# http://www.labornotes.org/2012/07/politics-done-differently

# Politics Done Differently

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If we were designing a way for unions to be involved in politics on a clean sheet of paper, would we choose to spend hundreds of millions of dollars and countless thousands of hours on millionaire candidates, financed by the super-rich and selected by party leaders who view unions as an embarrassment?

To put it politely, this “strategy” has produced unreliable allies. To put it bluntly, the policy of hitching labor to the Democratic Party has given us virtually nothing to show for it. That President Obama and the national Democratic Party practically boycotted the Wisconsin struggle is only one more proof.

Bitter though we may be, labor can’t turn its back on political action. These institutions set the legal rules for labor’s struggle and employ a majority of the organized workers in the country. Political strategy doesn’t have to center on electing officials, but it must impact the institutions of government.

What we need is a political movement that unabashedly challenges corporate control over our daily lives. The Occupy movement brought this perspective out from the fringes of American politics.

The focus of political organizing has to be identifying, reducing, and then eliminating the power of the class of people who control the corporations, rake off giant wealth for themselves, and restructure jobs for still-greater profits, at the expense of most of the population. We call out the 1% and say that the solution is putting the majority in charge.

**FUTURE TENSE: LABOR NOTES 400**

The changes in the labor movement, the economy, and politics since the first issue of *Labor Notes* came out in February 1979 have been profound.  
  
For our 400th issue, *Labor Notes* asked several activists to address what happened to labor—and what we should do given the spot we're in.   
  
[**Download the entire package**](http://labornotes.org/files/pdfs/LN400FutureTense.pdf)**.**[**Donate today and support the movement you want to see.**](http://labornotes.org/donate)

Tragically, despite the educational value of advocating a labor party to carry out this working-class politics, organized labor is now too small for such a project. Its leaders are turned in another direction and isolated from their members.

**STARTING GATE**

If national unions can’t be counted on to be the solid center of an anti-corporate movement, how do we get there?

The first step is rebuilding our unions from within, through fights to defend members against their bosses. If you don’t see the need to stand up against the boss at work, you won’t see the need to do so in politics.

At the same time, national and local political efforts should feed off each other. Unfortunately, we are pretty much starting from scratch in both cases. Educational efforts, independent efforts like the Green Party, and struggles within the Democratic Party may all contribute to a national political movement down the road.

The other place to start is in local coalitions of labor and community. A workshop at the recent Labor Notes Conference examined some efforts, including the New Lynn project in Massachusetts, the Working Families Party, and an attempt to remake a local Democratic Party in New Jersey.

Another effort is the Richmond Progressive Alliance in California, where a community-labor alliance has reshaped local politics.

Richmond lies on the east side of the San Francisco Bay, a few transit stops north of Oakland. Home of a Chevron refinery, it has been used as a dumping ground, like most older industrial cities. Its shoreline is still plagued by toxic wastes from chemical companies and its air is polluted by the refinery and other industries.

Richmond is about 40 percent Latino, 30 percent Black, and 15 percent Asian. Its unemployment rate is around 18 percent—about twice that of the state and the surrounding communities. Every corporate proposal, from tax breaks for Chevron to shoreline property deals, is always presented as a job-creator. The Richmond Progressive Alliance is tagged as a job-killer.

**GIANT-KILLERS**

In the 2010 election for mayor and city council, Chevron, other industry, land developers, the building trades, the central labor council, and the police and fire unions united against RPA candidates. Altogether these groups spent several million dollars against the progressives. They lost.

Two RPA leaders won. Mayor Gayle McLaughlin won re-election despite a vicious personal campaign against her, and Jovanka Beckles, a Black Latina, won a council seat.

RPA’s string of ballot-box victories started in 2004 and includes electing and re-electing the mayor and two city council seats, and winning ballot measures to defeat a casino and greatly increase Chevron’s tax bill. Our campaign for an increase in Chevron’s utility tax produced a settlement which added to the general fund.

Our non-electoral campaigns have also made significant progress. We participated with others in actions to reduce pollution from the refinery. We effectively ended ID checkpoints aimed at catching undocumented workers. We helped mobilize the community in a campaign to attract a new campus of Lawrence Berkeley National Labs.

What are the keys to success?

All of our work was done with no corporate contributions and with an all-volunteer organization.

RPA refuses to accept any corporate contributions and will not endorse any candidates who accept such contributions. Corporate domination is the prominent issue in every campaign.

Turning back contributions was hard. An organization needs money to send out mailings, print literature, pay for offices and phone lines. But it earned trust. RPA politicians do not vote a certain way because they were bought.

RPA is not just about elections. We are year-round activists in the community and actively support other community organizations, like those seeking to aid returning prisoners or undocumented workers who need municipal IDs, those fighting foreclosure, and those fighting for environmental safeguards like cleaning up toxic wastes or limiting greenhouse gases.

We strongly defend unions and pro-union policies, backing organizing drives, contract campaigns, and Project Labor Agreements. We get solid support from public employee and teacher unions and continually push against outsourcing good union jobs.

We have minimum core beliefs: unity against racism and the politics of division; democracy is about people, not corporations; respect for diversity.

We make door-to-door canvassing our primary election tool.

We have made the most of the fact that the council is technically nonpartisan. We invite registered Democrats, Greens, and independents to join. We depend on volunteers committed to the RPA as an independent local movement.

Some of our most active members will have nothing to do with the Democratic Party, while some strongly support liberal Democrats at the state and national level and believe that we must do so until there is something better. We understand that our model would face serious problems if or when we challenged for partisan offices.

**UNION LEADERS DIVIDED**

Official organized labor plays an important part in the RPA story. Much is negative: The building trades endorsed a Chamber of Commerce candidate for mayor and opened a Richmond office to defeat RPA, largely because of our opposition to the casino and our support for holding up a Chevron project until pollution concerns were met.

But the fact that central labor council and building trades opposition didn’t hurt us much is a sign of the weak link between official labor and its members.

At the same time, the support of the public employee unions was critical. Their money and endorsements were a major source of support, as was their participation in our grassroots campaign. But clearly we need to win over the support of more of labor, working from the inside and outside simultaneously.

Nothing for the future is guaranteed—least of all for an all-volunteer political organization that takes on the largest corporations in the world. We aren’t resting: We are campaigning to fight obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, which especially plague low-income communities of color, by taxing sugary drinks to pay for athletic fields and health programs.

Even a fight for healthy kids means a fight with Corporate America. The Big Beverage industry has moved in with money flying, buying “experts,” media, and support. It’s an uphill fight, but so is every fight worth winning.

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- See more at: http://www.labornotes.org/2012/07/politics-done-differently#sthash.Oig3l0e8.dpuf