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21

A Party for a Change

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In 1982, Doreen Del Bianco, a former member of the Hospital Workers' Union (District 1199), ran as the Democratic candidate for the Connecticut legislature from Waterbury and defeated the Republican incumbent. What was notable about her campaign was the strong support she received from the Legislative Electoral Action Program (LEAP), a new left-of-center coalition that includes the United Automobile Workers, the International Association of Machinists (IAM), the Connecticut Federation of Teachers and other unions, women's and environmental groups and the Connecticut Citizen Action Group, a community organization that Del Bianco cochaired. She ran an issue-oriented campaign calling for lower utility rates, property-tax reform and the cleanup of toxic wastes. Thanks to her links with labor and single-issue groups, she was able to mobilize a small army of experienced, energetic campaign workers.

Del Bianco is one of a growing number of politicians whose roots are not in traditional party politics or right-wing moral crusades, but in the burgeoning progressive citizen movements of the past decade. These organizations represent an important new force on the Left, not just for 1984, but also for creating a viable strategy for social change beyond. We call it a "party within a party" strategy.

Progressives who want to offer an alternative to both Reagan-style conservatism and Carter-style liberalism have generally considered three options. All of them, however, have serious defects.

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The easiest, but least effective, choice is the candidate-centered approach. At the presidential level, it means jumping on the bandwagon of one of the Democratic candidates. In 1984, this "anybody but Reagan" theory leads some progressives to shop around for a lesser-evil Democrat. Cranston is the "peace" candidate; Hart emphasizes his youth and spouts trendy, neoliberal ideas; and Mondale is the front-runner, prolabor and (according to the *New Republic*) "the most experienced at governing." This crop of essentially identical Democratic candidates, however, symbolizes the bankruptcy of ideas among mainstream Democrats. Their views on women, the environment and civil rights are acceptable, if not on the cutting edge. However, except perhaps for Jesse Jackson, they are all wedded to the corporate-dominated "free enterprise" system, to government welfare (tax breaks and subsidies) for big business, to pacifier programs for the poor and to a globalist foreign policy designed to maximize corporate profits. They all, to different degrees, pay lip service to the nuclear-freeze idea, without directly challenging militarism and the permanent war economy. None of them is as progressive as Robert Kennedy in 1968, George McGovern in 1972 or Fred Harris in 1976, candidates who tried to inject issues of economic and social justice into the national debate.

Progressive organizations, looking to translate their concerns into political issues, may hitch their wagons to candidates for everything from city councils and state legislatures to Congress and the presidency. Trade unions have been doing it for years, and more recently, groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), nuclear-freeze groups, the National Abortion Rights Action League, environmental organizations, tenant and community organizations and others have taken steps to endorse and work for political candidates.

But candidate-centered campaigns have a piecemeal, ad hoc quality about them. Each progressive candidate has to piece together a new coalition, drawing on different grass-roots groups and their activists. In one election, a women's group and a labor union will find themselves working side by side. In the next election, the union stays on the sidelines, but the women's group is behind a prochoice candidate, this time working alongside an environmental group or a tenant organization. Grass-roots groups, in other words, are constantly reorganizing and reconstituting themselves, drawing on shifting reservoirs of

campaign volunteers and donors, depending on which self-selected candidates present themselves in a given election.

Charismatic candidates can ignite enthusiasm and attract volunteers. But the problem with candidate-centered politics is that no long-term strategy or working relationship can develop among grass-roots groups. Lacking the continuity of an ongoing coalition, momentum can't build from successes. Whether a progressive candidate wins or loses, the campaign's resources (mailing lists, staff, volunteers and research) tends to scatter until the next campaign. In between, there is no mobilization for other elections (including referenda issues), no fund-raising, no issue development, no search for progressive candidates, no training of staff or volunteers. This is something that in some other countries political parties do, but that is not how parties have developed in the United States. This leaves a huge vacuum, waiting to be filled.

Under these circumstances, a third-party strategy may seem more appealing. This is the second option for progressives. The Citizens party, for example, has articulated an anticorporate program, enlisting activists in chapters around the country, and has even elected a few local officials. But these small triumphs do not add up to a national strategy. The odds against third parties in the American political system are staggering: Witness the fates of the Progressive and States' Rights parties in 1948, the Peace and Freedom party in 1968 and the American Independence party in 1972. Their failures did not result from bad intentions or lack of organizing skill, but from the structure of American politics. America's winner-take-all electoral system (unlike proportional representation found in European democracies) encourages voters to cast their ballots for one of the two front-runners. Voters don't want to feel that they are "wasting" their votes by casting their ballots for a minority party that has no chance of winning, since that party's vote will not translate into any formal voice in government. Twenty percent of the vote doesn't get a 20-percent voice in the government.

Candidates and parties need to win the *most* votes—a majority or a plurality—in order to gain a voice. Otherwise, they get nothing. Because of proportional representation, protest parties in Europe can get a foot in the door. But there can be no "greening" of America.

Third parties, in fact, can be harmful, leading to conflict between potential allies. Progressive groups (labor, women's, minority, citizen

action, peace, environmental) organize around immediate gains and are unlikely to abandon their short-term goals and victories in the hope of comprehensive change in the long term. The two-party system forces compromises, or concessions, to bring movements into the mainstream. Most pragmatic groups won't give up opportunities for immediate reforms in order to build a third party. And in some situations (particularly in New York), third parties have actually thrown victories to the more conservative candidates by taking votes away from liberal Democrats. When that happens, squabbles among progressives become open wounds, and take years to heal. A vote for the third party is a vote wasted.

The third option for progressives is to continue working in grass-roots movements and ignore electoral politics altogether. This is the Saul Alinsky/Ralph Nader theory of electoral politics. Let Tweedledee and Tweedledum fight it out, and then attack the winner—with protest demonstrations, scorecards rating their records, letter-writing, lawsuits and lobbying campaigns. According to this theory, efforts to bring grass-roots groups into the electoral battles only sap their strength and co-opt their issue focus into a cult-of-the-candidate mentality.

This approach has many adherents and, given Americans' cynicism about politicians and government, builds on people's angers and frustrations, while putting issues ahead of personalities. However, there is a weakness in an approach that, through public pressure and embarrassment, implicitly threatens public officials with defeat, but does nothing to carry out the threat. Sooner or later, politicians realize that the threats are empty and take the groups' demands less seriously.

Also, for people interested in building a coherent movement that has a chance of taking power in Washington, the ad hoc nature of those tactics is a serious drawback. Grass-roots groups have no vehicle for uniting behind a common political agenda. As in the candidate-centered approach, their power is diffused and lacks an institutional context. Politics becomes a grab bag of single issues, narrow constituencies, and rival organizations competing for turf, often working at cross-purposes. This approach also leaves the job of nominating the Democratic candidates to the traditional powerbrokers within the party. You can't win the game if you stay on the sidelines.

Is there a way to merge the strengths of these three options while avoiding their defects?

We believe there is: a "party-within-a-party" strategy. Contrary to popular assessments, the last decade has seen a tremendous amount of progressive political activity. Campaigns for rent control, regulation of toxic chemicals in the workplace and the community, tax reform, a nuclear freeze and the Equal Rights Amendment have employed a wide variety of tactics and won many victories. Groups like NOW, ACORN, Mobilization for Survival, Massachusetts Fair Share and 9 to 5 have involved millions of Americans, raising their political awareness and honing their activist skills. In recent years, some of these groups have moved into the electoral arena, providing funds, endorsements and campaign workers for issue-oriented candidates. Under the party-within-a-party strategy, they would unite in a permanent coalition within the Democratic party, supporting a program of economic democracy. The coalition would support and run candidates in party primaries, initially in local, state and congressional races. By mobilizing its supporters and launching massive voter-registration drives in these campaigns, it would work to defeat Reagan in 1984 (and his counterpart in 1988), but not waste time and effort on the presidential primaries.

Similar coalitions have been established at the state and local levels. Groups like the New Jersey Public Interest Political Action Committee (PIPAC), the Montana Committee for an Effective Legislature (MONTCEL), the Ohio Public Interest Campaign (OPIC), the Illinois Public Action Council (IPAC) and California's Campaign for Economic Democracy (CED) have coalesced women, blacks, Hispanics, environmentalists, neighborhood and tenant activists and senior citizens into effective political forces. Working with labor unions like the UAW, the IAM, AFSCME, the Steelworkers, the United Food and Commercial Workers, the Service Employees International Union, the International Union of Electrical Workers and the Communications Workers of America, the coalitions have engaged in lobbying, developed "hit lists" of conservative incumbents and backed candidates who are not tied to corporate interests. In 1982, for example, IPAC members campaigned door to door in nearly every Illinois community with more than 5,000 people. They visited some 50,000 households and helped elect a progressive candidate, Lane Evans, to Congress.

In California, the CED, founded after Tom Hayden's surprisingly effective campaign in the 1976 Democratic senatorial primary, has

become a progressive caucus within the state Democratic party. It has helped elect candidates, hammered out a platform that emphasizes housing and energy issues, and drawn unions, minority organizations, tenants' committees and women's groups under its broad banner.

In New Jersey, PIPAC, founded in 1981, has brought a number of statewide single-issue groups into an umbrella organization. Spearheading efforts to form the committee was the eleven-year-old New Jersey Tenants Organization, which has more than 80,000 dues-paying members and which has won rent control in more than 100 cities and helped push through the toughest landlord-tenant statutes in the nation. NJTO endorsed many members of the state legislature, who in return supported the group's legislative agenda. But it eventually recognized the limitations of single-issue politics and turned to coalition-building, bringing together representatives of the Environmental Voters Alliance; NOW; the auto workers', communications workers' and machinists' unions; the Hispanic Political Action Committee; senior citizens' groups and SANE. The groups discovered that many of their friends and enemies in the legislature frequently overlapped, so they decided to work together to elect (or defeat) candidates. Because of its late start and lack of money, PIPAC had only limited success in the November 1981 elections. But in 1983 PIPAC supported a 25-year-old newcomer named Steve Aduato, Jr., who defeated a conservative incumbent for the state legislature.

The Rhode Island Community Labor Coalition (CLOC), formed in 1979, consists of fourteen labor unions, six community organizations, and individual members. CLOC initially worked on two legislative issues—a plant-closing bill and a tax on oil companies. But its leaders felt that if the coalition was to be effective, it had to be able to threaten defeat for those legislators who opposed its efforts. CLOC successfully ran a candidate for state legislator in 1983's Democratic primary; he later won the general election. It plans to run four or five candidates in 1984.

The first steps toward party-within-a-party coalitions are now being taken in other states as well, such as Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Oregon, Minnesota and Virginia. Citizen Action, a nationwide federation of fourteen state-level community groups (such as Massachusetts Fair Share, Ohio Public Interest Campaign and Virginia Action), has played a critical role in nurturing these alliances. Several years ago, its leaders formed the Citizen-Labor En-

ergy Coalition (CLEC) to test the waters of working with unions on national issues such as natural-gas decontrol. Other groups—such as NOW, ACORN, Jobs with Peace, environmental, senior-citizen, civil-rights and other organizations—have shown increasing willingness to forge coalitions and work in electoral politics. Progressive groups are working together within the Democratic party while continuing to pursue their own goals outside it. The next step is the formation of a party-within-a-party at the national level, which would coordinate tactics and enter candidates in local, state and congressional Democratic primaries—and perhaps in the 1992 presidential primaries.

To be sure, many people have serious reservations about working within the Democratic party, pointing out that it includes some of the worst racists, sexists and corporate fat cats in American politics. But by the same token, it also includes almost all of the most progressive figures: Governor Toney Anaya of New Mexico, Representatives John Conyers, Ronald Dellums, Byron Dorgan, Pat Schroeder, Barbara Mikulski, George Crockett, Esteban Torres, Bruce Morrison, Barney Frank, Marcy Kaptur, Robert Torrecelli and Tom Downey; Mayors Ray Flynn of Boston, Andrew Young of Atlanta, and Harold Washington of Chicago; Texas Agriculture Commissioner Jim Hightower, North Dakota Tax Commissioner Kent Conrad, Alabama Secretary of State Don Siegelman; city council members Ruth Messinger of New York, David Cohen of Philadelphia, David Orr of Chicago, Harry Britt of San Francisco, Sandra Graham and David Sullivan of Cambridge, Massachusetts; Essex County (New Jersey) Executive Peter Shapiro; and state legislators Julian Bond of Georgia, Harlan Baker of Maine, Tom Gallagher of Massachusetts, Tom Bates, Maxine Waters and Tom Hayden of California, Tom Towe of Montana and Harriot Woods of Missouri. Most of the prominent activist politicians on the Left today—those who helped establish or attended the meetings of the Conference on Alternative State and Local Policy, for example—are Democrats. Also in the Congress, the Black Caucus, the Hispanic Caucus and the Progressive Caucus are in the forefront of developing and advocating alternative agendas. Their members, too, are Democrats.

Why now? What makes us think that the Democratic party can be transformed? Why spend our time and energy reinventing a crooked wheel?

Two trends give this strategy a potential it would not have had a decade or so ago. The first is a change in the rules of electoral politics. The second is a transformation of the broader political economy.

The growing number of primaries, the notable success of recent voter-registration drives (partly due to less restrictive laws) and the decline of political bosses have opened up the party and decentralized power within it. In recent years, for example, the traditional Democratic party monopoly in the South has been challenged by right-wing Republicans. This has forced Democrats to reach out to blacks, Hispanics and labor; to loosen voter-registration laws, and to give long-disenfranchised groups a larger voice.

Also, since the mid-1970s, the uneasy alliance between "corporate liberals" and organized labor, which exerts a strong influence on the Democratic party's policies, has been severely tested. During the postwar growth years, as both Alan Wolfe and Jerry Berman remind us, the Democrats were somewhat receptive to the needs of the poor and the working-class. It was the Democrats who passed the Voting Rights Act, Medicare, Legal Services, VISTA, CAP (with its requirement of "maximum feasible participation" of the poor), low-income housing programs, the Occupational Safety and Health Act and similar post-New Deal achievements.¹ But corporate interests are no longer willing to make the concessions to the poor and the working class that they made during the era of economic expansion following World War II. Now they want give-backs and take-aways. They want to "reindustrialize" the country on the backs of those with the least to give up. Living standards for the bottom two-thirds of the population are declining. All the 1984 Democratic presidential candidates espouse some version of neoliberalism, with its call for cooperation between business and labor. But neoliberalism offers little to the electorate outside the upper middle class. It is also not sufficiently sensitive to the concerns of feminists and environmentalists, particularly when they directly challenge corporate privileges and profits.

The Democratic party is in a transition period, looking for new ideas and a new social base. An organized progressive strategy could move it to the left and turn primaries and caucuses into genuine political contests.*

* We recognize that many mainstream Democratic operatives may be threatened by the style, rhetoric and action of grass-roots movements. Southern Democrats may view this approach as a strategy of blacks and minorities. Ethnic working class

An alternative to both Republican Reaganomics and Democratic neoliberalism is a program of *economic democracy*. This would close tax loopholes for the rich; dramatically reduce nuclear arms and defense spending; direct public funds toward a national health-care system, mass transit, and nonprofit housing; give employees and consumers a greater voice in corporate decision-making; reform labor laws to strengthen organizing; and reform campaign finance laws to reduce the political advantage of corporations and the rich. This program would put America on the road to full employment and improve chances for a lasting peace. It would also promote a vision of a humane society, of technological resources and human will directed toward meeting human needs, and of government as the instrument of social betterment, not of corporate greed and political corruption.

A detailed blueprint is unnecessary here. A proliferation of excellent ideas is contained in Mark Green's *Winning Back America*; Derek Shearer and Martin Carnoy's *Economic Democracy and The New Social Contract*; Tom Hayden's *American Future*; Bowles, Gordon and Weisskopf's *Beyond the Wasteland*; the wide range of publications of the Conference on Alternative State and Local Policy; and S. M. M. Miller and Donald Tomaskovic-Devey's *Recapitalization of Capitalism*. More concrete programs will emerge, as they did in the New Deal, out of the ideas and experiences of labor and citizens groups working at the local, state and national levels.

With an effective national organization, progressives running for office on a platform of economic democracy would be able to mobilize the millions of alienated citizens who don't bother to vote because they can find no candidate or party that represents their interests.

Voter registration is a crucial part of any progressive strategy, and it is here that the grass-roots organizations in a party-within-a-party coalition would play a particularly important role. In the 1980 election, 76.5 million people out of the 163 million who were eligible to

citizens, who want to preserve neighborhoods and so-called traditional values, may interpret it as a program of liberals committed to abortion, integration and homosexuality. Environmentalists may see it as a stronghold of unions committed to preserving smokestack industries. We could note other potential divisions. We have found, however, that while the potential divisions are real and important, they are not as great as many think—witness the recent election of so many of the men and women mentioned in this article.

vote—47 percent—stayed home. They were mostly blue-collar workers, members of minority groups and the poor—those who have suffered most from the policy failures and broken promises of politicians in both parties. But experience shows that when candidates offer workable solutions to pressing problems, voters turn out in large numbers. The New Deal brought millions of people into the political process with the promise of Social Security, public-service jobs, subsidized housing and rural electrification. Harold Washington's mayoral victory in Chicago proved the effectiveness of large-scale voter-registration drives among the powerless.⁷

To make the party-within-a-party strategy work, the various state coalitions and national groups must form an umbrella organization that will plan how best to use their collective resources. Its activities might include:

1. Creating a think tank to generate ideas and policy proposals. Such a body could draw on work that is already being done by the Institute for Policy Studies, The Democracy Project, the Conference on Alternative State and Local Policy and similar groups.
2. Designating a shadow cabinet composed of individuals from the progressive Left who could fill positions in government related to their areas of expertise. Prominent figures like Barry Commoner (energy), Frances Moore Lappé (agriculture), Ralph Nader (commerce), Richard Barnet (defense), Ron Dellums (health and human services), Elizabeth Holtzman (attorney general) and William Winpisinger (labor) could provide critiques and proposals on a wide range of issues.
3. Establishing a communications network, drawing on publications like the *Nation*, *In These Times*, *Mother Jones*, the *Progressive*, *Dissent*, *Social Policy*, and *Socialist Review*. These magazines could publish discussions of ideas, strategies, values and goals. The national coalition might also start a syndicated column, a news service and a cable network in order to reach a wider public.
4. Compiling a scorecard to rate elected officials' voting records and public statements. Many progressive groups already produce such ratings, which are often published by the mainstream press. While individual groups should continue to rate politicians according to their own litmus tests, the coalition could compile a comprehensive scorecard on all the issues that are important to the Democratic Left.

5. Hiring a field staff of organizers, who would recruit candidates capable of strong leadership, help groups and candidates on the national coalition's priority list, teach campaign techniques and coordinate voter-registration drives. Both Project Vote and the State and Local Leadership Project have started this process.¹

We are not merely asking people to pull the Democratic lever and abandon grass-roots organizing; activist groups should, of course, continue their efforts to democratize unions, build community organizations, organize the unorganized, challenge environmental devastation, fight for equal rights, reshape universities and foster worker control of corporations. The strength of the party-within-a-party strategy is that by maintaining an independent political base, it avoids the pitfalls of being absorbed into the Democratic party. The grass-roots movements continue organizing and consciousness-raising. Meanwhile, they are taking advantage of the two-party system to build on what activists are already doing.

The growing number of successful coalitions at the state level will provide the building blocks for a national strategy. It will be necessary for some sectors of organized labor to oppose the AFL-CIO's current direction, including its attachment to a cold war foreign policy, its lack of imagination in fighting the tighten-your-belts austerity mentality, and its weak efforts to organize the unorganized. Fortunately, more and more union mavericks—leaders and rank and file alike—are working to shake up old-style business unionism. A revitalized labor movement, with allies in the new progressive citizen movements, would push most of the Democratic party's business support into the Republican camp and open the field for greater numbers of progressive Democratic candidates.

This strategy also provides an opportunity for the ideological Left (intellectuals and socialists) to join forces with the pragmatic Left (grass-roots movements organized around immediate reforms). Much of the ideological Left continues to waste its time and energy debating and fine-tuning its theories of the state and of social change. There is still some suspicion that electoral politics or short-term reforms lull people into the system and co-opt protest, but a growing part of the ideological Left has taken part in the past decade's revitalization of the grass-roots politics, either as organizers or as sympathetic journalists and "think tank" policy advisers and strategists. They help to

guarantee that the long-term vision of the Left is not lost in the day-to-day struggles for a better life today.

Can the party-within-a-party strategy work?

New political directions always involve some risks. That was the case in the decision of industrial unions to break from the AFL to form the CIO in the depression; the decision of black activists to employ civil disobedience as a major tactic to challenge southern racism; the decision of early suffragists to establish a movement for women's voting rights despite the cultural and political obstacles; and the recent courage of the Catholic bishops to get involved both in citizen action (through their Campaign for Human Development fund) and in the peace movement.

The resources and skills are there. Whether activists can put aside their organizational rivalries and ideological squabbles to forge a broad coalition is a matter of will, not predestination. But the trends we outline here suggest that they can.

Only one thing is certain: The progressive Left must step up its political and organizational attack. Otherwise, the living standards of those who are employed will continue to decline, and the plight of the unemployed will continue to worsen. Even if the Democrats win with a Carter clone in 1984, their policies will lead voters to swing back to the Republicans four years later. The Left must offer a *real* alternative, one that will shift the basic priorities of national politics. The party-within-a-party strategy offers the best hope not only for defeating worst-evil Republicans, but also for moving the nation toward peace, freedom and justice.

Notes

1. Alan Wolfe, *America's Impasse*; and Jerry J. Berman, "Mainstream Politics," *Democracy*, Summer 1983.
2. Richard Cloward and Francis Fox Piven discuss the potential of voter registration in "Toward a Class-Based Realignment of American Politics," *Social Policy*, Winter 1983.
3. Heather Booth, "Left with the Ballot Box," *Working Papers*, May/June 1981, and Sanford A. Newman, "Project Vote: Tapping the Power of the Poor," *Social Policy*, Winter 1983, both discuss these developments.