

THE EFFORT TO BUILD A LABOR PARTY (What Might We Learn)

(Ed Bruno, edmundbruno47@gmail.com Prepared in 2016 at the request of the UE General Officers In re to the 1996-2005 attempt to establish a Labor Party)

“History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme” – Mark Twain

Twenty years have passed since the most recent attempt to form a Labor Party in the U.S. The particular conditions and characters of those years will not come back around again. There is no sense in trying to repeat the specifics of the LP experience, but there may be a rhyme or two from which to learn. Here are a few observations and one recommendation.

The Labor Party was founded in 1996 and continued for 9 years. It was preceded for five years by the Labor Party Advocates which was intended to be an organizing transition to an electoral party. The LP convened three national conventions that were attended by thousands of mostly union-organized activists and leaders: the Founding convention in June 1996 in Cleveland and two Constitutional Conventions, 1998 in Pittsburgh and 2002 in Washington DC. Hundreds of thousands of union members ‘belonged’ by virtual of their unions’ affiliation and thousands more joined as individual at-large members.

The Party had no outside funding beyond its dues, affiliation fees and in-kind contributions primarily from Unions. UE was a founding union (the second behind the initiating OCAW). For six years from 1996 to 2002 I was assigned on behalf of the UE to assist the LP in this effort.

A Working Class Economic Program: This carefully crafted program stands the test of time. Its adoption required much effort, was not without its contentions, and adhered very strictly to working class needs. It remains as relevant today as it was twenty years ago – universal healthcare, free public education, a guaranteed job and wage, fair not free trade, racial justice, environmental protections and so forth. It is worth paging through the issues of the ‘Labor Party Press’ (published 6 times a year) to see its full scope.

Structure, Recruitment and Action: These three elements are entwined and need to be considered together in the very early stages of Party formation. The LP was

founded as a membership-based organization that would recruit and mobilize thousands for non-electoral action *first* and engage in electoral action *second* (the LP resolution 'A New Organizing Approach to Politics' does a nice job of describing this). This presented some challenges to the LP, as it will to any new political formation that intends to be membership-based:

1. Recruitment was class-wide (union members and non-members) and continuous. Therefore a structure has to be provided that is easily accessible by the average worker, is a reasonable vehicle through which members can make decisions and take political action, but lends itself to coordination for maximum impact. **It took us too long (2 years) after the Founding Convention to resolve structure, and it absorbed very significant effort and time to do so.** The resulting structure was approved by the 1998 Convention. It provided for state parties, subordinate city and regional chapters, and a base of 20-member neighborhood committees or union clubs. Criteria set out the minimum number of members and affiliates for each level of Party organization.
2. **Non-electoral Action:** Selecting for action a few program items that offer a mix of possible intermediate success, urgency for the working class, and also suggests reasonable activities that members and the public can do **makes member recruitment simpler and faster.** The Party began with its 'calling card' issue of a constitutional amendment that guarantees a job with a \$10 wage. While this provided a fine long-term vision for the Party, it suffered from a lack of urgency and from the difficulties of amending the U.S. Constitution. By the 1998 Convention, three program items were selected for Party-wide action: Just Healthcare (universal single payer), free public higher education, and workplace rights. This provided a good balance among the various Party constituencies and lent themselves to a wide variety of non-electoral actions that members could do to move the issues forward. (including the very successful non-binding ballot referendums that the Party waged and won on healthcare and free public education in Massachusetts, Maine and Florida).
3. **Electoral yes, but with tight criteria:** Here too we resolved the issue too late, after 2 years (1996-98) of needless confusion and contention. The LP

rightly was adamant on avoiding the twin dangers of acting the spoiler and winning powerless local offices that 'prove' the impotency of the Party. By 1998 a set of strict criteria was adopted by the Convention. This will be tricky business for any new political formulation.

4. The LP effort was resource-starved.

And a recommendation: If there is to be a new working class political formation, its operational control should be in the hands of younger leaders (as seasoned and experienced as possible) and not by the grey-haired. Folks my age will have a tendency to 'fight the last war' and will not be able to bring to bear thinking that reflects the new conditions.