• • • THE LEFT & THE DEMOCRATS

The debate about "lesser evilism" is often caught between two opposing positions. On the one hand, some claim that whatever the common agenda of the U.S. corporate elite, which both the Democrats and Republicans represent, there are nevertheless important differences between the two political parties. These differences require leftists to work for the election of one over the other.

On the other hand, there are those who argue that because of the common agenda of the U.S. corporate elite, which both the Democrats and Republicans represent, there is no significant difference between the two parties. The essential similarity between the two parties requires leftists to work for neither the Democratic nor Republican candidate.

Both of these positions are one-sided. If there were really no difference, or no significant difference, between the Democrats and Republicans then that would quickly become obvious, and it would be very difficult to convince anyone to vote for one candidate over another.

To be sure, the fact that roughly half of the eligible voters sit out presidential elections, and nearly two-thirds absent themselves from Congressional, state and local elections suggests the two parties are having increasing difficulty convincing large numbers of people that there are significant differences!

There are differences, nonetheless, over questions about appointing federal judges; abortion rights; how much to partner with other capitalist powers in assuring corporate domination of the world militarily and politically; what sort of pro-corporate tax and spending policies should be pursued; how hard, how fast, and how far to push in dismantling social programs, affirmative action, etc. All these do represent real differences between the major parties, and even among individual candidates within those parties.

At the same time all of these real differences — with the possible exception of abortion rights, where the pressure of a massive pro-choice movement has sharply limited the Democrats' option to capitulate to the hard right — fall into the category of secondary questions, especially small when compared to those programmatic elements on which the two parties agree.

That bipartisan agreement includes: that tax policies should promote profitability; that welfare, affirmative action and economic regulation need to be scaled back or dismantled; that U.S. military dominance must be maintained. When we vote for either a Democrat or a Republican for president we are voting for a continuation of the political priorities of the capitalist class.

Within the two-party system continued rule by political, economic and military elites remains unquestioned — only the policies designed to maintain that rule. We need to ask ourselves: What do we achieve if the "lesser evil" candidate wins? What do we lose? How do we balance these gains and losses against each other?

Perhaps most important, what would be required for the emergence of a genuine political alternative that will actually promote a tax policy that favors working people over the rich, expands social programs and affirmative action, and opposes military spending and wars abroad? If we examine the problem in a bit more depth, we will get some helpful insights.

Where Do the Differences Come From?

The differences that do really exist between Democratic and Republican politicians come from two sources. First, there are genuine disagreements among corporate rulers about what is in their best interests. The two most pressing questions that divide some Democrats and Republicans in 2004 revolve around tax and foreign policy.

Will tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy stimulate investment and the "trickling down" of jobs and income? Or will these tax cuts merely fuel larger federal deficits and spark inflation?

Should the United States move ahead unilaterally to impose its worldwide military dominance regardless of the desires of the European and Japanese capitalists and their governments? Or is multilateral military intervention, with the approval of the UN or NATO, less dangerous than U.S. unilateralism?

In different times and situations, either party will advocate one approach or another — there are no principles to sacrifice.

Working people and oppressed communities have a real stake in what answers are given to such questions by

Congress and the White House. On the surface this would appear to add credibility to the "lesser evil" argument that we should vote for candidates who advocate a more moderate fiscal and foreign policy.

WHAT DO WE ACHEIVE IF THE "LESSER EVIL" CANDIDATE WINS?

This conclusion is wrong. It incorrectly assumes that elections really determine what kinds of policies are carried out. It also ignores a second, and far more important, source of disagreement among Democratic and Republican politicians: different sensibilities regarding what corporate America can actually get away with before it faces a fightback from working people.

Here there is no disagreement about what would be desirable: Every cutback in social programs, every successful attack on the ability of unions to organize, every time inequality between men and women or between whites and people of color is sustained or expanded, Corporate America is the winner. The direct result is an increased ability to generate profits and to keep them in corporate pockets.

The answer to the question "what can corporate America get away with?" depends primarily on how much of an active fightback and resistance is likely to take place. It is on questions such as this that the left most immediately and acutely sacrifices its ability to make progress, or sustain historical gains, when we give our votes to a "lesser evil" candidate.

Inevitably, when activists get involved in delivering progressive voters to the lesser-evil Democrat, the work of building independent movements of struggle is derailed. And yet it is the real movements of resistance, not what happens at the ballot box, that hamper the ability of all corporate politicians to implement their agenda.

How We Got To Where We Are Today

We will probably all agree that at the dawn of the 21st century political discourse in most respects is more reactionary than at any time in the past two generations. (The exceptions are a tribute to mass struggles, the civil rights movement that smashed the legitimacy of open racism, the women's movement that demanded the right of women to make the basic decisions about their bodies and lives and the LGBT movement that demolished legally entrenched homophobia.)

If we look back to the late 1960s and early 1970s the contrast is stark indeed. Richard Nixon's social policies were miles to the left of those carried ou by Clinton, whom the right and the media effectively labeled as a "liberal."

In the first half of the 1970s we got troop out of Vietnam, more democratic access t government files with the Freedom of Information Act, and the formal dismantlin of COINTELPRO (the FBI's program of surveillance and disruption of antiwar and African-American organizations that began under the Democratic Johnson administration) Now we get the "war on terror," unregulated detentions immigrants, military courts, and the USA PATRIOT Act.

In the 1970s there was an expansion of affirmative action programs for women and minorities. Today affirmative action is rolled back everywhere. In the 1970s the federa government created social programs that, to a limited extent, redistributed income, and increased regulation of workplace safety and of environmental pollution. Today w get the dismantling of the vestiges of the meager U.S. welfare state and the rule of the "free market" over more and more aspects of our lives.

The difference, of course, is that during the 1960s and ear 1970s there was a dramatic upsurge of social struggles. Beginning with the civil rights rebellion in the South, continuing with the anti-Vietnam war movement, and the with the new wave of feminist struggles, the rise of the ga liberation movement, and a wave of official and unofficial strikes that shook U.S. manufacturing, mass struggles shift the center of political life to the left.

One thing that followed during the late 1970s and 1980s particular was the siphoning off of the energy of these movements into more "mainstream" forms of electoral p itics. Instead of mass movements that disrupted "busine as usual" helping to set the political agenda, the concern Democratic and Republican politicians and their corpor supporters increasingly shaped political discourse.

At first there were politicians who occupied some of th political space that had been opened up by mass struggl Many came to believe that these politicians had actually created the political space they occupied. The reality w quite different: Mass struggles created the political spac and the politicians had moved into it.

As the mass movements faded — often at the behest c these same politicians, who urged activists to get involv in "politics" rather than merely in "protest" — the spa got smaller and smaller. The politicians who had occup the space created by the social movements shrank in r

ber and moved to the right. Nevertheless, the leaders of the unions and social movements, in thousands of non-presidential elections, have enthusiastically backed Democrats without fail.

The result? In each election, the Democratic "lesser evil" is secure in her or his support from progressives, labor and oppressed minorities. The Democrats have no reason at all to give progressives or labor or minority communities anything — either in campaign promises or much less in policies once elected.

Instead, all the concessions have been made to the right, in order to win the support of corporate funders and more conservative, mainly white middle-income voters. With each election the center shifted, as the Democrats know that no matter what, progressives, labor and racial minorities have "no place to go." Little by little, we have arrived at the point where "liberal" is now a dirty word and the need for social welfare is dismissed as something of concern only to "special interests."

In some situations, the fruits are even more rotten. Democrats, including liberals, often elected with the support of labor, civil rights and other progressive constituencies, have implemented austerity and administered growing unemployment and declining living standards at the local, state and federal level. The frustration many working and oppressed people legitimately feel toward the Democrats is easily captured by the right.

This dynamic has been played out in California as we write. The failure of "New Democratic" Governor Gray Davis provided a fertile environment for the growth of the Republican right, which successfully pushed for a recall election. While some of the left backed an independent, Green candidate for governor, the support of the unions and minority organizations for Davis and the Democrats left those alienated by the Davis administration's bankruptcy open to appeals from Schwarzenegger and other Republicans. In California, the "Terminator" in the governor's mansion is the fruit of lesser-evilism.

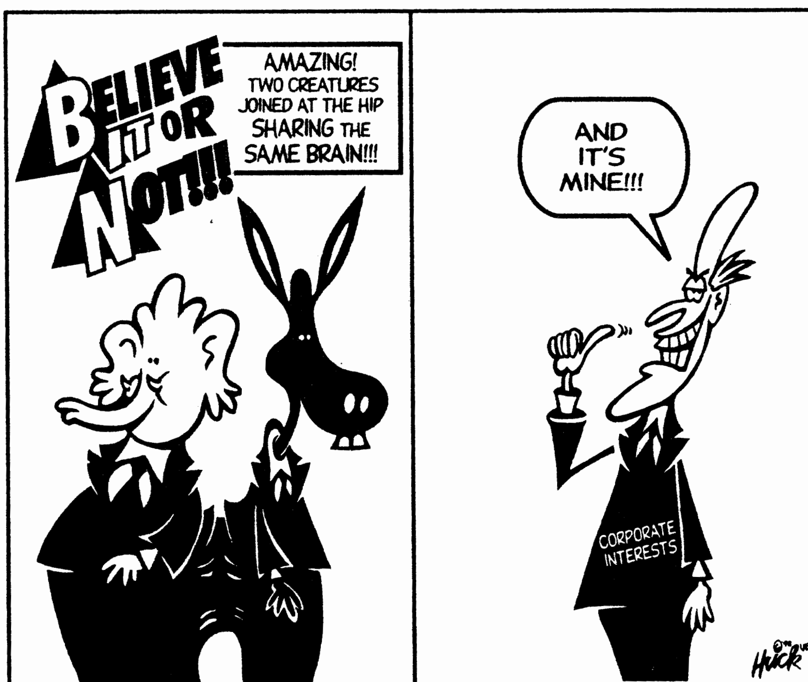
This political dynamic is obscene, of course. But the deeper tragedy is the way in which many on the left have allowed themselves to become trapped within it. When Richard Nixon was in office many leftists argued that he was the worst thing to ever happen in this country and had to be defeated at all costs. Then, when Ronald Reagan was in office they said the same thing. We heard the same arguments with Bush Sr., and now again with Bush Jr.

No question, each Republican president has been worse than the one before. But the same thing can be said of the "lesser evil" Democratic candidates and elected officials. This pattern is not accidental, and we need to learn something from the experience. None of this will change until we try a different approach.

False Assumptions

The lesser-evil strategy assumes that government policies are the result of elections. This assumption is simply incorrect. Yet it is often a matter of indifference (or only of marginal importance) to most within the corporate elite which party wins the election. They have many other means at their disposal to make sure the government carries out policies that are in their interests.

The programmatic differences between the two major parties, for the most part, are not significant enough to matter greatly to them. It is even common for big corporations, or rich individuals, to give money to both the Democratic and Republican candidates in order to have a finger in the pie no matter who is elected.



Commitments to the rest of us are another matter. When was the last time any president, or congressperson, or governor fulfilled their promises to working people once in office? There is always a fiscal crisis, a terrorist attack, or simply "practical politics" that dictates the limits of what can be done "within the system." The reality is that even the best-intentioned politicians, if they do not break from

"politics as usual," will be trapped in a web of obligations from which they cannot escape.

At times, to be sure, the bosses are in sharp disagreement with one candidate. For example, during the 1964 election when Barry Goldwater was deemed too dangerous and provocative a right-winger, Lyndon Johnson received overwhelming corporate support. Similarly, when George McGovern won the Democratic nomination in 1972 and was deemed too liberal, the majority of corporate support went to Richard Nixon.

Today, George W. Bush's policies are substantially to the right of Goldwater's. Yet the corporate ruling class is perfectly comfortable with Bush in the White House. The difference is the political moment. The corporate ruling class does not fear that a right-wing agenda will stimulate an unacceptable resistance from working people and the oppressed.

If our desire is to get Bush and everything he represents — the religious right zealots, the neocons, the militarists, the environmental rapists — out of the White House, then we need to make it too risky and costly for the U.S. ruling class to keep him there. Our main task is to turn up the heat through social protest and resistance.

U.S. elites have little to fear from popular anger at Bush's policies, so long as the main expression of dissent is electing a more moderate party of pro-corporate politicians. They will have little or no reason to stop supporting Bush with their campaign dollars and favorable coverage in the media, which they control.

Campaigning, fundraising, defending and voting for Democrats will not raise the social costs of keeping Bush in the White House. As many activists are drawn into Democratic electoral work, energy, time and money will drain away from the real source of our power.

What is more important to organize: a campus teach-in on Iraq, or a tea party for Dean? A die-in at Caterpillar to protest Israeli home demolitions, or a fancy dinner for Kerry? A house party for the Green candidate, where radical anti-corporate politics can be raised and debated, or an e-mailed fundraiser for Edwards? A showing to co-workers of "Shots on the Docks" — a video on the Oakland police attacks on longshore workers and antiwar protesters in April 2003 — or passing out slick photographs of Kerry? Developing a local speakers' bureau on the war, or developing rhetorical tricks to explain away the Democrats' support for occupying Iraq?

● ● ● THE DEMOCRATS & SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

From the industrial workers' movements of the 1930s through the civil rights and Black Power struggles o the 1950s and 1960s, to the anti-Vietnam War movement and the movements against "Reaganism" in the 1980s, the historical record in the United States demonstrates a consistent pattern. Social movements decline, even disappear, once key leaders decide to "be practical," subordinate mas militant struggles and get involved in traditional, Democratic electoral politics.

The Democrats and the Decline of the CIO

The CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations), the industrial union federation, was born in struggle. Since the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929, unemployment wage cuts and speedup had beaten workers down. By the early 1930s, radicals, socialists and communists had laid a foundation that led to the organization of the unemployed.

The unemployed workers' movements engaged in mass demonstrations, sit-ins at relief offices and direct actions t resist evictions. Despite facing severe repression from loc police and municipal governments (often with Democratic mayors), the unemployed movement won important gains and provided many workers with the experience that they could fight and win.

Many veterans of the unemployed movement, as they returned to work, together with radicals, socialists and communists who were in the big industrial workplaces, began to organize industrial unions. In 1934 a series of radical-led mass strikes — among Teamsters in Minneapol auto workers in Toledo, and dock workers in San Francisc — showed working people that they could win.

In each of these strikes the keys to victory were united struggle, the organization of democratic, rank-and-file rur unions, reliance on their own power in the streets rathe than politicians or government mediators, and building alliances with the unemployed and farmers.

The success of the 1934 strikes sparked a debate in the American Federation of Labor (AFL), whose unions wer divided along craft lines. Rank-and-file organizers in the

auto, rubber, steel, machine making, and other mass production industries, along with leaders of the miners' and clothing workers' unions, argued for industrial unionism that united everyone working in a particular industry regardless of their job or position.

While this strategy was rejected by the AFL, the CIO launched a series of organizing drives. Industrial unionism's ultimate test was the sit-down strike against General Motors in Flint, Michigan in 1936-37. The victory of the United Automobile Workers in Flint encouraged a wave of sit-downs in other industries and was decisive in the establishment of the CIO unions.

The emergence and victory of the CIO owed little to who was in the White House. Franklin Roosevelt, the first Democrat to win the presidency in twenty years, had been elected on a rather conservative program of balancing the federal budget to restore business confidence.

While unrest among the unemployed led Roosevelt to launch some public works programs in 1933 and 1934, the "first New Deal" did little to redistribute income or promote worker organization. The primary goal of the National Industrial Recovery Act, which was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, was to limit what Roosevelt deemed "destructive competition" among manufacturers by setting prices and production quotas.

The famous Section 7A, which recognized the right of workers to form unions of their own choosing, had no mechanisms for enforcement against recalcitrant employers. Rather than being granted the "right to organize" through legislation, the CIO unions seized this "right" through mass, direct action. The Roosevelt administration's policies moved in a more reform-oriented direction only in 1935 — after the strikes in Toledo, Minneapolis, and San Francisco — and in the midst of a continued strike wave.

The "second New Deal" marked a sharp shift to the left on the part of Roosevelt and the Democrats. The passage of the Social Security Act (which established unemployment insurance, pensions and cash relief for widows with children), the Fair Labor Standards Act (which established the forty-hour week and the minimum wage) and the National Labor Relations Act (which established legal mechanisms for union recognition) were all responses to the wave of strikes that shook U.S. industry between 1934 and 1937.

Roosevelt and the Democrats responded to industrial unrest with reforms. But in order to maintain the support of two key constituencies — the northern Democratic machines that represented urban real estate developers, and the segregationist southern Democrats ("Dixiecrats") who represented large planters — the New Deal reforms contained important limitations.

State governments would administer unemployment insurance and cash aid to single mothers (Aid for Dependent Children – AFDC) to insure local employers' need for cheap labor. Even more importantly, agricultural and domestic workers — who were overwhelmingly African Americans and other people of color — were excluded from the unemployment insurance, old age pensions, and the legal right to unionize.

The power and radicalism of the activism from rank-and-file workers that fueled the CIO upsurge not only frightened the corporate bosses and the Roosevelt administration, but a segment of the AFL officialdom as well. Led by John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers, dissident industrial union bureaucrats attempted to divert the CIO upsurge from militant direct action to more routine forms of bargaining and reliance on federal mediation.

In the wake of the GM sitdown, the new CIO bureaucracy was able to stop the spread of sitdown strikes to Chrysler and other auto manufacturers and established top-down control over the ultimately unsuccessful organizing at the "Little Steel" companies in 1937. A central element of the new CIO officialdom's program for taming industrial worker militancy was an alliance with the Democrats and the Roosevelt administration.

The role of most Democratic Party politicians — including many governors and mayors — in assisting the bosses and attempting to thwart the unions in their organizing campaigns gave rise to a fierce discussion within the CIO about whether a Labor Party should be formed. Many resolutions calling for an independent party based in the new industrial unions were passed by locals of CIO unions, and even at international conventions of the United Auto Workers.

The allegiance of the CIO leaders to Roosevelt and the Democrats, however, quashed any serious discussion of an independent party that could present the views of working people in the electoral arena. Labor's support for Roosevelt in the closely contested 1936 election was crucial to his reelection.

The Democrats repaid the CIO leadership in 1937 when the Democratic mayor of Chicago dispatched the police to shoot unarmed "Little Steel" strikers at a Memorial Day picnic. Roosevelt's response was to call down a "plague on both your houses" — both the steel corporations and the unions.

Labor's alliance with the Democrats, combined with a desire not to appear "unpatriotic," led both the AFL and CIO leaders to give up the right to strike during the Second World War. With the help of the Roosevelt administration, the labor officials stamped out the tradition of "quickie" strikes over shop-floor issues and imposed the bureaucratic grievance procedure to adjudicate workplace conflicts.

THE AFL-CIO'S ANTAGONISM TOWARD THE CIVIL RIGHTS, WOMEN'S & ANTIWAR MOVEMENTS ISOLATED IT FROM IMPORTANT POTENTIAL ALLIES.

By the end of the war, the CIO unions had been housebroken. The officials tightly controlled the post-war strike wave, and inflation quickly wiped out the wage gains won during the strikes.

The corporations were so confident after the war that they successfully pushed through the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which placed legal obstacles in the way of union organizing (especially in the south) and gave the federal government the right to stop nationwide strikes.

Despite the crucial role the unions played, once again, in electing Roosevelt's successor, Harry Truman, and a Democratic majority in Congress in 1948, the Democrats have never repealed the Taft-Hartley Act.

In pursuit of its alliance with the Democratic Party, the AFL-CIO leadership adapted its politics to the corporate interests that dominated the Democrats throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The unions accepted the corporate argument that overseas investment and trade were essential to economic expansion and continued prosperity for U.S. workers.

As a result, most of the AFL-CIO leadership supported the "cold war" interventionist foreign policy of the Democrats, and assisted CIA efforts to undermine militant labor movements as well as left leaning governments in the Third World. The AFL-CIO also abandoned its demands for national health insurance and public housing, and adapted to conservative pressures from the Democrats.

When the civil rights movement began to challenge the American version of apartheid in the South, the AFL-CIO refused to challenge the racist Dixiecrats. The AFL-CIO did not support the 1963 March on Washington organized by Martin Luther King, Jr. and removed A. Philip Randolph fro its Executive Board for criticizing its inaction.

The AFL-CIO bureaucracy's policy was ultimately self-defeating. Through the 1950s and 1960s, the size of the unions and their alliance with the Democratic Party masked the fundamental weakness of the labor movement So long as profits were high and employers granted wage increases — in exchange for unions giving up any attempt to control the pace and nature of work — the unions seemed to be doing all right. But when the U.S. and globa capitalist economy entered a prolonged crisis in the late 1960s and the corporate employers began to attack the unions, labor's weaknesses became apparent.

The AFL-CIO's antagonism toward the civil rights, women' and antiwar movements isolated it from important potential allies, while its continued reliance on the Democrats served as a substitute for militant action against the employers and their government. The bureaucratic unions allied to the Democrats were unable to respond to the turn of politicians in both parties to fiscal restraint and deregulation, and by major corporations to new methods of "lean production" during the mid-1970s.

The "barren marriage" of labor and the Democrats has produced a union movement that has declined from nearly 35% of the workforce in the 1960s, to less than 15% toda The rightward moving Democrats know that they have little or no reason to make any significant concessions to th labor movement. The AFL-CIO has no place to go electorally besides the Democrats and has neglected workpla and social militancy as a means of building power for working people for decades.

The African-American Struggle

At the beginning of the 20th century nearly three-quarte of African Americans lived in the rural South, working as sharecroppers, tenant farmers, or domestics. White supremacy, based on the Southern plantation system, was codified in the legal and social practices of segregation ar disenfranchisement. The reorganization of Southern agri ture and the growth of Northern industry in the early 2 century opened the road both to massive Black migratic and to a challenge to the brutal Jim Crow system.

Between 1915 and 1920 a million African Americans migrated to the urban North; tens of thousands more moved to cities in the South or West. Another million

rural Black people migrated to cities during the 1920s. Despite the discrimination African Americans faced in the Northern urban centers, they were able to create a community, build their own organizations, and begin to confront discrimination and segregation.

The Depression of the early 1930s cut migration to a trickle, as Black workers were laid off in disproportionate numbers. During the 1930s, however, Black workers joined interracial unemployed organizations and, with the founding of the CIO, joined unions that actively sought to include them.

The Great Migration resumed during World War II, as the expansion of war industry created millions of new jobs, practically eliminating unemployment in the Northern manufacturing centers. Most industries initially refused to hire Blacks. By 1944, despite widespread discrimination on the job, African Americans made up more than eight percent of the workers in war production.

At the beginning of the war A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters initiated a "Double V" campaign: victory against fascism abroad and victory against racism at home. Faced with pressure from civil rights organizations and the CIO unions, Roosevelt banned racial discrimination in the defense industry and federal government employment.

African Americans continued to face racist resistance. During the summer of 1943 alone there were 250 anti-Black race riots in forty-seven cities. There were also a wave of "hate strikes" — when white workers walked off jobs to oppose the hiring or promotion of African Americans in traditionally "white" jobs in the war economy.

Three million African-American men and women served in the armed forces (segregated into all-Black units, commanded by often racist white officers and military police), with half serving overseas. Black officers and enlisted personnel fought against the Jim Crow in the military. In response, the federal government began to take small steps toward desegregation.

Once a legal order was issued, African-American soldiers fought to make it a reality. Lt. Jackie Robinson — who would break the color line in major league baseball after the war — refused to sit in the back of a bus in Texas after the War Department issued a directive in 1944 against discrimination in transportation and recreational facilities on all military bases. Arrested and court martialed, Robinson was vindicated. His is but one of many cases.

Throughout the war, the African-American community fought segregation and disenfranchisement through both direct actions and legal means. NAACP chapters carried out local mass action opposing restrictive covenants (Chicago), discrimination at lunch counters (Newton, Kansas) and segregated theaters (Council Bluffs, Iowa). They carried out voter registration (Roosevelt, Alabama) and staged the country's first lunch counter sit-ins (Topeka, Kansas).

The chapters were aided by NAACP Field Director Ella Baker, who, after she became Director of Branches in 1943, set up ten leadership training conferences for activists in the Black community.

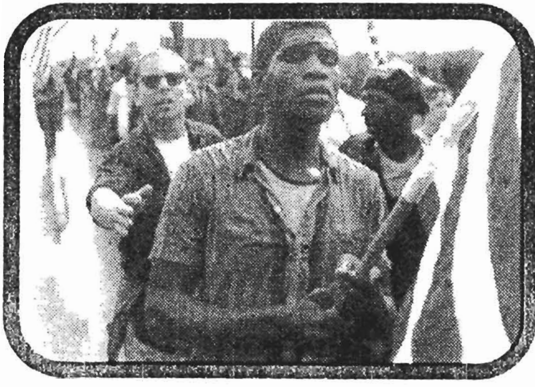
In 1946, in the aftermath of the massive postwar strike wave, the CIO launched "Operation Dixie" — an ambitious campaign to organize unions in the South. "Operation Dixie," to be successful, would have had to confront Jim Crow segregation and disenfranchisement as the precondition for uniting Black and white workers in industrial unions in the South.

Such a labor-led civil rights movement would have put the CIO on a collision course with the Democratic Party, which relied on the support of Southern landowners and the disenfranchisement of African Americans for the party's regional and national political supremacy. The CIO officials, however, feared the prospect of confrontation with the Democratic "friends of labor," with whom they also sought to join in the anti-communist Cold War crusade. As a result, they abandoned "Operation Dixie."

The failure of "Operation Dixie" did not spell the end of the African-American community's struggle against the Jim Crow system. The declining importance of the Southern landowning classes — the main social base of support for legal segregation and disenfranchisement — opened the possibility of successful struggle against white supremacy in the South.

The social transformation of the Southern African-American communities — with a growing urban working and middle class in the South, and the experiences of many Blacks returning from the war or from working in the Northern cities — set the stage for the emergence of the mass civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

This movement rooted itself in local struggles that forced the entrenched Southern power structure to abandon legal segregation and disenfranchisement. It was a movement that had the power to force the federal government — whether Republicans or Democrats were in office — to act against Jim Crow, despite the vacillation of both parties.



Marching in Montgomery

By the spring of 1951, students at a Black high school in Farmville, Virginia protested their inadequate conditions and, led by Barbara Johns, went out on strike. The spirited 16-year-old sent off an appeal to NAACP lawyers, who agreed to come to Farmville for a meeting — not realizing it was "the children" who had initiated the contact.

The lawyers explained that they had no mandate to sue for better Black schools, only for integrated ones. At a mass meeting the community — overwhelmed by students' audacity — voted to proceed with a federal suit challenging "separate but equal" schools. Their case, plus four others (from Delaware, Kansas, South Carolina and the District of Columbia), became part of the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision. On May 17, 1954 the Court ruled racial segregation of public schools unconstitutional.

In December 1955, following the arrest of Montgomery, Alabama NAACP activist Rosa Parks for failing to give up her seat to a white passenger, a one-day bus boycott was called for the day of Parks' trial. The Women's Political Council, led by JoAnn Robinson, initiated the boycott and distributed more than 52,000 leaflets throughout Montgomery's Black community.

The buses rolled through the city empty, and several thousand came together that evening for a rally that formed the Montgomery Improvement Association. What was planned as a one-day boycott lasted 381 days and involved 42,000 protesters, who walked or car pooled until the U.S. Federal District Court ruled in favor of the NAACP's legal challenge to overturn segregated seating in public transportation.

Although Montgomery wasn't the first successful bus boycott, for Ella Baker of the NAACP the sustained outpouring of community support meant there was the possibility of building a mass civil rights movement. Back in New York City, Baker worked with Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levison to organize a meeting that launched the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Moving back to Atlanta to head up the SCLC's voter registration drive, Baker saw the SCLC as a vehicle for the creation of a mass movement based on local leadership and organizing.

Four students launched a sit-in to desegregate a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, NC on February 1, 1960. By April, anti-segregation sit-ins had taken place in 125 cities. Baker helped organized a meeting of leading Southern student activists that spring. The SCLC provided the funding, but Baker counseled the students to maintain their independence rather than become a youth affiliate of SCLC.

The creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) provided new energy for the civil rights movement. Based in local activism, SNCC organized direct action and voter registration in both urban and rural areas of the South. Able to adapt quickly to changing conditions, SNCC became the movement's cutting edge.

The activists who initiated the civil rights struggle, like those who led the CIO upsurge in its early days, were not focused on winning favor with politicians. Instead, their goal was to build a political force that could effectively demand change.

Among these organizers were long-time labor activists such as E.D. Nixon, a leader of the Montgomery NAACP and member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; ministers like James Lawson, Martin Luther King, and Fred Shuttlesworth; students such as Ruby Doris Robinson, Charles Sherrod, John Lewis, Diana Bevel Nash, James Bevel, Gloria Richardson and Bernice Reagon; grassroots organizers like Fanny Lou Hamer; and seasoned organizers including Medgar Evers and Amzie Moore. They found support in community educators such as Septima Clark.

The militancy and determination of the civil rights movement forced both Republican and Democratic administrations in Washington to take action against racist violence and in support of desegregation and the right of African Americans to vote.

The Republican Eisenhower administration dispatched troops to Little Rock, Arkansas to enforce federal school desegregation rulings. Eisenhower insisted that the law be obeyed, but sought a compromise with Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, and repeatedly argued he could think of few things worse than using federal force.

The Kennedy administration, while trying to limit civil rights activism to voter registration drives, was also compelled to stem violent white resistance to the African-American freedom struggle in the South. (The liberal Kennedy also authorized the FBI wiretap of Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders.)

The heart of the Kennedy administration's civil rights policy was to maneuver and compromise, hoping to get Southern Democrats to make the minimal concessions necessary and maintain Democratic control of the "solid South." Dr. King wrote that the negotiations between Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett and Kennedy over James Meredith's court-ordered admission to the University of Mississippi" made Negroes feel like pawns in a white man's political game." (Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters, America in the King Years, 1954-63*, 672)

Ultimately it was Lyndon Johnson, a white Texan, who presided over the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which effectively abolished legal segregation and re-enfranchised Black voters in the South.

In February 1964 SNCC workers decided to launch a broad campaign to register Southern Black voters. SNCC activists combined "freedom registration" of voters in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) with registering African-American voters in the official Democratic Party.

In the weeks following the founding of the MFDP, its members attempted to attend precinct and county meetings of the regular party, but were excluded. They organized independent MFDP precinct and county meetings to establish their party's legitimacy, preparing to challenge the regular delegation at the national Democratic Convention in Atlantic City that August.

Victoria Gray, a civil rights worker from Hattiesburg, was chosen to oppose Senator John Stennis, and SNCC worker Fanny Lou Hamer was to be a congressional candidate. Eight hundred delegates attended the MFDP state convention and elected sixty-eight delegates to go to Atlantic City.

President Johnson was determined to avoid any action that might weaken his support among Southern whites and asked the FBI to surveil MFDP forces. The delegation realized they might not achieve their goal of unseating the regular delegation, but expected a compromise that would seat both delegations.

Instead Johnson, after heavily pressuring the Credentials Committee, offered Aaron Henry and Edwin King at-large seats at the convention, while the others would be "guests." Additionally, it was promised that the 1968 convention would bar any state delegation that discriminated against Blacks. Despite the intense lobbying from liberal Democratic stalwarts like Walter Reuther of the UAW, the MFDP delegates overwhelmingly rejected the compromise.

Some MFDP leaders, and particularly SNCC activists, saw the 1964 Democratic National Convention as a test of their strategy of appealing to the federal government. They concluded that mainstream liberal allies — especially the civil rights and labor establishment — had deserted the MFDP because their ties to the national Democratic Party were paramount.

These activists drifted away from MFDP, seeking more radical political alternatives. Many were attracted to the ideas of Malcolm X, who in the last year of his life was embracing a strategy for African-American struggle that rejected reliance on either the Democrats or Republicans.

The success of the civil rights struggle in the South demonstrated both the power of collective, direct action and the limits of legal equality. While the end of Jim Crow and disenfranchisement was a tremendous step forward for African Americans and other people of color, neither the Civil Rights Act nor the Voting Rights Act attacked the systematic and institutionalized racism that was quite visible in the northern cities.

Disproportionate levels of unemployment and poverty, job discrimination, residential segregation and unequal education all persisted despite the establishment of legal equality. The "ghetto insurrections" of 1965-1968 led a generation of Northern African-American activists to seek more radical solutions to the problems of racism, poverty and exploitation.

Organizations like the Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers took up the demand for "Black Power" first raised by SNCC leaders like Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown. "Black Power" was a call for African-American self-organization and for a mass movement that would confront the connections between institutional racism and the capitalist system. "Black power" resonated with many young African-American activists who had organized in the South and who had gone through the MFDP experience.

Toward the end of his life, Martin Luther King sought to make these links through his Poor People's Campaign, which sought to force the federal government to radically expand jobs creation programs for the working poor, and establish national health insurance. King understood that as long as "profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the triple evils of racism, militarism and economic exploitation are incapable of being conquered." (Manning Marable, *Black American Politics*, 105).

The new wave of militancy among African Americans and other people of color forced both the Democratic Johnson

and Republican Nixon administrations to enlarge government social services to an unprecedented extent. Johnson's "War on Poverty" programs focused on education and job training, but did little to redistribute income through job creation, a higher minimum wage, or new social entitlements.

Perhaps the most important long-term effect of Johnson's effort was the creation of "Community Action Programs" that sought to integrate poor people and their advocates into the administration of the new education and job training programs. From the ranks of the administrators of federal anti-poverty agencies, a new layer of African-American Democratic activists were recruited, many of whom would become elected local and state officials in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

It is a testament to the power of the Black struggle that it was able to compel Richard Nixon, the most right-wing president in a generation, to implement social welfare policies that were much more radical than the Democrat Johnson. Under Nixon, not only was federal affirmative action in employment and education established, but the minimum wage raised, new entitlements and jobs programs created, new workplace health and safety regulations enacted, and there was a national discussion of the possibility of establishing a federally guaranteed minimum annual income.

African Americans and people of color alone were unable to mount a successful challenge to the systemic capitalist roots of institutional racism. The logical ally in such a struggle, the labor movement, had been tamed by the post-war prosperity. The AFL-CIO's bureaucracy was steeped in business unionism, conservatism, and reliance on electing Democratic "friends of labor."

Separated from the organized working class, African-American and other radicals of color were effectively marginalized and all too easily repressed. The FBI and other federal and local law-enforcement agencies were systematically infiltrating and undermining the civil rights and Black Power movements.

By the end of the 1960s, federal operations like the FBI's COINTELPRO — set up in 1967 during the Democratic Johnson administration — were literally wiping out radical Black leaders and brutally disrupting organizations like the Black Panther Party. By the end of the 1970s twenty-eight Panthers had been killed and many others were in jail or forced to leave the country to avoid arrest.

As the radical Black left declined, a new layer of politicians began to take political leadership in the African-American community. Many of these new Black Democrats were recruited from the ranks of the "Great Society" anti-poverty programs. These forces were already removed from the arena of militant social protest and reliant on the national and local Democratic machine for their positions in the new social service and educational apparatus.

For these moderate Black leaders the election of more people like themselves to office as Democrats was the natural strategy for the advancement of African-American interests. By the early 1970s, the debate between "protest" and "politics" in the African-American community was decided in favor of a newly emerging Black Democratic urban machine.

In its own terms, the new Black Democratic machine was very successful. Before 1965 there were fewer than 500 African-American elected officials in the United States. Today there are more than 5,000 in the South alone. Between 1901 and 1955, only four African Americans served in the House of Representatives. Today, the Congressional Black Caucus boasts thirty-eight members.

The number of African Americans in both the federal and state legislatures grew from fewer than 200 in 1970 to over 600 today. While most of the African-American elected officials are found in small towns and cities and on school boards, Black mayors have run a number of major urban centers such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Boston and New York.

African Americans still hold proportionately fewer elected offices than their percentage of the U.S. population. Black electoral successes, however, have brought some gains to African-American communities. African-American elected officials have been able to extend government contracts to minority businesses as well as hiring minority administrators and professionals. There has also been some improvement in the delivery of vital services — garbage collection, repairs to public housing, schools and community centers — to the Black community.

Most big city police departments are no longer run by notorious racists — although police brutality hasn't disappeared by any stretch of the imagination.

More significantly, though, African-American elected officials — especially those running towns and cities — have been forced to administer austerity. Like their white counterparts, mayors and other elected officials of color have had to cut social services, on which working class and minority communities most rely. They have opposed the demands of teachers and other public employees

(the majority of whom, in many municipalities are people of color).

At the same time, local officials, Black and white, have sought to stimulate investment in their areas through tax breaks and other subsidies to the corporations. The "urban redevelopment programs" of Black mayors in the big cities have gutted working-class and poor neighborhoods, while "revitalizing" the center cities with new office towers and middle-class shopping malls.

Overall, while a new African-American middle class of small business people, professionals and managers have benefitted from the emergence of minority-run Democratic city governments, the vast majority of working and poor people of color have borne the brunt of declining numbers of unionized public and private sector jobs, the growth of low-wage employment in urban services, and social service austerity.

At the federal level, despite the loyalty of African Americans and other voters of color to the Democratic Party and the growth of Black and Latino representation in Congress, social services such as AFDC continue to be dismantled and affirmative action rolled back, even under the Democratic Clinton administration.

In place of anti-capitalist radicalism, the new Black Democratic establishment — along with the rest of the Democratic Party — is promoting "free market" solutions to poverty and despair in Black America. Charles Rangel, the African-American New York Democratic Congressman — ranking Democrat on the House Ways and Means Committee, Chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee and founding member of the Black Congressional Caucus — is leading the way. *(http://rangel.house.gov/lez_vision.shtml)*

Rangel is one of the leading advocates of "enterprise zones" in depressed urban communities. In these "enterprise zones" — often described as "North American maquiladoras" — corporations willing to invest are given huge subsidies and tax breaks and the public education system is revamped to serve the labor needs of the new local employers. The "enterprise zone" in Rangel's Harlem home district has transformed 125th Street into a shopping mall for Harlem's middle class, but has brought mostly low-wage, part-time and seasonal employment to Harlem's working-class and poor residents.

Once again, as "politics" — support for the Democrats — replaced "protest," the movement declined and the gains of the past came under attack. Today, antiracist activists are engaged in a bitter defensive battle to preserve what remains of affirmative action, while African-American Democrats are almost giving up the fight for real improvements in social welfare and expanded public sector employment.

The Anti-Vietnam War Movement and the Democrats

Beginning in 1965, thousands of students, civil rights activists and radicals began to build a movement against the barbarous U.S. war against the Vietnamese people. Over the next eight years, millions of people took to the streets to demand that Washington cease its brutal bombing of Vietnam and withdraw its nearly 500,000 ground troops from Southeast Asia.

Although the antiwar movement was organized around opposition to the war, contingents and feeder marches allowed extensive self-organization. African Americans carried banners with slogans such as "No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger." Asian Americans and feminist contingents connected their issues to the war. Native Americans, who were organizing fish-ins and reoccupations of their historic land, made the point that U.S. foreign policy was similar to the government's policy of extermination, forcible removal and paternalism toward them. Beginning in 1968 veterans — including Vietnam vets — and antiwar GIs often led the marches.

The antiwar movement utilized a diversity of tactics — from teach-ins and sit-ins at colleges and universities across the country to mass demonstrations of up to one million people in Washington, DC and San Francisco; from draft resistance to organizing active-duty GIs and Vietnam veterans against the U.S. war. The antiwar movement's ability to disrupt "business as usual" for almost eight years was the source of its power and radicalism.

The antiwar movement created a generation of activists who understood that the Vietnam war was not a "mistake" — as moderates and liberals claimed — but part and parcel of U.S. imperialism's strategy to dominate the world. Repulsed by the naked face of U.S. aggression, and inspired by the determined resistance of the Vietnamese, the Black revolt and growing worker unrest at home, and their own power, thousands of young people embraced radical, anti-capitalist politics in the 1960s and early 1970s. As Max Elbaum points out in his recent book of the same name, "revolution was in the air" after 1968.

The antiwar movement had a powerful impact. Together with the determined military resistance of the Vietnamese, the movement forced the U.S. state to first de-escalate its war and to eventually withdraw in defeat from Indochina. After being elected with the largest majority in U.S. history in 1964, Lyndon Johnson was forced by antiwar protests to withdraw from the 1968 presidential race.

NIXON WROTE THAT "ALL THE PROTESTS" HAD PREVENTED THE U.S. FROM USING NUCLEAR WEAPONS AGAINST THE VIETNAMESE.

Even more importantly, Johnson temporarily stopped the bombing of northern Vietnam and initiated negotiations with the Vietnamese resistance movement. The antiwar movement continued to grow under the right-wing Republican administration of Richard Nixon. Nixon, no "dove," was forced to begin to withdraw U.S. troops from Vietnam in 1969. He later wrote that "all the protests" had prevented the U.S. from using nuclear weapons against the Vietnamese.

In late 1969, one of Nixon's aides sent a top secret memorandum to Henry Kissinger warning that "[t]he nation could be thrown into internal physical turmoil," requiring the "brutal" suppression of "dissension," if the U.S. used nuclear weapons. They were afraid not of Congressional Democrats or electoral opposition but mass, militant mobilizations.

In 1973, after unsuccessfully trying to bomb the Vietnamese into submission, Nixon was forced to engineer the final withdrawal of U.S. troops from Indochina. Despite Nixon's claims to the contrary — and continuing U.S. aid to the puppet regime in southern Vietnam — the U.S. withdrawal in 1973 was tantamount to a surrender. In 1975, the Vietnamese national resistance took power.

From the beginning of the antiwar movement, moderate and liberal forces tried to convince activists to channel their energies into the election campaigns of ostensibly antiwar Democrats. In 1968, many young people opposed to the war flowed into the campaigns of Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy. Kennedy's assassination cleared the way for the nomination of Hubert Humphrey. Humphrey, who became Johnson's vice-president as a reward for his role in convincing the MFDP delegation not to "disrupt" the 1964 convention, was one of the engineers of the escalation of the Vietnam War.

The pro-war Democratic establishment did not merely marginalize the McCarthy forces — who received no platform concessions or positions in the Democratic leadership — in the institutions of the party. At the Chicago Convention in 1968, Democratic Mayor Richard Daley unleashed his notoriously racist and brutal police force on antiwar demonstrators, many of whom were McCarthy supporters.

The McCarthy campaign was a diversion for the antiwar movement. There was, however, a significant wing of the movement that rejected reliance on the Democrats. Part of this left wing also built the antiwar 1968 presidential campaign of Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver on the Peace & Freedom Party ticket, which provided a small but significant alternative to the morass of Democratic Party politics — despite many antiwar activists' support for Kennedy or McCarthy.

After 1968, there was a significant core of organizers that insisted on continuing to build street demonstrations and other active forms of protest. As the war continued and tens of thousands of GIs — disproportionately working class and people of color — died, the activist core was able to maintain an antiwar movement whose power the Democratic-controlled Congress as well as Nixon, the right-wing Republican, had to recognize.

In 1972, the liberal and moderate wing of the antiwar movement did what it could not in 1972 — it captured the Democratic Convention and nominated George McGovern for president. However, the real centers of power in the Democratic Party — the capitalists and labor officials who funded the Democrats — simply refused to campaign for McGovern. Further, millions of dollars that would have usually funded a Democrat flowed into the campaign of Richard Nixon. The result was Nixon's "landslide" reelection in 1972.

Hoping never again to alienate the corporate backers of the Democrats and disgusted with the AFL-CIO's role as a "special interest" in the party, many former McGovern forces became central leaders of the Democrats' drift to the right in the 1980s and 1990s. Both Bill Clinton and John Kerry were moderate opponents of the war in Vietnam, enthusiastic supporters of George McGovern in 1972, and key architects of the Democratic Party's embrace of "free market" neoliberal politics in the past two decades.

The Women's and Gay & Lesbian Movements

The "second wave" of feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s marked the coming together of two groups of women. The first were young activist women in the civil rights and antiwar movements who discovered an "invisible barrier" that limited their full participation in social movements. The subtle, and not so subtle, sexism of many male leaders of the civil rights and antiwar movements convinced many women of the need to organize independently.

The second were working women, who found sexist laws and practices that limited them to the "pink collar ghetto" of low-paying clerical and service jobs. Given the social ferment of the 1960s, these women began to discuss and define their problems and formulate challenges to a status quo that rigidly defined "womanhood."

The energy of the early women's movement came out of local consciousness-raising groups, caucuses within unions and professional organizations, and independent women's organizations. It was based on campus, in the workplace and in the community. It raised a public discussion of issues previously defined as "personal," and thus beyond public awareness: the way gender forces individuals to assume rigid social roles, inequality within the family, violence against women, and sexuality.

This meant that it had to confront homophobia and welcome lesbians as lesbians into the women's movement. It examined every institution within society, and demanded the right of women to control their own bodies and their own lives.

When Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminist Mystique,* called for women to celebrate the 50th anniversary of women's suffrage by "getting out of the kitchen and into the streets," enough women's organizations had been created to organize local demonstrations in hundreds of cities on August 26, 1970. Hundreds of thousands of women poured into the streets around three key themes: "Equal Wages for Equal Work," "24 Hour, Community-Controlled Childcare," and "Free Abortion on Demand."

The feminist challenge introduced the demand for women's equality into every element of U.S. society — including religion, politics, work, sports and the media. The women's movement changed many aspects of society and transformed women's expectations of themselves.

The vision women dreamt has not become the reality. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was defeated; women are still concentrated in low-paying clerical and service jobs; violence against women is an everyday occurrence. While the overwhelming majority of women — including women with young children — work outside the home, childcare remains the responsibility of individual women.

The movement also developed "speak outs" in which women talked about "illegal" abortions they or their friends and relatives had. The dramatic testimony illustrated the need to abolish repressive anti-abortion laws. After a series of class action suits and demonstrations at state capitols across the country, and growing judicial opinion that laws banning abortion violated the U.S. Constitution's protection of privacy, in 1970 the New York State legislature legalized abortion.

In 1973 the U.S. Supreme Court declared unconstitutional all state laws restricting abortion in the first trimester of pregnancy, allowing some restrictions in the second trimester and further restrictions in the third. Despite this legal victory, abortion remains unavailable in most counties across the United States.

Over the last thirty years — even as the mainstream women's movement has become increasingly integrated into the Democratic party — federal and state laws have circumscribed women's right to choose. Restrictions on public funding for abortions have severely limited poor women's access to reproductive health care.

While the women's movement's agitation against forced sterilization of poor women and women of color resulted in stricter federal guidelines for sterilization procedures, women's reproductive needs remain unmet. Today, the policies needed to guarantee women's reproductive freedom — from quality sex education to the resources needed to raise healthy children — are absent from the agenda of both the Republicans and Democrats. In a society that values "responsibility" and "hard work," women — particularly women of color — are demonized as "lazy," "irresponsible" and "sexually promiscuous."

The "culture wars" launched by the radical right targeted, to a large extent, the women's movement. The conservative assault glorified women's secondary status in the name of "traditional values." It gave the status quo forces in Congress and in the state legislatures the justification to wait out the time limit on the ERA, to deny women on welfare the right to abortion and, later, to limit their right to public assistance.

The feisty women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s no longer exists. But it established a diffuse feminist consciousness and left behind a number of marginally confrontational women's organizations. Some local groups

continue to organize, such as the antiwar Women in Black groups, women fighting for environmental justice, and women of color organizations struggling against both racism and sexism.

National organizations, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), have paid staff that enable them to issue statements or organize conferences and actions. Gender studies courses at the university are educating the next generation of women, but these classes have never had a secure funding base and today they are threatened by the economic crisis in higher education.

The weakness of the contemporary women's movement is clearly rooted in the decline of other social movements, the loss of several important feminist battles, economic insecurity, widening inequalities and a sustained right-wing offensive. However, the failure of the women's movement to develop an independent political voice that can pose an alternative pole of attraction to right-wing ideas has also contributed to the movement's decline.

In the early 1990s, Ellie Smeal, former president of NOW and head of the Feminist Majority, organized a conference for women and their allies in the labor and civil rights movements to discuss independent political action. The energetic conference produced a platform and called for the formation of a new party, a Party for the 21st Century. But it was stillborn, disappearing without even an explanation for its demise.

THE FEISTY WOMEN'S MOVEMENT OF THE LATE 1960S & EARLY 1970S NO LONGER EXISTS.

Like its allies in the trade unions, the mainstream women's movement decided to be "practical" and mobilize its members to support one or another Democrat (and an occasional Republican). The "there are two political parties" orientation of the Women's Political Caucus has reinforced such a decision. Like the trade union movement, NOW did not mobilize against the anti-women legislation passed under the Clinton administration — from NAFTA to the abolition of "welfare as we have known it."

For the 2004 presidential election NOW voted to support Carole Moseley Braun as the Democratic candidate, as "a prime example of what feminists strive for." *(See "NOW Targets George W. Bush for Defeat in 2004," National NOW Times, Fall 2003).* Since Moseley Braun has withdrawn from the race and thrown her support to Dean, will NOW and the mainstream feminist organizations will line up behind whomever the Democrats nominate — no matter how vacillating on issues of reproductive rights, social welfare and other issues of concern to working women?

The contemporary gay and lesbian movement, while tracing its origins to the "homophile" movement of the 1950s, "came out of the closet" with militant street actions against police harassment such as the Stonewall "riots" of 1969. As it has other social movements of the past half century, the relationship of direct action and electoral politics has divided the LGBT movement.

During the past two decades, organizations like ACT-UP have kept traditions of Queer direct action alive. However, most of the national LGBT organizations, like the women's and labor movements, are committed to "practical" politics — lobbying elected officials and influencing the outcome of elections.

Although a small number of gay and lesbian activists have been active in the Republican Party, especially through its "Log Cabin" caucus, the majority have supported Democrats. The high-watermark of gay and lesbian activism in the Democratic Party was at the end of the Reagan era.

Queers' energetic support of Bill Clinton's election in 1992 was rewarded with his "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" directive to the military. Criticized by the movement at the time, this directive has led to even more harassment of gays in the military.

In 2004, the mainstream gay and lesbian organizations are again lining up behind some Democratic "lesser evil." While 12% of gay and lesbian voters polled by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLFT) indicated that they would vote for a third party candidate — a high percentage, to be sure, in relation to the overall population — 76% were willing to vote for whomever the Democrats nominate to defeat Bush.

Dean's support of Vermont's civil union law won him the greatest support among gay and lesbian voters — he was preferred by 33%, compared to only 10% for John Kerry, and less than 10% for the rest of the Democratic nominees *(www.ngltf.org/news/printed.cfm?releaseID=568)*

Ultimately, the loyalty of the vast majority of the Queer electorate to the Democrats guarantees that the Democrats are under no compulsion to make any serious commitment to extending their rights. As with the suppo[illegible] of labor, racial minorities and women, the Democrats can take the support of the majority of Queers for granted.

The Rainbow and the Democrats

In the early 1980s, after nearly a decade of declining activism, promising new struggles began to emerge. Confronted with the Republican Reagan administration's attacks on unions (air traffic controllers) and social services, in the midst of a deep recession, and with the administration's arming of right-wing death squads in Central America, radicals and working people began to organize.

A movement against U.S. intervention in Central America, which had roots in the organizing against the introduction of draft registration under the Democratic Carter administration, was able to mobilize tens of thousands in national demonstrations.

The AFL-CIO mobilized hundreds of thousands against union busting and in defense of social security at "Solidarity Day" in 1981, and a handful of significant strikes against concessions popped up in heartland towns such as Austin, Minnesota in the mid-1980s. In the Midwest "rust belt," unemployed workers organized and demanded increased social services for those displaced in factory closings. Civil rights organizations organized a thirtieth anniversary "March on Washington" in 1983.

Radicals and other activists in these struggles against "Reaganism" sought ways to build solidarity among their different movements. For many, Jesse Jackson's campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1984 appeared to offer that opportunity.

Many activists in 1984 believed that Jackson's campaign represented an electoral revolt by the African-American community and opened the possibility of building a "Rainbow Coalition" of working and poor people against Reaganism. Many also believed that the registration and mobilization of millions of Black voters would force the Democrats to move to the left.

Jackson's 1984 campaign did little to either build the incipient movements against Reaganism or move the Democrats to the left. Despite Jackson's "rainbow" rhetoric in 1984, his platform was very vague and never took up any of the specific demands of the social movements. The Rainbow Coalition remained a letterhead organization of prestigious movement individuals, not an organization with an active membership to set its direction.

Nor did any of the main forces of official reform in the Democratic Party flock to the first Jackson campaign. A significant portion of African-American elected officials refused to support Jackson's challenge, and the AFL-CIO gave Walter Mondale an unprecedented early endorsement in 1984.

In 1988, the situation appeared much more favorable to the advocates of the "Rainbow" strategy in the Democratic Party. Jackson's campaign openly criticized U.S. policy in Central America and Southern Africa, supported strikes and union demands for greater legal protection, and put forward a left-populist program calling for greater regulation of corporations and social welfare policies that would redistribute income.

The Rainbow Coalition, at its October 1987 convention in Raleigh, NC made some small strides toward becoming a membership organization, chartering twenty-five state organizations. Within the Democratic Party, the relationship of forces seemed to be shifting. With Reagan out of the running and no Democratic front-runner in the primaries, most Democrats of color and a significant number of labor leaders endorsed Jackson's campaign.

Jackson's success in the primaries — polling 6.8 million votes (29%) in 1988 compared with 3.2 million (18%) in 1984 — seemed to give the Rainbow Coalition an unstoppable dynamic. Yet the outcome of the 1988 Jackson campaign was, in some ways, even worse for the radicals and social movement activists than the 1984 campaign.

Because the Jackson campaign promised to be more successful than 1984, it was run in a much more traditional manner. In 1984, the African-American churches and the radical and activist-led Rainbow Coalition organizations ran the campaign. In 1988, Gerald Austin, a white centrist Democrat from Ohio, managed the Jackson campaign, and Willie Brown, a Black millionaire, mainstream Democrat and former speaker of the California Assembly was its chair.

Movement activists and leftists were pushed out of almost all positions of responsibility in the campaign, and the Rainbow Coalition was stripped of the financial and staff resources that would have been required to maintain it as an independent rank-and-file movement that could live beyond the primaries.

Not surprisingly, Jackson moderated his campaign rhetoric as he appeared to become a "force" in the Democratic presidential race. Not only did Jackson downplay the struggle against racism in favor of "finding a new economic common ground," but he provided little programmatic content to his denunciations of "corporate greed."

Ultimately, the Achilles heel of the Jackson campaign and the efforts of the Rainbow Coalition were their commit-

INDEPENDENT POLITICAL ACTION

INDEPENDENT POLITICAL ACTION is a difficult proposition in the United States, with its deeply entrenched two-capitalist-party system. Despite the obstacles, however, it is not impossible. In fact there are a number of examples that have produced significant lessons for today and for the future.

The best-known historical example are Eugene Victor Debs' presidential campaigns under the Socialist Party banner early in the 20th century. In 1912 he received one million votes, which represented 6% of the popular vote. Debs' fifth and last presidential campaign was in 1920, when he campaigned from a prison cell after his conviction for antiwar agitation — and polled more than 900,000 votes.

In 1948 the Progressive Party was founded to oppose the Truman administration's Cold War policies and its domestic consequences. Its grassroots organizers were members of the Communist Party and those it attracted from the CIO and other mass movements. The party ran Henry Wallace (former vice president under Roosevelt) for president. Although party activists projected winning at least four million votes, early polls showed Wallace receiving eight million (about 17%).

Truman responded by adopting a left New Deal election strategy, de-emphasizing the Cold War, calling for national health insurance, repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act and a strong civil rights plank in the Democratic Party platform. Combining a progressive social agenda with heavy-handed redbaiting, Truman stole the thunder from the Wallace campaign, which ended up with 2.4% of the votes cast. The Progressive Party was unable to survive the Cold War, conducting their last presidential campaign in 1952 on an anti-Korean War platform.

There have been other relatively recent radical third party movements that sought to give an insurgent political voice to communities of oppressed people. During the civil rights struggle activists in Lowndes County, Alabama built a local party called the Black Panthers. In Michigan, a Black Power political initiative called the Freedom Now Party achieved ballot status.

The National Black Political Assembly in Gary, Indiana in 1972 gave rise to a formation called the National Black Independent Political Party; NBIPP declined, however, when it was unable to forge a coherent national organizing project.

During the 1970s La Raza Unida Party, growing out of a radical Chicano movement in the U.S. Southwest, built significant bases of power in Texas, Colorado, and California. The movement's base was made up of descendants of the cultural and ethnic mix formed by the area's original inhabitants and the Spanish invaders.

A post-World War II "bracero" ("hand") program administered by the federal government brought Mexicans to work in agriculture, keeping wages down, and preventing unionization in the fields. But by 1960 the mechanization of agriculture meant that Mexican immigrants, both documented and undocumented, had joined their Chicano brothers and sisters in barrios in all the major cities of the Southwest and Midwest.

The repeal of the bracero program created the opening for unionization among farmworkers, and by 1965 the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee began the now famous grape strike and boycott. Throughout the Southwest agricultural and cannery workers demanded the right to belong to a union.

These strikes and boycotts, in turn, spurred a radicalization particularly among Chicano youth, who were denied their right to speak Spanish on school grounds. By 1968, starting in Los Angeles, thousands of Chicano youth were staging school walkouts. These "blowouts" spread throughout the Southwest. Participants demanded the firing of racist principals and teachers, the right to use Spanish in the schools, and challenged the version of American history being taught.

Annual National Chicano Youth Conferences were organized under the auspices of the Denver-based Crusade for Justice. The 1970 conference called for a National Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War, which mobilized 30,000 Chicanos in Los Angeles around the demand "Bring Our Carnales

ment to the Democratic Party. While some in the left wing of the Rainbow hoped that the campaign could be used to build an independent political expression of the movements, this was never the goal of Jackson or the key forces in his campaign. Instead, African-American elected officials and left-wing union officials hoped that "our" party could be realigned on a "new economic ground as key to a new coalition and a new Democratic Party."

The notion of an independent political and organizational vehicle was foreign to Jackson and his top advisors, who — unwilling to even consider an independent Rainbow campaign — remained prisoners of a rightward-moving Democratic Party. At the Atlanta Democratic Convention in 1988, Jackson's forces received at best token concessions — minimal funds for voter registration, minor positions in the Dukakis-Bentsen campaign, and an opportunity for Jackson to address the convention.

The Jackson forces' platform proposals for a U.S. renunciation of a nuclear first strike and for increased taxes on the wealthy went down to a 2-1 defeat, while their call for a Palestinian homeland was never brought to a vote. The nomination of conservative Texas Democrat Lloyd Bentsen for vice-president met with hardly a protest from Jackson and his closest aides. While Jackson was shocked that Michael Dukakis did not even consult him before nominating Bentsen, Jackson endorsed the ticket telling

Home." The demonstration was brutally attacked by the police and Ruben Salazar, a popular reporter, was murdered.

In 1967 Chicanos in Texas began holding Raza Unida conferences in response to President Johnson's Cabinet Hearings on Mexican Affairs. These and other conferences led to establishing a La Raza Unida Party. But it was the struggle for community control of the schools in Crystal City, Texas where the reality of an independent Chicano political party gained a foothold by 1970.

Activists then projected expanding into a twenty-six county area in south Texas that was predominantly Chicano. But the embryonic La Raza Unida parties of California and Colorado were not able to set down similar roots and eventually the Texas party was isolated — although it still exists.

All these efforts, of course, came under enormous pressure — particularly as African-American and Latino activists were recruited into the Democratic Party (and, occasionally, Republican Party) apparatus as staffers or elected officials.

In the absence of sustained, powerful national movements, these pressures ultimately overwhelmed small fledgling parties. These examples show, however, there is a long and determined challenge to the two-party stranglehold on politics.

his supporters that the Democrats "need two wings to fly."

The futility of "moving the Democrats to the left" though Democratic primary campaigns is a crucial lesson of the Jackson campaign of 1988 — one which is especially relevant for today. The Democratic Party is very secure in its support from African Americans, labor and progressives. So long as these forces remain tied to the Democrats, the Democratic mainstream has no reason to make any concessions to them.

For its part the Rainbow Coalition has been subsumed into Operation PUSH (People United to Serve Humanity), the Chicago-based organization that Jackson formed upon his split from the SCLC. PUSH seeks to "empower" African Americans through negotiating franchises and management positions with major corporations. Whatever the merits of this, it has nothing to do with political mobilization.

While Rainbow/PUSH has done some voter registration since 1988, it is primarily Jackson's personal vehicle to "advocate for a variety of public policy issues, including universal health care, equal administration of justice in all communities, sufficient funding for enforcement of civil rights laws, and for increased attention to business investment in underserved domestic communities (a theme that the Clinton administration picked up as the 'New Markets Initiative')." *(www.rainbowpush.org/founder)*.

Jackson campaigned for Bill Clinton in both 1992 and 1996 — even after Clinton had signed NAFTA and helped abolish Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC). During the subsequent scandals, not only did Jackson ask the country to recognize that Clinton, "like all men, [had] sinned and fallen from the glory of God," but claimed "that Mr. Clinton has been good for America...his policies have helped workers, have helped seniors, have increased pay equity for women, more youth in schools. We are a stronger nation six years later." *("Direct Access: Jesse Jackson"* Washington Post, *December 16, 1998. http://www.washington post.com/wp-srv/politics/talk/zformum/jackso n121698.htm)*

Today, Jackson is an unofficial advisor to the centrist Democrat, Howard Dean. The impact of the "Rainbow" experience on the radical left and the social movements of the 1980s was not beneficial. Far from a left revival, many political groups and movement organizations collapsed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the end, the Jackson campaigns didn't move the Democrats leftward either — rather, they rehabilitated the image of Democratic party politics and reincorporated the social movements and the left into today's plain and simple "lesser evil" orientation.

Our historical account could be extended and many more examples could be given. But the point should be clear enough. If we want to shift U.S. politics to the left, the key lies in creating a militant mass movement, independent of any politicians, in the streets, on the campuses, in the workplaces and communities of the oppressed. Therein lies the power to force liberal and conservative, Republican and Democratic regimes to make concessions to working and oppressed people.

Movements that disrupt "business as usual" also fuel political radicalism, and push the political center of gravity in their direction. Only electoral campaigns that are independent of the corporate dominated parties, like the Nader campaign in 2000, can give a voice to and build the social movements.