

Independent Political Action Today: A Response

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Independent Political Action Today: An Orientation by David F and Dianne F is a good starting point for a discussion of electoral activity in the US today. But to me, it is insufficiently critical of the prevalent attitude in DSA and in most of the reformist Left, which it correctly describes as:

Given the dominance of money and media attention necessary to compete in the longstanding two-party electoral system, the Democratic Party appears as the only alternative [for] defeating Republican candidates...

The piece proposes not to fight this sentiment, but rather to conduct electoral activity in its shadow:

We do not see a mass of voters ready to break with the Democrats in the present period, but the creation of independent campaigns at the local level can provide the opportunity to build for future possibilities of independent political action. We also promote referenda at the local and state level as an effective means to campaign for important rights, and we celebrate recent and successful initiatives on reproductive freedom, environmental justice and ballot rights.

This is a big step backward from the 1986 Solidarity Founding Statement, which declares forthrightly:

Indeed, in the U.S. the question of the Democratic Party is the most important principled and practical divide between the politics of reformism and revolutionary socialism.

Below are some additional excerpts from the Founding Statement on independent political action.

The Solidarity statement I'd like to see would add the following points to "IPA Today."

Two-party system

The two-party system in the US traps the working class in an endless debate over which representative of the ruling class is the lesser evil. The Democrats present themselves as more concerned about the poor, the specially oppressed, civil rights, and the environment than the Republicans are. The Republicans present themselves as more concerned about the economy, jobs, working families, and individual freedom than the Democrats are.

Both are capitalist parties, of course. They represent the ruling class, albeit with ideological and tactical differences. Their commonality is expressed in the massive bipartisan Keynesian bailout of the economy under Trump and Biden, the massive bipartisan military spending under both administrations, and the massive bipartisan funding for police, prisons, and border control.

Lacking a working-class alternative, a quarter of the electorate thinks that a Republican victory would lead to disaster; a quarter of the electorate, including a majority of white working-class voters, thinks that a Democratic victory would lead to disaster; and half the electorate, disillusioned with the political system, stays home.

“IPA Today” argues:

The two-capitalist-party system that has served U.S. elites and the ruling class for more than a century and a half, through all kinds of changes and crises, is becoming a factor of instability.

I see the situation differently. The failure of the capitalist system to solve its problems or to meet the needs of 90 percent of the population leads to the instability. Forty-five years of neoliberalism have worsened the crisis, not lessened it.

The two-party system continues, successfully, to channel the discontent into “lesser evil” politics. But to contain the greater social polarization requires a greater political polarization, greater extremes to the swing. For the Republicans, Trump and rightwing populism. For the Democrats, Sanders and a new New Deal.

From a socialist standpoint, the Democrats are certainly the lesser evil in the alternation. But the bigger problem is the demobilizing effect of the alternation. “Stop Trump. Fight Biden” becomes “Stop Trump. Don’t fight Biden.” Which leaves us with Biden and, quite possibly, a roundabout way back to Trump.

The Solidarity Founding Statement critiques this dynamic. Revolutionary socialists should reaffirm the critique.

Mass action

Having established this framework, I’ll cover the additional points of orientation more briefly.

Neither support for Democrats nor the marginal electoral activity proposed by “IPA Today” provides a way out. Only mass mobilization and mass action by the workers and the oppressed provide a way out.

Electoral activity can confirm victories won by mass action, but for revolutionary socialists its main uses are to put forward working-class demands, to expose the ways in which the capitalist political system thwarts those demands, and to support mass

action outside the electoral arena. Electoral success will come as a byproduct of mass action, as the mobilization of the workers and the oppressed demands and finds electoral expression in a working-class party.

Democratic Party

The Solidarity public statement on independent political action I'd like to see would oppose the Democratic Party as sharply as the Solidarity Founding Statement does. Substituting Donald Trump for Ronald Reagan, Joe Biden for Walter Mondale, and Bernie Sanders for Jesse Jackson, the statement expresses an attitude as correct today as it was in 1986.

Solidarity was divided on support for the Sanders campaigns of 2016 and 2020 and on support for Biden to stop Trump in 2020. Given the relatively low level of class struggle, support for Sanders and Biden in the Left was inevitable. But I'm still puzzled that it extended into Solidarity, given the clarity of the Founding Statement.

The comrades who took those positions should draw up a balance sheet of the results. Did the support for Sanders and Biden in the Left advance or retard the class struggle? How? Not to rehash 2016 and 2020, but to decide what to do now.

Limitations of local electoral activity

Local election campaigns and voter initiatives are a way to promote independent political action and should be pursued where possible. But revolutionary socialists should be candid about what they can achieve.

Local governments lack the funding and the authority to make major changes. They're usually so dysfunctional that municipal councils can do little. Even seemingly major changes, like rent control in Richmond, California, are limited by the city's lack of control over the housing stock. Often there are frustrated backlashes, as with the recall of Chesa Boudin.

Recent initiatives in Michigan have been successful, but they require an immense amount of work and can be circumvented or even used for reactionary purposes, as with the 2006 Michigan Proposal 2 to ban affirmative action. The experience in California has been much less positive.

Sometimes there is a major win, like adding abortion rights to the Michigan constitution. But usually the biggest gain is the experience of fighting, seeing the resistance, and being inspired to keep fighting.

A Resolution on Independent Political Action

If I were proposing a resolution on independent political action for the 2023 Solidarity Convention, it would be to return to the positions of the 1986 Founding Statement,

updated to reflect the deeper capitalist crisis, the greater polarization, and the change of names of the political actors.

I'm not proposing a resolution, however. We've debated the issue of supporting Democrats for eight years. We know each other's arguments. Now we mainly need to determine whether the experience of the past eight years has moved us beyond our previous divisions. Will we be able to agree on a common position for the 2024 elections?

Excerpts from the Solidarity Founding Statement on Independent Political Action

But nowhere has the decline and disorientation of the left been as acute as in the United States, and for revolutionary socialists in the U.S. this must be our practical starting point. The small forces of the revolutionary left in the U.S. face an acute crisis of perspective. That crisis cannot be overcome by ignoring it, or resolved by means of admiration and support for struggles in other countries.

A profound conservatization of the left, caused in part by the decline of dynamic mass opposition movements, has pulled many former radical activists into the Democratic Party. We are completely against this disastrous course, and we regard combating this trend as a basic task of socialist politics. There has been a smaller but equally disastrous drift toward Stalinist politics and a tendency toward organizational bureaucratism falsely packaged as "democratic centralism." We believe that revolutionary socialist regroupment, and the general political approach to be outlined in this statement, is a first step toward overcoming this crisis and rebuilding effective socialist politics and organization in the U.S...

There can be no single formula for building all the movements. We support any form of activity that mobilizes people and raises consciousness. However, the general drift to the Democratic Party has made itself felt in the movements, a retreat which in fact demobilizes activists, eases pressure on Congress and the Administration and thereby indirectly contributes to the drift to the right in both capitalist parties.

We favor strategies that combine a range of activities such as independent electoral activity or local initiative campaigns, broad unified mass actions, civil disobedience where this helps build the struggle, and ultimately a broad mass mobilization that links the struggle against intervention abroad to workers' struggles against austerity at home...

Much of the resistance that has arisen in recent years has taken an electoral form. Clearly the Rainbow Coalition is the most developed expression of this phenomenon. The desire to seek allies among all who seek to fight against social injustice is at the heart of the coalition, as well as a recognition that those who are oppressed by the

institutions of class rule must have a political voice. But at the same time the formation is locked within the confines of the Democratic Party...

In all areas of feminist organizing, we emphasize the self-activity and political development of women. As is true of other social movements, reliance on the Democratic Party has seriously weakened the women's struggle. We oppose campaigns, strategies, and forms of organization that encourage passivity, reliance on leaders, experts or politicians. We support strategies of direct action, educational campaigns, grass-roots mobilization. We are convinced that such strategies are the most effective way for women to win reforms. We also believe that the self-organization of women, their mobilization and development as political activists, is crucial to the re-emergence of a revolutionary socialist movement in the U.S...

The necessity for autonomous class action is at the root of our conception of independent political action. Class independence is at the heart of revolutionary socialist working-class politics, which emphasizes workers' self-organization, self-activity and reliance on their own strength — including building their own alliances with the oppressed. In the electoral arena, the principle of working-class self organization requires an independent party.

Lacking such a party, the working class and other progressive movements are reduced to pressure groups on bourgeois politics, no matter how militant their activity. This is the trap from which labor in the U.S. has yet to escape.

Just as we believe that workers, through their class institutions (the unions) should have a policy of challenging the employers rather than of accepting collaboration, we believe the same principle should apply in the arena of politics. Unlike reformists, we do not see ourselves as "critics" of the bourgeois parties, the Democratic and Republican parties, but as opponents. Indeed, in the U.S. the question of the Democratic Party is the most important principled and practical divide between the politics of reformism and revolutionary socialism.

The Party Line of reformism in the U.S. holds that the arena for progressive politics lies inside the Democratic Party. However frayed around the edges, however disunited on other issues, sectors of reformism come together on this question — from the most conservative to the most liberal wing of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, from the middle-class women's movement leadership to the mainstream leaders of civil rights organizations to the Rainbow Coalition, from liberal cold warriors to the Democratic Socialists of America.

In fact, the Democratic Party is the graveyard of movements for social and political change. It is a party controlled by and thoroughly tied to corporate capital, and for that reason is irrevocably committed to the maintenance of the world U.S. economic empire. It is therefore a party of intervention in Central America, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and the rest of the Third World; at home, its ability and will to advocate social reform is strictly limited by what capital is prepared to tolerate...

We believe, on the contrary, that independence from the Democratic Party is a decisive question, at least as important if not more so than any particular point in a formal program or platform. The willingness or unwillingness of the Rainbow Coalition or major forces within it to break from the Democratic Party determines whether the Rainbow offers the potential to seriously challenge two-party capitalist political hegemony, or is only a pressure group within the system which can be contained, then conservatized or defeated.

Unfortunately, there is no available evidence to suggest that this question is open inside the Rainbow: rather, Jackson and the Rainbow leadership are committed to working within the Democratic Party, indeed to saving the Democratic Party. We do not share that goal, and therefore for us any form of political support to the Rainbow Coalition is excluded. We make it clear through our literature, statements, etc. that we regard the overall political project of the Rainbow Coalition inside the Democratic Party to be a tragic dead end which blunts the enormous potential of the movement.

On the other hand, where Jesse Jackson or the Rainbow are engaged in actual activities such as anti-war demonstrations, civil rights struggles or speaking out for a just peace in the Middle East as Jesse Jackson has done, we of course support such actions even though we may not be in full agreement with every slogan. The positive attitude of movement activists in general toward the Rainbow Coalition is understandable and normal. While our views should be clear, we do not want these differences to be an obstacle to building demonstrations and solidarity actions in defense of Central America, against racism, etc.

Under present conditions there is, unfortunately, no clear-cut electoral strategy for the revolutionary left to follow. We are not anti-electoral. That is, wherever there are local, state or national initiatives of an independent radical character (ranging from anti-war, farmer-labor, Black, Latino, or environmentalist to socialist), the question of whether to support them, and how, is open for discussion.