

On eve of Milwaukee convention: Green Party divided over Nader campaign

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As delegates to the Green Party convention assembled in Milwaukee today, they were split over what course of action to take in the 2004 presidential election. The convention is to decide Saturday whether to nominate its own candidate for president, endorse the independent candidacy of Ralph Nader, or sit out the election entirely.

The latter position seemed to have little support among the delegates, who individually expressed sharp hostility to Kerry, describing him as a candidate of corporate America and supporter of the war in Iraq, virtually identical to Bush. A small minority of Greens for Kerry was active on the fringes of the convention, distributing a leaflet urging the Green Party not run any candidate of its own, in order to leave the field clear for the Democratic candidate. They were not even allowed to set up a table at the convention.

The convention delegates appear split into two main camps. One group favors the nomination of California attorney David Cobb, a longtime Green Party activist and a former party candidate in Texas. The other seeks to support the Ralph Nader campaign by endorsing both Cobb and Nader and allowing each state Green party to decide which of the two to support in the 23 states where the Greens already have ballot status, and in other states where the Greens are petitioning to get on the ballot.

Nader already has the support of the Reform Party, the rump of the organization founded by billionaire H. Ross Perot, which backed the far-right candidacy of Patrick Buchanan in the 2000 election. The Reform Party line will give Nader ballot status in as many as eight states, assuming that each state party accedes to the decision of the national Reform Party leadership.

Nader bid for Green Party support a week before the convention by announcing that California Green Party leader Peter Miguel Camejo would be his vice-presidential running mate. Camejo, a former leader of the Socialist Workers Party and the SWP candidate for president in 1976, was the Green Party's candidate for governor of California in both 2002 and 2003. He received more than 300,000 votes for governor in 2002, about five percent of the vote, the Green Party's best showing in a major US campaign.

Neither faction adopts a principled position towards the Democratic Party and the Kerry campaign. Cobb argues that the Green Party will suffer politically if Bush is narrowly reelected and "progressive" voters believe that Green votes in key states cost Kerry the election. He has proposed a state-by-state approach to the presidential campaign, promising to campaign in the so-called battleground states like Florida and Ohio only if the state parties agree to it, while focusing his main efforts in states like California, New York and Texas where the Green vote is not likely to tip the balance.

Nader and Camejo adapt to the Democratic Party as well, but propose a different tactic. Giving ground to the localism of the Cobb campaign, they also propose a state-by-state approach, one in which the convention would endorse both candidates, and each state party would choose which one to place on its ballot line. As Camejo explained this maneuver at a meeting with Michigan delegates Friday afternoon, in states like Michigan, where Nader will appear on the Reform Party line, the state Green Party can put Cobb on the ballot. In other states, where only the Green Party has a line, Nader should be the candidate.

While Nader and Camejo criticize the Cobb approach as a concession to the Democrats, and pledge to campaign in the "battleground" states regardless of the possible impact on the Bush-Kerry contest, their own attitude to the Democrats is not fundamentally different. Nader continuously presents himself as a left adviser to the Kerry campaign, suggesting how the Democrat can best appeal to his (Nader's) own supporters and win their votes away from his own candidacy. His goal is not to build a political movement completely independent of and opposed to the corporate-controlled two-party system, but to pressure one of the two parties to the left.

Early this week Nader issued a statement calling on Kerry to name Senator John Edwards of North Carolina as his running mate, saying that Edwards would be the most effective in appealing to potential Nader voters. Edwards has the same position as Kerry on the war in Iraq, having voted for the October 2002 resolution authorizing Bush to wage war, then voting in September 2003 against the appropriations to finance the continued occupation, at a time when both he and Kerry were contending with the surging campaign of Howard Dean,

which made a strong appeal to antiwar sentiment.

Nader's backing for Edwards amounts to a declaration that the key issue in the 2004 elections, so far as Nader is concerned, is trade policy, not the war in Iraq, because Edwards distinguished himself in the Democratic presidential primaries mainly through his criticism of the impact of free trade on US manufacturing jobs.

On the eve of the vote on a presidential nominee, Nader's supporters distributed an open letter to the delegates in which Nader urged support for a "unity resolution" proposed by Camejo (for dual Cobb and Nader-Camejo endorsements). He argued that his own campaign would do more to build the Green Party organization than Cobb's, and reiterated his criticism of the plan to "lie low this election and not receive many national votes in the close states. This is a peculiar way to expand your Party and establishes a poor precedent that the Democrats will seek to exploit."

On Thursday night, June 24, several hundred Greens attended a pre-convention meeting to hear the candidates for the party's presidential nomination. Camejo, who initially sought the Green nomination but now has agreed to be Nader's running mate, addressed the group, along with Cobb and three other candidates who had less support. The meeting featured loud hooting, hissing and booing from the supporters of the various positions.

Cobb portrayed the Nader campaign as an obstacle to the long-term building of the Green Party as an organization, saying that the purpose of his campaign was to "grow the Greens," and that nominating a Green Party candidate, rather than endorsing a non-Green, would be an act of "institutional self-respect." He offered to withdraw in favor of Camejo, if Camejo would agree to be the party's presidential candidate.

At the same time, he made a clear appeal to the "anybody-but-Bush" sentiment which will lead many of the Green Party supporters to cast their votes in the end for Kerry and the Democrats. "George W. Bush is a problem," Cobb said. "George Bush must go."

A spokesman for Cobb later spelled out the logic of this position, telling a WSWS reporter, "It's important to get Bush out of office. [Cobb] will describe Kerry as a corporate militarist, but he understands there is considerable fear of a second Bush administration, and the only way to get Bush out is for Kerry to win."

Camejo sought to take advantage of the crass opportunism of this line of argument, telling the Thursday night meeting that Greens should never, ever vote for a Democrat. "Kerry will do what Bush wants to do, better," he said. But he did not explain why, if that is the case, that Nader himself was offering helpful advice to the presumptive Democratic Party nominee.

It is clear that both factions are sensitive to the campaign waged by the media and the Democratic Party, criticizing Nader's 2000 Green Party race for playing the role of "spoiler" which placed Bush in the White House. Such propaganda

serves two purposes: in general, to discredit any third-party campaign which challenges the Democrats and Republicans; and in particular, to cover up the capitulation of Gore & Co. to the anti-democratic methods of the Republican Party and the unconstitutional intervention of the US Supreme Court to shut down the vote counting in Florida.

Camejo also suggested that Cobb was less opposed to the US occupation of Iraq than Nader, citing statements in which Cobb said that the United States could not "cut and run" from Iraq and offering support for continued US troop presence if requested by the interim Iraqi government rubber-stamped in this month's resolution by the UN Security Council.

Camejo's specific role is to give a "left" face for the Nader campaign, while Nader himself conducts sordid maneuvers with the right-wing leaders of the Reform Party and even with Buchanan himself, who gave him generally friendly treatment in an interview for the American Conservative magazine published last week. Particularly cynical is Camejo's claim to represent the interests of Hispanic voters in California, while Nader was telling Buchanan he would support restrictions on immigration long desired by the xenophobic right.

Many of the rank-and-file convention delegates who spoke to the WSWS voiced confusion about the nature of the differences between the two camps. Some of those supporting Cobb cited Nader's own statements favoring the continued presence of US troops through the end of this year, while Cobb called last month for an immediate withdrawal. As with the question of the Kerry campaign, neither faction has a principled position on the war in Iraq. They both favor replacing the US military control with a UN-run caretaker regime, essentially substituting control of Iraq by a consortium of the major imperialist powers for the exclusively US-run operation which has proved such a political, economic and military disaster.

The confused and politically murky character of the conflict at the Green convention is, in the final analysis, a reflection of the contradictory and unstable character of the Green Party itself. This is a party for which confusion and political unclarity are a way of life. It is based on extremely heterogeneous and unstable layers of the middle class—many self-employed or only marginally related to economic life, ranging from former participants in the 1960s radicalization, now entered into middle age, to a sprinkling of college students.



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