

WHAT WOULD DEBS DO?

Socialists and the 2008 Presidential elections



EUGENE DEBS: "A party in this later day of our industrial and social development is either a capitalist party or it is a labor party. It is the one or the other. It cannot be both."

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WHAT SHOULD SOCIALISTS DO IN THE 2008 ELECTIONS?

Ralph Nader's and Cynthia McKinney's 2008 presidential campaigns are actively supported by a part of political spectrum usually referred to as "progressive." These "progressives" are generally understood to be those who want to support candidates who go beyond the limits of the Democratic Party's positions on foreign policy and social change. A number of small socialist groups have announced Presidential candidates: the Socialist Workers Party, the Party for Socialism and Liberation and the Socialist Party. The campaigns of Nader and McKinney have been endorsed by some other socialist groups. This article addresses advocacy of a vote for one or another radical or progressive non-socialist candidate by socialists, based on a review of historic experiences of the 20th century US socialist movement in connection with non-socialist electoral campaigns that ostensibly held out the promise of a new radical political party and progressive social change.

SOCIALIST VIEWPOINTS ON 2008

The **Communist Party** and **Democratic Socialists of America** (DSA), as usual, unambiguously support the Democratic candidate in order to "defeat the right." CP leader Erica Smiley says, "*our goal is to remove the Ultra-right from power right now, and currently we can only do this through the Democratic Party.*" A July editorial in the CP's People's Weekly World asserts, "*A broad multiclass, multiracial movement is converging around Obama's 'Hope, change and unity' campaign because they see in it the thrilling opportunity to end 30 years (??) of ultra-right rule and move our nation forward with a broadly progressive agenda.*" (Queries added.)

DSA says, "*Given the U.S.'s restrictive election laws, the only electoral fight possible against corporate domination has to happen in and around the Democratic Party, on the federal, state, and (allowing for the rare exception) county and city levels.*" Notwithstanding that, "*Obama is the darling of the Goldman Sachs wing of finance banking,*" according to DSA Vice Chair Joseph Schwartz, DSA believes "*a political landscape (of a) Democratic presidential victory, combined with bulked-up Democratic majorities in both houses of the Congress would provide the most favorable terrain upon which mobilized, assertive social movements can pressure the government to appoint decent federal judges and agency administrators and enact desperately needed universal health care legislation, labor law reform, and a federally funded Marshall Plan to develop green technologies and green jobs.*"

The unvarying and essentially uncritical support of the Democratic Party by the CP and DSA is beyond the scope of this essay. The object here is to take up the arguments of socialist groups for support to "third" and "fourth party" reformist electoral campaigns that allegedly hold out a promise of a break with the Democrats and Republicans, or at least a positive step in the direction of independent working-class political action.

The **Workers International League**, a US-based socialist group, says, "*The WIL supports Cynthia McKinney's 'Power to the People' presidential campaign as an example of what is possible outside the narrow limits of the two bosses' parties. But what U.S. workers and youth ultimately need is for the unions to break with the pro-capitalist Democrats and the building of a mass party of labor, fighting for a socialist program.*"

Socialist Alternative urges a vote for Nader, saying,

"Every Nader vote registers a protest and strikes a blow against the establishment and their two parties. A vote for Nader is NOT a vote for McCain and the Republicans – it's a vote for radical change. Ralph Nader is not a 'spoiler' – it is the Republicans and Democrats who have already spoiled too many lives".

The **International Socialist Organization (ISO)** says, “*But people who want to build an opposition to the status quo politics of official Washington should draw a different lesson: If we want to win our demands, we have to organize independently of either of the pro-business and pro-war parties. We have to refuse to tailor our demands to what ‘hurt’ or ‘help’ the Democrats in the election.*”

ISO says, “*On most every question--war, civil liberties, jobs, corporate power, health care, the environment--McKinney and Nader represent a stark alternative to the two mainstream parties...McKinney and Nader do offer voters the chance to cast a protest vote against war, racism and corporate greed, even if they will not be able to break through the media blackout on their candidacies. That vote won't count for much in this year's electoral arithmetic, but it can be a marker for the future.*” ISO was critical of Nader's and McKinney's participation in a joint news conference with right wing Presidential candidates Ron Paul and Chuck Baldwin. All four candidates, ISO's journal, Socialist Worker, reported, “*agreed to a four-point program drafted by Paul that included foreign policy aims such as ending the occupation of Iraq, defending civil liberties like the right to privacy, balancing the federal government budget and investigating the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank.*”

“*...There has to be a point to an independent election campaign,*” ISO says, “*beyond giving voters a choice--any choice at all--opposed to the Republicans and Democrats. The goal must be to make the left stronger, by building solidarity with others in their struggles and furthering the kind of politics that makes our side stronger.*”

“**Solidarity,**” another socialist organization, has endorsed McKinney's campaign. Against The Current, which reflect the views of this organization, editorializes that, “*if you consider yourself to be a progressive or independent voter with a commitment to peace and social justice, you'll have to confront the disconnect — which will only grow from now till November — between the symbolic, audacity-of-hope Barack Obama and the real-life candidate who's consciously opted for the politics of a centrist, pro-military corporate Democrat. If you decide you want a genuine, not just symbolic alternative, you'll need ‘the audacity of hope’ to look elsewhere.*” ATC also advises, “*for those Democratic voters who supported Hillary Clinton, the only reason for ‘staying home’ or voting for McCain would be racism.*”¹

NADER AND MCKINNEY

Ralph Nader, of course, has been a public figure for decades. He has been an independent candidate for President in four elections. In 1996 and 2000 he was endorsed by the Green Party, receiving nearly 3 million votes (2.7%) in 2000. Nader, who is 74 years old, has never been elected to any public office. McKinney, 53, was elected as a Democrat to six terms in the House of Representatives from Georgia. She opposed the two Iraq wars, introduced legislation to impeach Bush II, and in general spoke out on behalf of oppressed people in the US and internationally, particularly people of African descent. McKinney's candidacy is endorsed by the **Green Party**. She left the **Democratic Party** in September 2007 and began a campaign for Green Party nomination shortly afterward.

It goes without saying that neither Nader nor McKinney has any more chance of being elected than socialist candidates Brian Moore, Gloria LaRiva and Roger Calero, or even of receiving a single vote in the Electoral College. No minor party candidate for President has ever received an electoral vote. There have only been a handful of Presidential elections in which there has been any real contest between more than two major bourgeois candidates since 1860. That election, which precipitated the Civil War, is remembered as a contest between Stephen Douglas and Lincoln, but Douglas actually came in fourth, carrying only two states, while the Southern vote was split between two long forgotten supporters of slavery.

In 1912, there was a fairly close three-way contest between Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt and

William Howard Taft. That year Eugene Debs received 6% of the popular vote for President, the highest ever recorded for a socialist Presidential candidate, but got no electoral votes. Collectors of historic trivia may find it of interest that Debs carried three US counties, two in northern Minnesota and one in North Dakota.

THREE CAMPAIGNS

There have been three Presidential elections since 1912 in which more there were more than two major contenders. In 1924, Robert LaFollette, the famous Progressive/Republican Senator from Wisconsin, received the first ever endorsement of a Presidential candidate by the American Federation of Labor. LaFollette got 16% of the popular vote and 13 electoral votes.

In 1948, racist Georgia Senator Strom Thurmond broke from the Democratic Party, running as the Dixiecrat “**States Rights**” candidate. While he got only 2.4% of the popular vote, Thurmond carried four Southern states and received 39 electoral votes.

Also in 1948, Henry Wallace, former New Deal Secretary of Agriculture and thirty-third Vice President of the United States (1940-1944) ran as the Presidential candidate of the **Progressive Party**, a formation initiated in reaction to the onset of the Cold War with the enthusiastic support of the Communist Party. Wallace received over a million votes, but trailed just behind Thurmond in the popular vote and got no electoral votes.

In 1968, segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace ran against Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey, getting nearly 10 million popular votes and 46 electoral votes, from five Deep South states.

ROBERT LAFOLLETTE 1924

In 1924, key US Communist Party leaders initially supported LaFollette’s campaign, on the premise that, notwithstanding its bourgeois/reformist character, it was the precursor of a political movement of workers and farmers. CP leader John Pepper called the LaFollette movement the “*Third American revolution.*”

“After the victory of this LaFollette revolution,” Pepper wrote, *“there will begin the independent role of workers and exploited farmers, and there will begin then, the period of the fourth American revolution—the period of the proletarian revolution.”*²

This anticipation was heightened by the expressed support for LaFollette of unions, progressives and liberals, as well as the Socialist Party, allied in an organization known as the Conference for Progressive Political Action (CPPA), some hoping for a new political party, and some hoping to pressure the two old parties. Even Debs, who briefly saw the CPPA as a step towards an independent labor party, (the CPPA was formed at a 1922 convention called by the 16 major railroad unions) supported the alliance of the SP with the union/liberal/progressive coalition, although he warned, “A party in this later day of our industrial and social development is either a capitalist party or it is a labor party. It is the one or the other. It cannot be both.” Assessing the experience later, Debs felt that the SP had been weakened, not strengthened, by its support of LaFollette.

The CPPA had previously requested that Wisconsin Senator Robert M. LaFollette make a run for the presidency. Their 1924 convention was addressed by the Senator's son, Robert M. LaFollette Jr., who read a message from his father accepting the call and declaring that the time had come "for a militant political movement independent of the two old party organizations." LaFollette declined to lead a new third party, however, seeking to protect those progressives elected nominally as Republicans and Democrats. LaFollette declared that the primary issue of the 1924 campaign was the breaking of the "combined power of the private monopoly system over the political and economic life of the American people." After the November election a new party might well be established, LaFollette stated, around

which all progressives could unite.

The Cannon-Foster faction of the Communist Party vehemently opposed the orientation to and support of LaFollette advocated by Pepper, and the dispute was referred to the Comintern in early 1924.

Trotsky: “For a young and weak Communist Party, lacking in revolutionary temper, to play the role of solicitor and gatherer of ‘progressive voters’ for the Republican Senator LaFollette is to head toward the political dissolution of the party in the petty bourgeoisie.”

“In America,” Trotsky wrote in 1924, summarizing the position of the Comintern, “the ...illusions of the petty bourgeoisie...take the form of the Third Party. The latter is being mobilized at the present moment around Senator LaFollette himself, or, more correctly, around his name, for the Senator himself, almost 70 years old, has not yet found time to leave the ranks of the Republican Party...But truly amazing is the position of certain leaders of the American Communist Party, who propose to summon the party to vote for LaFollette, hoping in this way to secure...influence over the farmers...”

“For a young and weak Communist Party, lacking in revolutionary temper, to play the role of solicitor and gatherer of ‘progressive voters’ for the Republican Senator LaFollette is to head toward the political dissolution of the party in the petty bourgeoisie. After all, opportunism expresses itself not only in moods of gradualism but also in political impatience: it frequently seeks to reap where it has not sown, to realize successes which do not correspond to its influence. Underestimation of the basic task—the development and strengthening of the of the proletarian character of the party—here is the basic trait of opportunism...The party cannot accompany the farmers and petty bourgeoisie generally through all their political stages and zigzags, it cannot voluntarily pass through all the illusions and disillusion, dragging after LaFollette in order to expose him later...The Communist Party can become such a force in action...only as the vanguard of the proletariat, but never as the tail of the Third Party.”³

LaFollette’s “party” died with LaFollette in 1925 and was, as Trotsky observed, never really more than an ephemeral electoral shadow of LaFollette. Following LaFollette's defeat the CPPA met in convention in early 1925, but without the support of the railroad unions. Morris Hillquit of the Socialist Party called the 5 million votes cast for LaFollette an encouraging beginning and urged action for establishment of an American Labor Party on the British model. No action was taken on any proposals and the CPPA adjourned *sine die*, never to meet again.

Those delegates favoring establishment of a new political party immediately reconvened, with the opponents of an independent political party departing.

EUGENE DEBS: “A party in this later day of our industrial and social development is either a capitalist party or it is a labor party. It is the one or the other. It cannot be both.”

Debs had addressed them the day before. *“I venture to say that if this body in the course of its deliberations decides upon organizing a middle class party that shall be neither one thing nor the other...that shall be known as a progressive party--and by the way--do you know of a party that is not a progressive party? (laughter)... There is not a term in our vocabulary that has been more prostituted in the last few years than the term progressive. Now what does it mean? Absolutely nothing. Make your appeal broad enough to embrace small capitalists and workers and all sorts of elements, launch that party tomorrow, and I admit that it may make some little progress. I admit that it may have some accession to its ranks, but it cannot live. Its death is a foregone conclusion. **Organize a so-called progressive party combining all of these elements more or less in conflict with each other, and they***

soon begin to disintegrate and they will be gone the way that all third parties have gone during the last fifty years. (emphasis added.)

“A labor party, Debs stated, *“is the only party that can be organized with any hope of `making it a permanent` party and achieving its historic mission.”*”⁴

The reconvened convention found itself split between adherents of a non-class Progressive Party based upon individual memberships as opposed to the Socialists' conception of a class-conscious Labor Party employing "direct affiliation" of "organizations of workers and farmers and of progressive political and educational groups who fully accept its program and principles." Following extensive debate, the Socialist counter-proposal was defeated by a vote of 93 to 64. The "Progressive Party" survived for a short time in a limited number of states.



DEBS RAN FOR PRESIDENT IN 1920 FROM FEDERAL PRISON AND WON A MILLION VOTES

HENRY WALLACE 1948

Henry Wallace was the scion of a prominent Iowa agricultural family, and for a long time editor of the magazine founded by his father, *Wallace's Farmer*. In 1926 Wallace founded the seed company which

later became known as Pioneer Hi-Bred, now the second largest U.S. producer of hybrid seeds for agriculture. (Another note on historic trivia: Wallace's partner, Roswell Garst, hosted Nikita Khrushchev as he toured Iowa during his celebrated 1959 US visit.) Wallace was appointed Secretary of Agriculture by FDR in 1933. After being rejected by Roosevelt for nomination to second term as Vice President in 1944, he served briefly as Secretary of Commerce before being fired by President Truman because of disagreements about the policy towards the Soviet Union. As the Cold War emerged post-World War II, Midwest agricultural interests, who saw potential high stakes in trade with the Soviet Union, advocated a live and let live policy towards the USSR. The main political expression of this in the 1948 elections was the candidacy of former Minnesota governor Harold Stassen for the Republican nomination, backed by Minneapolis-based agribusiness. Former New York Governor Thomas Dewey was nominated instead. Incumbent President Harry Truman won the election. The moderating bourgeois tendencies expressed by Stassen and Wallace coincided with Stalin's desire to maintain and extend the wartime detente with his former allies. When Wallace announced his candidacy for President on a resurrected "Progressive Party" ticket, the Communist Party did not field a presidential candidate, and instead endorsed Wallace for President. At that time, the CP controlled nearly a dozen CIO-affiliated international unions, and innumerable front groups.

James P. Cannon: "But this break-up of the two-party system...comes about under the pressure of social crisis. These are not our tasks. Bourgeois parties are not the arena for our operation."

Some trade union members of the Socialist Workers Party saw in this the possibility of an incipient labor party development, and urged the SWP to get behind it. James P Cannon, the party's National Secretary, dissented, warning against "*impatience,*" and the possibility that "*fear of isolation may color our judgment in concrete situations and impel us to seek shortcuts to a labor party, or some wretched substitute for it, over the head of the official trade union movement.*" The "*minimum condition*" for a labor party, Cannon said, is "*that the party must really be based on the unions and dependent on them, and at least ultimately subject to their control as to program and candidates.*"

The Wallace party, Cannon contended, "*is bourgeois...by its program, its policy and practice, its composition and control.* While the bulk of Wallace's organized support is Stalinist, he said, "*these Stalinist unions in the Wallace movement function as supporting organizations and not as controlling powers. They roughly play the same role towards Wallace's wrapped up, predetermined program as the...AFL will play in the Truman movement.*"

Fred Stover, a long time left wing farm activist from Iowa, was the co-chairman of the Progressive Party and nominated Wallace for President at the 1948 convention. Stover told me in a conversation in the 1970's that he regretted it the next day, because Wallace would not support the left-wing farm program that Stover advocated.

"*The Wallace movement,*" Cannon continued, "*is a one-man Messiah movement. He is at the head of 'Gideon's army' throwing the Bible at his adversaries. That, it seems to me, is the worst kind of substitute for independent political action by the workers' own organizations.*"

"*Now, a break-up of the two party parliamentary system in America is undoubtedly a good thing,*" said Cannon. "*It destroys the fetish of the trade union bureaucracy to the effect that it is impossible to operate on the political field outside the traditional pattern. Splits in the two old bourgeois parties are bound to ...loosen things up and create a more favorable situation for agitation for a labor party. But this break-up of the two-party system...comes about under the pressure of social crisis. These are not our tasks. Bourgeois parties are not the arena for our operation.*"

“It will be a sad day for us if our party members get it into their heads that they can run after any demagogue who talks radical and promises to cure all the evils, and forget that our task is the class struggle that cannot be transcended by any maneuvers.”

Responding to those party union activists who feared isolation if the SWP stood aside from the Wallace movement, Cannon responded, *“We can't be isolated if we are in the unions. That is where the mass of the workers are today; they are not in the Wallace movement...The argument that we have to get into the Wallace movement in order to be with the masses runs into a contradiction. The real mass movement, the official labor movement, is not there...The Stalinists represent a very small sector of the American labor movement. When the labor party movement really gets under way in this country, it isn't going to be a Stalinist movement. The real mass movement, the official labor movement, is not there.”*⁵



James P Cannon, 1934

In 1948, the American Trotskyists fielded their first Presidential candidate, Farrell Dobbs. The 1948 SWP campaign, while modest, was undoubtedly a crucial part of arming and anchoring the party for the trials ahead.

The Progressive Party in 1952 had fallen on hard times. James P Cannon described it somewhat brutally as a *“political monstrosity, which the Communist Party lugs along and props up—something like a hoodlum escorting his idiot brother and pretending that he is a normal person.”*⁶ The party ran radical lawyer Vincent Hallinan for President in 1952 on a slogan of *“Vote for Peace,”* which was of course a reference to the US war in Korea. He received 140,000 votes, or about 8% of the 1948 total. That was the end of the party.

PEACE AND FREEDOM PARTY (1968)

The California-based Peace and Freedom Party (PFP), formed in the late 1960's aimed for the creation of a *“new, radical party.”* Since 1968 it has nominated or endorsed candidates for President. In most election years the party has gotten in excess of 2% of the vote in California, qualifying for official ballot status, with a state-financed primary. The party defines itself as *“socialist.”* This year PFP has endorsed Ralph Nader. In the 1960's there were high hopes among many radicals that PFP could catch the crest of surging antiwar activity and become a mass-based *“all-inclusive radical political party,”* harboring socialists and other radicals *“with the most disparate and clashing ideologies.”* Some socialists saw the possibility of PFP attracting large numbers through a *“minimum program”* of opposition to the Vietnam War and support for the African-American liberation struggle and transmuting itself into a permanent radical party of major dimensions. In 1968, coming out of the conservative 1950's, there was a lot of electricity around this prospect, and, with the failure of the Democratic Party to nominate *“peace candidate”* Eugene McCarthy for President, PFP attracted a

certain number of his supporters who wanted to cast a protest vote against the party's nomination of Hubert Humphrey, Lyndon Johnson's Vice President and a cheerleader for LBJ's war policy.

Tom Kerry: “It may seem new...but this trick has been tried before—with dreary results...The end result of the policy of seeking numbers at the expense of ideas and program will be to get neither clarity of ideas, nor large numbers, but accelerated demoralization and disintegration.”

The PFP was a hodgepodge of factions, tendencies, and caucuses, most of whom agreed on the goal of an “all-inclusive radical party,” and that some version of a “minimum program” should define the party's electoral strategy. “History records,” SWP leader Tom Kerry wrote at the time, “all such nonclass or supraclass political formations have foundered on this particular all inclusive reef.”

“It may seem new, but this trick has been tried before—with dreary results.” Kerry pointed to Henry Wallace’s 1948 Progressive Party campaign as an example of “a third party movement that advanced a ‘minimum program’ of capitalist reforms as bait for the discontent of the masses with the Truman administration.”

“The end result of the policy of seeking numbers at the expense of ideas and program will be to get neither clarity of ideas, nor large numbers, but accelerated demoralization and disintegration,” he said. “The device of the ‘minimum program’ cuts both ways. An electoral coalition composed of diverse, disparate and clashing tendencies can be held together only on the basis of a minimum program... Conventional political wisdom views the ‘minimum program’ as a guaranteed vote-catcher designed to attract the largest possible number of supporters...But to build a viable permanent radical political party, the unity of radical ideas are an indispensable prerequisite.. I am not impressed by the assurance that ‘many PFPers’ advocate socialism, as individuals, if not as candidates. Nor am I impressed with groups who call themselves ‘socialist’ joining with anti-socialist and procapitalists in an electoral coalition on a platform of capitalist reforms.”

“The PFP has neither working-class base nor working-class program. In social composition PFP is based on the unstable, highly volatile middle class, and on only a very small section of that class....True, PFP can not be faulted for not having a working-class base, but it can for not having a working-class, that is, a revolutionary program.”

“Because we are convinced that the American working class as a whole can and will change, we utilize our election campaigns to advocate that workers break with the bankrupt policy of supporting Democrats or Republicans for public office and that they form their own independent labor party and run their own candidates on their own program...Is this perspective realistic? Not if one thinks in terms of this year and this election campaign. But the idea is father to the deed. At least in this election we can advance and promote the idea.”⁷

In 1968 the SWP ran a highly successful Presidential campaign, nominating trade unionist and antiwar leader Fred Halstead for President and African American militant Paul Boutelle for Vice President, calling for immediate withdrawal from Vietnam and support to Black liberation. While the vote total was minuscule in relation to the capitalist candidates, the party was on the ballot in more states than ever before and won young activists to its ranks that it could never have reached through any other medium. The PFP was able to place their candidate, Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver, on the ballot in only 11 states, and did not nominate a candidate for Vice President.

PARTIES AND CLASSES

It is an axiom of Marxism that parties are based on classes, or segments of classes. No political “party” in the United States with a “non-class” or “supra-class” basis has ever been anything but an ephemeral electoral combination, without influence, and often without many votes. With a minimum program, it is unable to take advantage of temporary success to educate broadly about anti-capitalist social change.⁸ As Cannon observed of the Henry Wallace campaign, most of them have been “one-man Messiah movements,” as was the LaFollette campaign. Nader and McKinney are no different in that respect. Such campaigns, however, have played a role in diverting impulses and efforts towards independent working class political action into dead-end reform politics. It can be stated as a certainty that no so-called “non-class” or radical-sounding petty-bourgeois “party” in the US will ever have any sustained existence except insofar as it can play a role in derailing and disorienting working class political mobilization. Of course the Democrats and Republicans present themselves as supra-class parties of all the people. With a monopoly of the electoral arena in practical terms, they undeniably receive the votes of the masses—more precisely, those that can or do vote. But the “bipartisans,” as Fred Stover used to call them, are financed and controlled by big capital and have governed in their interest for centuries. There is no historical or structural ambiguity about their class nature.

Socialists clearly will have no impact on the outcome of the 2008 elections. That doesn't mean that the elections can't have an impact on the socialists. Support to petty-bourgeois candidates like Nader and McKinney can impart a miseducation to young socialists about the class nature of politics that, if not corrected, could be disorienting in the future. After all, if socialists should support ineffectual advocates of penny-ante reform like Nader and McKinney, whose candidacies are essentially personal vehicles, what would the response be to the emergence of a large, dynamic and demagogic “nonclass” or multiclass party or campaign in the future, where all of the arguments put forward for support would be even more compelling? The fundamental reason Nader and McKinney and other petty-bourgeois reformers sound better than the “bipartisans,” is because they have no chance of getting elected. If they did, their tune would be very different.

Do Nader and McKinney show “*what is possible outside the narrow limits of the bosses parties?*” That simply begs the question. What IS “*possible outside the limits of the bosses parties?*”? That is what socialists need to explain. The historical record is clear—the only mass-based political movements advocating significant change in the interests of workers, farmers and oppressed nationalities that had anything other than a temporary existence were class-based—the Greenbackers and Populists of the 19th century, the Non-Partisan League and the Minnesota Farmer Labor Party of the 20th century, and of course the pre-World War I Socialist Party. Young socialists, and other fighters for social justice, need to be educated that the root of problem is not the US two-party system *per se*, and that all American history testifies that voting for, and more importantly, sowing illusions that capitalist reformers, whether inside or outside of the two-party system, really represent a possibility of “radical change” is a snare and a delusion. For those seeking to build a socialist movement, muddying up the clarity of ideas about class politics can have lasting consequences far beyond any temporary gains.

SOCIALIST ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

Cannon: “The cause of socialism can be advanced only by counter-posing it directly to capitalism—simply, honestly and directly...The main purpose of participating in elections, as a socialist organization, or as a coalition of socialist organizations, is to take full advantage of the opportunity to make socialist propaganda”.

Speaking fifty years ago on socialist electoral policy, James P. Cannon said, in words that seem to have great prescience today, *“There are still a lot of socialists in this country. The sentiment for socialism, even today, after all that has happened, is much bigger than all of them put together. And the potential sentiment, which the bankruptcy of American capitalism will generate in the next period, is a hundred or a thousand times greater than the conscious socialist sentiment at this present moment. That's the real situation as I see it, and the real prospect before us. We ought to take it as the starting point in a new struggle to put socialism on the map and wipe capitalism off the map.*

“The basic aim in rebuilding for the future—as I think all present agree—the basic aim for which we are all striving, is to regroup the scattered socialist forces and eventually get all the honest socialists together in one common party organization...the starting point of the process is for all genuine socialists of all tendencies, whether presently affiliated to one organization or another, to recognize that we are all part of one movement, and that we ought to work together fraternally in one field of action after another, work together against the injustices and oppression of capitalism...

“Many different opinions are being expressed in the course of the debate on the American road to socialism. I think all suggestions and ideas ought to get an attentive hearing. But however one may think socialism is going to come to the United States, one thing is sure—it's not going to be smuggled in...

The cause of socialism can be advanced only by counterposing it directly to capitalism—simply, honestly and directly...The main purpose of participating in elections, as a socialist organization, or as a coalition of socialist organizations, is to take full advantage of the opportunity to make socialist propoganda. And in the economic and social storm that is now beginning to blow up in this country, with fear and insecurity about war and making a living or even existing on this planet—there will be more interest in social and political questions and more people will be listening than at any time in recent decades...The best time of all—the most fruitful time to explain socialism, is during election campaigns, when public interest is the highest and we stand the best chance of getting a hearing.”⁹

Focusing by socialists on the idea that the primary concern is to find better candidates for workers and other groups aspiring for meaningful social change is simply a replication in miniature of the fundamental error of the present labor movement, and logically leads back to support of the capitalist “lesser evil,” since that is the only one that has a chance of getting elected. The rank and file of the working class, like everyone else in this country, has been educated to believe that social problems can be solved only when and if the right people can be placed in office. The real problem socialists need to come to grips with is not finding better candidates, but the deep-rooted illusion that the electoral process in itself can provide fundamental change.

SOCIALIST ACTION: “VOTE SOCIALIST”

“The historic socialist rejection of political support of any kind to the parties and candidates of capital is embedded in the core program and every activity of the socialist movement.”

Socialist Action urges a vote for socialism in the 2008 Presidential election. Since we are unable to field our own candidates, we call for a vote for either Socialist Workers Party candidate Roger Calero, Socialist Party candidate Brian Moore or Party for Socialism and Liberation candidate Gloria La Riva. While we have differences on a number of issues with all three, they are campaigning publicly and articulately for, as Jim Cannon said, “*a socialist society of the free and equal.*” All three candidates oppose the genocidal war in Iraq and Afghanistan and call for “Bring the Troops Home Now,” an end to racial oppression, and real majority rule by the masses. They explain that capitalism is a system that can never deliver peace, abundance and human solidarity, that only social ownership and democratic control of the wealth of society can fulfill human needs, end the struggle of each and against all, and make the planet a safe and secure home for human beings.

Socialists whenever possible in the electoral arena, and in everyday practice, pose a working-class alternative to the rule of the minority capitalist elite. We are advocates of real majority rule, rule by the masses themselves, through their own institutions, in their own name and in their own interests.

Elections in essence pose the issue of power, of which class shall rule, the minority capitalists or the majority of workers and their allies among the oppressed. The historic socialist rejection of political support of any kind to the parties and candidates of capital is embedded in the core program and every activity of the socialist movement.

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¹ All quotes taken from the respective websites of the groups.

² Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, (New York: Viking Press, 1960) p.83

³ Leon Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Communist International, Vol. 1* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1945) pp.12-15)

⁴ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1925/cppa.htm>

⁶ James P Cannon, What Must Lead to a New Labor Upsurge? in *Speeches to the Party*, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), p.33

⁷ Tom Kerry, “Peace and Freedom Party, The Trouble with a Minimum Program” in *Aspects of Socialist Election Policy*, pp.35-39 **Tom Kerry** (June 27, 1901 – January 8, 1983) was born in Boston, the son of Irish immigrants. Kerry was radicalized during World War I and he joined the youth organization of the Socialist Party of America. Like many other young socialists, Kerry was inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1917. During the Great Depression in the 1930s. Kerry and his wife Karolyn joined the Trotskyist movement led by James P. Cannon and became one of the early members of the Socialist Workers Party at its foundation in 1938. In 1953 when James Cannon decided to retire from the post of National Secretary, he was succeeded by Farrell Dobbs and Tom Kerry became Dobbs' closest collaborator. Kerry was made Organizational Secretary. He retired from active party work in the mid 1970s, but remained in the Socialist Workers Party until he died in Los Angeles in 1983, aged 81.

⁸ The Greenback Labor Party of the 1880's and the Peoples' Party (Populists) of the 1890's, primarily based on insurgent farmers, were spectacularly successful in obtaining votes for short periods but disappeared after attempting fusion with the Democrats. The North Dakota Non-Partisan League, a radical farmers organization built by ex-socialists, took control of the state government in 1915 via the vehicle of the Republican primary and instituted some significant reforms, like state-owned grain elevators and a state bank, but later dissolved in the Democratic Party.

⁹ Cannon, “Socialist Electoral Policy.” *Speeches to the Party*, pp. 333-344