

June 21, 2013

HUFF
POST POLITICS

Prospects for Progressive Politics: A July 4th Interview With Activist Jeff Blum

Posted: 07/05/11 10:48 AM ET

This year, Americans celebrated their independence at a time when almost 10 percent of the workforce is officially unemployed, millions more are underemployed, and millions of families are losing their homes. Under these circumstances, why isn't the left gaining momentum? What are the prospects for progressive politics? To answer these questions, on July 4, between the fireworks and the parades, I interviewed veteran activist Jeff Blum about the challenges and opportunities facing the progressive movement today.

Blum has been on the front lines of the progressive movement for 40 years. For 12 years he has been executive director of [USAction](#), a multi-issue progressive advocacy organization with independent affiliates in 22 states. Under his leadership, USAction has broken ground on health care, budget and taxes, Social Security and the war in Iraq. Blum co-chairs and was one of the founders of [Health Care for America Now](#) (HCAN), which formed the progressive flank in last year's health care debate. It played a key role in passing the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which -- with all its flaws -- is the first guarantee of affordable health care for all Americans in our history.

Blum began as a community organizer in Boston in the 1970s. In 1980s he ran a statewide advocacy group in Pennsylvania that, among other significant victories, worked with then-Congressman Bob Edgar (D-PA) to pass the Toxic Chemical Right to Know law. He also helped pass Pennsylvania's first statewide tax supporting public transit and led a successful campaign to reform the state's Public Utility Commission. He was also a founder of [Jewish Funds for Justice](#).

Dreier: What are the key things that progressive organizations need to do today to expand progressive power and shrink corporate power?

Blum: The first thing we need is a vision of progress that is rooted in American reality and history. I am drawn to the idea of "liberty and justice for all," written as part of the Pledge of Allegiance by Rev. Francis Bellamy in 1892. Liberty and freedom are easier concepts in America than justice and equality. But the greatest political leaders - Lincoln, FDR, King - always linked them together. There are many other similar concepts. Van Jones is promoting the American Dream as an over-arching vision, and we're working with him on that.

Dreier: What about President Obama - does he do that?

Blum: I think he's part of the way there. His campaign captured that spirit of aspiration and optimism that is so deep in America. He made us all feel that we could move forward together with "Yes we can."

All Presidents respond to the political winds. So it's up to us to have a compelling progressive vision, one that pushes out to the limits of the possible, that creates a strong political pole toward which we pull politicians. That's just the job of movements, left and right. We organize for democracy, we organize for power, we organize for change. That's what makes us a movement.

The 2012 elections will be a big test for Obama and for all of us. If we as progressives can make our pole of the political debate compelling to him - powerful and articulate - then he will move to incorporate more of our vision. We showed we can by moving him to an anti-war stance in 2008, and with making health care reform a central part of his Presidency. And I think that we should focus on creating jobs and rebuilding the middle class as the central fight we pick.

Dreier: So why does the political energy seem to be so heavily on the right?

Blum: First, you've got to remember that the American economy has really been stagnating for middle class families for almost 40 years. Then the 2008 crash just pushed the economy, and millions of people, over the edge. Globalization has changed all the rules, and as progressives we should be clear about this. Talk about patriotism! American corporations no longer have any loyalty to the country. They have a world of customers out there. All they want is lower wages, lower taxes, less regulation -- the "race to the bottom." And of course they are increasingly allowed to buy our elections - directly with campaign contributions, indirectly with their own media like Fox and the Wall Street Journal and all those right-wing radio hucksters like Rush Limbaugh.

The American middle class is shrinking as a result of this corporate greed and the right-wing ideology it supports. So all strategies to bring people into the middle class are at risk. We're a wealthy nation. We can do this. We've got to put out a big vision of how the economy can put people back to work, expand the middle class, and tie economic opportunity to both environmental sustainability and good jobs with good wages and benefits. Until we do, we'll continue to be on the defensive.

Meanwhile, the right is reacting to those same forces with a simple message of liberty - less government, freedom for the corporations to "create jobs." Go back to our founding, have a Tea Party. It won't work, but it resonates deeply with Americans.

Dreier: How could the left take back the initiative?

Blum: We need a three part approach First, lay out our vision. We need to explain how our approach will bring prosperity, more justice AND more liberty, more equality AND more freedom. Our vision has to be based in building a bottom-up majority, poor and middle class, city and suburb and small town, all races and ages, women and men. We need to find a language and policy agenda that unites the core progressive base and "swing" voters - middle class folks in the inner suburbs, people who are now losing their jobs, their homes, their ability to send their kids to college or save for retirement. That's how we win in a democracy.

Second, we have agree on some simple concepts that we'll all use. People need to hear something similar from many different movement voices if we're going to sound like a movement to them - a beautiful harmony, not a wild cacophony. And people are working on this - Van Jones, Mike Lux, top people from labor, community organizing, Internet organizing, think tanks have been meeting to try and find a set of terms we'll all agree to use.

Third, we have to organize the people who will be the moral voice of this change - people who've been hit hard by the changes of the last decades. That means the unemployed and under-employed. People who used to have benefits and now are working without any health care or pension. People with underwater mortgages. Young people who haven't been able to get a job in their chosen field for the last three years. Great movements have at the forefront people who have a strong moral claim for change, and who look and seem like a much bigger group that is attracted to the movement, who say, "That could be me."

Dreier: Can you give an example?

Blum: Last fall, many of us worked really hard to extend the federal unemployment benefits another year. (They generally kick in after state benefits of, roughly, 26 weeks). This is a critical safety net for unemployed workers. But by talking about the need to extend unemployment benefits, we also get to talk about the need to create jobs. People are out of work because there aren't enough jobs, not because they don't want to work. We organized the first mass demonstration of unemployed folks since this recession began. We went to Capitol Hill. Thanks to aggressive work by the AFL-CIO, that fight allowed us to engage some building trades unions that are not the "usual suspects" in progressive organizing. We found some of our best spokespeople through on-line organizing by groups like Progress Ohio, affiliated with USAction and Progress Now networks. Lots of groups had been working together for a year promoting Rep. George Miller's bill to create a million public or community jobs. We couldn't move it, but that fight created some organizational ties for a two-month sprint on jobless benefits.

To be believable on job creation, we have to be comfortable explaining how the public-private partnership is just how large capitalist economies function. The private sector can't and won't do it all. Government can't and will never have the public support to do it all. They have to swim together, or we'll sink as a nation.

Dreier: Are you saying, we need a Tea Party of the Left?

Blum: We need something new. The Tea Party learned from us, we can learn from them. But I don't agree with the notion that crops up periodically, "If only we on the left had something they have on the right. The Christian Coalition. The NRA. The Tea Party." History doesn't work like that. We can't go backwards to what already was, we need to go forward to what will be.

The Tea Party seemed to speak to a lot of people who are hurting. Of course, it is funded and got a lot of organizing help from institutional right-wing forces like Dick Armey's Freedomworks and funded by the Koch brothers and others in the corporate world. But our side has not organized middle Americans well for decades. Labor used to, but it has shrunk so much, it can't do it alone - as the most visionary labor leaders like Rich Trumka, Mary Kay Henry, Maria Elena Durazo, and Larry Cohen say clearly.

Liberal foundations and big donors have mostly funded organizing efforts among narrow constituencies -- groups who have not been able to get a stable path into the American middle class. I'm talking about women, people of color, young people, and immigrants. These are critical constituencies and there's some good organizing going on as a result. But the key funders have rarely been willing to focus on the 100 million Americans who are the middle third of the country - families making roughly \$30,000 to \$60,000 a year. Those are a lot of the swing voters, and some of them are attracted to the Tea Party. Men and women. We need to find a way to join these forces together. Do the math. That's how we gain a majority in a democracy.

To take on a task that big, I think progressive organizations should explore new ways of cooperating. We've done a lot with one-issue coalitions, or even bigger groups with a specific purpose like the political coalition America Votes or even HCAN, which I co-chair. But I think the times demand that we, as leaders of organizations, look at how we are going to be able to wield more power and have more sustainable organizations. Because the job in front of us is huge.

Dreier: Can you give examples of how we've combined the defensive and offensive fights?

Blum: Sure. In 2005, President Bush proposed to privatize Social Security, and we created a big coalition to stop him. But we also had some internal fights. Some wanted to just say, "don't cut our benefits." USAction and others instead agreed with Rep. [Nancy] Pelosi, who said, "Social Security is a sacred promise, passed down from one generation to the next, to take care of each other." That lays out a bigger vision while defending - long-term and short-term together. And that vision moved people all across the country - including in places like Fargo, North Dakota, Omaha, Nebraska, and Greece, NY.

Right now, a lot of Democrats just want to hammer the Republicans about Medicare - that's how Kathy Hochul, a Democratic, won that special Congressional election in upstate NY last May in a so-called "safe" Republican district. Medicare matters a lot. So does Medicaid. Put together, they provide nearly 100 million Americans with public health insurance. And Medicaid will be a giant building block when the Affordable Care Act - "Obamacare" - takes effect in 2014. Medicaid may be harder to defend, but it's critical. And the story we can tell of them together is a bigger story.

Dreier: Isn't President Obama's decision whether or not to appoint Elizabeth Warren to head the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau a real test of progressive's power?

Blum: It depends on whether it's a fight with lots of people involved. We have to be humble about the difference between the way we think about politics and the average American, the person we're trying to organize. Elizabeth Warren has deservedly gotten a lot of media attention. She's an incredible advocate for consumers and that's why Wall Street and banking industry fear her so much. But the truth is that few people have actually heard of Elizabeth Warren. We need both a big vision and a lot of humility to remember that people are really stressed to make ends meet and try to make life better for their kids. They aren't following politics the way you and I do. That said, the campaign to get Obama to appoint Warren is an important one.

Dreier: Some also argue that the Republicans will fail because they are better in opposition than in governing and they don't have a positive legislative agenda. They are the party of "no." Is this analysis correct?

Blum: Well, it's definitely easier to say that the solution to everything is "less government" and "fewer taxes". That's a crowd-pleaser. As a progressive movement, we have set ourselves a higher standard, to propose real solutions, but we've set ourselves a lower standard of effective communications. The best Republicans actually propose legislative and policy solutions. We may not like them but we'd better take them seriously, because they have a lot of levers of power, and they intend to use them, because they understand that power is fleeting. As they say, use it or lose it.

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