own deficiencies or because it ran up against the shoals of powerful reactionary forces, or (more likely) both.

Nor are such transitions the inevitable result of sharpening contradictions between the forces and relations of production. They are politically driven and contain a spontaneous element.

At the same time, objective contradictions and processes heavily

condition the stage, set, script, actors, and outcome of people's real life dramas.

While movements of a genuinely mass character don't happen without spontaneous bursts and surges, it is also true that they can't realize their full potential without progressive and left leadership.

Election 2008

Not every struggle carries the same political significance. Some leave little trace on the political landscape; others rearrange it extensively.

The decisive defeat of the Republican Party next year falls into the latter category. Much like the elections of 1936 and 1964, a landslide in 2008 will alter the political landscape and balance of forces in a positive direction, will give new energy, confidence, and hope to the labor-led people's movement, and set the stage for progressive and radical reforms.

What is more, the defeat of the right will weaken not only the

Did you know...

Young adults voted for the Democratic candidate over the Republican candidate in races for the House of Representatives (58% v. 38%), the Senate (60% v. 33%) and the governor (55% v. 34%) in the 2006 elections. Youth were the only age group to vote majority Democrat.²

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most reactionary section of the capitalist class -- it will weaken the capitalist class as a whole.

So these elections cannot and should not be reduced to simply a contest between Republicans and Democrats, or between the two wings of the ruling class, one reactionary, the other more moderate and realistic.

Democratic Party Sweep

Will a Democratic Party sweep solve every social problem? By no means -- why would anyone think so? But it will allow the labor-led people's movement to fight on more favorable ground for immediate gains and to deepen the new stage of struggle.

Just as there is no road to socialism that bypasses the anti-corporate stage, there is no road to the anti-corporate stage that bypasses the 2008 elections.

Perhaps this is too stiff a political construction for some, but I believe that if we have learned anything from the 20th century it is that the class struggle goes through different phases and stages, and that the movement ignores this at its own peril.

Let me close this section with a quote from Lenin:

"A Social-Democrat must never, even for an instant, forget that the proletarian class struggle for socialism against the ... bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie is inevitable. This is beyond doubt. From this logically follows the absolute necessity for a separate, independent and strictly class party of Social-Democracy. From this logically follows the provisional character of our tactics to "strike together" with the bourgeoisie and the duty to carefully watch 'our ally, as if he were an enemy,' etc. All this is also beyond doubt. But it would be ridiculous and reactionary to deduce from this that we must forget, ignore or neglect those tasks, which although transient and temporary, are vital at the present time. The struggle against autocracy is a temporary and transient task of the Socialists, but to ignore or neglect this task would be tantamount to betraying socialism and rendering a service to reaction." (Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution, p. 72)

Heterogeneous Movement

We should not recoil at the thought that the coalition to defeat

the right will include heterogeneous forces. There are no pure struggles at any stage of struggle. The sooner the left and progressive movement learns that, the better.

Any mass movement contains varied tendencies and trends. A common political platform doesn't mean a singularity of political outlook. Indeed, in a broad, multi-class political coalition, relations will be contested as well as cooperative. Each component will promote its views and attempt to leave its imprint on the overall struggle, while not rupturing the unity of the larger coalition. And this is more so as the movement gains in scope and influence. Haven't we seen this in the peace movement?

Did you know...

According to a recent poll, 41% of 18-24 year olds say they will vote in the upcoming Presidential primaries and 61% say they will vote in the general election.³

Thus, maintaining and deepening unity is as much an art as it is a science, or maybe more an art than a science. Whatever the case, it is something that all of us in the movement have to master. And the coming elections will provide a practical laboratory to perfect this, for a heterogeneous mixture of political forces is gathering to defeat the right and each of them bring their own distinct views and resources.

From the standpoint of the progressive and left movement, the most vexing element in this mixture is the Democratic Party, which, as we know, is a class-based party. It is incapable of being consistently democratic. Its inclinations lie with gradual and partial reforms. It does not have the desire to encourage the independent initiative of the people nor any inclination to trample on capital's profit imperatives. It isn't against concessions to the people, but it wants them to be of a limited nature.

In 2008, the Democratic Party will try to limit the scope of the political discourse and agenda as well as the influence of grassroots and people's organizations on the election process. At the same time, it is the only election instrument that is capable of defeating the extreme right at this moment.

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While we wish there existed an independent and powerful political party with leadership and support from the core forces of the people's movement, there is not, and we have no choice but to live with the reality for now.

So what should be our concrete attitude to the Democratic Party in the upcoming election?

On the one hand, we should not fall into the trap of hurling equal doses of abuse on both parties, or of damning the Democratic candidates with the faintest of praise, or of acting as if it doesn't matter who wins.

On the other hand, we should not hesitate to criticize the Democratic Party and its candidates. But it should be done within the framework of our strategic task of defeating the right. And it should be done in such a way that it gives those candidates space to move in a progressive direction.

Frankly speaking, I never subscribed to the notion, embraced by too many on the left, that people have illusions in the Democratic Party, and that a new party would emerge if only we were able to dissipate these illusions. Such thinking over simplifies a very complicated problem.

Who Will Leave an Imprint?

Just as Lenin argued against the idea that the "bourgeois revolution is a revolution which is only of interest to the bourgeoisie," we can argue that the defeat of the right at the polls next year is not only to the advantage of the Democratic Party and to the capitalist class, but also to the advantage of the labor-led people's movement. To affirm one doesn't deny the validity of the other.

In fact, I would go a step further, and say that a decisive victory will be of more advantage to the working class and people's movement than to the capitalist class.

Which begs the question: what constitutes a decisive victory? A decisive victory would mean a shift in the balance of forces in Congress and the country is such a way that the labor-led people's movement is positioned to go on the offensive in 2009 and beyond.

For that to happen, three conditions have to be met.

First, there will have to be a Democratic Party landslide at the Presidential and Congressional levels. Second, it will be particularly important to increase the number of progressives in Congress.

Lastly and most importantly, the labor led people's movement – not the Democratic Party, not Wall Street – must leave, or, more accurately, impose its imprint on the election process. Admittedly, because the working class and its allies don't have their own political party, this won't be easy. But it would be wrong, egregiously wrong in fact, to infer from this that the labor led people's movement has virtually no political space and leverage to leave their clear and unmistakable imprint on the election, its outcome, and its aftermath.

We should not forget (and it is easy) that the boundaries of politics and democracy in a capitalist social formation, and even in one in which the working class doesn't have its own political party, are malleable, elastic, and can be stretched to include radical reforms and new configurations of political power. What those boundaries are, however, can't be answered abstractly, but depend on the balance of forces, on which forces leave their mark on the political process, and on unforeseen events and contingencies of all kinds.

Participate Directly and Vigorously

Thus, the labor-led people's coalition – and Communists as a current within that coalition – must energetically participate in every phase of the election process. It must give substance to

Did you know...

According to a recent poll, the two top issues for young voters are the Iraq War and Healthcare. The environment, the economy, immigration and education were tied for third place among other issues.⁴ Half of all young voters favor a universal healthcare system.⁵

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the national dialogue. It must be a major factor in the primaries, with an eye to electing the most progressive candidates. It must shape the political platform of the Democratic Party and its candidates. It must reach, register, and educate new and stay-at-home voters. It must unrelentingly expose the reactionary positions of the Republican candidates. It must guarantee a maximum voter turnout. And it must define the political mandate and agenda in the election's aftermath.

In doing this, the movement will position itself to qualitatively reshape the political terrain to its advantage and to take another, critical step on the transition to a new stage of struggle. At this moment, this is the essence of political independence.

Of course, some will ask: Is this subordinating the Party and the movement to the Democratic Party? Is this just 'lesser evilism'?

Obviously, I don't think so. Both notions have currency only to the degree that political abstractions and morality tales substitute for a concrete understanding of what is required to move from one stage of struggle to another, from a period in which the people are on the defensive, to one where we have the wind at our back.

A sweeping defeat of the right will give labor and its allies more political leverage and independence than they have had for a long, long time. And there is only one way to achieve that: along the strategic and tactical path that we have outlined.

Endnotes

1. Pew Research Center http://www.pewtrusts.org/our_work_ektid24462.aspx?category=16
2. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) http://www.civicyouth.org/?page_id=241
3. Harvard University Institute of Politics <http://www.iop.harvard.edu/>
4. Harvard University Institute of Politics <http://www.iop.harvard.edu/>
5. Harvard University Institute of Politics <http://www.iop.harvard.edu/>

Discussion Questions

- 1. What are some of the national and local issues that youth and students will mobilize around in the elections?**
- 2. How would a defeat of the ultra-right help to strengthen and build the youth and student movement?**
- 3. Would we be able to end the Iraq War, make gains in the fight for affordable healthcare and education if a Republican wins the presidency in 2008?**
- 4. How would a Democratic sweep be a step forward in the fight for socialism in the USA?**
- 5. What can your club do to build unity and mobilize youth and students in the general election? How can you build your club and *Dynamic* through your election work?**