

USA: Occupy the Democratic Party? No Way!

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At a moment when Occupy faces severe police repression and cold weather, and as we are both extending our movement to the streets and rethinking our future, various pressures are beginning to build with the objective of taking our movement into the Democratic Party. While our movement so far has remained politically independent and non-partisan, newspaper articles and commentaries suggest that the Occupy movement should give up its “utopian” demands for a different and better society and its “amorphous” participatory democracy and enter into the Democratic Party in order to have an impact on society. We will increasingly hear calls for Occupy to become a new “rainbow coalition” within the Democratic Party, a coalition that can at best capture the party and at least move it to the left. Yet history suggests that nothing could be worse for our movement than entering the Democratic Party where youthful ideals are transformed into cynical winks, where movement activists are corrupted and turned into party hacks, the place where for a hundred years movements have gone to die.

Even as Democratic Party mayors are sending in the riot police to clear Occupy out of the parks, analysts and consultants from Democratic Party think-tanks and foundations are scouting movement activists and a few Democratic Party politicians have come down to rub shoulders with Occupiers. With many traditional liberal groups—labor, immigrants, environmentalists, and others—feeling disappointed in the performance of President Barack Obama and Democrats in the Congress, party leaders feel a desperate need to find new energy and they are strategizing ways to capture the Occupy movement and to channel its exuberance into the November 2012 elections. We will face throughout the next year a series of arguments from without and then from within about why Occupy belongs in the Democratic Party, and we should understand why that would be a disaster for our movement.

A Variety of Arguments for the Democrats

We read in Newsday, for example, that Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell recently told a Harvard University seminar that Occupy activists should “start registering voters, start playing towards the 2012 election. Not just the presidential, but congressional and Senate elections and state legislative elections. That’s where they can make real change.” This argument—that only electoral politics leads to “real change”—will be the mantra of Occupy’s seducers, growing louder every week as we head toward the elections.

The argument for cooperation between Occupy and Progressive Democrats is made in a soft and more subtle way in an editorial by Paul Rosenberg published in Al Jazeera. He suggested that Progressive Democrats should see Occupy as an ally in fighting the corporate wing of their party. Someone will soon take that a little farther and suggest that Occupy should enter the Democratic Party and ally with the Progressives and old time liberals to fight the corporations for control of the party. We have another, stronger version of this argument from Van Jones, the former green jobs czar for Obama. Jones says he wants 2,000 candidates running under the “99% banner.” While he doesn’t say so explicitly, these will presumably be 99%ers running in the Democratic Party. MoveOn.org, once a voice for the anti-war movement, before it moved on to become a fundraiser for the Democratic Party, is now working to co-opt Occupy, as Steve Horn pointed out in a TruthOut article. They too want to drag Occupy into the Democratic Party, liberal mainstream.

Jesse Jackson, traveling around the country and bringing his passionate oratory to the defense of the Occupy movement has compared Occupy to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, but has so far avoided arguing that Occupy should get involved in politics. It is unlikely that he will refrain much longer, since he has built his career on work with and within the Democratic Party. When in the 1980s the Democrats were losing steam, Jackson organized the Rainbow Coalition of African American, Latino and labor voters, and, though it became something of an independent force, he led it into the Democratic Party, arguing that a party needs “two wings to fly,” a left wing and a right wing. Today as the Democratic Party flails around like a one-winged, right-winged, rightward gyrating chicken, Jackson would like to see Occupy become the Democrat’s new left wing, turning the Democrats once again from a neo-conservative to a moderate center-left party.

Union Officials and Workers Not the Same

The AFL-CIO and Change to Win federations represent yet another pressure on Occupy to become part of the Democratic Party operation. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka and the federation’s executive board have recognized the power of the Occupy movement which has taken on the task that the unions long neglected, namely: speaking out on behalf of all working people. Trumka has recently come to the defense of Occupy, and has adopted our language, talking about the 99% instead of the 10% of actually union-organized workers. Trumka and other union leaders see in Occupy a way to revive activism in their unions, but they want that activism to be directed toward reelecting President Barack Obama and putting more Democrats in Congress. While the Occupy movement and rank-and-file workers have everything in common—the need for economic justice, democracy, and a new and different kind of politics—union officialdom has its own agenda focused on the Democrats.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), one of the largest in the country, is working assiduously to co-opt Occupy into the Democratic Party, according to Glenn Greenwald of Salon.com. SEIU suggests Obama and the Democrats represent the Occupy movement’s goals. Greenwald writes, “But whatever else is true, the notion — advanced by SEIU — that it’s the Democratic Party and the Obama White House working to bring about these changes and implant these values of the 99% is so self-evidently false as to be insulting...to try to cast the Democratic Party and the Obama administration as the vessel for the values and objectives of the Occupy movement is just dishonest in the extreme: in fact, it’s so extreme that it’s very unlikely to work.”

And Not Just Arguments

We should be clear that the invitation to enter the Democratic Party is not merely an intellectual and

political one. The Democratic Party, the labor unions, the foundations and think-tanks, the various NGOs and all sort of other organizations offer not only ideas: they will also be offering jobs and in some cases careers. Ambitious young idealists and some middle aged and older ones too will be invited to come on the staff of the party or one of its front groups. Seasoned politicians will argue that a job with the party or with one of the other organizations working for the party represents a real chance to put Occupy's politics into practice. What really counts, they will argue, is electing politicians and passing legislation. Doing that work, they'll suggest, is a valuable contribution to society, and there's no reason that it shouldn't be well paid. At a moment when jobs are hard to find, the party and its various arms will offer jobs of all sorts, some of them paying good salaries and carrying expense accounts or providing cars. Occupy activists will be invited to enter another world with its own élan, excitement and energy, a place which offers both opportunities to make a career and to meet attractive and interesting people. For some the material attractions will weight as heavily as the arguments. Those who take these jobs and make careers out of them will be the ones to similarly fish leaders out of future movements and take them into the Democratic Party.

The Democratic Party is Not a Park

What would happen if Occupy were to enter the Democratic Party? The Democratic Party is not a park, not a public space to be occupied. The Democratic Party exists to bind working people, the poor, and small business to the program of corporations and banks. The Democratic Party is a hierarchical organization made up of powerful politicians with strong ties to government, banks and corporations, and the military. It is financed by corporations and wealthy individuals who provide millions, though it has also proven successful in raising funds from millions of ordinary Americans. Its program is written by the politicians along lines proposed by corporate consultants. On a daily basis, year in and year out, the Democratic Party, working in the White House, the Congress and in state legislatures puts forward legislation intended to keep the capitalist system working and to serve the banks and corporations.

We should remember that this Democratic Party failed to bring an immediate end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, rejected single-payer health care, increased the round-up and deportation of undocumented immigrants, bailed out the banks while letting the foreclosures continue and unemployment soar, and allowed the increase of police power and the loss of civil rights to continue. We should remember that this Democratic Party and Obama's White House brought us Secretary of the Treasury Timothy Geithner, the man who proven to be the bankers' best friend. This Democratic Party gave us Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, the enemy of public schools and teachers' unions. This is the Democratic Party that Occupy is asked to join, the one where hope dimmed and change never took place.

The idea that Occupy might enter the Democratic Party and join with progressives to change it is an old strategy that has failed before. During the 1960s, Michael Harrington, leader of the group that became the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), argued that if socialists and people from the civil rights and anti-war movements entered the Democratic Party they could change its direction. Yet during a half century of work as progressives in the Democratic Party, despite their considerable influence in labor and liberal factions of the party, DSA utterly failed to move the Democrats to the left. In fact, under the influence of the banks and corporations, the organizations which in fact own the Democratic Party, it moved considerably to the right, so that today the Democrats stand to the right of Richard Nixon's Republican Party of the 1970s. The pro-Soviet Communist Party and some pro-Chinese Maoist groups pursued similar strategies (the Maoists with a one-foot-in-one-foot out variation) and with no more success.

If Occupy activists either individually or in large numbers enter the Democratic Party, we should think about the impact it would have on the movement, as has happened from time to time in some large cities where Democratic Party mayors won support from the left. Many talented organizers, writers, and speakers would be sucked out of the movement for months at least, but probably for years because they would find their lifestyle and their political objectives transformed. With leading activists raptured up into the Democratic Party, there would be roles left unfulfilled in the movement, and the movement's dynamism and its energy would decline. At the same time, because people had come out of Occupy, they would still have influence within Occupy, and Democratic Party organizing goals, methods, and styles would also transform our weakened movement into a kind of shadow of the party. Not a pretty picture to contemplate.

Larger Movements Derailed

The idea that the Democrats could be a vehicle for progressive social change was attempted on a larger scale over the last hundred years by farmers, workers, and the African American community, and while they had some impact on the party and through it on American society, by and large the result was the death of those movements. The Populist farmers movement of the late nineteenth century entered the Democratic Party in 1896, enticed by William Jennings Bryan's "cross of gold speech." After that date the movement which had succeeded in several states in forcing changes in legislation and which had had an impact on the courts and their decisions, ceased to be a factor in American life.

Similarly in the 1930s, the great labor upheaval that began in the 1934 sit-down strikes had led to the creation of local labor parties and union proposals to create a labor party, a party for working people. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had been elected as a moderate in 1932, moved to the left long enough to capture the Socialist Party, the Communists, and the new Congress of Industrial Unions. The old left and labor movements, particularly their leaderships, became deeply involved in the Democratic Party and during the World War II period became transformed into partners of the corporations and the government. By the 1950s the AFL-CIO had become largely an extension of the Democratic Party's political operation, no longer a vehicle as it had been in the 1930s for workers' struggles for a better life.

The African American civil rights movement which began in 1956 became a powerful force not only for blacks' rights but also progressive change in the United States. By 1965 the civil rights movement had succeeded in winning the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act and in ending de jure segregation in the South. From that time on, President Lyndon Baines Johnson and other politicians of that era opened the door of the Democratic Party to African Americans, bringing them into the party, and closing the door on civil rights progress. Once the Democrats had captured the civil rights movement, progress toward solving the more complicated problems of racism in the North was virtually abandoned. Every movement that entered the Democratic Party became stuck in the quicksand. Few escape. Bones of former activists litter the landscape.

All of those movements—Populists, 1930s labor, and African American civil rights—were far larger and more powerful than Occupy is today. If they could not transform the Democratic Party, there is little chance that we could. Meanwhile, however, entry into the Democratic Party is likely to domesticate the movement and thwart its potential to spark the kind of alternative political force this country so desperately needs.

The Role of the Institutional Left

What might be called the “institutional left”—the Democratic Socialists of America, some old line Communists, some labor officials, groups of influential university professors, intellectuals and authors—play a key role as the gate keepers of the Democratic Party on the left. They work to encourage labor and social movement activists to enter the Party, and they work to keep them from leaving. Their arguments, of course, are not all the same, but they have the same impact ultimately.

They argue—and have argued for decades—that unless we support the Democratic Party, the far right will come to power ushering in an era of reaction or perhaps even fascism. To stop this, they argue, we must enter and strengthen the Democratic Party as a bulwark against the radical right. To work for third parties or to abstain from electoral politics, they argue, undermines the democratic forces and strengthens the right and fascism. Yet the Democratic Party, far from being a bulwark against the right, has drifted over into the right. Democrats, like Republicans, represent corporate interests. Democrats, and not just the blue dog Democrats either, have adopted virtually the same austerity politics as the Republicans. Some Democrats do espouse pro-labor, feminist, pro-choice, pro-LGBT rights positions, but the rightward drift of the party means that their positions are often ignored.

Left intellectuals have played and continue to play a key role in drawing leftward moving people in society back into the Democratic Party and in keeping those who get in from leaving. For example, since the 1960s Richard Cloward, now deceased, and Frances Fox Piven argued that the left should build social movements that would force the Democrats to the left, but should not challenge Democrats electorally from outside the party. Intellectuals like Piven have made strong arguments intended to both build social movements, but also to keep them operating as a pressure group on the Democrats rather than as an independent force.

The institutional left often argues that leftists who are not in the Democratic Party are betraying the struggle for African American rights, women’s rights, or some other group’s rights. Failure to be in the Democratic Party, they argue, will lead to Republican victories which will both bring bad legislation and turn the Supreme Court and other Federal courts over to the rightwing. If we on the left fail to continue to build an independent pole and if we allow the Democratic Party to smother our movement, we will find that frustration with austerity, ongoing unemployment and economic stagnation is likely to promote extreme right wing forces in the absence of a genuine left alternative. Yet the truth is that all the great reforms in the history of our country were won not through the establishment parties, but rather through independent mass movements.

The argument of last resort is always lesser-evilism: the Democrats are not as bad as the Republicans. We must work and vote for the lesser evil. When I hear this argument, I think of an equestrian astride two horses straining at full gallop, the man with one foot on the back of each, riding his team—over a cliff. Which is the lesser evil? What does it matter? Horses and rider are going over the cliff. Today we have two parties—Republicans and Democrats—both serving the banks and corporations, both riding toward the cliff of economic crisis and disaster for us. At the last moment, as in some early silent movie, the horses may turn way leaving the poor rider to go over the precipice and into the abyss.

Voting for the lesser evil, voting for a party and for candidates in whom you do not believe has a terribly destructive impact on the individual. When we step into the voting booth, stand before the ballot, and lift the pen or touch the button and vote for something in which we do not believe, we take responsibility for destroying a little piece of our integrity, of our conscience, of our soul. We give our backing, our bona fides to something we know is not good, not right, not the best path for

our country. We violate ourselves, or permit ourselves to be violated by the lesser evil argument. Don't do it.

Occupy as a Political Force

We may not have a party political alternative, but we do need to understand our Occupy movement as apolitical force.

The idea that Occupy has to enter the Democratic Party to have political influence and power is ridiculous. In the first two months of its existence, precisely because it has been independent, it has had an enormous influence on society, on the media and on politics. Occupy has challenged the Republican and Democratic parties and the entire political system. Our encampments, our demonstrations, and our ideas have led millions to identify with our movements. Today most Americans are on our side, as numerous polls have shown. We must continue to be an independent movement, but we must throw our weight around in a more self-conscious fashion, using it to fight against rightwing policies and to push for policies that provide jobs, housing, education, and health care for all Americans.

There is some truth in the notion that we need power in the formal political sense. A working peoples' political party—one led by, made up of and fighting for working people and all the exploited, oppressed and disenfranchised—would make a huge difference in this country. Unfortunately we do not at this moment in American history have the makings of such a party. While several left parties—the Socialist Party, the Green Party, and the Peace and Freedom Party in California—have many good people and good ideas, they do not represent the political expression of the Occupy movement, the labor movement, the African American, Latino, women's and gay movements. That is we do not today have a political party of the 99%.

Why, you might ask, would we want a party? Wouldn't a party inevitably succumb to the corruption of government and the bankers and corporations who dominate the political sphere? There is certainly that danger. If, however, a powerful social movement arose—the Occupy movement perhaps, the 99% movement—and if it were committed to dismantling the economic power of the banks and corporations while building the political party of the so-called middle class, working people and the poor, as well as of all those who suffer discrimination and exploitation, we might, we just might be able to break the power of the 1%.

Ours would have to be a party with a different conception of government, far more democratic and participatory. A different government altogether, based on our communities, workplaces, and social centers. Ours would have to be a party prepared to reorganize the economy, to reshape the culture, to remold our values from below. Ours would have to be a party led—and led in the most democratic sense—by ordinary workers, by people of color, by women, gays and lesbians. Ours would have to be a party of immigrants, those with documents and the undocumented. Ours would have to be the party of real equality, not only political and social, but also economic equality. Ours would be the party that took power away from the 1% but also redistributed economic and political power among the rest of the highly unequal 99%. Could we build such a movement and such a political party? I think we can. In any case, we have no other choice than to try.

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P.S.

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