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USA :

The search for a new, independent electoral politics in the United States

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American discontent with the political status quo has shown itself in many ways in the last few years, principally in the major political parties. On the right, we have had the Tea Party movement which has become a significant force within the Republican Party. On the left, the most striking development took place last year with the landslide victory in the New York mayoral election (by a vote of 73.3 to 24.3 percent) for Democrat Bill de Blasio.

Tired of Republican billionaire Michael R. Bloomberg—seventh richest person in the United States, thirteenth richest in the world—a mayor who had catered to the rich at the expense of the poor, New Yorkers voted in November for de Blasio who ran on a platform opposing the growing economic inequality in the city. A former activist who had been in Nicaragua as a supporter of the Sandinista revolution in the 1980s, de Blasio had evolved into a mainstream Clinton Democrat. But with a populist platform he won the support of the city's multiethnic working class voters.

At the same time, and perhaps more important in the long run, Americans are witnessing new sorts of political campaigns, manifestations of a search for independent politics. The combination of the economic crisis of 2008, the austerity drive by both Democrats and Republicans, and the continuing racism against African Americans have led various left, labor, and black groups to reject the existing two-party political model and to create novel political vehicles. Some of these efforts are merely local, others are small in scale, and almost all have a tentative character, but they may represent an emerging trend in a country dominated since the 1920s by two capitalist parties, a society where the underdogs have seldom had their own political voice.

Many radicals and leftists still believe that progressive social-political movements can and must be built within the Democratic Party. In Jackson, Mississippi, a city of 175,000, 59 percent white and 37 percent black, Chokwe Lumumba, a civil rights attorney and longtime black nationalist—a former leader of the Republic of New Afrika—stood for mayor in the spring of 2013. His campaign was built by the Jackson People's Assembly, itself a project of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement. The assembly's "Jackson Plan," called for participatory democracy, a solidarity economy, and sustainable development combined with progressive community organizing and electoral politics. Lumumba won five out of seven wards and defeated his closest opponent by 3,000 votes. While his campaign never mentioned socialism, the Maoists who supported him believe that it represents a step in that direction. Other leftists criticized the campaign for its failure to break with the Democratic Party.

One of the most interesting developments is the more independent role being played by unions. Historically the AFL-CIO and other labor unions have supported the Democrats almost exclusively and fought fiercely against any attempt by unions to move to the left, arguing that independent campaigns divide the left and lead to Republican victories. Yet in some regions local unions have been willing to defy the AFL-CIO and their own national unions to support Green, socialist, and independent labor candidates.

In Syracuse, New York, the Civil Service Employees Association, an affiliate of both the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the AFL-CIO, defied tradition and supported Howie Hawkins, a former Green Party candidate for Governor, for a seat on the city council. Hawkins lost to the incumbent. Similarly in Seattle, Kshama Sawant, the Socialist Alternative candidate for the city council succeeded in winning support from several local unions: AFSCME, the Postal Workers, the America Federation of Teachers, and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. Sawant won in a victory that surprised both her opponents and her supporters.

In Lorain County, Ohio—just west of Cleveland—the local labor council decided to run its own candidates after the

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mayor overturned the city's agreement to use local, minority, and union labor. "It took us three years to negotiate this historic agreement, and it took them three days to kill it!" said Joe Thayer of the Sheet Metal Workers Union. Faced with betrayal by the local Democratic Party, the unions decided to run their own candidates. "This was a step we took reluctantly," said Lorain County AFL-CIO President Harry Williamson. "When the leaders of the [Democratic] Party just took us for granted and tried to roll over the rights of working people here, we had to stand up." With the support of the unions, an immigrant workers center, and a student group at Oberlin College, the labor slate won two dozen seats on the city council. "Running independent wasn't our first choice, but hopefully this can help bring the Democratic leaders to their senses," said Machinist Art Thomas. "If not, we've shown them that we can work with our friends and elect our own!"

In the United States, most social movement and labor union activists still tend to be more supportive of Democrats like de Blasio, or inclined to support left candidates like Lumumba who run in the Democratic Party. But things appear to be changing as a result of the experience of the crisis, of austerity, and of the occupy movement. We have seen the growth of a far left, multi-ethnic milieu of young people who reject not only the two-party system but also corporate domination of the society, consumerism, and environmental degradation. The new left either rejects politics altogether or its inclined to support radical new political alternatives. Most important, some workers in the unions now believe that when the Democrats betray them they have to organize their own alternative political option.