A Blueprint for a Party of an Old Type

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This is a reply to “A Blueprint for a New Party” written by Seth Ackerman and published by Jacobin Magazine.

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“Blueprint for a New Party” recently published in Jacobin Magazine advocates a model of building a new left electoral party – but author Scott Jay argues it is strategy that leads to campaigning for Democrats and expanding the focus on electoralism rather than a path to strengthening social movements.

These are desperate times. The victory of Donald Trump promises a rightward turn in US policy as well as an emboldened far-right in the streets. Immigrants will be among the first attacked by Trump’s promise to expel them en masse, but they and others will also continue to see an increase in daily harassment, racist attacks and organized vigilante violence.

In response to these horrors, Jacobin Magazine, which enthusiastically promoted Bernie Sanders as a route to rebuilding the Left, has published an article by Seth Ackerman which provides what he calls “A Blueprint for a New Party.” Having put all their eggs in the Sanders basket for the past year, Jacobin and Ackerman now lay out the possible next steps for what the Sanders campaign supposedly promised all along—a newly formed independent third party to the left of the Democrats. Ackerman describes this, at the end of the article, as a “Party of a New Type.”

What Ackerman provides is a lengthy history and analysis of attempts to build third parties, in particular the US Labor Party, and challenges to attaining and keeping access to the ballot. What he does not provide is much of a picture of how this Party of a New Type is going to be built, or by whom, or why anybody would want anything to do with it. It is not even clear what sort of politics it would have or what—if anything—it would do besides run candidates, although it may not even run candidates, apparently. How it would even build the membership and resources to eventually run candidates is left as an exercise for the reader, as they say in a graduate seminar.

Scott Jay is an independent socialist living in Oakland and was previously active with Occupy Oakland.
Before we proceed, imagine for a moment that instead of the Left enthusing over Bernie Sanders for the past year they had focused on organizing among working people and oppressed people in defending themselves from the daily onslaught of capitalism. Imagine what a stronger position we would all be in now, as the newly empowered far-right seeks to assault the lives and dignities of immigrants, women, African-Americans, the LGBTQ community, and others. Instead of talking abstractly about the possibilities of a New Party, we would be talking about how to stop deportations, racist attacks and sexual assaults. There are people around the US who have been doing just that, who do not call themselves Leftists or read socialist periodicals, who have been working on protecting their family members and neighbors from being deported or being beaten by the police.

Ackerman’s proposal seems less interested in these problems and instead focuses on the question of whether or not an electoral party should seek its own ballot line, to which he boldly answers: “Sometimes.”

What About the Workers?

The problem with these “Parties of a New Type” is they appeal not so much to the working people who they are supposed to represent but to other Leftists who love talking about blueprints and grand strategies and united fronts. Nobody needs these parties-in-waiting more than left-wing intellectuals looking to project their ideas. Nobody needs them less than people actually fighting the daily grind of capitalism—they are left building their own communities and organizations. They are building their own blueprints from daily experience, developing new tactics that could in fact develop eventually into larger national organizations and networks. If such a thing actually happened, the role of the working class and the role of the party they might form would not have been defined by Ackerman’s Party of a New Type.

These urban rebellions of the past few years have posed real challenges for Democratic Party politicians, especially Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. The youth in the streets have been less concerned about ballot access and more concerned about challenging the system that is trying to kill them.

Beyond the urban rebellions, there is also the resistance at Standing Rock, the increasingly popular self-defense trainings for people likely to be attacked by vigilantes, and the prison strike of tens of thousands. Is there a “Party of a New Type” that is able to empower these constituencies? Consider that many of the people in these groups cannot even vote, due to age, immigration status or felony convictions. Are they supposed to be engaged in the “Party of a New Type” or is the party really for another population entirely? I would argue that the answer is the latter, not because Ackerman and his co-thinkers want it to be this way, but because like many on the Left, they focus primarily on strategies that inspire and excite themselves. Everybody else, it is presumed, will come along because it is obviously such a great idea.

In short, electoral activism feeds into electoral activism. It relies on itself to further itself. It attracts people who are attracted to electoral politics and generally does not attract people engaging in class struggle. It does not need, nor does it feed class struggle, except to the extent that it might be able to take advantage of the sacrifices of militants in order to declare itself a proper representative of a social movement it did not create.

When looking at Ackerman’s summary of this “Party of a New Type,” it is not clear that there is much new here at all. Most of the description is trivial—a national party with local branches, spokespeople, etc. The only non-trivial part is when he notes that “it would avoid the ballot-line trap” but it is not clear how, other than to support the candidates of existing parties. If the US Labor Party had to ask itself “why have a party?” when they refused to run can-
movements, it is almost exclusively a justification for its own con-
tinuance. In the context of a country dominated by two parties, this
often means at some level feeding back into the Democratic Party,
reluctant to harm the only game in town.

For example, high on Ackerman’s mind is the problem of “spoil-
ing” elections – by which he means running candidates against the
Democratic Party thus leading to the Democrat losing and a Repub-
lican win. This is primarily a problem because so many people (ap-
parently) are terrified of destroying the chances of the Democrats
to win that they would never build an alternative unless they had
an answer to this problem. This was especially an obstacle, as Ack-
erman points out, for the US Labor Party, who could not decide if
they were going to run candidates or not and eventually lost any
sense of purpose because it was unwilling to do what it was sup-
posedly created to do.

Half the population of the United States could not be bothered
to vote for Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump or anybody else. Yet it
is not they who are the source of concern, rather it is the sort of
activist who most likely is attracted to left-wing electoral politics.
They think that there ought to be a way to elect the correct person
or pass a law that can just fix things in some limited way. They are
also horrified at the idea of hurting a Democrat’s chances to win
against a Republican. But if you want to build a left-wing electoral
project, you have to deal with these people and these sentiments.

On the other hand, there are young people around the country
who have risen up in rebellion against the police killing them over
the last few years. They probably did not bother to ask themselves
whether their actions were going to hurt the Democrats’ chances in
getting reelected. In fact, the problems that Ackerman pose proba-
vably have no relevance whatsoever to these young people. They are
living in completely different worlds, one where people fight for
their lives against a system trying to destroy them, another where
people draw up blueprints for national organizations with no dis-
cussion as to who is actually going to build the thing.

social struggles would be central and not an afterthought, as it is
with Ackerman.

Ackerman might object to describing his blueprint as one where
the working class is an afterthought, but there is hardly anything
in his blueprint to suggest otherwise. The working-class and class
struggle are almost nowhere to be found in this blueprint. Are local
branches and chapters supposed to be rooted in workplaces, or in
schools, or neighborhoods? Are they supposed to represent practi-
cal efforts to fight austerity locally or are they supposed to recruit
like-minded, politically engaged people? If the former, how exactly
how is it supposed to do that?

This may seem to belabor the point–of course this is how the
party would be built, Ackerman might say–but it is precisely the
inability of the Left to make practical contributions to local strug-
gles and to build itself primarily among the most affected and most
militant people in those struggles that has challenged the Left for
decades. The Left has not simply failed to put into practice a suc-
cessful blueprint for a national organization. Rather, it has typically
failed to put in practice a blueprint for an organization of twenty
people in a single workplace or neighborhood who can resist lay-
offs or evictions, probably because such a project is not nearly so
sexy as grand strategizing and electoral campaigns. They may not
provide much of a basis for building social movements, but they
do allow their participants to feel like that is what they are doing,
which is usually enough.

Along these lines, Ackerman focuses not on building power from
below but on the legal obstacles to electoral campaigns and how to
maneuver around them. He sums up the blueprint as follows:

The following is a proposal for such a model: a national
political organization that would have chapters at the
state and local levels, a binding program, a leadership
accountable to its members, and electoral candidates
nominated at all levels throughout the country.
As a nationwide organization, it would have a national educational apparatus, recognized leaders and spokespeople at the national level, and its candidates and other activities would come under a single, nationally recognized label. And, of course, all candidates would be required to adhere to the national platform.

But it would avoid the ballot-line trap. Decisions about how individual candidates appear on the ballot would be made on a case-by-case basis and on pragmatic grounds, depending on the election laws and partisan coloration of the state or district in question. In any given race, the organization could choose to run in major- or minor-party primaries, as nonpartisan independents, or even, theoretically, on the organization’s own ballot line. The ballot line would thus be regarded as a secondary issue. The organization would base its legal right to exist not on the repressive ballot laws, but on the fundamental rights of freedom of association.

Essentially what he is describing is the US Green Party, although with a “pragmatic” approach to how it may or may not appear on the ballot. What is this pragmatic approach? He describes elsewhere that such a party should avoid a “suicidal frontal assault” on the existing parties, ie the Democratic Party. He even notes that, “The Labor Party [US] always assumed that a genuinely independent labor party must have a separate party ballot line. That assumption was a mistake.” He does not say this explicitly, but it sure sounds like he is advocating his party supporting Democratic Party candidates, at the very least in the primaries, and we can imagine beyond that as well.

Ackerman takes so little interest in the social base that will carry out his blueprint that he even argues that such a party could take advantage of Citizen’s United, the notorious Supreme Court ruling that allows unlimited donations from corporations and billionaires into political campaigns:

In this model, the national organization would incorporate as a 501(c)4 social welfare organization, permitting it to endorse candidates and engage in explicit campaigning, while accepting unlimited donations and spending unlimited amounts on political education. (It would also, of course, be free to adopt rigorous self-imposed disclosure rules, as it should.)

The speed with which we have gone from celebrating Bernie Sanders’ campaign funded largely on $27 donations, to seeing Citizen’s United as an opportunity to take advantage of unrestricted political donations, is truly breathtaking. Who exactly is going to make these donations of an unlimited size? No need to worry about that, apparently. How such a party receiving free-flowing political donations will be certain to “adopt rigorous self-imposed disclosure rules” is once again left as an exercise for the reader. Ackerman has created a blueprint but with hardly any details.

**Electoralism Leads to Electoralism**

We have been told, over and over again, that left-wing electoralism will eventually feed into social movements and vice versa. And yet, this never really seems to happen. Electoral strategies always seem to focus on funding and promoting themselves, with just enough lip service to give them a gloss of social movement relevance, but not much more. Instead of being a launching point for social struggles, electoralism has been a one-trick pony whose only concrete strategies feed directly back into itself and not into something greater. Rather than providing a strategy for propelling social