

On Independent Political Action

Introduction and Bibliography



SOLIDARITY

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, ANTI-RACIST ORGANIZATION

WWW.SOLIDARITY-US.ORG

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In Solidarity's Basis of Political Agreement, point 4 states:

In the labor and social movements, we call for political independence and a break from the two-party system. The Democratic and Republican parties are dominated by corporations and merely offer different flavors of pro-war and pro-business policies. These capitalist parties maintain a stranglehold on politics in the United States and offer only dead ends for working class and oppressed people. The Democrats in particular have functioned as a trap for organized labor and as the graveyard of social movements. We argue against engagement in the "lesser evil" approach of working with the Democratic Party, which tends over the long term to push the overall political climate to the right. *We argue, instead, for the political independence of movements. When possible, we support third parties and independent candidacies that stand on these principles. Our long-term strategic goal is the construction of a mass party that can champion workers' interests independently of the two-party system.*

Introduction

Socialists as well as working-class and social movement activists have attempted to build independent parties for more than 100 years. The renewed interest in campaigning for socialist and community candidates stands on that tradition.

In the past, those efforts were unable to break through at a national level and several were incorporated into the Democratic Party. Today, election laws, the amount of money necessary to build a campaign, and the emphasis on campaigning through the media have raised the stakes against independent political action.

Building on the momentum of 2014

Independent candidates registered some impressive results at the polls last fall. The Green Party's New York gubernatorial candidate Howie Hawkins secured nearly 5% of the vote, more than doubling his 2010 results. He and his running mate Brian Jones, an African-American teacher in NYC, ran on an aggressive, pro-working class and pro-environmental program. Although they knew they had no chance of "winning" in the November election, they set goals that they did meet. They became the campaign that activists who worked for "progressive taxation, fully-funded schools, renewable energy, single-payer health care, \$15 minimum wage and a New York that works for the 99%" supported. Following the election, Governor Cuomo did ban fracking in the state, an issue that the Hawkins-Jones ticket made central to their campaign.

At the local level, the Richmond Progressive Alliance elected three candidates to city council and helped secure victory for the RPA backed mayoral candidate. RPA's slate won despite Chevron desperately spending nearly \$3 million to stop them. This puts the new city government in a position to work toward rebuilding a city fraught with joblessness, poverty, pollution, violence and dominated by the Chevron refinery.

In the Milwaukee, Angela Walker, an African-American bus driver, won an impressive 20% in the city's election for sheriff on a program is to implement a living wage and end mass incarceration.

In Chicago, a coalition of socialists, the Chicago Socialist Campaign, backed Jorge Mujica for alderman in the 25th Ward. Though Mujica was not able to win the February 2015 primary, he did secure 12% of the vote running on an explicitly socialist program. Chicago Teachers Union activist Tim Meegan almost succeeded in pushing Rahm Emmanuel's favored candidate for City Council from the 33rd Ward, but was defeated when the absentee ballots were counted. However Susan Sadlowski Garza, a counsellor in the public schools and also a CTU activist, did win an aldermanic seat from the 10th Ward.

The newly formed coalition, United Working Families--composed of the Chicago Teachers Union, an SEIU local and community groups--endorsed a number of candidates in the city election, which is non-partisan. Karen Lewis was originally slated to run

against Rahm Emanuel and his austerity policies, but was forced to withdraw because of illness. Lewis then encouraged Cook County Commissioner Jesus “Chuy” Garcia to step forward. Despite Emanuel’s outspending his opponents 4-1, he was unable to win the primary—the first time an incumbent had not secured reelection for Chicago mayor. In the April 7th election, Garcia won 43.8% of the vote despite the fact that Emanuel poured \$23 million into his reelection campaign. Eighty percent of the margin of Emanuel’s victory, according to Crain’s, came from the most affluent neighborhoods. Here is an case where the establishment Democrat was forced to run against another Democrat, who was supported by independent forces in a non-partisan race.

Electoral Action, from the late ‘60s to the end of the 20th century

Coming out of the 1960s and the upsurge against the Vietnam War, support to Black Liberation and the development of a women’s movement was the Peace and Freedom party, which still maintains registration in California. By the end of the 1970s and early 1980s there were a number of attempts at breaking with the two-party system:

- The Black Panther Party*, La Raza Unida Party, The Freedom Now Party, and the National Black Independent Political Party are but a few examples in the 20th century of oppressed nationalities utilizing independent parties and embracing elections as a tactic or strategy to win power. Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver ran for president on the Peace and Freedom ticket in 1968 and was recorded as winning more than 135,000 votes. But given the winner-take-all character of the U.S. election system, these efforts weren’t able to sustain themselves, abandoned electoral work when they could not win or eventually integrated into the Democratic Party. Repression was also a factor, particularly with the Black Panther Party.
- The Citizens Party, which ran environmentalist Barry Commoner for U.S. president in 1980 and Sonja Johnson, an ex-Mormon and feminist in 1984. It also ran statewide candidates and won elections to various city councils. (At that time the International Socialists, a predecessor of Solidarity, was involved in the Citizens Party.)
- The Communist Party, Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party ran local, state and national candidates throughout this period. But the difficulty of gaining and maintaining ballot status was only the beginning of their problems as campaigns became more media centered and the amount of money required zoomed. These campaigns were based, to a large extent, on movement work these parties were involved in. For example, from 1972 to 1984 the Communist Party ran African-American activists Jarvis Tyner and Angela Davis as their vice presidential candidates. The most successful presidential campaign was that of the 1976 SWP campaign when charismatic Peter Camejo ran with African American vice-

presidential candidate, Willie Mae Reid; they were credited with winning over 90,000 votes.

- Eleanor Smeal, past president of NOW and founder of the Feminist Majority, initiated a conference to call for an independent political party, but after the conference the organization disappeared into thin air as Bill Clinton launched his campaign for the Democratic Party nomination. Several Solidarity members participated in the conference.
- The Vermont Progressives developed at the end of the 1970s at a local level and were founded as a statewide party in 1999. Over the years they have elected a total of 17 members to the state legislature and 30 to the Burlington city council. Currently there are five VPP members in the state house and two in the senate. Having lost the office of Burlington mayor, they hold office on local school boards and community planning bodies. The party is active in supporting grassroots organizing as well as electoral campaigns and has sought to run working people as its candidates. It also supports a variety of workers' issues—from a single-payer health care plan to the recent 18-day bus drivers' strike in Burlington. (Bernie Sanders, who is an independent from Vermont, has supported various Progressive candidates for state and local office although he is not a member. He was first elected to the U.S. House in 1990 and is now a U.S. Senator.) Steve Early described the Vermont Progressive Party as “the most viable third party in the U.S.”
- Progressive Dane began in 1992. It focuses on issues within Dane County, Wisconsin, which includes the city of Madison. It was once part of a larger network including the New Party. It currently has three members on the Madison common council and another three on the school board as well as seven on the Dane County board of supervisors. It sees itself as working to improve the quality of life for all, particularly those marginalized by economic and social discrimination. Marsha Rummel has served on the common council for several terms, and currently focuses around housing issues. Solidarity members in Madison have worked on independent political action since the 1980s and several discussion bulletins of that period had rich discussions around various issues raised.
- The Green Party, founded around a set of principles, first ran for public office in 1985. Approximately 160 Greens have held elected office including Gayle McLaughlin (a Green elected as a candidate of the Richmond Progressive Alliance). Several Greens have also been elected to city councils. The Green Party has contested five U.S. presidential elections: in 1996 and 2000 with Ralph Nader for President and Winona LaDuke as Vice President, in 2004 with David Cobb for President and Pat LaMarche for Vice President, in 2008 with Cynthia McKinney for President and Rosa Clemente for Vice President and in 2012 Jill Stein for President

and Cheri Honkala for Vice President. Jill Stein is planning on running for president on the Green Party ticket in 2016. She has remained political active, especially around single payer and other health care issues, including environmental justice.

- In the 2000 presidential campaign, Ralph Nader and Winona LaDuke won almost 2.9 million votes. The election—which was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court—of George W. Bush was “blamed” on the Greens.

Solidarity members have been involved in the Green Party since its beginning. The highpoint of our involvement was during the Nader campaigns. Our members have run for local and state office. In 2010 Ann Menasche ran for Secretary of State in California and garnered close to 287,000 votes. Howie Hawkins won 41% for Syracuse city council in 2010 and in 2012 when the Working Families Party sent in organizers to campaign for his Democratic Party opponent, received 40% of the vote. (See interviews with Ann Menasche and Howie Hawkins in *ATC* 151 (March/April 2011 and John Halle’s “Left Parties in 2013,” at <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4043>.)

During the 1980s Tony Mazzocchi, of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union, campaigned within the union movement for a labor party, saying “The bosses have two parties. We need one of our own.” With the labor movement agreeing to concessions in the face to the restructuring of industry and the rise of globalization, Mazzocchi called for a union movement that revitalized itself through developing a fightback strategy and building alliances with social movements.

There were some important union struggles during this period, some of which won, and some went down to defeat. Perhaps the most important rank-and-file victory was the election of Ron Carey as Teamsters president in 1991. This in turn, led to a militant mobilization and bargaining strategy that was most evident in the 1997 UPS strike. Every work on the picket line articulately explained their demands. Foremost was turning temps into having permanent jobs. UPS was forced to bend.

The Teamsters also rejoined the AFL-CIO, which in turn set the stage for the first contested election of the AFL-CIO officers in 1995 and the victory of the “New Voices” slate. They promised to organize a million new workers a year.

Throughout the early 1990s Mazzocchi attempted to educate unions to the need to have an electoral component to the social movement unionism that was being talked about. By 1993 he felt there was sufficient backing from labor to launch Labor Party Advocates. Eighty union leaders in attendance represented over half a million workers.

President Clinton took office in 1993 and--despite labor and social movement opposition--set about pushing the North American Free Trade Agreement through Congress. NAFTA took effect at the beginning of 1994. Labor leaders vowed to punish the Democrats who had voted for its implementation. As it turned out, that promise fell by the wayside.

In June 1996 approximately 1500 unionists met in Cleveland to found the Labor Party. It did not launch electoral campaigns but saw as its task building a working-class base. The Labor Party was unable to grow without a revitalized labor movement where unions were willing to break with the Democratic Party and support pro-working-class candidates. It did build campaigns around single payer health care and free, quality public education but by the end of the '90s had stagnated. Many members of Solidarity were involved in the Labor Party from the very beginning.

What this recent late 20th century reveals is the determination to build an independent electoral vehicle for the 99% but the difficulties given a winner-take-all system, the inability of the unions to break with the Democratic Party, the massive loyalty of the African-American electorate to the DP despite the minimal rewards for their support, the issue of voting for the lesser evil, the dependence of electoral campaigns on a growing grassroots movement and the difficulties posed in financing campaigns.

Solidarity has been supportive of these campaigns because we support initiatives for independent political action and don't prejudice which will thrive. For example, Dan LaBotz, a Solidarity member, was asked to run on the Socialist Party ticket for U.S. Senator of Ohio. He developed a working-class program and worked to encourage socialists of different stripes to join in the campaign.

*There are two formations known as the Black Panther Party.

A. The first is the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), a voter registration campaign launched under the direction of the Student Non-Violent Committee in 1965 in Lowndes County, Alabama, which was 80% Black but none were registered voters. It adopted the black panther as its symbol and entered county races, opposing the Democratic Party (its symbol was the white rooster). In 1968 the National Democratic Party of Alabama was formed along the principles of the national Democratic Party, and distinct from the state Democratic Party, which refused to run Blacks for political office. LCFO became the National Democratic Party of Alabama's county organization. By 1974 when the NDPA was integrated into the state Democratic Party, it had 100 elected Black officials.

B. The second was the Black Panther Party, founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966. Started in Oakland, California, it became a national organization. Its leaders asked LCFO if they could use the same symbol. Adopting a 10-point program for Black liberation, the Black Panther Party, which ran on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket, was overcome by government repression.]

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Discussion questions

1. Socialists don't believe that the government and the economy can be changed fundamentally through elections? So why should we participate in them?
2. In most states it is quite difficult to get political parties on the ballot and therefore had to run candidates? Why shouldn't we use the existing Democratic Party as the vehicle for our movements?
3. The Democratic Party has the reputation of being the "workers' party," supported by almost all of the major unions. African American civil rights organizations the women's organizations also support it. Since it already has the organized support and the reputation, shouldn't we work within the Democratic Party to build a working class political movement?
4. Most people we work with in the social movements and in labor unions, and particularly African Americans and Latinos, work in the Democratic Party. Whether or not we agree with the Democratic Party's methods or objectives, shouldn't we stick with our workers' movement and share their experiences in attempting to make the Democratic Party work for them?
5. The Working Families Party and other fusion parties based on unions and community groups that run Democrats on their ballot line, have proven successful both in maintaining their ballot status and in becoming the political expression of the progressive movement. While they make compromises, they are far more successful than most completely independent parties. Why shouldn't we work with them?
6. The Peace and Freedom Party of 1968 and 1970 arose out of the convergence of the anti-war movement and the radical "Black Power" wing of the civil rights movement. Some of Solidarity's founders were instrumental in organizing that political party. Today, however, there is no such national movement, so such an alternative is impossible isn't it?
7. The Green Party represents about the closest thing to what we want and can achieve today, doesn't it? It is to the left of the Democratic Party, is on the ballot in several states, and has elected some candidates. However, isn't it a problem when people like Howie Hawkins run on the Green Party as "open socialists"? Won't that make it harder for the Green Party to grow, since it will appear to be more sectarian or ultra-left?
8. While many of us were thrilled with Khasama Sawant's victory in Seattle, isn't it clear that that was a fluke, only possible because Seattle (like Minneapolis where her comrade Ty Moore ran), is a very liberal city with a lot of you activists? At a moment when working class activity is at a low point and the left is so organizationally weak, what is to be gained by running socialist candidates?
9. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, activists in the Rio Grande River Valley in Texas created the La Raza Unida party, basically a Mexican-American party. Should we be for the creation of Mexican-American, Puerto Rican or African American parties? Or should we be for one working class party?

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Solidarity's Basis of Political Agreement

1. *We oppose the capitalist system and its destructive impact on humanity and the planet.* The present system produces poverty, war, environmental crises, and social disorder for the many and fantastic wealth and power for a tiny ruling class. Through its exploitation of labor and endless drive toward greater profit, capitalism pits workers around the world into cut-throat competition, reinforces social oppression, and denies us real freedom. Unemployment, regular economic crises, and ecologically unsustainable growth are inevitable under the irrational capitalist system. While we fight for reforms that alleviate these miserable conditions in order to improve the confidence and organization of the working class, we understand that no reform of the system can permanently abolish these conditions. Therefore, we fight for the abolition of the capitalist system.

2. *Another world is possible, socialism: a system that is democratic, international, and ecologically sustainable.* Corporate media and mainstream intellectuals present capitalism as a system without an alternative, and use the collapse of 20th-century efforts at socialism to discredit all anti-capitalist visions. We stand with the millions of people worldwide who challenge this logic through the slogan, "Another World is Possible." As socialists, we have a specific vision for that world: one in which society's productive capacity is worker and community-controlled and used for the public good in an environmentally responsible way. Under socialism, planning and decisions are made democratically, rather than determined by a political elite. We strive to build a world in which all people can live equally without the hierarchies of race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender, age, and ability that oppress the great bulk of the world's people today. A society liberated from oppression, poverty, and economic inequality, and from the alienation inherent in capitalist social relations, would be free to pursue far greater creative possibilities.

3. *Our strategic goal is revolution—led by the working class and oppressed—that shatters the foundations of patriarchy, white supremacy, settler-colonialism, and capitalist rule.* We believe that the potential for realizing socialism lies in the contradictions of the current system. Under capitalism, the exploited and oppressed are in constant struggle with the political and economic elites. We seek to participate in all manifestations of this struggle, aiming to help develop them into movements against the capitalist class and we fight for reforms that may serve as bridges to deeper class consciousness. We also support efforts to begin building alternative, democratic institutions and social relations in the present. Only through a revolutionary, mass political movement of working and oppressed people can the political and economic domination of society by the capitalist class be ended. This future will not be realized by simply 'taking power.' Rather, the revolutionary process should seek to uproot the settler-colonial foundations and dismantle the institutions of the capitalist state—e.g., the police, borders, courts, and military that protect the current social order. In their place, we must construct new institutions of the working class and develop relations which support the right to self-determination for indigenous peoples and oppressed nationalities.

4. *In the labor and social movements, we call for political independence and a break from the two-party system.* The Democratic and Republican parties are dominated by corporations and merely offer different flavors of pro-war and pro-business policies. These capitalist parties maintain a stranglehold on politics in the United States and offer only dead ends for working class and oppressed people. The Democrats in particular have functioned as a trap for organized labor and as the graveyard of social movements. We argue against engagement in the "lesser evil" approach of working with the Democratic Party, which tends over the long term to push the overall political climate to the right. We argue, instead, for the political independence of movements. When possible, we support third parties and independent candidacies that stand on these principles. Our long-term strategic goal is the construction of a mass party that can champion workers' interests independently of the two-party system.

5. *We see organized labor as a central part of the working class movement; within it we organize for greater solidarity, internationalism, democracy, and militancy.* Since the 1970s, bosses have intensified their attacks on organized labor through union busting, automation, outsourcing, and “tiered” wages and benefits, among other tactics. The social safety net faces privatization and destruction. Activity in and coordination between unions and other forms of workers’ organizations and, particularly, the self-activity and leadership of the rank and file are central to beating back this reactionary offensive. We are active in union rank and file caucuses, workers’ centers, solidarity committees, and other forms of workers’ organizations in order to create a labor movement that acts in solidarity across union and international lines, organizes the unorganized, and transforms unions into more militant organizations capable of beating the bosses and shifting the balance of power.

6. *We fight against all forms of racism and support the right of self-determination against national/racial oppression. The United States was built on a history of genocide, slavery, land theft, and the exploitation and scapegoating of immigrants.* Because of the historical and structural connections between capitalism and white supremacy, the social disease of racism cannot be eradicated under capitalism, and overcoming white supremacy and national oppression is a central task of a revolutionary socialist movement. As members and allies of nationally and racially oppressed communities, we support and participate in fights against police brutality, voter ID laws, deportation and detention of immigrants, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the prison industrial complex, as well as fights for ethnic studies, environmental justice, immigrant rights, and native sovereignty. We support the right of people of color to self-organize within our organization, as well as within unions and social movements. We seek to become more multiracial and to ally with people of color and revolutionary nationalist organizations.

7. *We are a feminist organization that fights for the liberation of all women.* Though patriarchy existed prior to capitalism and is not simply an extension of capitalist exploitation, the oppression of women is integral to capitalism and is manifested in many ways: the denial of reproductive freedom, the exploitation of women’s sexuality, the pervasiveness of gendered violence, cultural norms that associate masculinity with authority and knowledge, the assignment of women to both paid and unpaid caregiving as well as other low-wage work that leads to the feminization of poverty. Race, class, nationality and citizenship, sexual orientation, gender expression, age, and other factors of power and privilege affect how women experience their oppression. We are committed to a women’s liberation movement that acknowledges these differences and strives to develop an inclusive feminism. Women’s self-organization is central to women’s liberation and to building a democratic socialist, alternative to capitalism. In our organization and in the labor and social movements where we are active we promote a more collaborative culture and support women’s caucuses or other forms of self-organization that build women’s leadership and participation.

8. *We fight against homophobia, heterosexism, and the compulsory gender binary and support sexual and gender self-determination for all people.* As members and allies of the LGBTQ community, we fight for equal rights, safe spaces, and liberation for all people who experience oppression based on their gender identity/expression and sexuality, including people who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex, two spirit, and same gender loving. We participate in the fight for full civil rights and the repeal of all discriminatory anti-LGBTQ legislation as steps toward a broader liberation struggle that would expand all people’s access to health care, housing, community, and sexual freedom. We promote the leadership of LGBTQ people within our organization and within progressive social movements. We work to unite the LGBTQ and labor movements through challenging both homophobia and transphobia in the labor movement and corporate domination of the organized queer movement. We oppose any approach that prioritizes the needs of the most assimilated and neglects the needs of queer people who are working class, of color, and/or transgender. As with all oppressed groups, we support the right of LGBTQ people to self-organize for liberation.

9. *We are internationalists: we oppose the imperialist domination of the world by the United States and other rich countries.* Internationalism is not just a goal for the future socialist world for which we fight, but a

political principle that guides us today. We demand an immediate end to the wars, interventions, efforts at political and economic destabilization, and funding of repressive regimes by the U.S. government. We call for the immediate dismantling of the United States' war machine, including the closing of Guantanamo and other military bases around the world. We resist efforts like "Buy American" campaigns that divide "American" workers from the international working class. We support movements for self-determination and independence all over the world, including Puerto Rico and other U.S. colonies, as well as within the territorial borders of the U.S. itself. We call attention to the ways in which US imperialism creates conditions leading to displacement and migration across our own borders and contributes to the political and economic difficulties of nations in the Global South. We learn from and extend our international solidarity to the trade unions and other workers' organizations, social movements, and the democratic revolutionary left of Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania.

10. *United by these principles, we are committed to building an organization of socialist activists and a broader anti-capitalist movement within the borders of the United States.* Socialist organization is essential: we must analyze the world and learn from the experience of socialist activists, apply these lessons in our work, popularize socialist ideas, and contribute to a future mass movement for revolution led by the working class and oppressed. We seek to promote collaboration and unification of existing groups as part of a much larger process of building and expanding left organization and renewing the left. We hope to learn from both the strengths and mistakes of the 20th-century left, while not being constrained by any one historical tradition or model. Membership is open to all who share our principles and work toward achieving them.

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