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# GROWING FROM THE CONCRETE

Left Electoral Politics in the United States

By Ethan Young

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## A Tidal Change

It's a strange time for the U.S. Left. At first glance its opposition would appear to be in shambles, at least to judge from the recent Republican primary campaign, where a procession of clowns trip over one another to espouse the most radically ridiculous – and scary – position. The self-referential dynamic of campaign discourse has led the Republican Party to veer further from mainstream opinion on a host of issues and continually threatens to marginalize it to a shrinking demographic of rich and rural white people.

However, this same clown-car party holds 31 of 50 governorships and both houses of the U.S. Congress. Thanks to its aggressive efforts to gerrymander districts and restrict voter rights, the Republican Party stands to dominate the House of Representatives for the foreseeable future. Thanks to the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision and the growing dominance of big money in elections (best exemplified by the Koch Brothers), the Right remains within a fractional swing of getting one of its out-of-step clowns elected to the White House.

Back on the Left, the apparent contradictions are no less acute. The Democratic Party has won the popular vote in five of the past six presidential elections but finds itself unable or unwilling to establish a programmatic alternative to ongoing neoliberal austerity. The Democrats are still better than their opposition in some areas—particularly surrounding social policy and the defense of certain redistributive programs—but in others (foreign policy, dependence on corporate funding) they are merely a little less bad. More broadly, the party finds itself enthralled to the dysfunction and malaise that grips Washington politics.

Outside of the Democratic machine, however, there is some reason for optimism. In Occupy Wall Street and now Black Lives Matter we see two of the most system-jarring and potentially influential social movement expressions in a generation. Simultaneously, the ongoing presidential campaign of independent and self-described democratic socialist Senator Bernie Sanders has placed economic inequality on the mainstream agenda and generated huge amounts of enthusiasm in doing so.

Less high profile but no less important, we are witnessing a series of left electoral campaigns that together may represent an incipient challenge to the Democratic establishment. This study by Brooklyn-based writer Ethan Young analyzes these challenges and explains how they fit into the broader context of the current, strange political landscape. A socialist in Seattle; Black nationalists in Jackson and Newark; insurgent mayoral campaigns in the hearts of American empire, Chicago and New York; various stripes of electoral coalitions and policy initiatives from West to East Coast—and in between—which in different ways seek to challenge politics as usual. What chance do they have? You'll have to read to find out.

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg  
Co-Directors of New York Office, November 2015*

# Growing from the Concrete

## Left Electoral Politics in the United States

By Ethan Young

Disillusionment with the two-party system raises an existential question for the U.S. Left: Should we even run in elections, or is it self-defeating? Or rather, do politics that concede the electoral terrain ultimately also concede the possibility of democratic action for radical change?

I would argue that organizing election campaigns is a necessary step in political action if the Left hopes to influence, encourage, and prepare working people to seize and exercise power in society. This study focuses on electoral politics as a central part of political strategy, but not in opposition to other forms of organization, street action, or protest. I open with an analysis of the relationship of the Left to electoral politics, followed by short case studies of a number of noteworthy electoral campaigns from recent years.

To even speak of movement on the electoral Left requires a bit of context. The 2014 Republican seizure of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate brought in a flood of sworn enemies of progressive social movements. Right-wing, anti-government, socially conservative populism found a successful vehicle in 2009 with the rise of the Tea Party in small towns and rural areas throughout the country. Well-financed right-wing mobilization outside of cities, combined with a decline in voter turnout, empowered some of the most reactionary governors and state legislatures in U.S. history.

Since then, Republicans Walker of Wisconsin, Rauner of Illinois, and Snyder of Michigan have run for and won governorships in historic in-

dustrial strongholds on fiercely anti-union platforms. They promote and enforce the Tea Party agenda: to hell with the poor, to hell with democratic rights, to hell with the planet. In some ways, the North seems to be swinging as far to the right as the South.

However, close observers of local elections will have also noticed a mid-2010s uptick in the number and audacity of identifiably left campaigns, including some notable victories. The elections of Bill de Blasio, Ras Baraka, and Chokwe Lumumba—as mayors of New York City, Newark, NJ, and Jackson, MS, respectively—marked a potential shift in the political balance at the national level.

Meanwhile, the startling size of the crowds in summer 2015 attending rallies for self-proclaimed socialist and insurgent presidential campaigner Bernie Sanders seems to further confirm this shift.

This progressive electoral trend has taken off with its own version of populism—opposing control of government by perceived elitist outsiders. In 2014 Bill de Blasio won the New York City Democratic primary by beating the contender backed by his powerful predecessor, Michael Bloomberg. The former mayor was the richest man in town, and his choice was the second-best-known local politician, a forceful city council leader. The less-well-known de Blasio ran outside the traditional political pecking order, openly favoring the public sector and criticizing police misconduct. His success came as a major shock to political observers and the establishment alike.

The powerful healthcare workers union local 1199 SEIU was instrumental in electing de Blasio. More broadly, union clout has created a stir in the body politic. Opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in June 2015 led Congressional Democrats to publicly split with the Obama White House. Since the Cold War, U.S. unions have consistently favored middle-of-the-road Democratic candidates, and this practice continues. But the recent support of major public employees' and teachers' unions for left-leaning, dark-horse candidates marks a turn.

Elections of left and center-left candidates in working-class population centers fly in the face of the consensus view that the Left is either without influence or permanently tied to the center-leaning-right stance of the Clintonite-dominated Democratic National Committee. There is still great pressure to push austerity and war, but the left-leaning electorate—at least in inner cities and college towns—is organizing, countering corporate funding with street heat and numbers. This motion is heaviest in local, usually low-level races, and it includes both Democrats and independents. Its main vehicle is economic populism, targeting the corporate sector and Wall Street rather than regulatory government and taxation. The thrust is strongly against social conservatism (i.e. bigotry), though it does not necessarily identify with social movements. The goal is the broadest possible anti-corporate tent—overlapping with most of the Democratic Party's base but not its pro-corporate leaders.

Social movements are also asserting themselves more and more—sometimes in alliances with Democratic officials, sometimes not.

## **The Left and the Electoral Arena**

The U.S. has never had a socialist or labor party that could effectively challenge or replace

Sometimes they find themselves able to maneuver around the system, sometimes they can't. Some electoral coalitions identify mainly as independent, for example the Vermont Progressive Party, Progressive Dane in Wisconsin, and the Green Party. Others openly interact with local Democrats, like New Haven Rising, Eastern Washington Voters, Florida New Majority, Virginia New Majority, and many more. Somewhere in between these two poles is the Working Families Party, about which more will be written later in this study. Finally, there are also groups like the Progressive Democrats of America that situate themselves entirely inside the Democratic Party.

Many projects concentrate solely on policy initiatives: Minnesotans for a Fair Economy is a broad coalition that has used ballot measures to successfully challenge neoliberalism in its economic forms as well as its anti-democratic political forms, such as voter suppression. Even in seemingly remote locales like Las Cruces, New Mexico, there are formations like the Progressive Voters Alliance raising critical voices in the electoral process.

All of these aim at challenging austerity and corrupt machine politics in particular regions. But as local efforts proliferate, they can't stay isolated forever, and as they grow they will change the political terrain nationally, both inside and outside the Democratic Party. This could turn out to be a much bigger dilemma for the Democratic leadership than a small outside party ever could be, not by undercutting their votes but by pulling the political popular consensus further to the left than party functionaries are prepared to manage.

the Democrats as the political home of labor and working-class constituencies. As a result

there is no national, coherent political center rallying left social movements. The Left takes self-aware political form inside some social movement alliances and leadership circles, and in socialist sects and pro-labor or pro-social movement tendencies inside the Democratic Party.<sup>1</sup>

In the first four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the political Left was largely recognized as the rival Socialist and Communist Parties. During World War II, the Communist Party became a stalwart in the Franklin Delano Roosevelt coalition, as did a segment of the Socialist Party. But even if they hadn't, election laws and anticommunism made it difficult if not impossible for left parties to find a place in the sun. But throughout the last century a debate has been raging on the political Left: whether or not to work within, alongside of, or in opposition to Democratic campaigns.

The main appeal of the Democrats for most of the left and center base is quite simply that they aren't Republicans. At their best and worst, elected Democrats tend to be in less of a hurry to send the poor and the unions to hell. Social movements have very limited power in the Democratic Party, as opposed to the GOP, where the Far Right holds real sway; but some argue that this is subject to change, particularly if the Left would focus on seizing leadership in the party. The odds of actually taking over are pretty poor. The real question is whether working to increase left influence inside would help or hurt the efforts to strengthen unions and rescue and empower the public.

Once upon a time, a third party composed of rising northern bourgeoisie and opponents of

slavery turned the Republican Party into a new ruling-class power center. Their biggest defeat in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century occurred when their free-market standard was undone by the New Deal, in its semi-state-socialist efforts to bolster the capitalist economy with the help of a revived labor movement.

From Upton Sinclair to Earl Browder to Michael Harrington, socialist leaders have made a case for working through Democratic Party campaigns and internal fights, rather than building a vehicle outside the two-party system. The opposing view has been just as constant and consistent for sixty-plus years.

The 1970s saw the rise of another view known as "the inside/outside strategy." Arthur Kinoy, an independent left lawyer with close ties to labor, Black Power, and the Puerto Rican Independence Movement, formed the National Committee for Independent Political Action, which simultaneously supported local third-party efforts and certain Democrats, including the Jesse Jackson campaign. It's a two-stage approach: work both sides of the fence until the Left is strong enough to either replace the old party or take it over. This position is now the path taken by a few socialist groups and, arguably, most independent leftists in social movements, as well as a section of academia.

One camp in the Left draws from the vestiges of vanguardism. It seeks to form an independent, broadly anti-capitalist party. This proposal calls on progressive voters to abandon the Democratic Party immediately. Persistent propaganda, they assume, will eventually do the trick. Three fundamental problems with this camp's approach also point to basic problems with vanguardism in the U.S. Left.

1. *Doctrine:* The third-party-now camp's view of parties in general is a throwback to the socialist movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and earlier. This view ignores the spec-

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<sup>1</sup> This view of the Left is more expansive and inclusive than many others on the Left would have it be. On the other hand, for the mainstream media and the political Right and Center, anything beyond the Bush family is considered "the Left." For a more comprehensive analysis, see Ethan Young, Mapping the Left: Progressive Politics in the United States, RLS-NYC study, 2012, [www.rosalux-nyc.org](http://www.rosalux-nyc.org).

tacularization of politics. It puts all parties into class categories. Since there is no workers' party, the theory goes, the first order of business is always to build one, from scratch if necessary. This fails to take into account the millions of trained and rural workers (mostly white and xenophobic) who identify with the Republicans, or the millions of union members, professionals, semi- and unskilled workers, and unemployed who vote Democratic; the theory completely ignores why they may do this, other than as a result of "false consciousness." Instead, the doctrinaire approach claims that the non-voting majority is really an enlightened mass, ready to break out of the two-party system.

2. *Conspiracism*: A wing of the political Left that is less influenced by traditional socialist strains overlaps with the third-party-now camp. The prevailing thinking in this corner views all political developments as machinations by powerful cabals, carefully thought out in advance and foisted on an innocent public. Mass action is only possible, in this scenario, when the public is enlightened by watchdogs and truth-seekers revealing the puppeteers' strings. The parallels to making anachronistic doctrine a measure of purity are pretty obvious—and the two wings have little trouble making them work together. From this perspective, Bernie Sanders, by announcing that he will back the Democratic primary winner, reveals himself as a "sheepdog" herding unsuspecting voters into the Hillary Clinton camp. Politics is reduced to a game of good guys versus bad guys.
3. *Sectarianism*: This sector of the political Left is made up of factions with irreconcilable differences. The main concern of these factions, generally speaking, is to attract members to their separate parties or pre-parties, and to increase their own influence in social movements, typically at each other's expense. By their own

self-definition they work at cross-purposes—even if they are capable of conducting themselves maturely in coalitions.

This sectarianism reflects a deeper problem—a general misunderstanding of how actual mass political structures appear and evolve. In this process, left groups' organizational missions, political programs, or stances towards the two-party system are far from the top priorities.

What's really important in this process is the involvement of masses at specific pressure points, where the system's contradictions lead to public crisis. This factor is at the heart of any democratic project, whether to defend democracy and move it in a class-conscious direction, or to launch an effective minority alternative with democratic practices.

Building an alternative in blissful isolation—or ignoring the attitudes of millions of people involved in the actual political arrangement—alienates the Left from the developing political direction of social movements. And this approach, with ready-made, self-interested leadership groups (sects) as the centerpiece, can't help but run counter to democratic forms growing out of social movements.

Mike Parker, a leader of the Richmond Progressive Alliance (and no advocate of working with Democrats) gave a fine summation of the Left's role in electoral politics:

*Those of us who want to see progressive social change in America view electoral activity not as end by itself, but as an important tool. Electoral activities serve three purposes: (1) Effecting change through the government or state. [...] (2) Educationally using campaigns to get ideas across to the public. (3) Increasing consciousness through struggle.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> "Building Power through Electoral Efforts: Approaches to Independent Political Action," *solidarity-us.org*, May 21, 2015.

## The Democratic Party: For and Against Social Movements

The docket of Democratic atrocities and betrayals is extensive. But this has not been the heart of the argument made by most left third-party advocates. By their description, the Democratic Party is a monolith, holding the masses and compromised social movements in thrall to its slick publicity and power to co-opt. The argument is that the party's structure and purpose is unified and tightly coordinated. Workers are trapped in it, and those who join, or even coalesce into it, accept a fixed program and some kind of internal discipline—or even a devil's bargain, trading principles for a cushy career. Therefore, it is argued, the first step in any progressive electoral motion is to build a Democrat-free political vehicle, no matter how puny and marginal. Some left sects seem to be strategically aimed at quietly taking control of that future electoral party, or even building it themselves with their tiny cadre as the nucleus. If that scenario were ever realistic, it certainly is no longer. The Democratic Party holds divergent tendencies, some rooted in the New Deal, some in neoliberalism. It gives the reins to corporate capital, but includes most of the labor movement among its biggest donors and vote-getting operations.

One problem with the old Trotskyist slogan, “break with the ass, build a party of the working class,” is that such a party cannot come into being by ignoring or opposing the fight for workers' interests that are taking place through Democratic candidates' campaigns. The mass base and large amount of money that would be required to launch a left anti-Democratic-Party party are nowhere to be seen. The electoral system is heavily rigged against serious outsiders. The political Left is fractured, isolated and deeply confused, which is a concern that must be acknowledged before we can come up with a coherent alternative, “transitional” or otherwise.

Another misunderstanding in the search for an independent alternative is the fixed view that all Democrats function as enemies of social movements. Some actually do fit this description, while others are determined that social movements should be kept around as long as they don't get in the way of fundraising. Still others come directly out of movements and are still dependent on their support to stay in office; while some actually identify more with outside movements than they do with other party tendencies. Only a very few see their role as suppressing, buying off, or swallowing up social movements, except in cases where they believe a movement poses a direct threat to their careers. This is not to say Democrats don't work with or for Wall Street. But recognizing the other roles and functions of Democratic campaigns is crucial for the Left's ability to identify and exploit contradictions within the major parties, and between political tendencies at the top. Social movements are distinct from the political Left. In fact, even when they overlap they have quite different views of the Democratic Party. While some social activists think of the party as their home, it most certainly isn't. They only influence party policy when there is some kind of organized pressure.

In general, social movements' ability to shape policy is determined by their willingness to defy party leadership and elected officials at the crucial moment when party and movement interests sharply diverge. This worked for the billionaire-backed, small-business-based Tea Party in its relationship to the Republican Party. But for underfunded dissident Democrats, defiance makes their standing more precarious, unless they are backed by mass movements.

The main issue that perpetuates the Democratic Party's social movement base—be it labor, inner city, women, LGBTQ, environment, etc.—is

fear of the Republicans. The advocates of “Thou shalt not” (work with and/or for Democrats) insist that the Democrats are so minimally less of an evil that it makes no difference, and any compromise with them only strengthens the party’s hold on social movements. This argument is ignored by most voters, not because the Democratic base is made up of suckers, but because the Republicans prove themselves time and again to be the deadlier enemy. Small business and social conservatives of all classes have made the GOP their home in a real sense, exercising real power because they share the goal of destroying unions and pushing back the social gains of the 1960s and 70s. And that is what the Republicans are actively doing in every state and region where they dominate lawmaking, while the Democrats, however weakly, are all that stand in the way nationally.

The right pushback does not originate primarily from the top (big business), but when left unchallenged it moves the political Center

dangerously farther to the right. (The danger in this case applies both to workers’ rights and lives, and to capital’s access to labor and consumer markets.) Under these circumstances, a wholesale rejection of the Democrats is suicidal. Independent campaigns actually do act as spoilers for the GOP sometimes, despite repeated claims from some on the Left that this is just a ghost story to scare voters back into the Democratic camp.

Even so, as long as it is owned and controlled by corporations the Democratic Party will not be a vehicle for radical change. The party can tolerate a left presence, but investing completely in the fate of the Democratic Party is a dead end. The party’s working-class base suffers increased austerity and militarization of society (which the Democrats either support, or very cautiously oppose). This will not change in a hurry. The Left needs to maintain autonomy in relation to the party, or any effort to end neoliberalism is nullified.

## **Populism, Both Left and Right**

Anti-government populism mobilizes the Republican base; meanwhile, economic populism is just beginning to have an impact among Democratic voters. Until recently its best known advocate was Elizabeth Warren, and more recently it has served as the basis for Bernie Sanders’ campaign for the Democratic Presidential nomination. While not quite socialism, it’s the closest such thing to enter national politics in recent memory. Economic populism calls for renewed state regulation of the corporate sector, especially banks, as well as progressive taxation and vigorous investment in the public sector, including education and national single payer health insurance. It also links left activists in the Democratic Party to the liberal tendency next door—the

anti-free trade, pro-labor “Old New Dealers.” And it taps into undecided voters outside the party who recognize that neoliberalism hurts them.

Both left and right populism are responses to the assault on living standards under the neoliberal austerity regime. Right populism portrays government as an alien and elite entity bent on destroying the middle-class. It appeals to the most basic myths of middle class life: patriarchy and racial hierarchy as biological destiny; wealth guaranteed by a life of hard work and “playing by the rules”; the superiority of religion over secular education; and fear and scorn for those whose very existence provides fodder for the lies that underpin these social tenets.

Left populism is resurgent, in part because the main 20<sup>th</sup> century left models—socialism and the New Deal welfare state—were discredited as alternatives to the unfettered market, in particular following the rise of neoliberalism and the collapse of the Soviet camp. Economic populism is still more of a blank slate than a worked-out political theory or strategy. Populism, whether left or right, emerges from a (mostly collective) sense of (mostly individual) victimhood. This in turn is quite often the initial response people have to social fragmentation and austerity.

Populism of this type is just now finding its bearings and its voice. It still leaves many questions unanswered but without excluding any progressive alternative, even socialism. The s-word may still be thorny for many Americans, and a bit of a mystery even to leftists. But those outside the pull of the far-right coalition are the majority, and the stigma attached to socialism is much less threatening than it was during the Cold War. This is why the socialist Senator Bernie Sanders can gain acceptance as a standard-bearer of economic populism.

Left populism points to socialism in a number of ways that the welfare state does not, while still falling short of demanding an end to capitalism. What makes libertarians and neo-fascists particularly crazy is the idea of wealth redistribution from top to bottom. Among Democrats, the centrist Democratic National Committee and the even more conservative Blue Dog Coalition are both worried that populism could undercut the party's connections

and funding from various centers of capital and finance, which are the main targets of populist anger. The party base is changing from a faithful flock to an angry and worried mass. As the base gradually becomes aware of its actual political leverage, populism serves as a rallying point for diverse tendencies and constituencies (as it has for the Right). This takes place both on the national stage, as evidenced by the Sanders campaign, and in local races.

Economic populism also makes it possible for the public to take a hard look at neoliberalism and how it destroyed the welfare state. Clinton-era liberals have either called for a return to pre-Reagan days or insisted that people accept that the market rules society. Now, discussions are taking up the need for cooperatively-run production, green jobs, and a revitalized labor movement. The discussants come from different directions, but all deal with the following question: Do we need a new New Deal, or does this path limit us to restoring top-down, state-run services in the context of a decaying and completely corrupt market economy? This represents a breakthrough in discourse among the political Left, encouraged by cooperative advocates like Gar Alperovitz and movements focused on wealth redistribution. It's sparked by the environmental crisis, and the mess that neoliberalism has made of life for workers. The basic premise of left populists is that the state needs to be purged of corporate and financial influence. After Occupy Wall Street, there is a clearer understanding of just how hard and protracted this project will be.

## **Examining Left Victories and Future Prospects**

The New York City election indicates a pendulum swing in national politics, whether or not Mayor de Blasio fulfills his promises. He was elected on a progressive program, with

a cross-racial, largely working-class vote. This represents a major change in voting patterns, and it's not unique. This and the other cases examined in this report demonstrate that the

Left is breaking through in key localities. The circumstances are distinct in each case. Some candidates have won in nonpartisan races. Some have run on coalition tickets including independents and Democrats. Some focused on opposition to corporate power. Some targeted police violence; others, entrenched corruption. Some have run in defense of public education. But all have appealed to populist sentiment among working-class sectors, calling for their defense from austerity, and won substantial vote totals for this very reason.

The Chicago mayoral race in 2015 pitted Cook County Commissioner Jesús “Chuy” García, a reformer with close neighborhood ties, against the incumbent, Rahm Emanuel, a technocrat powerbroker installed by the local Democratic machine in alliance with the Obama White House. The García campaign, viewed at first as a quixotic folly, turned the election into a tight, hand-to-hand battle for votes. The initiators of the challenge were not insider rivals of the mayor but the insurgent Chicago Teachers Union, Local 1 of the American Federation of Teachers. García lost the vote, but the circumstances were anything but business-as-usual, and as some observers noted, the Left can still claim some victories and important lessons from the outcome.

In two centers of African-American, working-class concentration—Newark, New Jersey and Jackson, Mississippi—candidates openly identified with the radical Left won the mayoralty: Ras Baraka (son of writer and activist leader Amiri Baraka), and Chokwe Lumumba (a leader of the revolutionary nationalist New Afrikan Independence Movement). They won the vote directly under the noses of the right and center powers that be.

The Newark and Jackson elections were remarkable for a number of reasons. In both cases, years of organizing experience led to wide recognition of the candidates at the street lev-

el, allowing them to outflank the party hacks identified with the status quo politics of corruption, austerity, and disenfranchisement. They also both represented breaks from the post-60s Black electoral movement, whose base was unable—or not inclined—to challenge now-entrenched officials, whose policies had moved the direction of community politics from left to center. Now, as working-class voters become re-politicized, they themselves are beginning to push the focus leftward.

Two cases in which left third-party runs defeated established Democrats and Republicans suggest that the two-party system itself is more vulnerable in certain local situations. Kshama Sawant won a seat on the Seattle City Council in a nonpartisan race. Sawant ran as an open socialist, a member of the Trotskyist group Socialist Alternative. In a contrasting scenario involving the labor-connected Working Families Party, two candidates for state office (in Hartford and New York City) won without Democratic cross-endorsement, and a WFP-backed candidate won the Democratic primary for mayor of Philadelphia.

Yet another drama played out in Richmond, California, an industrial center northeast of Oakland. In this case, an anti-corporate coalition beat one of the most powerful oil companies on what they thought was their own turf.

These are a few examples of a definite, promising change in the political winds, which is still only beginning to attract notice in national discourse. The indifference of much of the Left regarding the significance of this shift, however, is something to worry about. Some think electoral politics are a distraction from street action or grassroots organizing. A whole tradition within the Left sees electoral campaign work either as selling out or a trap set by the overlords. These maximalist arguments are expressions of the incoherence of our politics, and in no way do they represent or help us find solutions.

## **New York, New York**

Bill de Blasio's rise has been remarkable, considering his background as a left activist before going into "legitimate" politics. He was an important player in Hillary Clinton's successful 2000 senatorial campaign; then a city council member representing the liberal, gentrifying Park Slope neighborhood in Brooklyn. He also served a term as public advocate during Mayor Bloomberg's third term.

But further back, in the 1980s, de Blasio worked in the Central America solidarity movement, arguably the country's most visible branch of radical politics during the era of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. He then joined the 1989 campaign of David Dinkins, who became New York's first (and still only) Black mayor. It was then that he became an up-and-comer in the Democratic Party, working with Harlem Congressman Charles Rangel and Bill Clinton's administration.

He has a biracial family, which not long ago was anathema in American politics. In the campaign, his kids openly identified as Black. This actually seemed to increase his popularity with whites as well as people of color. Perhaps most surprising from a historical view of racial and gender mores, there were no repercussions for being married to Chirlane McCray, who had been a member of one of the first Black lesbian groups in the mid-70s, the Combahee River Collective.

This history helps clarify the significance of de Blasio's election. He is a liberal and an insider, but not a run-of-the-mill party hack. When he entered the race for the Democratic nomination for mayor, it was a crowded field, including an African American, Bill Thompson, who came close to defeating Bloomberg in his last run; a popular city comptroller, John Liu, who appealed to the city's burgeoning Asian demographic; and several others. The frontrun-

ner was City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, who went from Greenwich Village reformer to Bloomberg enforcer. Quinn, white and an open lesbian, hurt herself by opposing paid sick leave for city workers, and by successfully pressuring the city council to break the city's term limit law because Bloomberg didn't want to quit. But after leading for much of the campaign, nearly every observer was stunned to see her fall far behind in the weeks leading up to the primary.

NYC has an array of voting blocs. They tend to be in competition and reflect class, ethnic, and gender identification. So it was peculiar that de Blasio, a straight white male, pulled ahead across the city, including in working-class districts where whites were the minority of the electorate. But what also distinguished him was a purposely left position on a number of key issues.

Dissatisfaction with Bloomberg's policies was easily identified. Before it was dispersed by Bloomberg, Occupy Wall Street gave New Yorkers a way to express their anxiety and anger. Inequality was growing as Manhattan increasingly became a playpen for the wealthy. Meanwhile the city's public schools were being run into the ground through defunding and privatization. Affordable housing was disappearing. Bloomberg hated unions and repeatedly kept city workers dangling at contract time. The policing issue was even more urgent—Police Commissioner Ray Kelly had been kept on by Bloomberg when his predecessor Rudy Giuliani stepped down, and Kelly's now infamous "stop and frisk" strategy was turning into a major public scandal.

These issues, brought to the fore through Occupy Wall Street, led to confrontation with the most powerful forces in the city—the FIRE business establishment (composed of finance, insurance, and real estate) and the police department. Whatever de Blasio's intentions

before the election, or what he has actually accomplished in office, his popularity owes a lot to the challenge he posed when he ran on these specific issues.

The diversity of his base reveals new developments on the electoral landscape. In the polling results after the primary, de Blasio came out ahead in all but three areas: the wealthiest, who voted for Quinn; and heavy concentrations of African Americans and Asians, who voted for Thompson and Liu, respectively. Yet support from organized labor was divided between these four candidates, whether by design or by chance. Among the major unions, only SEIU1199, the largest local with the best GOTV (get out the vote) operation, backed de Blasio in the primary.

Winning the primary, de Blasio swept the election with unified labor support. MIT political scientist J. Philip Thompson notes:

*De Blasio won 73 percent of the vote in the general election to Republican Joe Lhota's 24 percent – nearly a fifty point difference. This just does not happen in mayoral politics. It was an astounding victory, and a sign that de Blasio tapped into a yearning in the electorate for a different politics [...]. (While) de Blasio and Lhota evenly split the vote among white males, de Blasio defeated Lhota decisively among white women, winning 60 percent of their vote. Where de Blasio surged the most, however, and what put the race out of reach for Lhota, was de Blasio's strong support among voters of color – winning 96 percent of the black vote, 87 percent of the Latino vote, and 70 percent of the Asian vote.<sup>3</sup>*

De Blasio went into the general election with a strong identification factor (more than recognition) among both Black voters and Democratic movers and shakers. He was known and respected among political insiders in Harlem and Brooklyn. Early activism that took him to Latin America probably helped him to reach out

to the traditionally estranged and dispersed Latino voter demographic. His campaign gave unions (reunited after the primary) and working-class community groups an opportunity to flex some muscle.

The election also saw changes in elected district representatives to the city council. In 2013 the council's progressive caucus numbered 11 members. New members sent to the council in 2014 increased that number to 19, and the council elected the co-chair of the caucus, Melissa Mark-Viverito, to the powerful position of speaker.

After the election, some of de Blasio's moves heartened his supporters; others left them furious. Naming a respected educator, Carmen Fariña, as his schools chancellor gave encouragement to public school parents and the teachers' union. It also threw a monkey wrench in the school privatization movement, a favorite of Bloomberg and New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo. De Blasio has strongly advocated progressive taxation to fund a new system of universal pre-kindergarten classes in the city's enormous school system. This is a major issue in a growing struggle between the mayor and the ambitious, austerity-minded governor. De Blasio continues to struggle to raise funds for public schools, but he did successfully launch pre-K citywide, and he has cleared important hurdles in negotiating new contracts with city workers, expanding paid sick leave, raising the minimum wage from \$8.75 to \$13 an hour, and setting in motion policy changes to improve the city's environment.

On the crucial issue of affordable housing, de Blasio has sought to avoid a conflict with the real estate moguls who dominate the city's economy. He has coupled calls for community preservation (slowing or stopping high-priced development and gentrification) with high-rise construction plans that would lead to the op-

<sup>3</sup> J. Phillip Thompson, "Does De Blasio's Win Represent the Birth of a New Urban Populism?" *New Labor Forum*, Winter 2015.

posite outcome. De Blasio has made promises in response to populist demands, but he cannot meet them (whatever his intentions) without the backing of organized opposition to the real estate moguls. This highlights the limitations on elected officials in meeting populist, anti-private sector expectations.

The police situation poses the most complex problem facing de Blasio, and it has duly sparked the most controversy among his critics—left and right. Under Bloomberg’s predecessor, Rudy Giuliani, Police Commissioner Bill Bratton pursued a policy called “Broken Windows,” which concentrated on making arrests for minor offenses. Giuliani later brought on Ray Kelly as a more low-key, hands-on replacement. Kelly was then kept on by Bloomberg for his three terms, making Kelly the longest serving police boss in NYC history. During these years Kelly built a loyal infrastructure within the department while shifting strategic focus from “Broken Windows” to “Stop and Frisk.” This policy amounted to giving officers free rein to harass and assault civilians at will, on the simple grounds of suspicion.

The problems this posed for working-class New Yorkers surfaced quickly. People of color, a numerical majority of the population, were threatened daily by a white-dominated police force—with no requirement that officers even live in the city. The problems were exacerbated by a national wave of corruption, racist paranoia, and a gang-like code of silence in police departments, New York’s included. A series of deadly police encounters made Stop and Frisk an urgent issue, and not just for inner city youth. De Blasio ran with this discontent and struck a chord in the broader population. After the election he surprisingly replaced Kelly with Bratton, the old commissioner’s rival. Bratton put a stop to Stop and Frisk, but reverted to his old Broken Windows strategy, nearly eliminating any hope of substantially improving police behavior.

It would be easy to write off de Blasio’s stopgap measures as those of a hack reverting to type. But reining in the police, even under ordinary circumstances, involves steady and careful work, like defusing a bomb. The department was and continues to be run on a day-to-day level by Kelly’s brass, who feel no loyalty to the new administration. Street cops, already nervous with orders to lighten up on bystanders and protesters, are afraid of having their hands tied or being punished for being bullies—and sometimes killers. Bratton attracted fire from both police supporters and civilians, which he was better able to withstand than the newly elected, first-time mayor. De Blasio has been labeled a race traitor and a flunky of Rev. Al Sharpton by the Rupert Murdoch press and leaders of police unions, but the mayor and commissioner have so far weathered the storm. Yet harassment, random imprisonment, and deadly violence are guaranteed to continue, as long as the NYPD sees its daily function as keeping an eye on kids just moving around the city.

De Blasio has staked out his own position as a leader of left Democrats nationally. His electoral success, and his past ties to Hillary Clinton, may be having an impact on the public stance of the party in the post-Obama era. How social movements choose to respond to such a shift remains to be seen. A move to the left by the Clintonites might motivate voters at the base to pressure for more funding for social programs and welfare financed by taxing the wealthiest and the corporate sector. Failing that, the Democrats will continue with Plan A, which consists of “flavor of the month” populist-themed circuses without the bread.

## **Chicago, Illinois**

If de Blasio’s 2014 election was a victory that foreshadowed new setbacks, Chuy García’s 2015 Chicago campaign was a failure laced with important successes.

Rahm Emanuel, elected in 2011, presented Chicago with the very model of a neoliberal Democrat. He is the first mayor in memory who did not come from the Cook County Democratic Organization. Instead he simply transferred from a House of Representatives seat based out of suburban Illinois, to becoming Obama's first chief of staff, to the mayoralty, in much the same manner that Robert F. Kennedy and Hillary Clinton won Senate seats in New York State: through White House connections. He immediately set to work transferring public funds to private pockets. Emanuel is a heavy-handed operator, and he is used to having his way.

But the following year his bully bluff was called, as described by political analyst John Nichols:

*If it is possible to point to one miscalculation by the mayor, it is surely his decision to close fifty schools and to provoke a fight with the teachers union, which struck for the first time in decades in 2012.*

Emanuel did not foresee that this would be no ordinary strike. The CTU turned to parents and community groups to join in pressuring the mayor to reinvest in public education and break from standardization and impoverishing and disempowering teachers. Parents joined mass demonstrations, and the teachers won a contract that went beyond Emanuel's limits.<sup>4</sup> The CTU's efforts created a network of teachers and public school families across the city, creating a movement aimed at undercutting Emanuel's goals of austerity and privatization. A mayor who built his career on connections to the powerful was faced with a working-class, neighborhood-based, anti-neoliberal opposition.

Nichols continues:

*The anger at Emanuel's policies and his approach grew so intense that Chicago Teachers Union*

*President Karen Lewis began in 2013 to prepare a challenge to Emanuel, and polls showed she might beat him. When Lewis fell ill last fall and announced she would not run, the "smart money" said Emanuel was safe. But Lewis and others prevailed upon García—a former alderman and state legislator with close ties to labor—to make the race.<sup>5</sup>*

And García was no ordinary candidate. While he had little name recognition, he had a rich background in Chicago politics. Older activists remember his radical beginnings in the Mexican barrio of Little Village. He moved into electoral politics as a foe of the machine led by longtime Mayor Richard J. Daley (who held office from 1955 until his death in 1976). García backed the 1983 campaign of Harold Washington, the first African American to win the mayoralty, and helped build a multiracial coalition in the country's most segregated urban area. García remained a loyalist even after Washington's sudden death early in his second term. A number of supporters bolted to the machine, and Daley's son, Richard M., took back city hall in short order. García served in the city council and state senate until 1998, then went back to community organizing in Little Village, and subsequently ran and won a seat on the Cook County Board of Commissioners.

García's mayoral primary campaign, initiated by the CTU, was an outgrowth of the strike. García was a logical choice for those with a sense of history—he connected contemporary movements with the Harold Washington era. He also was seen as a possible first Latino mayor for Chicago. Never before had a candidate so closely identified with a union entered the field.

The campaign benefited from increased coordination of work by social movements across racial and ethnic lines. Amisha Patel, a leader of Grassroots Initiative and the coalition Reclaim Chicago, describes how this was organized:

<sup>4</sup> See Ethan Young, Teachers on Strike, RLS-NYC study, 2013, [www.rosalux-nyc.org](http://www.rosalux-nyc.org).

<sup>5</sup> "Rahm Emanuel Seemed Unstoppable—Until He Ticked Off Chicago's Teachers," *The Nation*, February 25, 2015.

*From the occupation of Republic Windows and Doors by rank-and-file workers to the occupation of schools and mental health clinics closed by Emanuel in black and brown communities; from the Chicago Teachers Union strike of 2012 to sustained action against the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and LaSalle Street banks; from radical immigrant youth organizing against deportations and xenophobia to the #BlackLivesMatter movement; community and labor organizers have been waging a clear, escalating fight against the corporate agenda. [...]*

*In our coalition work, we've seen the power of organizing not around a single issue, but around a long-term collaboration rooted in a shared analysis. Dozens of organizations have come together under the banner of Take Back Chicago to engage in multi-issue organizing for several years now. We have done deep political education with grassroots leaders and have transformed the way organizations across the city think about issue campaigns. [...]*

*Organizations with a clear political ideology and a willingness to take real risks helped grow a grassroots movement for change, and long-term coalitions built around a shared analysis (rather than a single issue or short-term campaign) encouraged organizations to feel accountable to a broader movement.<sup>6</sup>*

The García campaign put a lot of attention into building a unified Latino voting bloc. There have long been Latinos working for the machine, but they have generally tended to the particular ethnic majorities in their neighborhoods. Harold Washington broke that pattern by allying with Mexican and Puerto Rican leaders and community groups. García followed the same path, galvanizing the various Spanish-speaking constituencies across the city. This led to some upsets in races for city council seats. It represented a significant step forward, with national ramifications, as Latino voters (inclusive of numerous nationalities) took a bloc stand against machine incumbents. García took 70% of Latino votes in the runoff.

Tension between Latinos and African Americans was a factor in García's defeat. Emanuel had backing from Obama in his first run, and loyalty to the president runs strong, both as a favorite son and for reasons of racial pride. The identification of Emanuel with Obama had eroded by 2015, but not to a large enough extent. Several important Black church and political figures gave their support to García, but the majority of voters either backed Emanuel or kept their heads down. (The mayor's reputation as an unforgiving punisher is well known.) Emanuel took the black vote 57% to 43%.

Ethnic competition for jobs and patronage is a real source of disunity among working-class Chicagoans, and it is quietly exploited through whispering campaigns and dog-whistle rhetoric by machine politicians. Similarly unions were divided, in a city where incumbents normally get rubber-stamped by labor leaders. One important local, SEIU Healthcare, actually broke ranks to back Chuy, until the entire SEIU district dropped their neutral stance and joined. The national AFT came around too, but UNITE HERE, representing hotel workers among others, opted for Emanuel. They tried to counter the populist theme of Chuy's campaign with a bizarre advertising series called "Rahm Love," in which Emanuel was portrayed as a folk hero. Since the mayor is almost universally identified more with Mr. Burns of "The Simpsons" than with "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," the ads were quickly dropped.

García did not campaign with a strong left program. He reserved his fire for some of Emanuel's most unpopular moves, like school closures and camera surveillance at stop lights. García backed away from targeting corporate power in the few concrete financial plans he presented, and he largely steered clear of issues of police brutality. In fact, in response to public concern over runaway gun violence in neighborhoods, he actually called for hiring 1,000 more police officers. But his pro-neigh-

<sup>6</sup> "How Chicago's Grassroots Movements Defeated Rahm Emanuel at the Polls," *In These Times*, March 5, 2015.

borhood, pro-teacher stand was firm, as was his advocacy for an elected school board.

The breakdown of voting results is telling. Turnout was low, despite vigorous campaigning. It was the lowest in Black neighborhoods. David Moberg writes:

*Emanuel beat García by just 51 to 49 percent among voters in precincts with households earning less than \$39,999 a year, and by 56 to 44 among those earning \$40,000 to \$99,999, but he won in precincts with an average annual household income of more than \$100,000 by 71 to 29 percent. There was a clear class divide, but even if just the working poor had voted, García would not have won.*

*Looking at maps of the vote, it becomes obvious that García did best in Latino areas, winning seventy percent of the vote in the city's five most heavily Latino wards; in some "white ethnic" working-class areas and often in recent immigrant wards (as well as the most diverse wards); and in some areas popular with young people. García won the under-30 vote 57 to 43 percent, but lost to their elders. Emanuel won white voters by 64 to 36, but that vote was very concentrated in the north lakefront and far northwest side wards that are also the most affluent.<sup>7</sup>*

The class divide favored Emanuel's opponents in some aldermanic races. Out of 18 city council seats that were contested in the runoff, nine went to opponents of the mayor. Every member of the council's Progressive Caucus was re-elected, and the caucus's total numbers grew. While the majority of the fifty wards are still represented by machine loyalists, this was a rare, even unique shakeup for Chicago. Just forcing so many incumbents into a runoff was extraordinary in itself. Emanuel's people were bolstered by funds the challengers couldn't dream of matching. The upsurge is closely related to organized parents of public school students, and unions choosing to back candidates based on their reform programs and independence

from corporate power, instead of their ties to entrenched, influence-peddling machines.

In the aftermath of the runoff, community groups involved in the García and anti-Emanuel campaigns have been meeting, projecting the creation of permanent, area-based political organizations. Curtis Black, a longtime political reporter, lays out post-runoff activity:

*United Working Families is said to be exploring establishing IPOs in several wards, including some where Chicago Teachers Union members ran strongly. And Alderman-elect Carlos Rodriguez-Rosa has said he would create an IPO in the 35th Ward.*

*If enough of these groups take off, they could make a big difference in four years. And with a new City Council—following an election in which Emanuel's coattails were not very impressive—their organizing and advocacy could make a difference in the interim, too.<sup>8</sup>*

This is why Emanuel tried to switch the tone of his campaign from pro-development to populist in its final weeks. Despite his win, national Democratic figures began to hard-pedal the party as a populist alternative immediately after the runoff.

Chicago now stands between devastated cities like Detroit and overdeveloping, turbo-gentrifying cities like New York and San Francisco. The fight to stave off Emanuel's renewed attacks on the public sector may lead to the kind of politically sophisticated mass movement capable of leading a thorough house cleaning the next time local power is confronted with the consequences of its dirty work.

## **Newark, New Jersey**

The fight over public education also played a major role in the election of Ras Baraka as

<sup>7</sup> "Chicago Progressives' Mixed Results Against the 'Money Machine,'" *In These Times*, April 10, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> "Chicago progressives hope to capitalize on April runoff results," *Chicago Reporter*, April 23, 2015.

mayor of Newark. Baraka is identified with the radical Left—much more so than either de Blasio or García—as the son of Marxist and Black nationalist leader Amiri Baraka, who laid the groundwork for the Black electoral movement of the 70s and 80s.

Ras Baraka had been a gadfly throughout the mayoralty of his predecessor Cory Booker. The ex-mayor, now senator, Booker is a prime example of a political class that rose out of the Black empowerment movement by joining itself to the neoliberal push for urban “development.” He led a blighted city toward a promise of recuperation through privatization and service cuts. Booker’s banner was economic and social uplift, but in the fashion of the Clinton-dominated Democratic operation, he instead doubled down on a plan to hand over more public money to private concerns.

Newark is the largest city in New Jersey, but it’s also small enough to launch a citywide ground game without requiring a war chest of tens of millions of dollars. Baraka had been a high-profile community figure for years, alternating elected city positions with a career as a high school principal. His role as a public sector worker put him at odds with Booker. Technically, Baraka ran against Booker’s chosen successor, but he was actually taking on Booker’s legacy as a paragon of insider politics. The impotence—or perhaps indifference—that Booker’s organization brought to the 2014 race highlighted the importance of Baraka, an opposition figure with shallow pockets but deep roots, winning by a large margin. The people of Newark spoke up: they knew that they were in a quandary that politically groomed, would-be saviors had only made worse.

Running in a nonpartisan race in a city with very few Republicans, the division between Baraka and his opponent came down to one issue: how to handle belligerent, scandal-ridden Republican Governor Chris Christie. Old Newark

city fathers and the daily *Star-Ledger* warned that Baraka would be a “protester-in-chief” and would scare off needed state funds. His vote—which was largely from Black, working-class Newark—made it clear that the majority prefers to fight than reach an agreement with Christie, even if the result is to be cut adrift by the vindictive governor. This meant that voters see Christie as an enemy, not just a hindrance.

As in Chicago, the money battle was fought between the private sector and labor. Public-sector unions contributed \$500,000 to Baraka. His opponent’s funds came overwhelmingly from three Wall Street-connected families and a major corporate attorney.

In another parallel to Chicago, Baraka, like García, had strong support from organized public schoolteachers. Booker and Christie had claimed to rescue Newark’s school system in 2010 with a plan funded by Facebook’s CEO Mark Zuckerberg. The system is run by the state and overseen by a Christie appointee, who has led the implementation of what is called the “One Newark” plan. Baraka ran hard in the 2014 race against One Newark and the school superintendent, whom he cannot fire or replace. Lyndsey Layton reported in the *Washington Post*:

*The plan, which fully took effect during this academic year [2014-15], essentially blew up the old system. It eliminated neighborhood schools in favor of a citywide lottery designed to give parents more choices. It prompted mass firings of principals and teachers, and it led to numerous school closures and a sharp rise in the city’s reliance on charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately run.*

*Opposition to the schools plan here has been led by the teachers union, a longtime Christie foil, which poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into last year’s mayoral race and helped elect Baraka in a contest seen as a referendum on One Newark.*

*But in recent months, the ranks of the defiant have swelled to include city leaders, state law-*

*makers, church pastors, civil rights advocates, parents and community activists. Even onetime boosters of One Newark, including some philanthropists and charter school operators, have soured on it.*<sup>9</sup>

The plan has also given rise to a furious student movement, which Baraka has acknowledged and supported.

Christie will however not be easily deterred from his blitzkrieg of disenfranchisement and privatization, so Baraka has formed an alliance with two other major New Jersey city governments, in Jersey City and Paterson. The goal is to pool meager resources to tackle crime, quality of life, and the high cost of municipal goods, bypassing the state government in Trenton. Baraka has also created a civilian review board with subpoena power to respond to complaints of police misconduct. The board will include representatives of the American Civil Liberties Union, NAACP, People's Organization for Progress, Ironbound Community Corporation, and La Casa de Don Pedro.

What Baraka may lack in organization, he makes up in direct community and labor ties. He will need to broaden this alliance with other towns and cities as they take on a depleted state budget, a teetering governor and an entrenched, statewide Democratic machine.

## **Jackson, Mississippi**

Chokwe Lumumba died on February 25, 2014, eight months into his term as mayor of Jackson, Mississippi. A special election was called, but his son, Chokwe Antar Lumumba, was unable to reclaim the seat. However, the elder Lumumba's campaign and his brief time in office offer an exemplary legacy, and his supporters have picked up where the administration left off.

Like Baraka, Lumumba had a storied history, going back to the early 1970s, in the revolutionary tendency of Black nationalism. The Republic of New Afrika (RNA) movement was concurrent with the Black Panther Party but focused on national independence for areas of the Deep South with the heaviest concentration of African Americans. After years of bitter state repression against the RNA, Lumumba shored up the movement by forming the New Afrikan People's Organization and its mass organizing group, the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement. The operation was based in Jackson, which has the second-largest concentration of African Americans in the country.

The Lumumba campaign combined the candidate's popularity in Jackson with a solid organized core of activists working to draw together locals across class lines. Lumumba ran as a Democrat in a nonpartisan race, coming out ahead of the incumbent, Jackson's first African-American mayor, and a GOP-backed Black businessman, whom he beat in a runoff despite his opponent's overwhelming media presence.

The election itself was phenomenal, but the effort to transform politics in a city like Jackson was much more so. Lumumba moved quickly to pass a 1% sales tax, striking out against the two options most cities face: either to let infrastructure rot, or to allow the private sector to rebuild the city while pricing workers out of their homes. Immediately after taking office they published and circulated their program, the Jackson Rising Policy Statement, as a way of holding themselves accountable to their voting base and to all of Jackson's residents.

NAPO and MXGM quickly organized a People's Assembly in Jackson's Ward 2 in which they laid the groundwork for this program. Kali Akuno was a key organizer of Lumumba's campaign and Cooperation Jackson, the coalition working to bring cooperatively-run businesses and par-

<sup>9</sup> "Chris Christie's bold plan to remake public schools is running into trouble," *Washington Post*, March 3, 2015.

ticipatory democracy to the heart of the “Black Belt.” In *Casting Shadows: Chokwe Lumumba and the Struggle for Racial Justice and Economic Democracy in Jackson, Mississippi*, he writes:

*[The Lumumba Administration’s] legacy includes the introduction of participatory democratic practices into municipal government. [...] [By] allowing the city council to engage in all departmental planning sessions and participate directly in budgeting sessions, and by having weekly one-on-one meetings with each of the seven council members. [...] On two major occasions the administration organized processes for the general public to decide on major issues, both as an attempt to elicit mass support as well as to build a public culture of participatory engagement as part of the political project of “democratizing American democracy.”<sup>10</sup>*

The ongoing work in Jackson following Lumumba’s death has deep implications for the South, as well as for every region where people of color are increasingly outnumbering whites. The Tea Party tied the Republicans’ hands, preventing them from even venturing to back a candidate with any credibility. A small but significant number of whites contributed to Lumumba’s margin of victory, and the campaign built ties to the largely Latino immigrant rights movement. Local unions, under siege from anti-labor legislatures, saw him as a rare ally in elected office.

The Jackson People’s Assembly has been the connecting thread between the electoral work and ongoing social action, as well as the backbone of the drive for actual democracy. Akuno writes:

*At present, the Jackson People’s Assembly operates at a mid-point between a constituent and a mass assembly. A constituent assembly is a representative body, not a direct democratic body of the people in their totality. [...] However, during times of crisis the Assembly tends to take on more*

*of a mass character, such as following the passing of Mayor Lumumba in late February 2014 to defend the People’s Platform (which was devised by the Assembly) and many of the initiatives the Lumumba administration was pursuing to fulfill it. It should be noted, however, that even though the current practice in Jackson tends towards the constituent model, the aim is to grow into a permanent mass assembly.<sup>11</sup>*

According to Akuno, the campaign’s base has taken up the question of the ultimate direction of political work. The distinction between a delegated, representative assembly and a mass decision-making body is mirrored in the choice between supporting candidates and building “dual power.” The goal of this initiative is to develop a form of direct democracy outside the rituals and institutions of typical electoral campaigns and representative legislatures.

This kind of discussion is obviously way outside the norm in local electoral politics. It is usually reserved for small intellectual groups, not broad-based electoral movements. This is largely a testimony to the decades of persistent efforts at registering, mobilizing, campaigning and governing, starting with Reconstruction and continuing through the Civil Rights Movement. It is scarcely understood by national political players, or even most left activists. But under the radar, it portends big changes in how people view political action and democracy.

The Southern Black Belt has long been a battlefield over democracy for African Americans and workers more generally. Since the recent racially motivated massacre in a church in Charleston, South Carolina, a showdown has become increasingly apparent between the foes and champions of white supremacy. The disappearance of the Lumumba Administration in Jackson represented a sharp jump backward. With the rise of a cultural challenge to Confederate symbols and other traditions born of the post-Reconstruction reign of ter-

<sup>10</sup> Kali Akuno, *Casting Shadows: Chokwe Lumumba and the Struggle for Racial Justice and Economic Democracy in Jackson, Mississippi*, RLS–NYC study, 2015, p. 6, [www.rosalux-nyc.org](http://www.rosalux-nyc.org).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

ror, an equivalent political showdown seems certain, very soon. Lumumba's groundwork will make its mark after all.

## **Richmond, California**

In 2006 Gayle McLaughlin was first elected mayor of Richmond, California. She had served on the city council as a Green Party member since 2004, a year after the formation of the Richmond Progressive Alliance. The background for these and future wins is a story of careful organizing and coalition building over more than a decade.

Richmond, with a population of 104,000, is a working-class town in the rapidly gentrifying San Francisco Bay Area. It is a stronghold of Chevron Oil, the city's major employer, but it is also a union town, not untouched by the exuberant left political culture of San Francisco, Oakland, and Berkeley. Mostly African-American and Latino residents have suffered from runaway pollution and deadly hazards caused by the destructive Chevron Refinery.

Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA) appeared on the scene following a police attack on local activist Andres Soto and his family at a 2002 *Cinco de Mayo* celebration. He and a handful of activists decided to pool their resources and experience to start a grassroots progressive opposition. They successfully took on the police chief, publicizing his record as a double-dealer, and then went after the city manager. But they discovered that public opposition to Chevron's heavy hand was political dynamite waiting for a match. The RPA went to work with an all-volunteer staff and a commitment to refuse corporate funding.

In 2004 Soto and Gayle McLaughlin ran for city council. While Soto was bitterly attacked, the less well-known McLaughlin made it through. Two years later, she edged out the incumbent

to take the mayoralty in a three-way race. This happened again in 2010, in an even fiercer three-way showdown. The RPA re-won city hall and took two seats on the city council, while at the same time struggling to build out their organization and base and contend with a giant opponent with unlimited funds. As John Geluardi wrote in the *East Bay Express*:

*Under the leadership of Mayor Gayle McLaughlin, the Richmond City Council has taken on the Chevron refinery, the city's largest taxpayer and the region's largest polluter, for avoiding its utility tax, having repeated accidents and dangerous operating conditions, being reluctant to be inspected, and for coming up with a poorly planned facility upgrade. The council has also taken stands against the soda industry, PG&E, the casino industry, and more recently, the Wall Street banking industry—perhaps its most powerful foe yet.<sup>12</sup>*

RPA's wins inspired the wrath of land developers and the building trades, along with Chevron. Despite RPA's strong pro-labor identification, they were opposed by the construction union-dominated central labor council and the police and fire unions.

Other public-sector unions worked for RPA, along with community groups and environmentalists. Between elections, RPA started or joined efforts against pollution from the refinery, to protect undocumented immigrants by ending ID checkpoints, and to bring construction jobs to town by lobbying Lawrence Berkeley National Labs to build a new campus. They also partnered with groups working with returning prisoners, fighting for municipal IDs, and cleaning the local environment by fighting toxic emissions. Geluardi continues:

*Richmond was hit particularly hard when the speculative housing bubble burst in 2008. [...] In many cases, homeowners are carrying mortgages that are twice the value of their properties. A spate of foreclosures in Richmond also has cre-*

<sup>12</sup> John Geluardi, "The New Progressive Leader," *East Bay Express*, December 25, 2013.

*ated a wide swath of blight through the city's working-class neighborhoods, which has further damaged home values. [...]*

*While the Wall Street Journal, Reuters, Bloomberg Business Week, the San Francisco Chronicle, and the Contra Costa Times have all attacked Richmond's plan [...]. [At] a recent council meeting, more than one hundred people rallied in the city's Civic Center plaza, waving placards, banging on drums, and chanting in favor of the plan.<sup>13</sup>*

RPA's organized support—actually an organic front of working-class social movements and anti-corporate activists—is coupled with well-coordinated canvassing of the entire city. Campaign materials are carefully prepared to make a thorough case for the RPA's goals, and volunteers are well-prepared to engage voters and answer questions. This, in a nutshell, has been the basis for RPA's record of victories.

The rise of RPA was tripped up in the 2012 election. They lost a council seat and expended a lot of effort on a ballot measure to raise the merchants' tax on sugared drinks; the measure was defeated by the powerful soda industry.

This reflected two weaknesses of RPA. First, its approach to the large African-American population has not led to a working relationship with solid roots—and Chevron has exploited this flaw at every turn. As a result, while trying to solve a real problem for the community—corporations pushing sugar and spreading obesity—they found out too late that, by asking voters to support a soda tax, they were pitting customers against merchants, and in particular, Black shop-owners affected by the tax. This made RPA look like interlopers, and Black politicians in the pay of Chevron used this to isolate the Alliance.

RPA came back fighting. In 2014 they swept the election with a broad slate behind a popular, independent-leaning councilman, Tom Butt,

who was elected mayor over Chevron's man by a 16-point margin. RPA also won a 6 to 1 majority on the council, despite the fact that Chevron poured \$3.1 million into its campaign, outspending RPA 20 to 1.

There is a delicate balance between established, business-friendly liberals like Butt and radical independents, even as they face off together against Chevron. RPA is aware of the need to counterbalance the private sector through increased democratic engagement of a broadening base of community groups, unions and unaffiliated constituents. At this point, for all the fragility of the coalition's hold on power, they have far outstripped San Francisco, Oakland, and Berkeley, where tech capital, realtors, and gentrification have all but pulverized opposition from the Left.

## **Seattle, Washington**

The election of Kshama Sawant created a great deal of buzz on the Far Left. Sawant ran as an open socialist for a seat on the Seattle City Council. Rather than driving away young independents and many older Democratic voters, she managed to attract them. This has everything to do with the political climate in the coastal Northwest, but it still represents a national breakthrough for socialist groups. Unlike Bernie Sanders, she is affiliated with a party, Socialist Alternative. She has developed a reputation for following through on her campaign positions, while directly engaging Seattle voters in the process. She garnered public endorsements from many local independent and Democratic Party leaders. In contrast to the traditional approach by which socialists use elections as “educational campaigns” aimed mainly at drawing in new party recruits, she also runs to win.

Support for Sawant is an expression of the local fight against the neoliberal Democratic Party machine, which took control in Seattle in

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

2001. High-tech development has transformed the city, with the concentration of austerity and wealth polarization imposed over a briefer period than was experienced in other cities. Seattle has a history of legitimizing left politics, as the largest city in a state that values fiercely independent political views. Independence and individual perspective tend to be more important than political party. Washington State has historically had blanket primaries and non-partisan elections, an environment that allows for unexpected outcomes.

Socialist Alternative first ran Sawant—a community college economics professor who worked with her union and the Occupy encampment at a junior college—for state legislature in 2012. As a write-in running against the speaker of the state house, she netted about 10% of the primary vote, enough to get into the general. She opted to run against the speaker again and got 29% of the vote. In debates, she confronted her opponent on his main issue, housing, at a moment when rents were skyrocketing across the city and public lands were being sold off to private developers.

In a November 2013 upset, Sawant ran and won her council position, unseating a 16-year incumbent in an at-large council seat, in spite of having available only half the funds. In that same election cycle the nearby city of SeaTac passed an initiative for a \$15 minimum wage (won by less than 100 votes), and a Seattle charter amendment created seven council districts and two at-large seats, as a result of the undue influence of downtown and outside money.

Sawant chose to run against a pro-development environmentalist. Her campaign highlighted the union-initiated “Fight for \$15” campaign. In response the city passed a transitional “\$15/hour in a decade” plan in May 2014. Sawant also campaigned for a millionaire tax, and to bring rent control to Seattle, both of which would have to be accepted by the governor and state legisla-

ture. She does not talk about the “middle class,” but rather draws clear class lines between the interests of capitalists and working people. It is hard to measure to what extent that difference from the common stance of economic populists really resonates with voters. But Sawant’s success is clearly based on her broad appeal as a rebel who forces fellow council members to account for their politics.

She is seeking reelection in 2015 as a district representative for the area that includes her original base from 2013, but which will require her to focus on more issues seen as important by a mixed constituency. The district includes older voters; affluent and middle classes; newly arrived young people, including tech workers and those in concomitant service industries; an established LGBTQ community; a large East African community; and increasingly displaced working-class families, African Americans in particular.

Stepping over the line of “respectability” has not prevented Sawant from making alliances and maneuvering in the insider muck of city politics. But she has nonetheless positioned herself as an outsider and actually made this work for her, at least in the short run. She has come under fire from the mayor and a few of the council members for supposed breaches of diplomacy and electioneering at city-sponsored meetings. Opponents threaten to censure and fine her, but this seems petty compared to the bare-bones economic reforms she champions. As Heidi Groover wrote in *The Stranger*, a local weekly that has allied with Sawant:

*Sawant wins even when she loses. When she’s drowned out by the establishment, she’s painted as the underdog fighting on behalf of working people up against the entrenched status quo. When she prevails, she’s the effective activist who forced the status quo to do something it didn’t want to.*<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> “The City Council Is So Over Being Nice to Kshama Sawant,” *The Stranger*, April 29, 2015.

Left-leaning Seattle Democrats seem to recognize this, or at least approve of an arrangement by which one firebrand can help to make widely demanded anti-austerity reforms seem more mainstream. This was demonstrated in May 2015. Democratic organizations in legislative districts that overlap with Sawant's city district chose not to endorse any of her four Democratic opponents. Withholding endorsement was an implicit acceptance of Sawant's role on the council. Significantly, Sawant and Socialist Alternative activists were present at the meetings in which these decisions were made, even though she rejects the Democratic label.

With Sawant on the council, neoliberals have a target they can't resist—but one who is valued by voters for her pro-worker stands. Her upcoming race is also the setting for a major political battle. Candidates endorsed by the mayor, especially those who are receiving a lot of donations from outside their district, have come under public scrutiny. While not standing

as a self-organized slate, a common push for a council independent of the mayor is now shaping the race. Affordable housing advocates are pushing six Seattle City Council candidates to form a progressive majority bloc with Sawant.

Sawant may work toward an ongoing Democratic/independent bloc, or she might make a stand for socialism while opting out of the fight between entrenched private-sector advocates and liberal Democrats. It is not a simple choice. There is a big difference between the dreams of marginalized socialists and the reality of winning elections and delivering services for workers in the current neoliberal climate. Her party starts from a stance of hardcore party-centric doctrine, which easily leads to irrelevance. On the other hand, in a thoroughly corrupt political system, limiting political work to public service and making deals can turn into another form of irrelevance for the Left. There are no guarantees of keeping on course, but listening and responding to constituents and allies is and will continue to be essential.

## The Working Families Party

Fusion parties are neither inside the Democratic Party nor entirely outside it. In New York State (NYS), a fusion party can win a ballot line if one of its candidates draws a minimum of votes. This is typically accomplished through cross-endorsements of Democratic or Republican candidates. During the 1930s and 40s, local labor leaders and pro-New Deal socialists formed the American Labor Party. The ALP supported left-leaning, pro-labor Democrats, but it also drew union voters to support anti-corruption Republicans like Fiorello La Guardia and Thomas Dewey, as well as genuine radicals like Vito Marcantonio. It was brought down by the Red Scare in 1956.

In the 1990s there was an effort to replace the corrupt, business union-linked Liberal Party as the largest fusion party in the state. This effort united various local labor leaders, and the Working Families Party (WFP) was the result. Like the ALP, it usually cross-endorses and only occasionally runs candidates on its own ballot line. Unlike the ALP and the Liberal Party, it never cross-endorses Republicans, in part because all Republicans in the 2010s are overtly anti-labor, and neither the left activists in its ranks nor the unions who hold the party together want to increase the GOP's number in the state legislature under any circumstances.

This has led to problems for the WFP. They have a strong vote-getting operation, and NY State (and NYC in particular) is still union territory, so the party's clout has grown. On the other hand, their ability to pressure the Democrats is limited, since they are not interested in crossing to the Republican side, even as a way of punishing the Democrats for ignoring or attacking labor. They made it to the ballot in NYS in 1998, when the party endorsed a machine Democrat for governor; this candidate lost, but the 50,000 votes he received on the WFP line enabled them to claim a party line on future state ballots.

Since then the WFP has made its presence felt, spreading to Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, the District of Columbia, and Oregon; it also plays a role in elections in a number of states in which it has no chapter. Over the years the party has run a number of progressive candidates on its own when there is no Democratic opponent in the race. On a few occasions it has even opposed particularly corrupt Democrats. In 2003 it successfully ran Letitia James against a Democratic candidate to win a seat in the New York City Council. She was later elected to the citywide position of public advocate in the left-liberal sweep of 2013. In 2009 WFP-backed city council candidates picked up eight seats, and the party was instrumental in forming the council's Progressive Caucus (see the above section on New York City).

Differences between union leaders and political reformers came to a boil in 2014. The issue was whether to support Governor Andrew Cuomo's reelection bid. Cuomo, a neoliberal Democrat, has taken a strong stand against public-sector unions, but union leaders with controlling interests in the WFP feared the wrath of a vindictive, ego-driven executive. They knew Cuomo was sure to win, since the GOP's candidate was little known and underfunded. And WFP ballot status would reflect the voting results of whichever gubernatorial candidate the party endorsed.

Many WFP members—dues-paying campaign supporters as well as staff—were not buying it and instead supported Zephyr Teachout, a reform candidate with a strong critique of Cuomo's neoliberal agenda. When the leadership pushed through a Cuomo endorsement, Teachout ran in the Democratic primary and showed real strength, much to Cuomo's embarrassment. In the general election, the WFP vote deserted their party to support the Green candidate, leaving WFP with nothing to show for their endorsement but diminished ballot status and a demoralized base in NY State.

They recovered some standing the next year. In February 2015 the Working Families Party successfully ran the left-leaning Edwin Gomes for a seat in the Connecticut State Legislature, defeating several contenders, including a Democrat. This was a first for WFP: getting their own candidate elected to state government. Then in May they elected Diana Richardson to the NYS Legislature, representing two working-class Brooklyn neighborhoods. Richardson ran as a WFP candidate and was not opposed by any Democratic candidate.

Between election campaigns WFP has pushed for progressive measures, most notably paid sick leave. Years of steady organized pressure on this issue has helped to reshape politics in New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. WFP State Senator Gomes has taken on the minimum wage issue. He is co-sponsoring a "Wal-Mart Bill" in the Connecticut Legislature that would fine companies for paying employees less than \$15 an hour. In NYS, Assemblywoman Richardson is taking on the critical problem of affordable housing.

In May 2015, the Pennsylvania Working Families Party backed a left-liberal Democrat, Jim Kenney, for the Democratic mayoral primary in Philadelphia. Kenney ran on the \$15-an-hour demand, an end to stop-and-frisk, the decriminalization of marijuana, universal pre-K, and

increased funding for public schools. As a city councilman, Kenney had made a name for himself through his vocal support for immigrant

and LGBT rights. Kenney won almost 56 percent of the vote and is now the favorite in the general election.

## Obama and Everything After

A new sense of “entitlement”—to democracy and economic security, both of which have been under direct attack for decades—is now finding political expression.

In smaller cities, known radicals have won powerful seats, as the patience for technocrats and machine politicians amongst many working-class voters wears thin. Affiliation with one or another duopolistic party also lost some clout. Careful coalition building and close contact with constituents has proven that it can beat out big money under certain conditions.

In both 2008 and 2012, Obama’s team included Clinton-style technocrats who successfully gambled on a run to the left. Why and how did he beat Hillary Clinton and win in a general election? Is it that the time was ripe for a Black president but not for a woman? It is more likely that the base, after eight years of George W. Bush, jumped at the possibility to reject the more overtly neoliberal candidate—as well as the presumed frontrunner—Hillary Clinton.

Obama’s failure to live up to that implicit promise—though to be fair he was always openly more center than left—is still sinking in. His centrism in office translated into many actions that would have been seen as rightist before neoliberalism and the “War on Terror.” The other outcome, breaking the color barrier to the White House, came unexpectedly and drove the Republican base into a xenophobic frenzy.

Before the summer of 2015 it was assumed that Hillary Clinton had a lock on the Dem-

ocratic nomination and stood the strongest chance of winning the presidency in November 2016. Meanwhile doubters pointed out the pre-campaign parallel to the last time she ran, against Obama.

The recent, sudden surge of support for Bernie Sanders, the independent Senator from Vermont, has overtones of déjà vu. Similarly to Obama, Sanders is running to Clinton’s left. But the resemblances end there. This time Clinton is flying a populist flag, highlighting social issues that Sanders has downplayed in his emphasis on economic demands. Obama came out of the belly of the Democratic Party, while Sanders has been much more of an outsider throughout his career.

The Bernie Sanders campaign has thus far prioritized issues aimed at the 99%, but his own base is located in one of the country’s whitest states, and he has never been pressed to make headway among people-of-color constituencies. Sanders’ career as an independent officeholder (mayor, congressperson, senator) has until now depended on his ability to respond to the concerns of the Vermont electorate. In building a broader national base, he is confronted with a number of problems that are not central to the politics of Vermont: police violence, immigrant rights, etc. Sanders has targeted the influence of corporate money in politics, which rose from a flood to a tidal wave since the Supreme Court Citizens United decision. But that’s only part of the current attack on democracy. Another major component is the multi-state effort to suppress voting rights.

This is more than an extension of traditional disenfranchisement of Black and Brown constituencies. It affects students, disabled, the poor, and the elderly across the board. Its goal is to undermine voting rights and democracy, both of which stand in the way of their power. And let there be no doubt: the Republicans believe that might makes right.<sup>15</sup>

Sanders is not trying to ride to power on a wave of ferment. His campaign has actually focused on redirecting political discourse nationally by concretizing the anti-neoliberal rhetoric of Occupy Wall Street with demands like single-payer healthcare and free higher education. His base consists largely of disillusioned liberals and dissatisfied progressives but is comparatively weaker in Black and Brown constituencies and only beginning to make headway into the multiracial working-class electorate. He has identified with issues rather than movements, but when approached recently by activists from the Black Lives Matter Movement his response was generally positive.

All of this amounts to a major shift for the Democratic Party. In the 2008 primaries, Clinton was playing by the book: starting with a guaranteed base of left-leaning voters, she concentrated on winning over the party's cen-

ter and right wings. Now in 2016 she is directly appealing to the party's left wing. But her strong ties to Wall Street hold her in check, just as her rightward lean lost her the Left's support in 2008. Obama's win gave a boost to the base, but his immediate show of solidarity with Wall Street left his supporters divided and demoralized. Sanders lacks the backing of any sector of capital (besides the ice cream makers Ben and Jerry), and this goes farther than Obama's record to demonstrate the ways the erosion of democracy and financialization of politics help the powerful while alienating the base. The party's campaign specialists are trying to figure out how to re-inspire the faithful.

Obama's team also developed a sophisticated social-media strategy focused on younger voters wary of social conservatism and militarism. In other words, the Obama campaign took off as an alternative to the Clintonite approach of distance from its liberal/left base. It caught Hillary Clinton completely by surprise. In fact, Obama's supporters surprised themselves as they leaped hurdle after hurdle. Much of this strategic approach, as well as the Obama campaign's reliance on non-corporate funds and self-organized volunteers, is now being put to use in the service of the Sanders campaign.

## When the Social Becomes Political

Social movements are eyeing the Sanders campaign warily. Resistance movements like Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter (BLM) turned away from electoral politics largely for moral reasons, as opposed to having alternative strategic standpoints. But for the Democratic base, which overlaps with that of the social movements, the likely rise of a far-right regime is still the main concern. Many workers and students

are all too aware that the current conservative backlash has distinctly violent and fascistic overtones. This was brought home in devastating fashion by the Charleston massacre and the popularity of Donald Trump's overt appeals to racism and sexism. There is still little incentive to abandon the party in this scenario.

<sup>15</sup> See James Hare, *Steal the Vote: Voter Suppression in the Twenty-first Century*, RLS-NYC study, 2012.

Electoral campaigns are shaped by many factors, including the success or failure of non-electoral movements and particularly mass mobilization efforts. We see this in the Fight for \$15 and Black Lives Matter Movements. Both focus on street action but have everything to do with politics.

Working-class power depends on breaking down the barriers that separate relatively more secure workers from the hardest hit members of our society. This is the dynamic just under the surface of the social movements currently spreading and picking up steam. On the one hand, Fight for \$15 is a clear-cut example of economic populism, backed by major unions and millions of low-paid workers. Meanwhile, Black Lives Matter deals largely with people of color affected by police violence and can't count on the support of more secure workers, even those who are facing life-wrecking austerity.

The Left has to clarify its tasks and goals in relation to the outbreaks of resistance, regardless of where they appear. In this case the goal is to move economic populism towards social solidarity for common class interests, which requires recognition of the role of race and racism. This does not happen spontaneously, but the constituencies attracted to economic populism are predisposed to recognize the validity of the argument. They are moving away from the Great Lie of U.S. society, as the myth of classless prosperity crumbles.

Economic populism has great potential for inclusivity, but it can only go as far politically as the perceived base allows. It's a fact of political life that to make any headway, progressive electoral campaigns must break ground with working-class constituencies, and to do that racial persecution must be identified, addressed, and denounced. Similarly, there are social issues (reflecting demands of myriad social movements) that may seem implicit in any liberal/left campaign—most significantly, the attack on wom-

en's reproductive rights. But in fact these issues need to be directly addressed for both political and practical reasons. A left populist movement may go there once its anti-corporate arguments are publicized. Or it may not.

The confrontation between Black Lives Matter and two Democratic contenders at the 2015 Netroots Nation Conference demonstrates these dynamics. Martin O'Malley lost the floor to BLM leader Tia Oso, who demanded that he take a stand on deadly police attacks on unarmed Black civilians. Then Sanders was confronted, and he also fumbled as the crowd got hotter. At first glance, they were talking past each other. But the encounter resulted in a swift turn by Sanders, bringing an explicit indictment of Black oppression into his economic populist message.

The rise of nonwhite eligible voters has changed the rules of the game, to the horror of functionaries of both parties. *Washington Post* correspondent Dan Balz found a surprising conclusion in a study by a GOP pollster:

*To win the White House, Republicans must systematically improve their performance among minorities while maintaining or even improving their support among white voters. In an electorate in which the white share of the vote was 72 percent, President Obama won reelection in 2012 despite losing the white vote by a bigger margin than any winning Democrat in the past. The white share of the electorate in 2016 will be a point or two smaller [...]. [If] the 2016 nominee gets no better than Romney's 17 percent of the nonwhite vote, he or she would need 65 percent of the white vote to win, a level achieved in modern times only by Ronald Reagan in his 1984 landslide. Bush's 2004 winning formula—26 percent of the nonwhite vote and 58 percent of the white vote—would be a losing formula in 2016, given population changes.<sup>16</sup>*

The GOP knows that it can't hang on to its white heartland base if it makes concessions

<sup>16</sup> "A Rubio 2016 blueprint, for all to see," *Washington Post*, May 23, 2015.

to Black and Brown voters. But the Sanders campaign finds itself in the mirror opposite position. Its ability to make a national impact depends on acknowledging and speaking to the many ways that African Americans, Latinos and other immigrant-identified groups are targeted every day (including through voter suppression and criminal police misconduct). Opposing institutionalized racial inequality requires much more than just fair consideration for the special oppression of “others.” Systemic racism creates misery for people of color, while locking whites in a rat race of alienation and futile pursuit of privileges that are more and more turning to dust.

Sanders’ lack of party credentials challenges even left-leaning Democratic loyalists. What’s more, the Democratic Party is not the natural incubator for a full-fledged anti-austerity political movement. An economic populist tendency, should it continue to develop, will quickly face slamming doors and empty promises. To prioritize jockeying for position in the party would lead to disaster. A populist movement can only avoid derailment by concentrating its attention on three tasks: (1) spreading the message through campaign and convention coverage and social media, to working-class constituencies in particular; (2) running against both Republicans and machine/corporate Democratic candidates, whether as independents, fusionists, or opposition Democrats; and (3) supporting non-electoral organizing in localities, especially between campaigns.

The progressive shift on the ground is playing out simultaneously through Democratic races and independent, fusion, nonpartisan, and multi-party campaigns. It won’t benefit those concerned mainly with building a home in an existing or future party. But it is crucial to the politicization of working people, who are losing both economic security and democratic rights. Moving beyond just getting angry at existing powers, politicization is what enables working

people to build the types of organizations that suit their needs and goals. From there they can shape their organizations’ outlook. The decisive question is not whether Democrats are involved, but whether the campaigns are accountable to social movements outside the electoral arena. The Bernie Sanders campaign, an open alliance, offers the possibility that this process can get started in 2016.

Electoral engagement is not the same thing as democracy, and political action takes many forms. But we don’t have to go back a full century to find useful examples of political organizations driven by politicized social movements.

There is an extraordinary example of this kind of political movement in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Their challenge to the 1964 Democratic Convention did not win them their immediate goal, namely replacing the racist delegates who won their seats by violently preventing Black citizens from registering and voting. But they made a more profound impact on party politics than any electoral effort since 1912. Charles M. Payne writes in *I Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*:

*During the spring of 1964, after futile attempts to get local branches of the state Democratic Party to accept Black participation, SNCC organized the Freedom Democratic Party as a vehicle for the political expression of Mississippi Blacks. [...] Ella Baker gave the keynote address at the founding conference. Miss Baker talked about the way the rest of the country had tacitly supported white supremacy in Mississippi: “At no point were the southern states denied their representation on the basis of the fact that they had denied other people their right to participate in the election of those who govern them” [...].*

*For the first time in seventy-five years, Mississippi Negroes began receiving routine communications from their putative representatives. All of a sudden, they were constituents. The challenge failed, but it gave Mississippi’s political establishment further evidence that it would have to restructure*

*itself and gave the leadership of FDP and others close to the movement further evidence that Mississippi's racism was predicated on the tolerance of forces outside the state, including forces once thought of as movement allies.<sup>17</sup>*

Opponents of the dominant forces in the Democratic Party will find a similar situation in numerous locales in 2016 and beyond. This does not mean that they should ignore the national stage, but exactly the opposite. The Left has to raise its voice loud enough that it cannot be ignored, either by the governors or the governed. To do this will require the kind of determination, insight, and empathy shown by Ella Baker,

Fannie Lou Hamer, Milton Henry, and our other heroes from the MFDP. They knew that the National Democratic Convention offered a mass audience, and they inspired the demonstrators who challenged the 1968 convention.

That was leadership. This is what happens when the practical application of democratic working-class politics becomes part of the learning and development of participants in social movements. As activists rally to Bernie Sanders' socialist/left populist platform, the possibilities are much bigger than "hope and change."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Charles M. Payne, *I Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, University of California Press, 1995.

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<sup>18</sup> The author wants to thank Kathryn Keller, Jan Gilbrecht, Cindy Zucker, Max Elbaum, and Elinor Blake.

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