

Saying No to Nader

Walker Lane (Peter Werbe)

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In the year since the anti-capitalist/anti-corporate demonstrations in Seattle, intense actions have occurred in Washington DC, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, London, Prague, and dozens of other cities across this country and the world.

They have functioned as models of resistance to global capitalism's exploitation of labor, environmental degradation, and state repression. Hence, it is disturbing to see some activists now advocating participation in the domesticated arena of electoral politics.

Abstention from voting has long been a highly held principle within the anarchist and anti-authoritarian movement which historically views electoral participation as an act legitimizing the rule of the state and capital.

This refusal is not a "utopian" position, but rather a realistic recognition that voting furthers only the illusion of power claimed to reside in the political process. The actual command centers of capitalist society lie in elite economic sectors which use government as their political and repressive arm and are structured as to be impenetrable by those who desire reform.

The capitalist class reserves governmental positions exclusively for those people and parties willing to accept the reigning racket. Revolution is always declared to be "unrealistic," but it is surely no more so than the ability to achieve reforms that seriously threaten capitalism.

Voting Makes for Good Citizens

Autonomous activity, people's real power, is external to the governing apparatus, and is feared by the state. This was seen in the official reaction over the last year during confrontations with those protesting the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization.

Encouraging voting makes for "good citizens." Participation in electoral politics takes the emphasis out of the streets; just what the rulers want. It calms things down, and lets business proceed as usual. Perhaps most importantly, it delegitimizes those who see direct action as a strategy to stop the capitalist juggernaut. Blinded by the spectacle of continual television and newspaper coverage, voters falsely view the elections as access to power.

Much of the current electoral effort on the Left revolves around the Green Party's campaign of Ralph Nader for the U.S. presidency, much of it fueled by the same sentiments and people who were at the center of many of the recent street protests. At a quick glance, Nader looks like a reasonable alternative to the one party state presently in power. He is divorced from corporate funding, has an admirable history of exposing some of the worst corporate abuses, and advocates reforms which, if enacted, would create a more livable life under capitalism.

But since Nader has a less than a negligible chance of winning the presidency, his campaign has the most immediate practical effect of re-integrating people back into the system precisely at a time when there is widespread distrust of official institutions among all sectors of society. Granted his run for office permits another forum for the expression of anti-corporate views, but Nader's real message may lie in the form, not the content of his campaign.

Take for example a late September press release from the Green Party announcing an appearance of their standard bearer along with liberal social commentary TV comedian, Michael Moore, in the latter's home town of Flint, Michigan, just north of Detroit.

Under the banner headline, "Building Democracy, One Vote at a Time," the press release laments that "More than half of all voting-age Americans DO NOT VOTE," (original emphasis) and goes on to list Nader's proposal for "encouraging greater voter participation," and speaks of "our democracy." Our democracy. Whew!

You might expect radicals to celebrate the fact that so many people have seen through the myth that political power resides at the ballot box. Instead, a strange coalition of leftists, liberals, and anarchists (the latter who should know better) are trying to herd the half of the potential electorate who "DO NOT VOTE," back into the polling booth.

Civics Class Democracy

What can the other half be thinking who overcome the cynicism and lethargy the official political scene engenders to actually bother to cast a ballot?

Obviously, some actively want to encourage the continuation of the existing racket. Others fall for the civics class definition of democracy, hoping, as liberals have for 100 years, that the bad guys will be voted out of office and replaced by good guys who will fix the country's ills.

Still others realize the system is a giant con game run for the benefit of rich, powerful, heavily insulated elites, impervious to electoral politics, but vote for the racket whose slogans or rhetoric most closely expresses their aspirations or ethics.

So, trade unions, women and minorities back the Democrats understanding all the while that the Party has a corporate agenda no different from that of its opponent, and its candidate, the odious Gore, has more in common with Bush than differences. But they will hold their noses and vote for the Vice President on the basis of expected Supreme Court nominations to protect a woman's right to abortion, or simply to forestall the slightly more reactionary Bush from moving into the White House. In essence, a defensive vote.

The electoral system is in shambles. Even a good proportion of voters who do make it to the polls think it's a ruse, but now come Nader and the Green Party, precisely at a point when the official system of rule is seen as the transparent sham it is by more than half the American people who "DO NOT VOTE," and they propose to encourage "greater voter participation." It's almost as if those who want to maintain the illusion of popular rule didn't have Nader, they would probably invent him.

This is not to say that Nader and his supporters are conscious tools of a capitalist plot to religitimize the most passive, ineffective act that is legally permissible, but that's what they are doing for all practical purposes.

Nader—Stalking Horse for Dems

Nader is a genuine crusader for reform on a number of fronts, and his platform puts the reactionary, pro-business, anti-worker, pro-cop, pro-war, pro-death penalty, anti-poor, anti-environmental stance of the two front-runners into stark relief. Nader supports every important reform from anti-WTO to anti-sweatshop, but when the smoke clears, he stands as nothing more than a stalking horse for the Democrats.

He has said it clearly himself. His campaign strategy is to move the Democratic Party to the left, and he hopes that his participation in the election will bring out enough voters to insure a Democratic victory in Congress. This may be of interest to liberals, but what are radicals and anarchists doing in this mess?

From 1992 to '94, there was a Democratic president and Congress, but the business of capital and the empire went on unabated with some things even worsening such as the environment and the growing disparity of wealth.

The Greens also hope to enter the golden circle of electoral politics by getting five percent of the vote, hence entitling them to about \$12 million of government funding for the next election. One can only anticipate a scene at the next Green gathering similar to what occurred at this year's Reform Party convention when the thieves began to fall out over the loot.

There is a new spirit of opposition to capitalism afoot in the world (not just to the corporatism that Nader criticizes), and it had its most dramatic expression in the streets from Seattle to Prague.

Many of those participating in the demonstrations put forth strident critiques of capitalist society and the state machinery which supports it, and a vision of a new world much more radical than anything proposed by the Nader campaign. A recent Nader release, for instance, calls for the “need to encourage small and medium sized businesses to locate in inner city areas.” Those radicals who back Nader find themselves operating under the constraints required to run a respectable, credible campaign to the point where they can sound much like the tepid reformers they often condemn.

What is needed is neither to communicate on their terms or to sharpen our presentation as actors in the capitalist media, but rather to strengthen our media and to maintain sharp criticisms and actions against the dominant society.

So far, the power we’ve exerted has been in the streets, but ultimately that can only be an expression of deeper roots sunk in alternative communities that expel definitions of capital and substitute those of a revolutionary vision.

This occurred in working class districts in many Western European cities in the 1920s and ‘30s, and exists in nascent form today in permanent autonomous zones of coops, info shops, and communes.

Let’s see if we can get the other half of the electorate, who “DO NOT VOTE,” to join us. According to the Greens, we are the majority.

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