



The Bumpy Road Ahead: The New Tasks of the Left Following Obama's Victory

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American progressives have won a major victory in helping to defeat John McCain and placing Barack Obama in the White House. The far right has been broadly rebuffed, the neoconservative war hawks displaced, and the diehard advocates of neoliberal political economy are in thorough disarray. Of great importance, one very important long-standing crown jewel of white supremacy, the whites-only sign on the Oval Office, has been tossed into the dustbin of history.

The depth of the historical victory was revealed in the jubilation of millions who spontaneously gathered in downtowns and public spaces across the country, as the media networks called Obama the winner. When President-Elect Barack Hussein Obama took the platform in Chicago to deliver his powerful but sobering victory speech, hundreds of millions—Black, Latino, Asian, Native-American and white, men and women, young and old, literally danced in the streets and wept with joy, celebrating an achievement of a dramatic milestone in a 400-year struggle, and anticipating a new period of hope and possibility.

Now a new period of struggle begins, but on a higher plane. An emerging progressive majority will be confronted with many challenges and obstacles not seen for decades. Left and progressive organizers face difficult, uncharted terrain, a bumpy road. But much more interesting problems are before us, with solutions, should they be achieved, promising much greater gains and rewards. for the America of popular democracy.

To consciously build on the gains of this electoral victory, it's important to seek clarity. We need an accurate assessment of strengths and weaknesses--our own, as well as those of our allies and our adversaries.

The Obama campaign, formal and informal, was a wide undertaking. It united progressive forces, won over middle forces, then isolated and divided the right. It massed the votes and resources required the win a clear majority of the popular vote and a decisive majority of Electoral College votes.

At the base, beginning with the antiwar youth and peace activists, Obama awakened, organized, mobilized and deployed an incredible and innovative force of what grew into an army of more than three million volunteers. At the top, he realigned a powerful sector of the ruling class into an anti-NeoCon, anti-ultraright bloc. In between, he expanded the electorate and won clear majorities in every major demographic bloc of voters, save for whites generally; but even there, he reduced McCain's spread to single digits, and among younger white voters and women voters, he won large majorities.

Understanding the New Alliance

It is important to understand the self-interests and expectations of this new multiclass alliance. If we get it wrong, we will run into the ditch and get bogged down, whether on the right or 'left' side of that bumpy road, full of potholes and twists and turns.

The Obama alliance is not 'Clintonism in blackface' or 'JFK in Sepia', as some have chauvinistically tagged it. Nor is it 'imperialism with a human face,' as if imperialism hasn't always had human faces. All these make the mistake of looking backward, Hillary Clinton's mistake of trying to frame the present and future in the terms of the past.

The Obama team at the top is comprised of global capital's representatives in the U.S as well as U.S. multinational capitalists, and these two overlap but are not the same. It is a faction of imperialism, and there is no need for us to prettify it, deny it or cover it up in any way. The important thing to see is that it is neither neoliberalism nor the old corporate liberalism. Obama is carving out a new niche for himself, a work in progress still within the bounds of capitalism, but a 'high road' industrial policy capitalism that is less state-centric and more market-based in its approach, more Green, more high tech, more third wave and participatory, less politics-as-consumerism and more 'public citizen' and education focused. In short, it's capitalism for a multipolar world and the 21st century.

The unreconstructed neoliberalism and old corporate liberalism, however, are still very much in play. The former is in disarray, largely due to the financial crisis, but the latter is working overtime to join the Obama team and secure its institutional positions of power, from White House staff positions to the behind-the-scenes efforts on Wall Street to direct the huge cash flows of the Bail-Out in their favor.

How the Obama Alliance won:

Values, Technology and Social Movements

The Obama alliance is an emerging, historic counter-hegemonic bloc, still contending both with its pre-election adversaries and within itself. It has taken the White House and strengthened its majority in Congress, but the fight is not over. To define the victorious coalition simply by the class forces at the top is the error of reductionism that fails to shine a light on the path ahead.

What is a hegemonic bloc? Most power elites maintain their rule using more than armed force. They use a range of tools to maintain hegemony, or dominance, which are 'softer,' meaning they are political and cultural instruments as well as economic and military. They seek a social base in the population, and draw them into partnership and coalitions through intermediate civil institutions. Keeping this bloc together requires a degree of compromise and concession, even if it ultimately relies on force. The blocs are historic; they develop over time, are shaped by the times, and also have limited duration. When external and internal crises disrupt and lead them to stagnation, a new 'counter-hegemonic' bloc takes shape, with a different alignment of economic interests and social forces, to challenge it and take its place. These ideas were first developed by the Italian communist and labor leader, Antonio Gramsci, and taken up again in the 1960s by the German New Left leader, Rudi Dutschke. They are helpful, especially in nonrevolutionary conditions, in understanding both how our adversaries maintain their power, as well as the strategy and tactics needed to replace them, eventually by winning a new socialist and popular democratic order.

As a new historic bloc, the Obama alliance contains several major and minor poles. It is composed of several class forces, a complex social base and many social movements which have emerged and engaged in the electoral struggle. There is both class struggle and other forms of struggle within it. There are sharp differences on military policy, on Israel-Palestine, on healthcare and the bailout. From the outside, there are also serious and sustained struggles against it. And some forces will move both inside and outside the bloc, as circumstances warrant or change. It is important to be clear on what the main forces and components are, and their path to unity. It's also important to understand the relation and balance of forces, and how one is not likely to win at the top what one has not consolidated and won at the base, nor is failure in one or another battle always cause for a strategic break.

Obama obviously started with his local coalition in Chicago—the Black community, 'Lakefront liberals' from the corporate world, and a sector of labor, mainly service workers. The initial new force in the winning nationwide alliance was called out by Obama's early opposition to the Iraq war, and his participation in two mass rallies against it, one before it began and other after the war was underway. This both awakened and inspired a large layer of young antiwar activists, some active for the first time, to join his effort to win the Iowa primary. The fact that he had publicly opposed the war before it had begun distinguished him from Hillary Clinton and John Edwards, his chief opponents. These young people also contributed to the innovative nature of his organization, combining grassroots community organizing with the many-to-many mass

communication tools of internet-based social networking and fundraising. Many had some earlier experience organizing and participating in the World Social Forum in Atlanta 2007, which energized nearly 10,000 young activists. Those who came forward put their energy and innovation to good use. Had Obama not won Iowa, it is not likely we would be talking about him today.

The Iowa victory quickly produced another major advance. Up until then, most African-American voters favored Hillary Clinton, and were dubious of a Black candidate's chances. But Iowa is one of the 'whitest' states in the country, and Obama's win there changed their minds. In short order, Obama gained wide unity in Black communities across the country, inspiring even more young people, more multinational and more 'Hip-Hop,' to emerge as a force. Black women in their churches and Black workers in their unions joined with the already-engaged younger Black professionals who were seeking a new voice for their generation. The internet-based fundraising was bringing in unheard-of amounts of money in small donations. A wing of trade unions most responsive to Black members came over, setting the stage for Obama's next challenge, winning the Democratic primaries overall against Hillary Clinton.

Defeating Clinton and the corporate liberals backing her was not easy. Hillary's main weakness was her inability to win the antiwar movement. Obama had mainly won the youth and Blacks, and through them, many young women and many Black women, but he had tough challenges. Clinton still rallied much of the liberal base and the traditional women's movement. But it was not enough, nor was she able to deal with all the new grassroots money flowing his way. Her last reserve was the labor movement, most of which was still supporting her. She tried to keep it with a fatal error: playing the 'white worker' card in a racist way against Obama. It only moved more progressives to Obama, plus won him wider support in other communities of color, who saw the move for what it was. Even with her remaining base in a sector of the women's movement and a large chunk of organized labor, after a fierce fight, he narrowly but clearly defeated her.

Now it was Obama versus McCain, and the Republicans were in the weaker position. Some think McCain made a mistake picking Sarah Palin as his VP choice, but actually it was his smarter and stronger card. To defeat Obama, he had to both energize the GOP core rightwing base, plus win a large majority of the 'white working class.' Palin's proto-fascist rightwing populism was actually his best shot, especially with its unofficial allies in rightwing media. The Fox-Hannity-Limbaugh machine, and its allies in the right blogosphere, escalated their overtly racist, chauvinist, illegal immigrant-baiting, red-baiting, terror-baiting, anti-Black and anti-Muslim bigotry to a ceaseless fever pitch. The aim was to manipulate the significant social base of less-educated, more fundamentalist, lower-income white workers who often seek economic relief through being tied to the military or the prison-industrial complex. They threw everything, from the kitchen sink to the outhouse, at Obama, his family and his movement. They whipped their crowds into violent frenzies. The Secret Service even had to ask them to tone it down, since assassination threats were coming out of the woodwork with each rally like this.

This now put organized labor in the critical position. Even though they represented only a minority of workers generally, they had wider influence, including into the ranks of the white working-class families who were for Clinton, and leaning to McCain. But both national coalitions, the AFL-CIO and Change to Win, did the right thing, and in a big way. They knew McCain was their ‘clear and present’ danger. So they mobilized their resources and members into the streets, especially in the ‘white working class’ battleground areas in critical electoral states, and among Latino voters in the West. They won a wide majority of union households. They won among women and younger workers, as well as Latinos and other voters of color. Although they still did not get a majority of white working class voters for Obama, they brought the spread down to single digits. In many areas, they did better with Obama than Kerry had done four years earlier. It was enough to put Obama over the top.

There are books to be written about many other aspects and components of the Obama alliance. But these five: insurgent antiwar youth, a united African-American community, Latinos and other communities of color, women with a grasp of the importance of reproductive rights and health care, and organized labor—these form the major elements of the social base of Obama’s historic bloc against neoliberalism and the right. Add these to the disgruntled progressive-to-liberal regular Democratic voters in the suburbs and elsewhere, and it brought the era of the conservative right’s dominance in the White House and Congress to an end.

The Obama Alliance From Below and Within

The alliance was also diverse in terms of political organization. At the very bottom grassroots, in the final months, there were often four campaigns, overlapping to one degree or another, united to one degree or another, but not the same by a long shot.

First, the local Obama offices were mainly run by the Obama youth, twenty-somethings, many of them young women, who worked their hearts out, 16-hours-a-day, seven days a week, months on end. They were deployed in a vast array of ‘neighborhood teams,’ with old teams often generating new ones, connected via the social networking of their own blogs, email, cell phones and text messaging. Each team knocked on hundreds, if not thousands of doors, and tracked it all on computers. The full-time leaders were often ‘parachuted in’ from distant states, skilled mainly in mobilizing others like themselves. But add up dozens, even hundreds of teams in a given county, and you’re making a serious difference.

Second, the Black community’s campaign was more indigenous, more traditional, more rooted, more deeply proletarian—it made use of the Black church’s social committees, tenant groups and civic organizations, who widely united. Many day-to-day efforts were in the hands of older Black women who knew everything about everybody, and had decades of experience in registering and getting out the vote. In some parts of the country, there were other nationalities working this way—Latino, Asian, Native American—and they found the way to make common cause with the African American community, rebuffing GOP efforts to appeal to anti-Black racism or narrow nationalism

as a wedge. Some of the older people in these communities learned how to use computers, too, and sent regular contributions to Obama via PayPal in small amounts. But multiply one of these experienced community-based women organizers by 50,000 or 100,000 more just like her in another neighborhood or town, and something new and serious is going on. They always faced scarce resources, and there was friction at times with the Obama youth, who were often mostly white or more of a younger 'Rainbow.' They worked it through, most of the time.

Third, organized labor carried out its campaign in its own way. They had substantial resources for meeting halls, phone banks and the traditional 'swag' of campaigns—window signs, yard signs, buttons, T-shirts, stickers, banners, professionally done multi-colored flyers directly targeted to the top issues of union members and the wider working class. They put it together as an almost industrial operation, well planned with a division of labor. Top leaders of the union came in, called mass meetings, and in many cases, gave fierce no-nonsense speeches about 'getting over' fear of Black candidates and asserting the need to vote their members' interests. The central offices produced walking maps of union member households and registered voter households, political district by political district, broken down right to how many people were needed for each door-knocking team to cover each district or neighborhood. They printed maps with driving directions. They had tally sheets for interviewing each voter, boxes to check, to be scanned and read by machines when turned in. Hundreds of member-volunteers from that ranks came to each hall, raffles were held for free gas cards, and when you got back and turned in your tallies, free hot dogs and pizza. Sometimes busloads and car caravans went to other nearby states, to more 'battleground' areas. They often shared their halls with the Obama kids, and tried not to duplicate efforts. It was powerful to see, and it worked. There's nothing to replace a pair of union members standing on the porches of other working-class families, talking things over.

Fourth, the actual ongoing structures of the local Democratic Party did things their way. In many cases, the local regular Democratic leaders were very good, and took part personally in all three of elements of the campaign described above. But frequently, there was no 'mass' to the local Democratic organization. The mass member groups of the old Democratic Party were just history. (It was a problem, but also an opening for new independent mass progressive groups, like Progressive Democrats of America, to grow). Each incumbent, moreover, had their own staff and core of donors and loyalists, lawyers and media consultants, and guarded their own turf. Some were Obama enthusiasts, some more low-key, but more than a few avoided any responsibility to win Hillary voters to Obama. They capitulated to 'Democrats for McCain' elements in their base, elements who worked informally with the GOP right. This latter group was called 'the top of the ticket problem.' They worked their campaigns as independent operations, but avoided identification with the 'top of the ticket' or those working locally for it.

The Core Message of Change

While all four of these sub-campaigns were united by the central message and 'change' theme from the top, each also carried out the 'change' message in its own way. One issue

linking at least three of them, save for a few ‘Blue Dog’ incumbents, was the need for a rapid end to the war. From Obama’s personal appearances on down, whenever a speaker forcefully made this point to a crowd, it got the loudest applause, if not a standing ovation.

The people in these crowds constitute a new component of the antiwar movement. It needs to be understood, however, that they have a different character than the traditional left-led antiwar rallies. Demands to end the war here are deeply connected with supporting our troops, getting them home and out of harm’s way, supporting veterans across the board, expressions of patriotism, and a view of the war as an offense to patriotism. They hate the waste of lives of people from families they know; and they hate the waste of resources and huge amounts of money. Ending the war is stressed as the way to lower taxes and revive the economy by spending for projects at home. People will denounce oil barons, but you’ll hear very little put in terms of anti-imperialism or solidarity with various other liberations struggles around the world. ‘We were lied to getting us into this’, and ‘we have our problems to solve here’—that’s the underlying themes and watchwords. There are a few incumbents who will take positions to the right of Obama on the war, trying to stake out various nuanced and longer ‘exit strategy’ processes, or who just don’t mention the war at all. But at the base, most just want to troops rapidly and safely out, while a few cling to the right’s calls for ‘victory.’ But there’s not much in the middle.

The other components of ‘change’ at the base are, first and foremost, new jobs and new industries. People are especially motivated by practical plans for Green Jobs in alternative energies and major infrastructural repair, health care for everyone, schools and support for students, and debt relief and other protections of their economic security in the face of the Wall Street crash. In fact, the Wall Street crash was the major factor in many older voters rejecting McCain and going for Obama. Regarding health care, many unions and local government bodies are signing on to HR 676, Single-Payer health care, but some will accept many other things, wisely or not, as a step in that direction or an improvement over the current setup.

The Nature of Rising Hegemonic Blocs

Within the Obama historic bloc, there are at least four contending trends regarding ‘change’ and political economy—two major and two minor. The two major ones come mainly from the top, while the two minor ones come from below.

At the top, the Obama White House will be pulled in two directions. The first is the ‘tinkering at the top’ approach of traditional corporate liberal capitalism, mostly concerned with securing the major banks by covering their debts and reducing the deficit through ‘shared austerity’ cutbacks. The emphasis will be on greater government-imposed efficiencies in entitlement programs, tax reform and adjustments in global trade agreements. Some of their favored programs, like pressing businesses to provide more 401K plans for employees, may be set aside because of the stock market’s volatility.

The second direction is Obama's own often-asserted 'High Road' green industrial policy capitalism, which wants to restrict and punish pure speculation in the 'Casino Economy' in favor of targeted government investment in massive infrastructure and research, encouraging the growth of new industries with 'Green Jobs' in alternative energy sectors. Since resources are not infinite, there will be a major tension and competition for funds between two rival sectors--a new green industrial-education policy sector and an old hydrocarbon-military-industrial sector. It's a key task of the left and progressive movements to add their forces to uniting with and building up the former, while opposing and weakening the grip of the latter. This is the 'High Road' vs. 'Low Road' strategy widely discussed in progressive think tanks and policy circles.

From below, Obama is being presented with a plethora of redistributionist 'New New Deal' plans, including Rep Dennis Kucinich's 16 Points, to Sen. Bernie Sanders 4 Points, to the Institute for Policy Studies 'Progressive Majority' plan. One outlier 'Buy Out, Not Bail Out' proposal, David Schweickart's Economic Democracy option, goes beyond redistributionism, and proposes deep structural reforms of public ownership in the equity of financial firms in exchange for the bailout, in turn directing capital into community investment banks to build worker-controlled options within the new wealth creation firms of green industries.

From the other side, the unreconstructed rightwing neoliberals will be out of positions of executive power but not without positions of influence. Centered among the House GOP and allied with the rightwing media populists and anti-global nationalists, with Lou Dobbs as a spokesman, they will remain a powerful opposition force. They are likely to try to sabotage Obama, as best as they can without their own mass base, suffering from the crisis, turning against them. This was the role they played in the rightist opposition to the corporate liberal bailout plans stirred up by the far right Human Events journalists.

The key point here is shaping the exact nature of what Obama unfolds as 'change.' What will bring about any progressive reform and protect 'Main Street' and the 'Middle Class' against 'Wall Street' is still open and not fully formed. In fact, it will be a focus of intense struggle both internally at the top and on the part of mass social movements defending and advancing their interests from below. Class struggle will unfold within the bloc, to be sure.

The Bankruptcy of the Ultraleft

This is where the questions facing the left and an account of its tasks become critical. What is our role? Who are our friends and allies? Who are our adversaries, of various sorts? What is our left platform within broader proposals for growing and uniting a progressive majority? What is our strategy, tactics and orientation for moving forward? All these need to be re-examined in this dynamic and new situation.

We have to start by acknowledging the real crisis across the entire socialist left for some time. While some progress and innovation has been made by some in recent years, no one is surging ahead with major growth and breakthroughs. What this election, its outcome,

its battles and ebb and flow, and the engagement of the masses, has especially done is reveal the utter bankruptcy of almost the entire anti-Obama Trotskyist, anarchist and Maoist left, save for a few groupings and some individuals. The crisis was not nearly as deep among the wider left—those hundreds of thousands working among trade union activists, community organizers and our country's intellectual community, but often not identified with a given socialist group or anarchist project. Whatever their problems, most of them understood this election and what to do, even if their efforts were limited. They 'got it right', even if they lacked the organizational means to advance the socialist project.

But among those belonging to organized socialist and anarchist groups with enough resources to put out their views, most got it dead wrong. On the election, only the CCDS (Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism, cc-ds.org,) the Communist Party USA, cpusa.org, and Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO, freedomroad.org) got it mostly right, mainly because they have some grasp on the importance of racism, elections and mass democracy. But we know these three groups, even if well situated, are rather small and not growing in any major way. Next was DSA which at least saw the importance of defeating McCain and backing Obama, even though they only managed to put out a rather wimpy pro-forma statement without once mentioning race. The other 10-to-15 groups, with the larger majority of organized US socialists, communists and Marxists in them, failed miserably, whatever the subjective feelings and views of their individual members. Besides broadsides against Obama and those backing him, they had nothing new or relevant to say, and some of them didn't bother to say anything, especially among the anarchists. Go to the sixty or more Indymedia sites, and you hardly see anything useful said besides macho bluster and shit-talk against the few pro-voting-for-Obama postings put up.

This is the face of this crisis: While there was an upsurge of millions of Obama volunteers in one of the most critical elections in our history, a true milestone, which was combined with direct engagement from a united Black community and the best elements of labor, from precisely the sectors all of them have been claiming to try to reach for decades, and almost all they could was bark at them: 'You're deluded!' You're Obamaniacs! 'You're wrong!' 'Obama is a capitalist!' 'Don't Drink the Kool-Aid! Obama is the more dangerous warmonger because he's the new 'Uncle Tom' Black face of imperialism!'

If the question of the day was immediate working-class mass action on seizing power from the capitalist class, for reform vs. revolution, socialism or capitalism NOW, they might have had a point. But it's not. Even with the financial crisis, it's not even close. Besides getting troops out of this or that country, they don't even have a package of demands or structural reforms worthy of the name being put forward. Worse of all, they don't think any distinction between revolutionary and non-revolutionary conditions is all that important. What that means, in turn, is that it's almost impossible for them, as groups and as a trend, to correct their course.

It's not a matter of being critical of Obama. Everyone engaged in his movement had criticisms and alternate positions of all sorts. Some made them public, some did not—but all these did so in a way designed to help him win, not to take him down, to add votes to his totals, not to subtract them.

As mentioned, the wider left, the left that defines itself as more than liberal but not necessarily socialist, did relatively well. These are the union-based organizers, community organizers, campus organizers, and the readers of Portside, The Nation, Black Commentator, Huffington Post and DailyKOS. For the most part, they were fully engaged for Obama in this election. Comparing the online commentary in these media voices and outlets with that of the Indymedia anarchists and the socialist papers of the far left was as revealing as the difference between noon and midnight.

We have to break decisively with this ultra-left, semi-anarchist perspective. While the hard core of this trend is small, its reach is wider than some might think. It's not a matter of purges; it's a matter of emancipating the minds of many on the radical left from old dogma. There's no way forward under these new conditions if we don't. We have to break with it not only in our own ranks, the groups working with 'Progressives for Obama', where it's not that influential, but across all the mass democratic organizations of the wider social movements as well. We have to spotlight it, stand up to it, isolate it and defeat it. It's not that we are demanding a split. The split has already taken place over the past two years, in real life and in actual battles. Many of us, for instance, stood up to the rightwing media's racist attacks on Obama, his family and his movement; others from this corner of the left added fuel to the fascists' fires and fanned the flames. We are sharply divided. We are as far apart in practice as we can be. What we have to do is acknowledge it, sum up its lessons, and warn others of its dangers, and try to unite all who can be united on a new path forward.

Charting Our Path Forward

So what is our path? Again, we start by getting clarity on where we are. We were in an alliance with Obama and the forces and movements that brought him to power against the NeoCon neoliberals and the far right. If we assess things accurately, we'll see that we are still in this alliance, although its nature is changing. We are part of a new emerging counter-hegemonic bloc in our country, an historic multiclass alliance. The Obama forces at the top are in turn linked to the multipolar, multilateralist sector of global capital. A new bloc on this higher, global level is both trying to consolidate its power against its rivals and maintain a degree of both unity and struggle among the contenting poles and centers of power within it. Our task is to grow the strength of the left, the working class, and broader communities allies within it, to secure strong points, and to win, step by step, the 'long march through the institutions' until we emerge with a new counter-hegemonic bloc of our own, in an entirely different period.

From the beginning, the Obama alliance brought together left-progressive forces, along with moderate center and center-right forces, from the grass roots level through middle-layer institutions to the top. No one or even two of these voting blocs was enough to win

alone. It took the entire coalition to win—and driving out any one part of it may have made defeat far more likely and risky. We were part of a left-progressive pole in a broader sub-bloc comprised of social movements, primarily antiwar youth, minority nationality communities and organized labor. While we were the most numerous of the blocs, we were not necessarily the most powerful.

A political pole or sub-bloc's power in electoral campaigns is a combination of three things—first, an organized platform of ideas appropriate to solving the problems of the day that, second, is in turn embodied in organized grassroots voters and, third, those organizations have readily available amounts of organized money. We can take part in an alliance without some or even all of these things, but we shouldn't then expect much clout.

Let's look at each of these three elements from the perspective of left-progressive activists.

What was our platform? First, we stressed an end to the war in Iraq and a prevention of wider wars, even if Obama talked of going into Afghanistan in a bigger way. Second, we were demanding 'Healthcare Not Warfare,' and in many cases, pressing HR 676 Single-Payer even if Obama opposed it. Third, we stressed Green Jobs and New Schools, and Obama eventually pushed these in a big way. Fourth, we stressed Alternative Energies over dirty coal, offshore oil and unsafe nuke plants, even if Obama waffled. Fifth, we wanted Expanded Democracy and Fair Elections, and Obama pressed voter registration and early voting in a big way.

The Obama volunteers in the official campaign often couldn't put things out exactly like this. Their messaging was more controlled from the center. But nothing stopped either organized labor or independent forces like PDA, MDS or other local groups connected to 'Progressives for Obama' from exercising our 'independence and initiative within the broader front.' We simply did what we thought best, but in a way that still maintained solid unity among local allies.

The Importance of Independent Mass Democracy

How did we organize voters? Many progressives simply worked through the local Obama campaign, registering and identifying voters with the neighbor teams. This was fine, especially if you spent some time in a mutual education process with the young staffers. But some of us were looking for something more independent and lasting. So we joined with groups like PDA, or set up 'voters for peace' groupings based on local coalitions, or worked through union locals. The idea was for the information gained--voter lists, donor lists, volunteers lists, contacts and such—to remain in the hands of the new grassroots formations, to grow them in size and scope, so as to help further struggles down the road.

To be sure, our influence, compared to the incredibly sophisticated, well-funded and innovative Obama campaign, was relatively minor. That didn't matter so much; what was important was that we weren't simply a tail on the Democratic machinery, but that we

were building our own independent strength for the future. In nearly every major city, independent blogs or clusters of blogs went up to serve as a public face and organizing hubs of these grassroots forces. Case in point: The local Obama offices are now all closed, but our local groups or coalitions have doubled or tripled in size, we now have news blogs getting thousands of hits, and our efforts are ongoing and more connected with labor and community allies.

How did we raise money? To be frank, we didn't raise that much independently. This is a fault, not a virtue. Some groups in the African-American community went into the T-shirt and button business, making a range of campaign items, selling them to raise stipends, gas money and donations to Obama, then turning some over to make more T-shirts and buttons, and so on. In some places, we relied a good deal on the resources supplied at local union halls—meeting space, phones, and printed materials. 'Progressives for Obama' kept itself alive from a few initial startup donations from individuals, then from its two blogs and listservs on the Internet via PayPal in small amounts.

But to return to our platform of issues and demands, the key underlying principle was segmenting the business community into productive versus speculative capital, rather than asserting an all-round anti-capitalist or anti-corporate perspective. We want to see mills reopened with new companies we can support that would make wind turbines via Green Jobs, while we oppose the Casino gamblers on Wall Street or insurance company parasites blocking universal health care. People can and will denounce every sort of corporate crime or outrage to make a point. But when it came to the platform of reforms for uses of our taxes dollars, we were much more focused on what kind of businesses we wanted to see grow, and how we wanted them to relate to their workers and surrounding communities. This approach did very well in getting many rank-and-file workers to take us seriously, especially in areas where many people suffer more from the lack of business than its presence.

The main point is that we now have mass democratic organization anchored in many communities, workplaces and schools, and that they have a basis to expand. PDA is a good example. Starting with only a few dozen people in 2004 with an 'inside-outside' independent view of dealing and working with Democrats, they have grown to some 150,000 people scattered across the country in every major city, with most of that growth taking place in the context of the last campaign to defeat the GOP and McCain. At the Democratic convention, together with The Nation magazine, PDA delivered a week-long series of panels and workshops that drew thousands of activists and hundreds of delegates, establishing itself as the 'Progressive Central' mobilizing and organizing pole for the week in Denver. Many PDA local chapters mobilized members that became the backbone of the Obama campaign offices, as well as boosting local labor mobilizations. The PDA chapters built their credibility by advocating Healthcare Not Warfare and backing local progressive candidates down the ticket. They helped unite progressives within the various trends of the Obama campaign with local unity events.

On a smaller scale, Movement for a Democratic Society groups did well, too Austin, Texas is a great example, where they combined with 'The Rag' blog, which is now

getting over 25,000 hits a month. On campuses, where the New SDS was able to make a break with anarchism and relate to the Obama youth, they also report successes and growth.

The Critical Priority of Organization and the Relative Importance of Socialist Tasks

What the heart of this says is that for left-to-progressive activists, **organization-building trumps movement-building in this period**. The movements are very wide and diverse, and in front of our noses. But the current wave has just peaked, and will now ebb a bit. In situations like this, it's more important than ever to consolidate the gains of mass struggle, including electoral struggle, into lasting organizations, either expanding earlier ones or building new ones. The same goes for coalition-building of local clusters of organizations, then networking them across the country, horizontally and vertically, via the internet. We need organizers now, more so than activists and agitators.

What about the 'socialism' part of the socialist left? Up to this point, I've mainly addressed the mass democratic tasks we share in common with the non-socialist left and progressive activists generally. Fortunately or unfortunately the Wall Street financial crisis combined with the right wing's red baiting of Obama as a 'Marxist' and 'socialist' has given the 'S' word far wider circulation and interest than it's had in decades. Unfortunately, in the mass media, it's mainly discussed in a one-dimensional, cartoonish way as 'socialism for the rich' or 'sharing the wealth.'

No matter. This expanded media buzz serves to underscore the main aspect of our socialist tasks in today's conditions. Our work here is mainly that of education, theoretical work, and the development of program and policy options. We need our own think tanks and networks of study groups developing our policies and platforms for deep structural reforms that serve as transitional levers to a new socialism. Before we can fight for it, we better have a fairly clear idea of what it is in this country in today's world—both among ourselves and the wider circles of the best left and progressive organizers with whom we want to share this learning process and socialist project.

It is a good time, however, to expand this work in a serious way. One small example: in the context of the initial wave of reaction to the Wall Street crash, and the first round of progressive proposals to deal with it, 'Progressives for Obama' asked David Schweickart, one of our country's foremost proponents of socialist theory, to write up his take on it. He wrote not only his account of why the crisis happened, but also briefly contrasted today's capitalism and its downturn and crash with the socialist alternative. His own 'successor system theory' of Economic Democracy, however, is designed to be a bridge to socialist options. If we, the public, are to buy up the bad debt of failed banks and firms, why not demand equity in the stock and public seats on the board, or buy them out entirely. Instead of simply paying off debt and providing the wherewithal for big bonuses and Golden Parachutes, why not do more than simply restrict or forbid this? Why not use these now-public resources to launch local community-owned investment banks to

partner with labor and local government and entrepreneurs to build the new worker-owned factories of green industries and alternative energies?

These are excellent take-off points. Schweickart's article was widely circulated as an authoritative piece, commented on across the political spectrum. In several cities, leftists in and around the Obama campaign even set up study groups to go over it. This shouldn't be exaggerated, but it does show the possibilities and frames our socialist tasks more accurately.

Both Immediate and Transitional Programs

But the more pressing task for us as part of the left is sharply and concretely outlining our immediate and transitional programs and their platforms. The immediate program of demands, like Kucinich's 16 Points, are basically redistributionist programs aimed at taking wealth from above and spreading it around below. Given the vast inequalities of our society, that is both pressing and desirable. As a stimulus, it also spurs the generation of new wealth. The transitional program of deep structural reform, like Schweickart's Economic Democracy, takes public resources to generate new wealth, but in a way that alters power relations in favor of the working class and broader public.

Some of the best proposals and projects on the table combine both of these. The Apollo Alliance, where steelworkers and environmentalists come together, put forward a range of recession-busting programs. Van Jones' Green Jobs programs for inner city youth do the same, as does HR 676 Single-Payer health care. The Blue-Green Alliance is still another.

Our task is to put flesh on these in a way that melds with our local conditions. We start by uniting antiwar Obama youth, community and labor locally, then build outwards and upwards from there. We start with an understanding of the critical role of a united African-American community, the most consistent defenders and fighters for a progressive agenda in the country, especially when it works in alliance with Latinos and other minority nationalities. We also grasp the significance of women and labor, and the overall intersection of race, gender and class in defining our policies, seeking out allies, and setting priorities. We design a package of critical local reforms, whether in rebuilding Ohio River locks and dams, constructing high-speed rail in California, or delivering single-payer healthcare everywhere. Then we make the fights for these a centerpiece to unite the entire area, win over all the public officials that we can, and then, in turn, take it to an Obama administration, demanding an end to the war and war making, in order to fund it and make it happen. It's really the only way out of this mess.

Our great victory in this election, finally, is that efforts and programs like this won't fall on deaf ears. The challenge to Obama is that to get it done, he has to end the war, avoid wider wars and cut the military budget in a major way. If he does, he can be a great president. If he doesn't, he'll have hell to pay.

Summary

Here are the key points, once again:

1. We have won a major victory, now consolidate its gains.
2. Start where you are, and build mass democratic grassroots groups bringing together the best local activists from the Obama campaign and others like it.
3. Build a coalition with local partners in labor, campus and community groups that did the same.
4. Start local left-progressive blogs to have a public face, and link it to others.
5. Develop a program of deep structural reform and immediate needs for your area, and take it upward and outward through the elected officials and government bodies, all the way to the top
6. Break decisively with the ultraleft mindset, in order to deepen and broaden left-progressive unity
7. Prepare the ground for mass mobilization to end the war this spring, and to prevent wider war. Link this battle to the economy. Green Jobs over War Jobs, New Schools, Not More Prisons, HealthCare Not Warfare, Peace and Prosperity, Not War, Greed and Crisis. You get the idea.
8. Study socialism seriously, the version for today, and bring it to bear in developing policy and uniting the most advanced fighters for the whole, not just the part, and for the future, not just the present.

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