

Green Party convention rejects Nader-Camejo ticket

Patrick Martin
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The World Socialist Web Site has sent a reporting team to cover the Green Party convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The first on-the-spot report appeared on Saturday, June 26. Further reporting on the convention will appear in subsequent days.

In a closely fought contest for the presidential endorsement of the Green Party, California lawyer and party activist David Cobb won a narrow victory Saturday, defeating an effort to swing the party behind the independent candidacy of Ralph Nader. Cobb won 408 votes on the second ballot, a majority of the 769 delegates, compared to 308 votes for no nomination, the position adopted by Nader's supporters, with the remainder of the delegates' votes divided between two other candidates.

After Cobb was declared the Green Party nominee, his running mate Patricia LaMarche, a leader of the Green Party in Maine, was named the vice presidential candidate by acclamation. LaMarche is a radio broadcaster who won 7 percent of the vote as the Green candidate for Maine governor in 1998.

The outcome was a severe blow to the Nader campaign, which hoped to use the Green Party line in the 23 states where the party has ballot status, thus relieving it of the burden of qualifying for ballot status through petitioning. In California, for instance, Nader would require 165,000 signatures of registered voters to gain ballot status independently of the Green Party line.

Although he never joined the Green Party, Nader was its presidential candidate in both 1996 and 2000. The Green Party eagerly grasped the opportunity to use Nader's celebrity status to raise its public profile. The long-time consumer advocate decided not to seek the Green nomination this year, running instead as an independent candidate. He also accepted the endorsement of the right-wing Reform Party, the rump organization left behind by the campaigns of billionaire Ross Perot in the 1990s, which has a ballot line in eight states.

While Nader initially spurned the Green nomination, David Cobb, a leading Nader campaign organizer in 2000 and the party's general counsel, announced his candidacy and won the largest number of state primaries and convention votes. Peter Camejo, the party's candidate for governor of California in 2002 and 2003, also sought the nomination and won the primary in that state.

A week before the convention, Nader announced a deal for Camejo to run as his vice-presidential candidate. Nader still refused to seek a formal nomination, however, instead asking the Greens to nominate no candidate of their own, but endorse the Nader-Camejo ticket instead. Nader would have the Green ballot line but would otherwise be under no obligation to the Greens, and the party would have no real voice in his campaign.

This approach alienated a large number of Green Party activists and

aroused concern that in some states a Nader endorsement, rather than a formal nomination, could cost the Green Party its ballot line. Cobb capitalized on this sentiment, arguing that the Green Party should, for the first time, nominate one of its own members for president and use the campaign to build the organization, rather than promote an individual candidate.

Beyond the organizational considerations, however, the nomination of the Cobb-LaMarche ticket represents a definite political decision by the Green Party to make an accommodation with the Democratic Party in the current presidential race. Cobb has espoused a "safe state" strategy, in which the Greens would put most of their effort into winning votes in states like California and Texas, where either Kerry or Bush has a large lead in the polls. In more closely contested states—the so-called "battleground states" such as Ohio and Florida—Cobb plans to run a low visibility campaign and seek to avoid having the Greens denounced as "spoilers," as Nader was denounced by the Democrats after the 2000 vote in Florida.

Cobb has acknowledged that the Democratic Party capitulated to the Republican political coup in Florida, capped by the intervention of the US Supreme Court, but he nonetheless insists that the Greens should avoid a future Democratic Party attack and make no real effort to win votes in the battleground states.

At the Green convention, Nader-Camejo supporters criticized the "safe state" approach as giving in to fear, either of a Bush victory or of Democratic Party retaliation. But Nader himself has proposed a variant on the same theme, meeting with Kerry, offering him advice on how best to win the presidential race, and even, in an interview June 23 on National Public Radio, suggesting that he would condone tactical voting for the Democratic candidate in the key swing states.

Both Cobb and LaMarche spelled out their conciliatory attitude toward the Kerry campaign in the press conference that followed their nomination Saturday. Cobb began with an opening statement filled with radical-sounding phrases about building "a non-violent movement that will be akin to a revolution in this country." He promised to work for an America as different from the present "as it was to go from the thirteen colonies to the United States, as different as it was to go from slavery ... to the abolition of slavery." Both of those transformations, however, were accomplished by mass social mobilizations and the use of force: the American Revolution and the Civil War.

In response to questions about the "safe state" strategy, Cobb denied that the Greens were ducking a head-on fight with the Democratic Party and the Kerry campaign. "This is not a victory for the Kerry campaign," he said, "because David Cobb and Pat LaMarche are going to campaign in this country and articulate a scathing indictment

of the corporatist-militarist policies of John Kerry. Kerry supported the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. John Kerry voted for the Patriot Act. John Kerry voted for No Child Left Behind. John Kerry is for NAFTA. John Kerry supports the entire corporate agenda. That criticism will be leveled completely. However, we will also honestly tell the American people George W. Bush is even more dangerous than John Kerry. Now that's an honest assessment."

Cobb said that Greens would use different "messaging" in the "safe states" and those where the presidential race is believed to be closer: "In California, Cobb-LaMarche's message is going to be, 'Progressives, don't waste your vote.' Because if a progressive casts a vote for the corporate militarist John Kerry in California, it does not help to unelect Bush, and you can only send a message that you actually support policies that you don't. That's a wasted vote. Simple message: progressives, don't waste your vote. In the other states where it's very much closer, we have the same, in-depth, scathing critique of both the Democratic and Republican parties, and then conclude with, 'but think carefully before you cast your vote.' You know, that is completely respecting the voter, and it is really challenging those voters to think about why we have a system where I have to vote against what I hate, rather than support what I want."

Patricia LaMarche was even more open in conciliating with the Kerry campaign. "I really feel that people need to make their own choices about what they feel their future is," she said. "One of the things that really dismays me is the way that, when people are really frightened this year, because we have, in my opinion, the worst president in the history of the United States, that if people are afraid of that, they are vilified for being afraid, and they are picked on because they might make a choice that is different than the choice they might have made in another election... If you see a bogeyman in the closet, we're not going to tell you the bogeyman doesn't exist."

This led to the following exchange between the Green candidate and a WSWWS reporter:

LaMarche: "It's about the voter being able to vote any way the voter chooses to vote, being comfortable with that vote ... it's about the voter not being placed in a position of having a government...that is a threat to the entire world ..."

WSWS: "But do you think a Kerry government would not be a threat to the entire world?"

LaMarche: "I don't know any president in the history of the United States more of a threat than Karl Rove and George Bush. That man has got to go. He needs to leave his office. He needs to go home and stay there."

The logic of this position is that if the presidential election remains close and Maine remains a battleground state, Ms. LaMarche will not seek votes for the Green presidential ticket in her home state, and perhaps will cast her own ballot for Kerry.

Behind this capitulation to the Democratic Party are not only ideological and political issues, but also definite material interests. Perhaps the most important fact about the Green Party is the development of a significant layer of local elected officials, up from 40 in 1996 to 205 as 2004 began. These include members of city councils in Minneapolis, Madison, Wisconsin and many college towns, a state legislator in Maine, numerous municipal positions in California, and dozens of lesser offices. Earlier this year Green candidate Matt Gonzalez, a San Francisco county supervisor, fell just short of victory in a race for mayor of the city.

Nearly all these local officials backed the Cobb campaign. Many of them initially called for the Greens to have no presidential candidate

at all, thus avoiding a conflict with the Kerry campaign in any state, not just the so-called battleground states. A "no nomination, no endorsement" caucus meeting on the eve of the convention drew about 50 delegates, who voiced concerns about the impact that a high-profile presidential campaign would have on local collaboration with liberal Democrats.

A leaflet supporting this position was distributed to the delegates, confirming the social and political pressures to which the Greens are responding. It declared that endorsing a national candidate would create barriers to working with other party members at the local level, divert attention from local races into presidential campaign activities, and provoke hostility to the party at the local level. "Choosing No Candidate will allow Greens to build strength at the grassroots, avoiding a punishing national media fight we cannot win," the leaflet argued. "Our best route to national influence is building local power."

A spokesman for the "no candidate" position addressed the convention before the nominating vote, declaring that upcoming local election campaigns were more important for the future of the Greens than the presidential race, and that the Greens should avoid antagonizing Democrats whose support they would need at the local level. "Whatever you might think about the 'spoiler' charge," he said, "for many voters, perception is reality. Politics is about getting people to vote for you."

He concluded, "Don't split resources between local candidates who can win and national candidates who can't. Do you want to keep running and not winning, or win some offices?"

Several Green leaders reiterated this crassly opportunist argument in interviews with the WSWWS after the nomination of Cobb and LaMarche. Austin King, an alderman of the city of Madison, Wisconsin, explicitly endorsed "lesser-evilism" in the voting booth.

John Rensenbrink, a founding member of the Green Party and retired professor at Bowdoin College, Maine, said that Greens like Gonzalez in San Francisco, Maine state legislator John Eder and other elected officials did not believe they could win or retain local office with Nader at the top of the ticket.

A statement issued by Eder to the convention, calling for a vote for Cobb, declared: "While I rejoice in the strength of the spoiler role, I believe at this strategic point in our development it would be better to show our restraint with this fierce cudgel."

Tony Affigne, a national coordinating committee member from Rhode Island, and head of the Green Party committee charged with international relations, said that most of the longest-serving Green Party leaders had backed Cobb against Nader because of their fears that a backlash against the presidential campaign would harm what he called "productive local relations with local Democrats." Most local elected Greens, he said, depended on support from liberal Democrats and were concerned about losing it.



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