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Debate: Inside or Outside the Democratic Party

Abstract

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Keywords

labor unions, Democratic Party, coalitions, New Party, Labor Party Advocates, Legislative Electoral Action Program, LEAP, Commonwealth Coalition



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Debate: Inside or Outside the Democratic Party

■ *Bill Fletcher, Jr.*

Since the New Deal, the dominant political strategy of American labor has been to work within the Democratic Party for legislative and other political aims. While sentiment for a "party of our own" has never disappeared in union circles, there has not been much serious talk of third party politics in mainstream unions for some time.

Lately, however, such talk has increased. Two new efforts—the New Party and Labor Party Advocates—are working in a number of states with unionists (and others) who think it's time to form an independent political organization. And even among unionists who still see the Democratic Party as their home, there is a lot of important and creative organizing underway, with such projects as Connecticut's Legislative Electoral Action Program (LEAP) and Massachusetts' Commonwealth Coalition leading the way.

*LRR asked two union leaders who have come down on different sides of this strategic divide to discuss their views of how labor can best move its political agenda forward. **Bruce Colburn** is Secretary Treasurer of the Milwaukee County Labor Council, AFL-CIO, is an activist in Progressive Milwaukee, a local affiliate of the New Party. **George Springer** is President of the Connecticut State Federation of Teachers, as well as President of LEAP. To interview Springer and Colburn, LRR turned to Bill Fletcher, Jr., the Director of Education for the Service Employees International Union. Fletcher was active in both Jackson Presidential campaigns. Fletcher sets the stage for the debate with a short introduction, which are his own views and do not necessarily represent those of the SEIU.*

In 1984, Jesse Jackson changed the terms of discussion for all activists interested in building a progressive political movement. By entering the Presidential race and drawing on a base in the African-American people's movement, Jackson defined a pro-people political agenda, which went beyond old-style liberalism. In so doing, his campaign surpassed any effort at progressive political action seen at the national level since the 1940s. Jackson's "Rainbow Coalition" represented an evolution of the Black-led electoral upsurge which came to national attention with the 1982 election of Chicago Mayor Harold Washington. Nevertheless, the Rainbow was more than the sum of its parts.

Following the 1984 Presidential race, efforts continued across the USA to build a political movement to the left of liberalism, either directly under the Rainbow banner or influenced by Jackson. This movement, however, existed within the organizational context of the Democratic Party, while retaining a high degree of political independence.

What gave this movement its uniqueness before and during the 1988 Presidential election process was its base among African-Americans. The Rainbow effort was not a marginal "third party" initiative of baseless individuals; it was a *movement* fighting for change in the Democratic Party, and for the empowerment of traditionally disenfranchised sectors in the Party and society.

Jackson emerged from the Presidential season with a formidable bloc of forces. Many believed that a "*Jackson wing*" of the Democratic Party had arisen, which would be a long-lasting force with which the party establishment would have to contend. Perhaps based on this assessment, Jackson and many of his close allies reached an ultimately tragic decision in March 1989 when they decided to make the basic structure of the National Rainbow Coalition into something more closely resembling a campaign apparatus rather than a mass-based political organization. Thus, Jackson shaped the organization directly under his own leadership. As a result, many of the most active forces, which had helped to build the Rainbow and Jackson's two Presidential campaigns, edged away. Time soon proved that no Jackson wing of the Democratic Party had been born, and Jackson himself was moved to the margins of the Democratic Party as the well-organized forces of neo-liberalism reasserted themselves. Jackson's Rainbow movement excited much discussion regarding the form and content of progressive political action. It also identified and energized activists for other initiatives.

Two of the efforts which were certainly influenced by the Black-led electoral upsurge of the 1980s, and the Jackson movement more specifically, are represented in the following dialogue. These groups, **LEAP-style political coalitions** and the **New Party** are not the only, nor

necessarily the largest of the groups attempting to articulate a new variant of progressive political action. [Editor's note: Labor Party Advocates, the Greens, and Ron Daniel's Campaign for a New Tomorrow have been active in articulating independent progressive politics. Space demands limited the participation in the LRR debate]. They are, however, significant forces in both their level of influence and scope of activity. Of particular relevance to the readership of *Labor Research Review*, both groups have worked steadily to build a base within labor.

LEAP was formed by activists in Connecticut to provide a collective voice for progressive political work. Since 1986, activists in four other states in New England have built similar LEAP-style coalitions, with the assistance of Northeast Coalition Project Action, a progressive regional organization, and considerable support from Region 9A of the United Auto Workers (covering New York City, New England and Puerto Rico). These coalitions include well over 100 organizations, such as ACORN; Citizen Action; Puerto Rican; African American, and Gay and Lesbian PACs, the Sierra Club, NOW, NARAL, and a broad representation of labor unions and two state AFL-CIOs. The five New England coalitions, which focused initially on electing strong progressives to legislatures, have racked up 200 victories during the past six years. Central to the strategy was a Rainbow-esque approach to conducting this political battle *within the context of the Democratic Party*. A significant difference with the Rainbow, however, was its lack of a real base among the political movements of people of color.

Jesse Jackson's March 1989 Rainbow restructuring also led to a different enterprise. Developing a strategy made popular in New York City in the 1930s by the American Labor Party, and further explored by other forces, several activists promoted a locally-based independent party movement which came to be known as the **New Party**. The key to their strategy was the *fusion ticket*. This establishes an independent electoral line, allowing a voter to cast a ballot for a candidate of any party as long as that candidate agrees to a New Party endorsement, while also giving the voter a chance to support an independent party (in this case, the New Party). Such a strategy, legal in only a few states, would defuse arguments denigrating independent parties for allegedly forcing the electorate to throw votes away. As with Citizen Action, building a base within the labor movement is a critical part of the New Party strategy.

The debate offered in the pages of *LRR* focuses not so much on general ideological approaches, but examines the manner in which these approaches play out in the practice of attempting to build a progressive political movement. Because both of these groups have sought to build an independent movement and get individuals elected to office,

they were asked to participate in this discussion. They also, as the reader will note, represent two different answers to the question of whether progressive activists should seek to build such a movement inside, outside or *both* inside and outside the Democratic Party.

LRR: **Let's begin at the beginning. Should labor work inside or outside the Democratic Party?**

COLBURN: From our end we've tried to do both. It's an approach that comes from a few observations about the general situation in the country, in Milwaukee and in communities just like it.

First off, large numbers of our members have pretty much lost faith with the political situation in general and the Democratic Party in particular. The evidence for this is everywhere—from term limits to the support for Perot, to disenfranchisement in the black community, to the high rates of non-voting among working class, poor and young people.

We saw this disillusionment especially clearly during the NAFTA campaign. I did a lot of work in Wisconsin and around the country, and often I'd go to a Perot meeting and it would be filled with union members who had never been involved in Democratic Party activity. They know that the situation for labor has deteriorated both nationally and locally, and that our traditional political strategy is not going to reverse that deterioration.

It won't surprise anyone to hear me say that the Democratic Party is mainly dominated by corporate interests and a corporate mentality. There are a lot of good people in the Democratic Party, but they don't control it. To build an effective political movement for working people you have to come up with forums and organizations that are going to match up with the situation that's out there.

So, we've got a two-pronged strategy. We support progressive Democrats and work with them inside the Democratic Party when it's appropriate. At the same time, New Party affiliates also try to develop our own independent candidates, especially at the grass roots level. Progressive Milwaukee has been recruiting people to our organization, and then running them for office as a way to build an independent political force in the city and county. We've got a real "threat of exit" from the Democrats, and this ability to develop our own independent activity and organization is turning out to be very useful.

SPRINGER: Generally, I would agree with a lot that Bruce has said. Our approach though happens to be different in that we see the reality of two large political parties. We see a lot of people who are our nat-

ural allies within the Democratic Party. We see a lot of people who are candidates who are running with that party that we can support. We don't for a minute believe that the Democratic Party is led by progressives. We also have maintained a certain kind of independence. Our purpose is not to defend the Democratic Party but rather to develop the best realistic strategy to redefine state and national politics. Very often we get in trouble with the regular party because we recruit and run candidates who challenge people in the Party who we believe are not representing the interests of the people of this country and the people of this area. Our goal has been to create a generally independent political force that articulates a message that touches the lives of low- and middle-income citizens by providing candidates within the Democratic Party who offer a clear progressive vision. LEAP has shown that it is possible to elect strong progressive Democrats who end up making a real difference.

So, while we are operating within the Democratic Party, it's not an easy relationship. There is some tension involved in our relationship because we are progressive and what we aim to do is to create a progressive movement that is so strong and so important that it will in fact become the dominant force within that Party.

LRR: Has LEAP ever run candidates against a Democrat in the final election?

SPRINGER: We have occasionally backed an independent candidacy but the overwhelming majority of our candidates are Democrats.

LRR: What experience have you had in creating actual organizations?

SPRINGER: I think that we've been particularly good in training large numbers of people in the electoral process. We've done especially well helping people to learn and talk about issues. We have been very good at building the broadest coalitions in Connecticut politics, bringing together groups who have never worked together on any kind of a consistent basis.

We've been especially good at bringing in private and public sector labor to talk to each other about the issues and deal with the community. On the other hand, we haven't been good at raising money.

LRR: How is LEAP structured in terms of the participation of the different groups that are involved?

SPRINGER: Probably our most important structure is a boardmeeting that takes place once a month with about 50 leaders. Each organiza-

tion has a delegate to the board. It's very exciting to see key leaders from a broad range of labor and progressive organizations meeting together to develop strategy for advancing progressive political work in the state. We expect significant participation from the thirty organizations in LEAP in developing strategy, producing volunteers for campaigns and raising money to fund LEAP. We have a couple of large fundraisers a year. We get involved in campaigns when three-quarters of the participants at the board meeting support a candidate. We spend a lot of time in the endorsement process. We have a demanding and thorough interview process. If someone comes in with a terrible labor record, then that person will probably not get endorsed.

LRR: Are there, for example, ward and precinct organizations of LEAP people or is the actual involvement of grass roots folks done through the organizations which make up LEAP?

SPRINGER: They are done primarily through the organizations who are members of the coalition. We are proud that one of the hallmarks of the political campaigns that LEAP runs is that large numbers of volunteers get involved in the campaigns.

LRR: Bruce, how does that contrast or compare with the party and the work that you've done in Milwaukee?

COLBURN: Our organization came together in Milwaukee, in the summer of 1991. A number of community groups, labor organizations and individual progressives came together with the idea of getting involved in local political elections.

People were very dissatisfied with the traditional kinds of electoral strategies. You'd work your heart out on an election, and then have to hold your nose when it came time to vote. A lot of times we didn't feel much was accomplished, even though our endorsed candidates often won. So we decided to join the New Party, because its overall national strategy was very much in line with what we were trying to do on a local level.

We set ourselves up as a membership organization, not a coalition. One of the strengths of this is that you have the leaders of several organizations who bring resources and try to get their organizations involved in the activities. But we stress the importance of members, because a real political organization needs people who work together on everything from elections to community issues to direct action. For example, New Party members participated in the Jobs with Justice Labor Board actions in Wisconsin and elsewhere. I can't remember ever seeing the Demo-

cratic Party send people to walk a picket line.

One of our hopes is that as we elect candidates, they will work with us to build strong precinct level organizations, block by block, inside their districts. A political organization can demand accountability from its candidates only if it has a real base.

LRR: What kind of successes have you had in building precinct organizations as well as electing people?

COLBURN: We've been very successful at going into races, winning some of the races and electing people we focused on. One of the parts of the inside-outside approach is that it tries to be a smart selective strategy. It's based on the idea of not wasting people's votes, not getting in elections that we don't have a chance of winning. So, we've really focused on open races or candidates that we particularly saw as vulnerable or had a particularly bad record. New Party chapters have backed candidates in about 50 local races so far in a handful of states, and we've won about two-thirds of these elections. It's a good start.

Here in Milwaukee, one of our first races was against a 24-year incumbent county supervisor. It was a fairly conservative district with a high percentage of older voters. Yet, because we coordinated a great grassroots campaign, we were able to unseat the incumbent with a Progressive Milwaukee leader with a solid, long history as a progressive activist.

So, from the standpoint of winning, we've been pretty successful. What's been less successful is turning election wins into a membership that is actively involved in the day-to-day life of the organization. This is a classic dilemma. Elections are exciting, but the real work begins after you win. We've taken on a project now to develop an economic development plan for the city, county and state that will serve as a road map for our candidates and supporters. It's called "Sustainable Milwaukee," and it will help us hold people accountable but also give these new officials some guidance about what we actually want them to do.

One other thing that we've tried to do is get candidates to sign a "contract," which is not binding by law, but goes into a series of things, including a requirement that they participate on the steering committee of the organization, that they build the organization, that they meet with other candidates who have been elected by the organization to make plans to carry out programs.

LRR: George, that seems like a different approach to what you've done in LEAP. What kind of thinking went into the decision to construct the organization in the way that you decided to? Was there any thought of building it as a membership organization?

SPRINGER: We have visited and revisited that question and I don't think it's by any means a closed issue. We chose going to organizations and especially going to PACs. LEAP is probably best described as a coalition of PACs because that was the way to quickly get a lot of people and a lot of resources. We've also, for example, always elected a few at-large members to the board. That gave us a chance to broaden ourselves, including our diversity.

We have been successful in electing 30 or 40 outstanding candidates, many of whom come from the labor and grassroots movement. But we also have problems with accountability. One of the problems we've had recently is that we have been able to get people elected and as they get involved in leadership it is very difficult to hold them accountable. Where our thinking is right now is a real soul searching and asking ourselves if we, in fact, intend to govern, what must we do differently? We don't just want people in the legislature who come up with good ideas.

We understand the importance for a grassroots base to hold elected officials to a clear program and set of issues. We are looking at various possibilities of developing local organizations, involving rank-and-file, that will mobilize around issues, run candidates, and direct campaigns. So, we haven't closed the door at all on making LEAP a membership organization.

LRR: I'd like to ask both of you about the diversity issue?

SPRINGER: We have gone to the Black and Puerto Rican caucus in the state legislature to identify their issues. We have tried to make sure that whatever we do involves people who represent a variety of backgrounds. But we're still not satisfied. We're going to various organizations and we quite honestly indicate that we want to be a broad organization and we need their help in fashioning that type of organization. I can't tell you any conclusions we've reached other than we are not satisfied with our current situation and we are working very hard at building a broader, more diverse organization.

LRR: Bruce, what about you?

COLBURN: First, I think there's been a common understanding from the beginning that unless you deal up-front with race, you can't build a political organization. We've done a pretty decent job of recruiting candidates, particularly in the black community and hopefully moving into some other minority communities. That's been a concentrated effort and those candidates in those races have generally won.

Second, this organization has taken on certain issues that we believe

will help us build the kind of multi-racial organization we need. There was a political void that Progressive Milwaukee jumped into around a bond referendum for the public school system, support for which was concentrated in the black community. And, as I mentioned before, our economic development work on issues like jobs, training, transportation, the environment, and lending practices is of central importance to the black and hispanic communities.

All that being said, I don't think anybody has any easy answers. We've been criticized as being a white organization trying to control black elected officials. Some of our own elected officials, both black and white, have tried to deal with that, but no one should kid themselves that building a multi-racial organization is anything but an ongoing process.

LRR: How diverse is your core?

COLBURN: In name, it's much more diverse than in actual practice. What I mean is that our steering committee is made up of a very diverse group of people willing to put their names and prestige behind the organization. In terms of actual practical matters, however, I would say it's less so.

SPRINGER: I would say pretty much the same thing. We constantly try to ensure that we have a diverse group. But when you come down to participation, that's another thing. We have also worked very hard in involving ourselves in campaigns with Blacks and Puerto Ricans. We have been more successful with Puerto Ricans in Bridgeport and Hartford than we have been with Blacks.

LRR: I know that at some early organizing meetings of the New Party in Maryland, the initial core was pretty much white. And I know that that was also the case with the Commonwealth Coalition in Massachusetts. In both cases there was sincerity in trying to recruit people of color to the core, but I'm wondering what this tells us about the way groups get formed as opposed to what happens after they've been formed. Do you know what I mean?

SPRINGER: Because of the kinds of racism that are deeply entrenched in our society very often we are not even aware of what we are dealing with. You need a lot of work, a lot of time, a lot of sensitivity, a lot of understanding to work through some of the issues that we are talking about. This requires our full attention, looking at how our work, our structure and our issues can bring this out.

One of the reasons why I believe it's extremely important that we work on this is that this problem is so pervasive. If we can be successful, if

we can begin to come to grips with the understandable alienation that so many people of color feel, then we can be successful in building a true multi-cultural coalition and make the changes we need in our society. And it will help this country to be a leader in the world, which it cannot presently do because of its racist attitudes. It's a very tall order but it's fundamental to the kind of society we must build.

COLBURN: Trust is in short supply. That's where I think we go back to building a membership organization that actually takes up some issues in order to develop that trust factor and those real issues within minority communities.

LRR: **Let's turn to the issue of the relationship of both of your efforts to the labor movement. How in general has organized labor responded to both of your initiatives and what form of participation are you getting from unions? I don't mean nominal. I mean are they doing anything different? Are they organizing in any particular way that you think is noteworthy?**

SPRINGER: I think that LEAP, from the beginning, had a core of union participation that was stronger—UAW, Teachers, and other unions. LEAP has always had a decent relationship with the AFL-CIO. And I would note that the AFL-CIO is a key member of our sister coalitions in New Hampshire and Maine. But, for many union people, there were some adjustments which had to be made. They had to get used to working in coalitions with other forces and not necessarily be the leader. There needs to be equality.

I would emphasize that one of the great benefits of LEAP, with most of the major labor and other progressive organizations at the table, has been to sensitize our non-coalition partners to key union issues and build understanding on the part of unions to issues of other constituencies. For example, we simply don't have the tensions between unions and environmentalists in Connecticut, in part because of the relationships built through LEAP, that we see in other parts of the country. The groups in LEAP work very well together and work on similar issues. Most of the candidates that are endorsed by LEAP are endorsed by the AFL-CIO. I think there's some tension, I think it's healthy tension.

LRR: **When a union signs on to LEAP, what are they committing themselves to doing?**

SPRINGER: When a union signs up with LEAP they contribute money, they contribute time, produce significant numbers of volunteers, recruit candidates, people get training, we share information in terms of issues.

So I think that there is a real partnership.

LRR: Bruce, what about your effort?

COLBURN: I work for the AFL-CIO so I'm particularly in a middle position. I think the way that we've been able to break it down is that you have a series of people in the union that consider themselves progressives, consider themselves activists, who have come and actively joined up with Progressive Milwaukee. They've taken it up, and used it to spur activity in their own unions. I would say that's a small section.

I think the rest of the general union movement is very cautious towards Progressive Milwaukee. The idea of an inside-outside strategy to the Democratic Party or even having an independent voice makes some people nervous. But the nervousness will disappear over time as we work together. I think there's a general understanding among elected officials in the labor movement, and perhaps even more so amongst the rank and file, that we have to do something different. We need some sort of independence, like the Bernie Sanders people have created in Vermont or the Canadian unions have inside the NDP. We have to build up our own sort of labor clout or labor political machine and align with other people active in community and environmental struggles. I don't see any other choice. ■

