

The Nation

July 23-30, 1983 \$1.25; U.K. 65p

PARTY-WITHIN-A-PARTY PLAN PROGRESSIVE POLITICS IN 1984

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Last year, 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 which includes the United Automobile Workers, the International Association of Machinists (I.A.M.), the Connecticut Federation of Teachers and other unions, women's and environmental groups and the Connecticut Citizen Action Group, a community organization which Del Bianco co-chaired. 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 in the progressive movements of the past decade and who represent an important new force on the left for the 1984 primaries and beyond.

Progressives who want to defeat Reagan and at the same time offer an alternative to Carter-style liberalism have generally considered three options. The first and easiest choice is to join the bandwagon of one of the current Democratic candidates. That course is known as the Anybody But Reagan strategy. Although Alan Cranston styles himself a peace candidate, Gary Hart emphasizes his youth and spouts trendy neoliberal ideas

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and Walter Mondale campaigns as an experienced and pro-labor pol, they all are committed to the corporate system, to government welfare for big business, to pacifier programs for the poor and to a globalist foreign policy designed to maximize corporate profits. Not one of them is as progressive as Robert Kennedy in the 1968 primaries, George McGovern in 1972 or Fred Harris in 1976—candidates who tried to inject the issue of social and economic justice into the national debate and who were able to mobilize grass-roots support.

The second option is to back a third party. The Citizens Party, for example, has articulated an anticorporate program, enlisted activists in chapters around the country and even elected a few local officials. But those small triumphs do not add up to a national strategy. The odds against third parties winning in this country are staggering: witness the fate of the Progressive and States' Rights parties in 1948, of the Peace and Freedom Party in 1968 and of the American Independent Party in 1972. Their failures were not the result of bad intentions or lack of organizing skill; America's winner-take-all electoral system (unlike proportional representation found in many European democracies) gives minority parties no voice in government. It should be apparent that a vote cast for the Citizens Party in a national election is a vote wasted. There will be no "Green-ing" of America.

The third option is to work with grass-roots and public interest movements that focus on specific issues and ignore the Presidential primaries altogether. That is the Saul Alinsky/Ralph Nader theory of electoral politics: let Tweedledum and Tweedledee fight it out, and then attack the winner—with protest demonstrations, scorecards rating his or her record, letter-writing and lobbying campaigns. But for those interested in building a coherent left that has a chance of taking power in Washington, the ad hoc nature of those tactics is a serious drawback. Grass-roots groups have often dissipated their energies by working at cross-purposes, and have failed to unite behind a common political agenda. Their power is diffused and lacks an institutional context.

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, Mass. 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 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 (C.E.D.) have coalesced women, blacks, Hispanics, environmentalists, neighborhood and tenant activists and senior citizens into effective political forces. Working with labor unions like the U.A.W., the I.A.M., 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 C.E.D., founded after Tom Hayden's surprisingly effective campaign in the 1976 Democratic senatorial primary, has become a leftist 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. N.J.T.O. 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 the coalition held together, and it is now preparing for this year's state Democratic primaries.

The Rhode Island Community Labor Coalition (CLOC), formed in 1979, consists of fourteen labor unions, six com-

munity 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 were 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 last year's Democratic primary; he later won the general election. It plans to run four or five candidates next year.

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. 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 leftists 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 some of the most progressive figures: Representatives John Conyers, Ron Dellums, Byron Dorgan, Pat Schroeder, Barbara Mikulski, George Crockett, Bruce Morrison, Barney Frank and Marcy Kaptur; Mayors Bruce Van Allen of Santa Cruz and Harold Washington of Chicago; Texas Agriculture Commissioner Jim Hightower; City Council members Ruth Messinger of New York, Ray Flynn of Boston, David Cohen of Philadelphia and David Sullivan of Cambridge, Massachusetts; Essex County, New Jersey, Executive Peter Shapiro; and state legislators Julian Bond of

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Georgia, Harlan Baker of Maine, Tom Hayden of California and Tom Gallagher of Massachusetts. Most of the prominent activist politicians on the left today—those who can be found at meetings of the Conference on Alternative State and Local Policy, for example—are Democrats.

Moreover, the growing number of primaries, the notable success of recent voter registration drives and the decline of political bosses have opened up the party and decentralized power within it. The Democratic Party is in a transition period, and an organized progressive strategy could move it to the left and turn primaries and caucuses into genuine political contests.

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. Corporate interests are not 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. All the current Democratic Presidential candidates now espouse some version of neoliberalism, with its call for cooperation between business and labor. But neoliberalism offers little to the electorate outside of the upper-middle class. It is also less sensitive to the concerns of feminists and environmentalists than is more traditional liberalism.

The alternative is a program of economic democracy that would close tax loopholes for the rich; dramatically reduce 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; and put America on the road to full employment. With an effective national organization, progressives running for office on such a platform 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 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.

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 pro-

posals. Such a body could draw on work that is already being done by the Institute for Policy Studies, The Democracy Project, the Democratic Socialists of America, 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*, *democracy* 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 score card 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 score card 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.

The growing number of successful coalitions at the state level will provide the building blocks for a national strategy. But it will be necessary for some sectors of organized labor to oppose the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s current direction, including its attachment to a cold war foreign policy, its acquiescence to a tighten-your-belts austerity mentality and its unwillingness 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 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.

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 which will shift the basic priorities of national politics. The party-within-a-party strategy offers the best hope not only for defeating Reagan next year but also for moving the nation to the left. □