

Significance of the Green Party: an exchange of letters

8 July 1998

Hello WSWS!

I was directed to your web site by Yahoo News. I clicked on their link and expected to find more of the same carefully groomed corporate news. How pleasant to be so surprised.

I'd like to know what you think of the recent Congressional election in New Mexico? Steve Schiff, New Mexico's representative for District 1, died of cancer in March, and New Mexico held a special election to fill his office. As you may know, it was a reasonably close race between Tweedledee and Tweedledum. The deciding factor was the astonishing fifteen percent of the votes the Green candidate, Jack Uhrich, took away from the Democrat Phil Maloof; these defecting Democrat voters led to the victory of the Republican candidate Heather Wilson.

The fifteen percent of the votes for the Green candidate Uhrich probably signifies a larger fraction of voter support than fifteen percent. On any occasion one votes for a third party candidate, any thoughtful voter is aware of a possible short-term negative effect for his side. I'm sure many a citizen does not vote for a third party candidate, despite the fact that the candidate's opinions on the issues may match the voter's, in favor of the 'lesser of the two evils,' who actually has a chance to win.

I felt that way when I voted for Ralph Nader in 1996. I was undecided even as I walked up to the voting booth; in twenty years of voting, I've never spent so long staring at a ballot, deciding whether to punch or write in. That was nothing but a protest vote, occasioned by President Clinton's nauseating and unforgivable sellout of AFDC. I didn't expect Nader would win, and certainly neither did any of the other 685,000 Nader voters; nothing short of one of those giant meteorites Hollywood is shoving down our throats this week could have got Nader elected in 1996.

So, as far as a practical effect goes, as far as the poll numbers were concerned, writing in Nader was the same as punching the card for Bob Dole.

Naturally, you flinch to hear about yet another Republican taking office in Congress, even if it is only for the few months between the special election and the regular election in November. So one might say that it is bad strategy for the Greens to run a third-party candidate.

However, I am optimistic about the implications of that New Mexico election. A Green, with essentially no campaign budget at all, took fifteen percent of the vote! You could hope that possibly now the Democratic National Committee will listen, just a bit, to the original Democrat constituency in the working class, or at least they will attempt to give the impression that they are more sensitive to the desires of other citizens besides executives and stockholders, since they simply can't afford to lose many more races for the House. Perhaps the DNC will abandon, or at least ameliorate, their scheme to turn the Democratic Party into an exact clone of the Republican Party.

I would be interested to hear your take on that election.

Yours, WDK

Reply by the Editorial Board

Dear WDK,

Thank you for your letter, which we took to be an indication that you are seriously seeking a political alternative to the straitjacket of official politics in the US. Given the spirit of your letter, we are fairly certain you will not object if we take this occasion to make a number of observations and critical comments on the recent election, even though you may not be entirely in agreement with what we have to say.

We, too, took note of the substantial vote for the Greens in New Mexico as a sign of a growing audience

for an alternative to the Democrats and Republicans. Given the fact, however, that the Greens refer to themselves as a 'protest' party, it may be somewhat easier to describe what Green voters opposed rather than what they endorsed. Be this as it may, your letter requires first of all an assessment of the political character of the Green Party, independent of the sentiments of those who voted for it.

As socialists we evaluate a political party on the basis of its program and the social interests which it defends. In contrast to the official media, the most important question for us is: which class does this party speak for? Does it uphold the profit system and therefore speak for the wealthy and privileged few, or does it oppose capitalism and speak for the working class? To be sure, this question may be somewhat complicated and must serve as the beginning, not the end, of political analysis. Nevertheless, it is a basic criterion for those seeking to represent the political interests of the masses of disenfranchised working people.

At this point, the Green Party in the US is a rather heterogeneous political organization. By the nature of its predominately environmentalist program, it straddles several classes. Though it is not a major capitalist party as the Democratic and Republican parties, when all is said and done, it does not object to the underpinnings of the profit system: the private ownership of the means of production. This is the key to understanding its potential future development.

Taking into account the relevant differences, international experience provides some indication of the general direction that the Green Party would take should it grow in influence and achieve representation in the government. European politics provides perhaps the best example. The Greens in Germany have, since the mid-1970s, shifted dramatically to the right, changing from a protest organization to a coalition partner of the major big business parties, the Social Democratic Party and the Christian Democratic Union.

Will growing votes for the Greens force the Democratic Party to shift to the left to represent the actual interests of its present or former working class constituency? To ask the question is to adopt a fundamentally mistaken approach. History shows that the failure of a number of popular, anti-capitalist third party movements began with their subordination to the Democratic Party.

The most tragic such experience was the channeling of the CIO upsurge of the 1930s into support for the Democrats, in the form of the Rooseveltian New Deal coalition. The militant social movement of the working class, engaged in major strike actions across the US, would have achieved far greater and more enduring gains had it formed a labor party, completely independent of the Democrats. The formation of such a party would have opened up the possibility of establishing a workers government, based on socialist policies.

This prospect was aborted by the efforts of the emerging CIO bureaucracy, supported, we should add, by the leadership of the Stalinist Communist Party of the US. As one can see from the experience of the last 20 years, the subordination of the working class to liberalism in that period had a terrible impact, as it left workers politically paralyzed when reformism exhausted itself in subsequent decades, unable to articulate a political alternative to Reaganite neoconservatism.

The political independence of the working class is therefore the precondition for a new socialist party today. This was among the reasons that led us to form the Socialist Equality Party two years ago in the US, in political solidarity with sister parties around the world. On this subject we can recommend to you a number of our other documents and publications.

What do you think of these points? We welcome a continued correspondence.

Yours fraternally,
the WSWS Editorial Board



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