

Labor Party Time? Not Yet.

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During the first of the 2012 presidential debates, President Obama opined to Governor Romney, "I suspect that on Social Security, we've got a somewhat similar position." This should come as no surprise to those of us paying attention. Since at least July of the previous year, President Obama has been dangling a "grand bargain" in front of congressional Republicans: cuts in Social Security and Medicare in exchange for a temporary agreement to raise the federal debt ceiling. While Republicans continue to hold out for deeper cuts and more extensive concessions, this offer is still very much on the bargaining table. And it is sure to be part of the post-election "fiscal cliff" negotiations.

That a Democratic President would be willing to trade away the crown jewels of the social safety net that have defined the party's identity in the minds of millions of Americans for generations is astounding. Coming after the Obama Administration's first-term failure to deliver on its campaign promises to labor on job-creation and labor law reform, its embrace of the "Bush Doctrine" and escalation of war in Afghanistan, and its repeated capitulations in the fight to pass substantive health care legislation, the proposed gutting of Social Security and Medicare should have marked the date when labor finally disowned the Democratic Party and declared its support for the establishment of a political party with a working-class agenda. Instead, one union after another rushed to endorse Obama for a second term, asking for little or nothing in return.

Obama owes his re-election to the labor movement. Its massive ground campaign mobilizations surely made the difference in the key battleground states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Virginia. Labor did so mainly because the "greater of two evils" alternative—the inauguration of a national union-busting regime committed to a Greek-style austerity program—was, quite simply, unacceptable. But the question still must be asked: will labor, as a social movement, be stronger in four years than it is today? Will the lives of working people be better or more secure?

The history of the past four years is instructive. Despite winning the presidency and both houses of Congress in 2008 on a platform of hope and change, the Democratic Party failed abjectly to articulate, much less implement, a program enabling ordinary Americans to recover from the worst economic meltdown since the Great Depression. This failure generated a political crisis with two exceptionally different expressions. On the one hand, it fueled a right wing, populist rage that pits workers who have lost secure jobs and decent benefits against those workers—many in the public sector—who have managed to maintain them. By scapegoating "underwater" homeowners, immigrants, and other victims of the economic crisis, this "populism" diverts anger away from the Wall Street bankers who caused the crisis while pursuing a political agenda that threatens to repeal the major social gains of the past 100 years. Although it purports to speak for small business folks and hardworking Americans, this Tea Party movement offers nothing in the way of real relief. While its momentum may have peaked shortly after its stunning successes in the 2010 midterm elections, the results of the June 2012 Wisconsin recall election and its repeated use as a Republican trope in the fall elections bear testimony to the continuing appeal of a well-financed and well-publicized right-wing popular base which uses the familiar themes of racism, religious and nationalist bigotry, and intra-class resentment to advance its anti-government agenda.

On the other hand, the current political crisis is also the reason why the Occupy movement resonated with many Americans. For all its shortcomings, it successfully articulated the impact of the current economic crisis in class terms. Occupiers focused on a critique of the shortcomings of capitalism rather than simply a temporary quick fix to the current crisis. It may well have been the first critique of neoliberalism to gain significant traction in the United States. However, while the movement may have helped shift the terms of debate, its lack of organizational unity, ideological coherence, and institutional support clearly are factors in its inability to coalesce into a serious alternative to our current two-party political party system - one that is clearly dominated by the "one-percent".

Unlike nearly every other industrialized country in the world, the U.S. working class has not succeeded in developing a class-based political party substantial enough to contend for political power. Instead, from the Great Depression through the 1970s, a private welfare state, negotiated via individual union contracts and adopted by "me-too" non-union corporations and supplemented by a relatively meager social safety net, provided a rising standard of living and a modicum of security for working Americans. This arrangement, however, has made working people in the United States particularly vulnerable to the ravages of neoliberalism. Indeed, for the past thirty years, we have experienced an unrelenting assault on the standard of living and well being of the vast majority of Americans who work for a living. As a result, wealth and power are concentrated increasingly in the hands of a globalized elite.

We would be hard-pressed to identify a period of U.S. history where the need for a labor-based political party was greater than it is now. After all of the events since the financial meltdown of 2008 - the "Wisconsin Winter," the "Occupy Wall Street Autumn," another "lesser of two evils" election season - the next logical step might seem to be the launching (or re-launching) of just such a party. Yet the short-term prospects of an independent, pro-worker political movement emerging on the American scene are virtually nonexistent.

A Party of Our Own

Hard as it may be to believe today, in the mid-1990s, a group of progressive unions and individual activists initiated a substantial organizing project to create just such a party. In 1996, after five years of intensive organizing, 1,400 delegates from unions representing more than two million workers met in an over-flowing convention hall in Cleveland, Ohio to launch the [Labor Party](#). After contentious debate about issues from abortion to running candidates, we adopted a comprehensive program - "[A Call for Economic Justice](#)" - and began the difficult yet exhilarating task of developing an organizing strategy to wean the labor movement from the corporate-dominated two-party political system.

This Labor Party moment reflected the confluence of a number of significant developments in the 1990s:

1. A belated understanding on the part of broad sections of the labor movement that the PATCO debacle of the previous decade (when newly-elected President Reagan busted the air traffic controllers strike and fired all of the strikers without any significant response from the labor movement) signaled the end of the post-war collective bargaining regime.
2. A growing fury among union members against the Democratic Party's support - via Bill Clinton's version of neoliberalism - for NAFTA, the first of many trade agreements that implemented a globalization program that enriched a global elite at the expense of workers everywhere.

3. A resurgence, after decades of marginalization, of the longstanding labor/left tradition which had long focused on class-struggle unionism and independent political action. This tradition helped to inform and inspire a new generation of union leadership.

After fifteen years of retreat, disorganization, and defeat, we witnessed in the mid-1990s an upsurge of trade union militancy, focused on taking the offensive against corporate greed. This upsurge was forged in the crucible of the Pittston coal strike of 1989-90 where the United Mine Workers of America put their union on the line and won, and in militant corporate campaigns against BASF, Ravenswood Aluminum, and other multinational corporations, where unions embraced new tactics and a mobilization model that was able to beat back the worst of the corporate offensive. In 1991, Ron Carey won the presidency of the Teamsters, setting in motion a member-driven upsurge of militancy and activism and reuniting the largest union in America with the AFL-CIO. In 1993, the revitalized labor movement turned Decatur, Illinois into a "war zone" to confront megacorporations Staley, Bridgestone/Firestone, and Caterpillar. In 1995, workers at the Detroit News and Detroit Free Press - in the very city that gave rise to the modern labor movement - were forced to strike and subsequently locked out. Unionists everywhere vowed that these battles would not end in another defeat for workers.

In response to growing demands for change, the "New Voice" slate of John Sweeney and Rich Trumka swept into office in 1995 in the only contested election in the history of the AFL-CIO. They promised a revitalized labor movement with the goal of organizing one million new members per year. A "labor spring" emerged in which the Cold War-inspired anti-intellectualism of the labor movement gave way to new leadership, welcoming academics and activists from other social movements to bring their experience and energy to help revitalize the movement.

It was no accident that many of the unions and activists involved in these struggles also led the effort to launch a labor party. A small number of unions associated with the labor left, including the [United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America](#) (UE), had long agitated for independent political action but the effort took a leap forward when the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW) allocated the necessary resources to implement both an internal union-wide as well as labor movement-wide organizing effort. Like many industrial unions, deindustrialization, off-shoring, and automation had begun to decimate the industries where OCAW unionization had thrived. OCAW's long history of anti-corporate activism and rank-and-file mobilization includes its 1973 strike against Shell Oil during which one of the first labor-environmental coalitions was forged. Its advocacy on health and safety legislation for workers, which received national attention when union activist Karen Silkwood was killed in the midst of her attempts to blow the whistle on the nuclear industry, was embraced by both the feminist and anti-nuclear movements. In 1988, a progressive caucus led by Bob Wages and Tony Mazzocchi won election to national office in the OCAW.

[Mazzocchi](#) was widely regarded as a visionary at the forefront of the labor movement's involvement in the major struggles for social justice in the postwar period - from the civil rights movement, nuclear proliferation, and the Vietnam War to environmental justice and the movement for occupational health and safety, in which he and the OCAW played a crucial role. He conceptualized health and safety issues as a fight against corporate power and for worker empowerment. Wages and Mazzocchi campaigned on the promise of breaking away from labor's lockstep allegiances to the Democratic Party.

To counter skeptics who claimed that the union's members would not support such a radical move, Wages and Mazzocchi commissioned a survey of International staff, local union officers,

and rank-and-file members. The survey found that 65 percent of members agreed that, "Both the Democratic and Republican Parties care more about the interests of big business than they do about working people." In addition, 53 percent of respondents agreed that, "It's time for labor to build a new political party of working people independent of the two major parties." These survey results facilitated top-to-bottom discussion of political alternatives within the OCAW and led the Executive Board (made up of both non-voting union officers and voting rank-and-file union members) to pass a resolution calling for a "new crusade for social and economic justice."

The survey became an organizing tool in its own right, prompting open discussions about politics and labor within the OCAW. Mazzocchi spread the idea to other unions. No matter what union administered it, regardless of geography, occupation, race, or gender, the results were strikingly similar. More than 50 percent of survey respondents agreed that neither political party represented the interests of working people and that the time had come to build a new party of labor.

Building on its successful worker-led small group trainings on occupational health and safety issues, the OCAW commissioned the Labor Institute to develop training materials (which later evolved into the Labor Party's "Corporate Power and the American Dream" training curriculum) to engage thousands of union members in discussion and debate. It was during one of these sessions that a union member coined what would become the Labor Party's slogan: "The bosses have two parties. We should have one of our own!" Local unions established labor party committees and began to reach out to potential allies in their communities and in the broader labor movement. One popular organizing tool was the video [Mouseland](#), narrated by Tommy Douglas, leader of Canada's New Democratic Party. The video is an animated story of a mouse that faces the false dilemma of voting for either a black cat or a white cat, parties that clearly do not represent the interests of the mouse.

By the early 1990s, the Labor Party movement was in full swing. The OCAW assigned Mazzocchi (who had stepped down from his position as International Secretary-Treasurer) to work full time on building Labor Party Advocates (LPA) within the broader labor movement. The LPA organizing committee was established solely to organize debate within the labor movement - not unlike an organizing committee in a union representation campaign. OCAW President Bob Wages used his national office and position on the AFL-CIO Executive Council to reach out to other national union leaders. OCAW funded the organizing work of veteran activist Bob Kasen who produced the newsletter, Labor Party Advocates. On the West Coast, organizer Leo Seidlitz worked out of the offices of the San Francisco Labor Council. Other unions contributed significant in-kind resources.

On April 7, 1991, the loosely-formed, multi-union LPA organizing committee issued "An Invitation from Tony Mazzocchi to Join Labor Party Advocates" to 5,000 union leaders and activists to better gauge support within the labor movement. In August of that year, conventions of the OCAW, the UE, and the Pennsylvania Federation of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employes (BMWE), one of the old railroad brotherhoods and now a division of the Teamsters, became the first three union bodies to endorse LPA officially. The following year the California State Federation became the first state AFL-CIO body to endorse. By the end of 1992, more than 300 trade unionists attended an LPA educational conference sponsored by LPA chapters in Detroit and Cleveland.

Momentum grew for the Labor Party as passage of the NAFTA trade agreement at the end of 1993 made the newly-elected Clinton Administration's neoliberal loyalties painfully clear. The

first LPA interim steering committee convened in Chicago in October of that year and was attended by 80 labor leaders representing unions with more than half a million workers. The committee called for a founding convention within two years and urged local groups to begin holding hearings about what a real Labor Party would look like.

The national convention of the BMW, instigated by Penn Fed Chairman Jed Dodd, endorsed LPA in 1994 as did the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), a union with a long militant history, in 1995. The California Nurses Association, which had just emerged from a period of internal turmoil to embrace a militant and organizing-oriented union model, soon followed. Organizations that sought to organize marginalized and excluded workers such as the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) and the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU) also joined. Respected and innovative leaders like the Nurses' Rose Ann DeMoro and American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) Vice President Ken Blaylock joined the National Council which, at a January 1995 meeting in St. Louis, issued a call for a founding convention of the Labor Party in the spring of 1996 and appointed convention committees. By January of 1996 affiliations included the 50,000-member California Council of Carpenters, the 20,000-member regional health care union 1199 New England, the 12,000-member Chicago Teamsters Local 705, and Machinists Local 1781 in San Mateo, California with more than 13,000 members.

The year leading up to the founding convention was a period of intense public discussion and debate almost unprecedented in the history of the labor movement. Thousands of members began to pay membership dues and worker-activists (as well as a number of groups with various ideological axes to grind) formed dozens of LPA chapters around the country. LPA moved out of the cubicle donated by Ralph Nader to open our own office and begin planning for the convention. LPA sent a convention call to every local union in the country and set up convention committees for rules, program, and constitution. Resolutions and affiliations from hundreds of unions and LPA members began pouring in to the new office.

Unlike previous party-building efforts led by the labor left, Labor Party Advocates had established enough legitimacy and breadth of support that mainstream union leaders did not publicly denounce it. Instead, our efforts blended with the broader flowering of "new activism" and debate surrounding the election of new AFL-CIO leadership. Newly-elected AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, while skeptical about the Labor Party's chances for success, commented: "I would be the last person, however, to discourage the dedicated brothers and sisters who are organizing the Labor Party movement from taking their best shot and I hope the progress they are making sends a clear signal to a Democratic Party that has moved away from working families just as surely as it has moved away from the old, the young, the disabled, and the poor." ([Labor Research Review 1996](#))

In preparation for the founding convention, LPA held hearings around the country to draft a constitution, program, and structure for the new party. LPA members also debated what the party would do, once founded. The majority understood that, despite the movement's rapid growth, it would not be possible to intervene immediately in a serious way in electoral politics and advocated a longer-term organizing approach that focused on building power and density and on broad issue-oriented campaigns. Three key factors influenced the debate about whether or not to run or endorse candidates at the outset. First, because of legal restrictions on the use of union funds for direct political purposes, engaging in electoral politics would have cut off access to union treasury funds needed to fund the party. Second, the newborn party would immediately have lost the support of key unions that were not yet ready to divorce the Democratic Party; and, third, it would have exposed the fact that the burgeoning party was not yet strong enough to win

campaigns much less keep elected officials in line.

The founding convention ratified this perspective. As Labor Party activist and political scientist Adolph Reed Jr. described this organizing model of politics in his Progressive column in 1996, "The idea is to build a coalition on the model of union solidarity: developing a base, consolidating it, expanding it, consolidating again, and so on." This "organizing approach to politics is based on intensive, issue-based organizing of the old-fashioned shop-to-shop, door-to-door technique. The paramount objective is to reach out to people who aren't already mobilized in left politics, to begin a conversation that builds a movement."

The founding convention in 1996 was a boisterous four-day event attended by 1,400 delegates and endorsed by nine international unions and 117 state or local union bodies. Invited speakers Jim Hightower and Jerry Brown brought delegates to their feet with anti-corporate messages. Brown, then out of elected office, declared himself a "recovering" politician who had to tell the truth. Ralph Nader, running for President on the Green Party ticket, spoke from the floor as an at-large delegate. Nader said, "This convention will be looked upon as the rebirth of the labor movement after so many years of being subordinated to corporate power."

Inspiring as the speakers were, it was the delegates who set the tone and energy of the convention. Committees met into the wee hours of the night to craft resolutions and work out compromises on the program and constitution. Threats were made to walk out over yet-to-be resolved disagreements. An impromptu march to city hall was organized to denounce the anti-collective bargaining initiatives of Cleveland's mayor and funds were raised for various unions on strike, including the Detroit newspaper workers.

The new party's program, "[A Call for Economic Justice](#)," includes a call to amend the U.S. Constitution to guarantee a job at a living wage; restoration of the rights to organize, bargain and strike; universal access to quality health care; access to quality public education; an end to the corporate abuse of trade; an end to corporate welfare; and revitalization of the public sector. The program was visionary and yet could pass Mazzocchi's often-repeated litmus test: "Can you get this passed in your local?"

Delegates to the founding convention set up a governing structure that assured that unions and worker organizations would play the predominant role in the party and made provisions for a committee to define conditions under which the Labor Party would embark on an electoral strategy. The list of new affiliate unions continued to grow, including the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) and the United Mineworkers of America (UMWA).

Between 1996 and 2002, much of the Labor Party's organizing focused on campaigns to organize labor support for issues including single-payer health care and worker rights. The Labor Party launched its [Just Health Care](#) campaign with a nationwide radio show hosted by Pacifica's Amy Goodman, and our financing plan was adopted by single payer advocates in the U.S. Congress including Paul Wellstone and John Conyers. We also launched the [Free Higher Education](#) campaign which called for free, publicly-funded higher education. The [Campaign for Worker Rights](#) based an expansive view of worker rights on constitutional principles that went far beyond calls for expedited union election procedures. We published a monthly newspaper, [Labor Party Press](#), edited by labor journalist Laura McClure and designed by the Labor Institute's Michael Kaufman. Veteran UE organizers Ed Bruno and Bob Brown joined the national organizing staff. We developed an electoral strategy which committed the party to electoral politics as an important tactic but not the only tool needed to achieve working-class power.

Labor Party chapters hosted public events in dozens of cities, launched a number of issue campaigns, and, in Massachusetts, Maine, and Florida, initiated and won non-binding referenda in support of single-payer national health care. The Labor Party also encouraged a vigorous cultural celebration of workers in theater, film, music and art, including the establishment, in conjunction with the American Film Institute and the Washington Metropolitan Council, AFL-CIO, of the annual [DC Labor FilmFest](#).

In the first few years of the new century, however, a number of events contributed to a significant loss of momentum in the movement to establish a Labor Party. The effects of globalization and deindustrialization had ravaged the membership of many of the sponsoring unions. Several ceased to exist, including the OCAW, which merged with the Paperworkers union in 1999. Soon thereafter, the leadership of the newly merged union, PACE, ceased its active support for the Labor Party (PACE later merged into the United Steel Workers of America). The debacle of the stolen 2000 Presidential election - and the subsequent scapegoating of Green Party candidate Ralph Nader as a spoiler - created an environment hostile to any attempt to build an independent political movement. The attacks on September 11, 2001 and the subsequent rush to war also had a chilling affect on efforts to promote a radical break with the two-party system. The Bush Administration's attacks on unions and the entire social insurance model gave rise to an "anybody but Bush" mindset within much of the labor movement and thus squelched any political vision beyond the urgency of defeating Bush and his political allies and defending the remnants of the New Deal and Great Society programs.

In 2002, Tony Mazzocchi, the "founding brother" of the Labor Party movement, died after a year-long illness. While Mazzocchi had been careful to avoid the "cult of personality" that has plagued many political movements and had cultivated a diverse group of committed leaders and organizers, his death was nonetheless an organizational setback. The Labor Party lost his years of experience, his strategic vision, and the vast respect that unionists at all levels had for him.

The 2002 Labor Party convention reflected these diminished prospects. Delegates opted to focus efforts on our issue-oriented organizing campaigns. While a step back from the dream of a fully-developed party with the capacity to contend for power in the political sphere, these campaigns were far reaching in their analysis and continue to inform the political discourse in the labor movement today. And many of the activists who founded U.S. Labor Against the War (USLAW) worked together in the Labor Party and participated in its 2002 discussion about how labor should respond to President Bush's growing threat to invade Iraq. Labor Party National Council members Noel Beasley and Jerry Zero hosted the first meeting of USLAW in Chicago early the next year.

In 2004, the Labor Party's analysis of labor's role in that year's disastrous election campaign received wide attention in progressive circles. It also weighed in on the [contentious debates about the future of the AFL-CIO](#) and the rise of the Change to Win alliance, a debate that was over almost before it started. Despite these efforts to find some strategic traction, the momentum was no longer there. The labor movement itself was in broad retreat. Huge sections were aligning themselves with a new global company union perspective that had no room for an expansive, anti-corporate political movement like the Labor Party. Much of the rest of labor was embroiled in losing, defensive battles and could no longer conceive of the possibility of a broad political advance for working people.

The last formal initiative of the Labor Party was a petition campaign to gain ballot access for the

[South Carolina Labor Party](#). With almost unanimous support from South Carolina's small but feisty labor movement, led by state AFL-CIO president Donna Dewitt, organizers fanned out across the state (flea markets in addition to union halls were the ideal venue to address working people) to speak one-on-one with thousands of South Carolinians who agreed that working people needed "another choice for South Carolina." With minimal resources, Labor Party activists gathered more than 16,000 signatures from registered voters, securing, in the fall of 2006, a ballot line and proving that we could build a party of labor in the heart of the right-to-work South.

Even this inspiring effort, however, fell victim to the growing marginalization of the labor movement and the rising tide of Obamamania. By the end of 2007, the Labor Party ceased accepting individual memberships and union affiliations and suspended its active operations.

Lessons Learned

Mistakes were certainly made in the short history of the Labor Party. And some obstacles proved too difficult to overcome. Perhaps the most difficult was the development of a strategy to extract the labor movement from the tentacles of the two-party electoral process. An organizing dynamic took hold in which enthusiasm for developing an alternative to the Democrats peaked in the off-cycle election years and diminished as unions mobilized for yet another round of elections. This dynamic cannot solely be attributed to muddled, compromised, or timid union leadership. Unions, and working people in general, have real, concrete interests and concerns which must be defended in the electoral arena even as we work to transcend the boundaries set by the two parties of the bosses. The prospect of breaking completely with the Democratic Party without an established alternative was too risky for even the most militant unions and remains the biggest challenge to any effort to build an independent labor politics.

The somewhat disjointed internal structure of the Labor Party also gave rise to conflict between union-based organizing and chapter-based organizing. Although a number of local chapters developed with a strong union base, many others were organized with no base to which to be held accountable. Many chapters contributed significantly to the advancement of the Labor Party's goals, others devolved into sectarian debating societies, drove out serious worker activists, and sucked resources from the organization. Another constant topic of debate was how high to raise expectations of this newly-created party. Many unions and activists pressured Mazzocchi and other early LPA leaders to hold the founding convention in 1996 to capitalize on that year's momentum. In retrospect, it may well have been wiser to secure support more significant support from the labor movement, retaining a looser, Labor Party Advocates structure rather than the raised expectations of a formal party.

None of the internal mistakes and weaknesses would have proved fatal if the labor movement had continued to gain strength from its revival in the mid-1990s. Instead, the pressures of neoliberalism, deindustrialization, and globalization led many unions to cut their losses and focus on holding the line. Even the most dynamic unions put their efforts into organizing union density rather than political power. Ultimately, it was this structural decline of the labor movement which made the Labor Party untenable.

Those of us who worked to build the Labor Party have little to regret. The fact remains that this was the most successful effort to construct an independent working-class party since the LaFollette campaigns 75 years earlier. The Labor Party did many things right:

* The Labor Party adopted a party-building model that was patient and inclusive. We resisted

attempts to convene a body of self-appointed leaders with a shopping list of demands for the working class to follow. Rather, we focused on building a broad movement of working-class institutions, leaders, and activists to speak on our own behalf.

* The Labor Party understood that unions had to be at the core. As the only institutions with the resources and the capacity to implement a broad political strategy, no viable party can exist without the support and participation of a significant percentage of the national labor movement. At the same time, success also depends on being inclusive enough to resonate with the interests and concerns of unorganized workers as well.

* The Labor Party avoided the expediency of identity politics and liberal talking points and instead organized around broad class-based interests and concerns. When faced with controversial or socially-divisive issues, we built consensus by developing a program and a vision that can appeal to and educate the broadest possible constituency without sacrificing a working-class agenda. For example, Clinton's 1996 "reform" of welfare demonized welfare recipients in ways that could have divided workers. The Labor Party framed it as a class issue and as a mechanism to undermine union rights, and members rallied in opposition.

* The Labor Party understood that elections were not about playing the spoiler or about bearing witness. Rather, the electoral process should be about building power for working people. The Labor Party's [Call for Economic Justice](#) is an eloquent statement of what politics would look like if workers had a party of our own. Our [electoral strategy](#), crafted after two years of internal debate, stands as a concise statement of what is required for an independent working-class party to intervene seriously in electoral politics.

There Is No Alternative

Many consider the perennial efforts to build a party of labor to be a fool's errand. Indeed, the challenges do appear insurmountable. Those who would build a Labor Party must find a way to extract a labor movement that is enmeshed in all types of instrumental political relationships from an entrenched two-party system where the winner takes all. In addition, a labor movement that now represents only seven percent of the private sector has difficulty setting terms and conditions of debate, much less building and sustaining political power. Is there an alternative to the labor party strategy in which working people can build such power? Activists within and outside of the labor movement have engaged in a number of significant attempts during the past two decades, including the following:

Reform the Democratic Party. Although individual progressive or pro-labor candidates have won office on the Democratic ticket and have impacted the party's platform, their efforts have not led to the transformation of the party into a vehicle for a working-class political agenda. One reason is that the Democratic Party defines itself as a multi-class party. But more significantly, neither of the two major parties has a structure that would hold them accountable to a living, breathing constituency. Rather, the parties exist in the ether as a series of unaccountable relationships between funders, candidates, and interest groups. Instead of accountability to masses of voters, and especially since the rise of neoliberalism, the overriding allegiance is to a globalized capitalism whose interests trump all other concerns. In this context, the periodic emergence of "insurgent" candidates may pull those who would stray from the Democratic Party back into the fold. But when the dust settles, we are left with the same unaccountable and unresponsive national party, a political graveyard for progressives.

Organize first, build political power later. This position has both a "left/syndicalist" (all power

springs from the active organization of workers at the point of production) and a "right/opportunist" (organization of workers can only be achieved by building a broad partnership with the bosses) variation. Both ignore the reality that the ability to organize and the broad social insurance programs that make it possible for workers to live a decent life are determined politically. After almost seven years of trying such an approach, those unions that formed the Change to Win alliance because they believed the AFL-CIO was spending too much of its resources on political activities rather than on organizing have not met with any breakthrough successes. In fact, many of them are now expending a higher percentage of their resources on political activities than many of the old AFL-CIO unions.

Green Party/Nader electoralism. The Greens have maintained that the way to build a new political movement is to first engage in electoral politics. They have been at it for more than twenty years and have won hundreds of local offices, though many are in nonpartisan elections. In 2000, presidential candidate Ralph Nader garnered 2.7 percent of votes cast. And although the party's economic program is inclusive enough to be considered a labor program, the party is unable to mobilize the institutional resources that even a weakened labor movement can still marshal. The party continues to promote candidacies that serve to protest the status quo. While that may assuage the consciences of the politically pure, it has not produced transformative political results.

Fusion. Several states allow candidates to be endorsed by multiple political parties. New York State, in particular, has a venerable tradition of "fusion" wherein minor parties endorse major party candidates in an attempt to gain some leverage and influence in the major party's administration. It has proven to be an effective tool to build some power within the current political system. In New York, the Working Families Party has for nearly 15 years used cross endorsements to win increases in the minimum wage and other benefits for working people (though activists in other states have also succeeded in raising the minimum wage and other similar initiatives through old-fashioned lobbying and pressure campaigns). However, fusion advocates have not been able to transform this power to advance a broad working-class agenda. Rather, fusion parties become creatures of the major parties that they are hoping to transform. New York witnessed the disgraceful spectacle of the Working Families Party being forced to endorse a gubernatorial candidate who - even before the election! - promised to attack public worker unions and undermine public worker benefits. It is possible that pro-worker fusion parties where they exist could become allies in a revived Labor Party movement but efforts to build new fusion parties in states that have no history of such politics and no legal framework of cross-endorsement appear to be a colossal waste of energy and resources.

In the end, the creation of a party of our own remains the great unfinished task of the U.S. working class and the only real way out of the two-party political wilderness. There are no political shortcuts. Nor is it conceivable that such a party could emerge without having, at its core, a revived and revitalized labor movement. While these tasks may be even more daunting today than they were in the 1990s, it doesn't make them any less urgent or necessary.

Next Steps

This is a time of tremendous opportunity. After years of economic crisis and political impotency, working people are questioning the legitimacy of the entire political system and exposing its corrupt domination by a rich oligarchy. The Occupy movement struck a chord with so many because its organizers understand that the system is rigged to generate inequality. Unfortunately, because of the reasons enumerated above, this is not yet a time when the revival or re-launching of a working-class political party is in order. No matter what individual activists may desire, the

simple fact remains that you cannot build a party of labor when the labor movement itself is in disarray and retreat.

While this is not the time to dust off the Labor Party, it certainly is the time for working-class activists to begin the discussion of what it would take to build an independent, class-based political party. That discussion can be greatly informed by the history of the Labor Party movement and we need to encourage a broad discussion of this history and its lessons for today. Many current leaders and activists in the labor movement were not around when the Labor Party was at its heyday more than a decade ago. Many of the key participants in the Labor Party are nearing retirement and have valuable lessons to share with a new generation. We believe that the current political moment is a time when people will be very responsive to such a discussion.

We should also work to support initiatives that could promote class politics. Groups such as the [Labor Campaign for Single Payer](#) and [U.S. Labor Against the War](#) (USLAW) fight for issues of broad concern to working people and require the construction of a powerful anti-corporate movement to achieve their goals. They help to educate working people about the nature of the political system and bring together the best and the brightest activists across geographic lines and union jurisdictions. They challenge labor to fulfill its historic role to lead a social movement of working people. In addition, unions should embrace internal mobilization projects that educate members about a real working-class agenda, identify and develop new leadership, and build relationships with potential allies. National Nurses United's ["Robin Hood Campaign"](#) is one concrete example of how thousands of union members can be moved to action around issues not directly tied to the next election cycle.

It might also be time to revive the Labor Party Advocates political survey. The history of the Labor Party shows how political action questionnaires can be a valuable organizing tool. In the current period, it would provide an immediate task to engage advocates, a low-commitment "ask" for union leaders at all levels, and an opportunity to gather valuable information about the state of mind and political attitudes of union members, activists, and leaders.

The "10% Solution"

It is not realistic to demand that today's labor movement completely disengage itself from its current ties with the Democratic Party. However, the ongoing economic crisis, and the failures of the Obama administration seem to provide an opening to begin to challenge labor to move some of its resources towards long-term projects that would advance a broad working-class program that goes beyond the next election and is geared toward building independent political power for working people. We could launch such a project if labor contributed just 10 percent of the resources and finances that it spent in the 2012 election cycle.

What could we do with those resources and commitments? We could connect with the 10 million Americans who are underwater on their mortgages. We could reach out to the 42 million Americans forced to rely on food stamps to feed their families, and the 50 million without healthcare, the 15 million unemployed, the 15 million underemployed, the 20 million immigrants with no rights to a secure life, the millions of college graduates condemned to a lifetime of debt peonage, the tens of millions of workers trapped in a series of Wal-Mart-style jobs and facing the prospect of the loss of even the minimal social insurance benefits that used to be the birthright of everyone in the United States. In short, we could begin to mobilize and speak on behalf of a working class that has become fragmented and disenfranchised because of a political system that inexorably distributes wealth and power upward to the "one percent."

There is much to learn from the Labor Party movement. Until we have a party of our own, working people are doomed to fight with one hand tied behind our back. "This is the struggle of our generation," said the Labor Party founders in 1995. "The future of our children and their children hangs in the balance. **It is a struggle we cannot afford to lose.**"

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