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A Labor Party: What For?

Mikhail Tsovma

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With the Democrats' recent passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the political impotence of the AFL-CIO's reliance on that party to defend its interests was as clear as it has ever been. The AFL-CIO mounted its largest lobbying effort in decades, doing everything short of a general strike to persuade Congress to vote NAFTA down. For their efforts, Clinton denounced unions' efforts to "bully" the Congressman they bought and paid for into voting their way. And top Democrats did not hesitate to voice their contempt for the business unions, assuring reporters that the AFL-CIO and its affiliates would continue to support the Democrats because they had no other alternative.

This debacle seems likely to give new impetus to ongoing efforts to form a labor party. Even before the NAFTA vote, the most prominent of these groupings, Labor Party Advocates (which is heavily supported by leaders of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers and the United Electrical Workers) announced plans for a founding convention. Although LPA initially said it would only organize a Labor Party when it had secured the support of 100,000 unionists, it appears to have plateaued at less than 5,000 members. Thus, the

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founding convention appears to be a last-ditch, desperation effort to get their party off the ground.

Yet there does appear to be growing support for labor party efforts (and indeed for third parties in general—as evidenced by the National Organization for Women’s efforts in this direction, among others), sparked by widespread and growing disillusionment with the Democrats. As UE secretary-treasurer Amy Newell put it, “Every month that goes by under the Clinton Administration is additional fuel for our fire..”

As Sam Dolgoff notes (in *The American Labor Movement: A New Beginning*), agitation for a labor party is almost as old as the labor movement itself and has on a few occasions come close to capturing the official support of the American Federation of Labor. State-wide efforts in Minnesota and New York in the 1930s had substantial success before they were absorbed into the Democratic party. Yet labor party enthusiasts might do well to examine the record of labor parties around the world before embarking upon this well-trod path.

In Belgium, our fellow workers recently found it necessary to take to the streets in a general strike to protest plans by the coalition Socialist-Social Christian government (each closely linked to the two largest labor federations) to enact a “social pact” to hold down wages and slash social spending. A similar pact was recently pushed through by Spain’s socialists.

In Canada, the labor-backed New Democratic Party lost nearly all its seats in the recent national elections, apparently because of widespread disgust with its role in enforcing capitalist austerity in the provinces under NDP rule. In Ontario local unions refused to allow the provincial NDP government to participate in Labor Day celebrations. The NDP won provincial elections in 1990 on a platform of labor law reform, pay equity, progressive tax reform and public auto insurance. But when corporations threatened to use its economic power in a sort of general strike by capital, the government quickly threw in the towel. The “labor” government

abandoned public auto insurance, abandoned most of its labor law reform package, and gutted social service spending. Ontario workers understandably concluded that they could get these sort of anti-worker policies from any capitalist government, and so did not vote for the “socialist” NDP in the federal elections.

These are not isolated examples. Every labor and socialist party in the world which workers have voted into office has ended up betraying them. This is because labor parties are incapable of addressing the real cause of anti-labor governments. As Dolgoff wrote,

A capitalist democracy is a competitive society where predatory pressure groups struggle for wealth and prestige and jockey for power. Because such a society lacks inner cohesion, it cannot discipline itself. It needs an organism which will appease the pressure groups by satisfying some of their demands and prevent conflicts between them from upsetting the stability of the system. The government plays this role and in the process... the bureaucratic government apparatus becomes a class in itself with interests of its own...

Labor parties are no more immune to the diseases inherent in the parliamentary system than are other political parties. If the new Labor Party legislators are elected they will have to “play the game” according to the established rules and customs. If they are honest they will soon become cynical and corrupted... Most of them, however, will find their new environment to their taste because they have already learned to connive when they were operating as big wheels in their own union organizations... A course in the school of labor fakery prepares the graduates for participation in municipal, state and national government...

Tactics must flow from principles. The tactic of parliamentary action is not compatible with the principle of class struggle. Class struggle in the economic field is not compatible with class-collaboration on the political field. This truth has been amply demonstrated throughout the history of the labor movement in every land. Parliamentary action serves only to reinforce the institutions responsible for social injustice—the exploitative economic system and the State.

The strength of the labor movement lies in its economic power. Labor produces all wealth and provides all the services. Only the workers can change the social system fundamentally. To do this, workers do not need a labor party, since by their economic power they are in a position to achieve the Social Revolution... As long as the means of production are in the hands of the few, and the many are robbed of the fruits of their labor, any participation in the political skulduggery which has as its sole purpose the maintenance of this system amounts to both tacit and direct support of the system itself.

Rather than diverting workers' resources and energies into forming yet another political party, sincere working-class activists would do far better to build genuine, class-conscious unions and to work with their fellow workers to build a new society through direct action in their communities and at the point of production. Labor parties can play no part in this struggle.