

“Electoral Pursuits Have Veered Us Away”

Kali Akuno on Movement Lessons from Jackson

Kali Akuno

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Introduction by Adam Weaver

Pledging to make Jackson become “the most radical city on the planet,” the July 2017 election of Chokwe Antar Lumumba as Mayor of Jackson, Mississippi is by many accounts an inspiration as to the ability of the left to critically engage in social change through elected office. By no means an isolated effort, Lumumba’s election is the result of decades of base building and social movement growth, most notably highlighted in their use of community assemblies and the work of Cooperation Jackson, which promotes the creation of worker cooperatives.

The origins of the campaign are rooted in the politics of Black self-determination and is spelled out in the Jackson-Kush Plan (referred to as the J-K Plan) formulated from 2004 through 2010 by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and New Afrikan People’s Organization. The Plan laid out an analysis and a collective model which was based on three pillars: building people’s assemblies for grassroots decision making, building an independent Black political party; and building a solidarity economy. Most important though is that the plan was very explicit that electoral efforts would be “on a limited scale” and that the focus on popular assemblies, building autonomous and dual power institutions “is primary.”

Trouble in Electoral Waters

But since last year’s election victory not all has gone as planned. Kali Akuno, one of the key figures within the Jackson movement, has been raising critical questions of the role of electoral politics in the movement. Often doing interviews and speaking engagements highlighting organizing efforts in Jackson, Akuno is a key figure of Cooperation Jackson, one of the primary authors of the Jackson-Kush Plan and co-editor of the book *Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi*.

As Akuno wrote in November 2017 for *Black Agenda Report*, the electoral focus was intended to be “adjunct component of a broader objective ... to build a transformative, anti-colonial power from the ground up through the People’s Assembly as an autonomous vehicle of self-governance,” but the reality is that “this understanding has been lost or ignored, and even more disappointing, has not really been pursued by the forces claiming adherence to the J-K Plan.”

He continues his criticism around the narrative that has been promoted within the larger left, one that he calls a “misplaced hope” that is “sadly being employed to prop up liberal notions about the utility of electoral politics to the [broader] left ...[and which] uphold and promote the false notion that capitalism can be tamed and reformed through electoral politics.”

More troubling for social movement work in Jackson is that the Lumumba administration has come to power at a moment where the local government faces what Akuno calls a “Syriza trap.” This is a dynamic often faced by the left in power whereby it is forced to administer the very austerity they fought to oppose. Currently in Jackson, as Bruce Dixon writes, the central business district is now under state control, the privatization of its schools, the water system and the destruction of black neighborhoods for development development projects is “nearly imminent,” and an “emergency management regime coming to strip elected city government of the ability to do much of anything without approval from bankers” is likely to be imposed. What will come of this remains to be seen.

However, the key question is that of the use of electoral politics to advance social movements and in a recent Labor Notes panel presentation (transcript below) Kali Akuno states the dynamic

in unambiguous terms: “I think the social movement development work that got us to this point, I think is gradually being eroded and then sidelined and there’s much more of an emphasis being placed on now on how to sustain ourselves in office.” As Kali wrote in *Black Agenda Report* the focus on winning elections “negates the pursuit of autonomous power, the execution of a radical program, and the building of a revolutionary vehicle.”

With that said, the wider left is wise to take a great pause and critical examination before using Jackson as an electoral model to be emulated. This strategy is a well-worn path and something around which we suggest the radical left should rightly be wary.

“Doing Politics Differently” Panel Discussion Presentation by Kali Akuno

2018 Labor Notes Conference, Saturday, April 7, 2018

Note: Due to audio issues the opening 30–60 seconds of the presentation were not recorded. Akuno stated that while he had prepared comments for the presentation the other speakers prior to him raised important issues that he felt should be debated.

Now what does it all mean? In our case in Jackson, and I’m going to speak for myself, because we are in a place right now where there’s an intense level of debate within the movement itself about what is the way forward, what are the strategies and tactics to move what our principal aims and objective are? And there’s a fundamental question: Are we still on the same page about what the fundamental aims and objectives are?

Speaking for myself, as one of the key thinkers and framers of the project [the Jackson-Kush Plan] for whatever that’s worth, for me, starting with that notion that the system as its constructed as it’s been set up since the founding of the settler-colonial project, is inherently a reactionary project and cannot and would not tend towards democracy. So that’s the basis from where I started from and from which these politics emerged from.

So the first piece is, I’m pushing to try to create as much democratic space as possible for the social movement without necessarily the expectation that winning office or even trying to accomplish certain reforms is actually going to get me where I’m trying to go.

The social movement in communities actually developing the capacity to govern themselves is more the final aim and I think a lot of times electoral politics gets in the way of us really aiming and pushing ourselves and those who we love, and work with, and live with, towards that other direction. And I would argue that some of our electoral pursuits have veered us away from that in Jackson as well, at least in this current iteration of the politics of the last couple of months, or last two or three years I would say.

That said we’ve laid out a couple of things like the four solutions [reference to a previous panelist’s discussion of four responses to tackling issues around state power] and I think that was a good summation. In our case I think we’ve tried to do the bottom three, two, three and four [which are to forego electoral politics or use an “occupy model;” reduce importance of elected officials and build alternatives; and build different relationships between elected officials and movements] and tried to do them all simultaneously and I think we have an uneven record in that regard. And our project if you look at it, particularly looking at the Jackson-Kush Plan, I think you’ll clearly see the outline of the two, three and four that we were trying to work on and

build. The critical piece has always been who and what should be in the lead? That's a question that we have struggled with.

At this point I would honestly have to say that the dominant forces both internally and externally have been around electoral politics, and I think that that's an error. This is Kali speaking, and I think that that's an error. I think the social movement development work that got us to this point I think is gradually being eroded and then sidelined and there's much more of an emphasis being placed now on how to sustain ourselves in office, how to build alliances that will enable more of our candidates to be able to retain themselves in office. In the wake of those compromises — and in effect that's what they are I would argue — as you make those types of compromises you will wind up jettisoning more and more of your program. The critical piece probably of what you're asking [refers to a question from the audience] is I think that our development in this day and age of a clear program that we can rally working class and oppressed around is fundamental and primary: far more so than pursuing or even trying to elect people to office.

Because there's still the fundamental question of where are we trying to go, which is different than what we think is possible. And I want to pose that very clearly and distinctly as two different things. I think when we move our engagement to what we think is possible we move our politics within the limits of the system as it exists and aren't looking to push beyond what exists. And I think we clearly live in an era where, straight up, the world that the US was able to impose upon the world after WWII — that world is crumbling, it's crumbling fast and crumbling hard. And unlike many people I don't think Trump's election was an aberration. Whoever was going to be in office this term, whether they were going to be an outright racist, or not, was still going to have to work on renegotiating the terms of empire. That was going to have to be done — capital dictates that, not any of the politicians themselves. So somebody was going to have to do the dirty job of getting the NATO partners to cover more of the money. Can we renegotiate terms of trade with China and can we reposition the world around climate change in a particular way to do certain types of offsets and financial flows? That was on the agenda period, regardless of who was going to sit in that seat both in the presidency and the two different structures of the supposed legislative branch, which doesn't really do that much anymore.

That reorganization was going to be forced upon us anyway. The question is how do we begin to build a politics that exceeds that and understands the limitations and understands the challenges that exist right now are actually, I would pose to us, key opportunities if we allow our imagination to see it that way? Right now I think the biggest challenge that we have is we know there are millions of people in this country who are pissed off, righteously pissed off: do we have the ability to reach them? Do we have the ability to offer them a program that speaks to their immediate interests and towards a better future? That is to me the critical piece that we don't have a consensus upon and I think some of the limitation is our own imagination and we're still stuck trying to figure out how to get the most out of the present system as opposed to let it die, let's create the new, what do we need to do to think do we organize ourselves to get to that point. And I think that's a deeper, fundamental question I want to see us look at.

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