

The following article, written by former Young Democratic Socialists (YDS) National Organizer, Daraka Larimore-Hall, outlines one individual's democratic socialist approach to the 2004 elections. Through November 2nd, YDS will continue formulating its strategic and principled orientation on the presidential elections, the dump Bush movement, the Kerry campaign and social justice activism. We encourage YDS members, progressives and radicals to join us in this effort by submitting their own views on the constructive role students and youth can play in the 2004 elections and beyond. Contact us at yds@ydsusa.org

TAKING SIDES: DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM AND AMERICAN POLITICS

By Daraka Larimore-Hall

"Truths about society can be discovered only if one takes sides."

-Michael Harrington

Imagine an America in which socialism is part of our political landscape. Imagine an America in which the Right couldn't destroy any initiative for social justice by simply labeling it with the "s" word. Imagine an America in which the values of solidarity and equality are defended by politicians with the same vigor as liberty and security.

We know what the alternative looks like. In today's America, it is difficult to fight for even limited progress against poverty, against hunger, against injustice in the workplace because mainstream politicians are not "able" to talk about the big questions of power and privilege without being denounced as "crazy", "radical" or worst of all, "socialist." We can blame the politicians, we can vote for the most radical option no matter their chances of winning, or we can go out and build the kinds of movements which would make progressive politics possible.

Looking back at American history, it is easy to see examples of political leaders who were far more progressive, even radical, than the crowd we see today on CSPAN. What we often forget, however, is that there were *movements* on the ground to which these leaders were appealing. Without the dynamic labor movement of the 1930's, there would have been no New Deal. Without the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's, there would have been no Great Society. Politicians, whether liberal or conservative, green or

socialist, are only as good as we can pressure them to be.

Have you ever wondered why other countries have been able to protect worker's rights, build strong and deep welfare states and achieve levels of equality and justice far beyond the vision of most mainstream Democrats? The reason for this is simple. These countries have socialist movements. Even when these movements do not enjoy majority support, they have had a tremendous impact on their nations' policies. Even those socialist parties, and their green allies, however, will drift to the center or become less responsive to their base without constant pressure and activism both inside and outside the electoral arena.

Our job, as Democratic Socialists, is to help build a movement that will bring about a change in the political order. That means joining with and working beside communities and social movements which fight for freedom and justice. It also means arguing for the connections between those struggles, and helping to create a new, *progressive majority* in America. That majority won't be socialist. Not everyone will agree with us. However, it is only as part of that majority that our ideas can become part of the political debate. Our ideas must be linked to people's everyday experience, and our work must be rooted in struggles that help people take power over their own lives. Otherwise, we are just a coffee-shop collection of romantic idealists.

We in the democratic left are not trying to "lead" people, or to tell social movements their

business. A majority of activists of color, unions, feminists, queer activists and environmentalists have made the political choice to work within the Democratic Party. For that reason, democratic socialists should also work as Democrats. Of course, that's not *all* we do, but we share with these movements a belief that Republicans are worth beating, and that many (but not most) Democratic politicians are part of the progressive majority we hope to strengthen. Even those good Democrats need the pressure of people's movements to allow them to create policies which foster a long-term change in America's power structure.

We must move beyond the "reform or revolution" debate, and understand that not all reforms are born equal. Some reforms are structural. A raise in the minimum wage is a good thing, but it doesn't change the power structure. Changing our labor laws so that it is easier to form unions is a reform that shifts the balance of power between employers and employees. Our role as socialists is to transform the political debate in America so that such "non-reformist reforms" can be fought for and won. Even if a majority of Americans are never socialists, without a loud democratic socialist voice within a larger progressive coalition, such deep changes will never make it onto the agenda.



This is more than a strategic question, though. We believe that our values are shared by millions of Americans, and we can speak to them if we can speak a language which makes sense. Our brand of socialism is part of a long-standing American tradition- a liberal tradition. At the heart of American liberalism is a deeply progressive impulse, critical of corporate power, dedicated to democracy and human equality. As democratic socialists, we don't think that this impulse is enough. It must be backed up by a political commitment to equality. If you really want to insure prosperity, equal opportunity, racial and gender equality and global justice, you must address the problems at the root of the capitalist system. Liberalism is a great start, but in order to fulfill its own goals, it must confront the structural problems of global capitalism.

Concretely, this means that our number-one priority between now and November should be defeating George Bush. The bottom line is that this will happen only if we elect a Democrat. However, while we are out campaigning for John Kerry, we should be arguing that there is only so much that he can do to help the cause of global justice. Social change comes from below, and we have a long road ahead of us. These two tasks do not stand in contradiction. We can believe that a better world is possible, and still understand that we live in the world of today.

I do not mean to suggest that electoral politics is the only way that social change happens. People confront and challenge corporate power, sexism, racism and homophobia every day. However, this is an election year, and this time in particular, we cannot afford to ignore it. Decisions are made by governments which have tremendous impact on people, and if socialists are not involved in the discussion about those decisions, or if we stay out of the fight to influence them, we become irrelevant. Our ideas are too important to let that happen.

Recommended Reading:

Making History by Richard Flacks

Socialism Past and Future, by Michael Harrington

Nickel and Dimed, by Barbara Ehrenreich

I May Not Get There With You, by Michael Eric Dyson

www.ydsusa.org / yds@ydsusa.org