

US Reform Party splits in two

Jerry White
12 August 2000

On the first day of its national convention in Long Beach, California, the Reform Party split in two, with each faction holding a separate convention to nominate its own candidate for the US presidential election. Both groups are claiming to be the real Reform Party, and therefore legally entitled to control the party's apparatus and finances, including \$12.6 million in federal campaign funds.

On one side are the supporters of Patrick Buchanan, the right-wing chauvinist and longtime Republican operative who left the Republicans last fall after a failed campaign to win the party's presidential nomination. The other faction is made up of supporters of Texas billionaire and Reform Party founder Ross Perot. They are backing John Hagelin, a nuclear physicist and leader of the Natural Law Party.

On Thursday, in a largely symbolic gesture for the national news media, more than a hundred Hagelin supporters marched to the convention hall in an attempt to seat their delegates. They were barred from entering the hall by security guards and Long Beach police officers on the instructions of the pro-Buchanan forces who control the party's national committee. Hagelin and his supporters then walked out and began a separate meeting at a nearby performing arts center.

These events followed Tuesday's meeting of the party's national committee, which erupted into shouting and shoving between pro-Buchanan and pro-Perot representatives, who challenged the credentials of each other's delegates. Party secretary Jim Mangia denounced Buchanan for his "brown shirt tactics," and along with Russ Verney, an associate of Perot and founding member of the Reform Party, led a walkout of about a quarter of the 120 people attending the national committee meeting.

On the eve of the opening of the convention each side issued separate credentials to party members it certified as "true" delegates. The composition of the delegation is crucial because while the nominee will be decided by mail-in voting, the convention can overrule the balloting with a two-thirds vote of the delegates. Buchanan's campaign claimed to control 410 of the 596 delegates. Hagelin said Thursday his side had 275.

Hagelin's supporters filed a formal complaint Thursday with the Federal Election Commission, asking the FEC to block Buchanan from receiving the federal matching funds. Hagelin's lawyer, Leonard Goldman, alleged that the signatures Buchanan submitted seeking the nomination were invalid and

that his campaign had refused to allow verification of the names. Party secretary Jim Mangia suggested earlier that Buchanan had submitted 250,000 names from his long-term Republican donor base and "other rented lists of likely voters," in violation of the Reform Party's primary rules.

Buchanan denounced the meeting of pro-Hagelin forces as a "rump convention" and said he would win the nomination because he was building a "new Reform Party—more energized on sovereignty, trade and cutting back on government."

Since leaving the Republican Party, where he had been a speech writer for Nixon, Reagan and other leading right-wing politicians, Buchanan has sought to turn the Reform Party into an instrument for building a political movement of a fascistic character.

At a press conference Thursday, Buchanan distributed a "statement of personal belief," which outlined his reactionary views. In it Buchanan denounced abortion, popular culture and homosexuality for the "cultural decadence and moral decline" of America. He chastised the Republicans for toning down their anti-abortion stance for the sake of gaining in the polls, and said they would "never take a stand in the cultural and moral struggle of our time." He promised to nominate only "pro-life conservatives" to the Supreme Court and to oppose same-sex marriage laws and anti-discrimination laws to protect gays.

Buchanan poses as a defender of American workers, and has sought to exploit popular anger over economic insecurity and inequality and channel it into chauvinist and racist campaigns against trade deals with Mexico, China and other countries. In a Buchanan 2000 circular at the convention, he states, "New American nationalists believe the 'global economy' and 'international community' are mythic, i.e., they do not exist; and the largest entity to which one may give love and allegiance is the country, the nation-state."

In the same circular Buchanan calls for a "time out" on immigration "after 30 years of open borders" in order to "strengthen the bonds of national unity." Many of those in Buchanan's "brigades," as he calls them, are militia-types, anti-Semites and racists.

As his running mate Buchanan picked a black woman who shares his reactionary views. At a Friday morning press conference Buchanan introduced Ezola Foster, a 62-year-old former Los Angeles teacher and school administrator who was a leading advocate of California's anti-immigrant Proposition

187. Foster, who co-chaired Buchanan's campaigns for the Republican presidential nomination in 1996 and 1999, said, "The American people want to see our troops protecting American borders, not overseas in other border disputes." Foster blamed "illegal" immigration for poverty, homelessness and unemployment, particularly among black men. "Those are some of the problems that we are faced with an open border policy," she said, "a policy that both of the other parties and candidates intend to maintain and go even further by welcoming everyone onto our shores."

At a rival press conference Thursday morning, both John Hagelin and Party Secretary Jim Mangia denounced Buchanan for promoting bigotry and intolerance, saying that such views were incompatible with the Reform Party. But earlier that morning, on national television, Reform Party co-founder Russ Verney said the opposite. He told an interviewer on the "Today" program that he had no problem with Buchanan's policies, and that Buchanan could have obtained almost unanimous support at the nominating convention were it not for his abusive organizational tactics. Verney had invited Buchanan to join the Reform Party in 1999.

Verney, who was also at the Thursday press conference, reiterated there his insistence that Buchanan's politics were not alien to the Reform Party. The problem, Verney said, was Buchanan's attempt to "conquer the Reform Party and displace its internal leadership."

These statements demonstrate that the differences between Buchanan and the Perot forces are not of a principled character. Rather they center on political power and control of the party's assets.

One only had to look around the Long Beach convention hall to obtain a sense of the reactionary political atmosphere that had come to dominate this party. The convention abounded with American flags; literature tables included the John Birch Society, Americans for Immigration Reform, Young Americans for Freedom and Gun Owners of America.

At least two Reform Party candidates—Richard Masker, running for Idaho state legislature, and Martin Ledstedt, competing in the Missouri Reform Party primary for US Senate, were reportedly running on an openly white supremacist program. One leaflet, passed out by a delegate from Leavenworth, Kansas called for government measures to promote "racial preservation," and asked, "Shouldn't each race have their own society so they can make laws better suited to their personality, their special qualities, their traditions, and their own ambitions?"

The right-wing trajectory of the Reform Party stems from its political foundations. The party was the personal project of Ross Perot, who had spent \$60 million of his own money to run as an independent in the 1992 presidential race. It was based on a vague program of raising the "ethical standards" of politicians and "uniting all Americans in spirit and purpose," while explicitly defending capitalism. From the outset the

Reform Party was based on the incongruous notion that ordinary people could stop the domination of "special interests" in American politics by joining a party bankrolled by a billionaire.

Perot appealed to middle class and certain working class layers of the population that were repulsed by the domination of politics by corporate lobbyists. But he channeled that disgust in a generally rightward direction. He promoted economic nationalism, protectionism, and further cuts in social spending. Perot's large vote in 1992—nearly 20 percent—torpedoed George Bush's campaign and helped place "fiscal responsibility" and eliminating the budget deficit at the center of the Clinton administration's policies.

John Hagelin, Buchanan's opponent, embraces essentially the same right-wing policies. He calls for a "flat tax" and further reductions in social spending, school vouchers to subsidize private and parochial schools, "strengthening national defense," restrictions on immigration and expansion of urban "enterprise zones." Perhaps Hagelin's only innovation is his party's plan for transcendental meditation training for prisoners.

The party's amorphous program attracted a heterogeneous following. This reporter spoke with an investment manager with a \$200 million portfolio, a real estate salesman, a dentist, a mental health professional, a Montana registered nurse and militia-type, and a union plumber attracted to Buchanan's economic nationalism. The party also includes its share of political adventurers such as Lenora Fulani, the former presidential candidate of the ostensibly "left" New Alliance Party, who allied herself with Buchanan before he threw her out of his faction.

The party had no real political cohesiveness. Its secretary, Jim Mangia, acknowledged Thursday that the party's national committee had sought out Ralph Nader, Warren Beatty, Sam Nunn, Gary Hart, Ross Perot and others as their presidential nominee. After all these refused, Mangia came upon John Hagelin. Mangia said he realized after 30 seconds of discussion that Hagelin was the "best candidate."

In such an atmosphere Buchanan—who is more politically conscious and organizationally ruthless than his opponents—had no great difficulty seizing control of the Reform Party and turning it into his own vehicle.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact