

MAY 1ST. Obama's Election Campaign. Labor Unions and the Occupy Movement

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In an open letter to Trumka in late March, independent consumer advocate Ralph Nader said he was aware of "your group's public stands in favor of" progressive legislation, "but as you well know, there is a very marked difference between being on-the-record, as the AFL-CIO is, and being on-the-daily ramparts pushing these issues, as your organization is not."

Nader was right in terms of the AFL-CIO endorsement of the president, which simply didn't accord with its own known disposition, but efforts are being made by some unions to mount the "ramparts" of public witness in recent times and they are not just intended to collect more votes for Obama in November.

This is an important point. There are two aspects to the question of the large labor-liberal coalition that lately has bedecked itself in the slogans of the Occupy movement. According to the Global Justice Ecology Project April 24: "Over the past several weeks, a broad coalition of progressive organizations — including National People's Action, Color Of Change, the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), MoveOn.org, the New Bottom Line, environmental groups like Greenpeace and 350.org, and major unions such as SEIU and the United Auto Workers — has undertaken a far-reaching effort to train tens of thousands of people in nonviolent direct action. They have called the campaign the 99% Spring."

This effort is not an Occupy project, and a number of Occupy supporters (such as the key magazine Adbusters) and some activist groups are suggesting that the coalition is merely an effort to co-opt the anti-1% forces to support Obama, but that's only partly correct.

It's true that Obama is using the 99% slogan to draw a sharper distinction between himself and shape-shifting Romney, who is expected to occasionally gravitate to the center right during the remaining campaign while not completely disavowing his opportunist waving of the Don't-Tread-On-Me Tea Party banner during the primaries. It's also true that some groups in 99% Spring are in it strictly to support the Democrats and are in fact front groups.

But some unions, which certainly want a Democratic win, also seek to promote labor's agenda independently among the masses of people, not least by associating itself with movements demanding a better deal for the 99%.

Union leaders know this isn't the latter 1930s or the first three decades after World War 2, when the Democrats often went to bat for the working class/lower middle class. This is 2012, after several decades when productivity jumped 70%, wages stagnated at 10% increase and the rich more than doubled their income. Today the Democrats are no longer

center/center left. Wall Street has both parties in its pocket.

Actually, many of the Occupy slogans are quite similar to what labor has been fighting about for years, such as denouncing Wall St., the corporations, CEO pay, the end of the “American Dream,” and particularly the rampant growth of economic inequality and the rich-poor gap.

The AFL-CIO organized several marches to Wall St. in New York in the years leading up to last October’s Occupy march and occupation of Zuccotti Park near the financial center. Labor hardly received any publicity because the commercial mass media is anti-union. The media, however, thrives on new social disruptions that include matters of permanent encampment, forced removal, several incidents of serious police brutality, and the fact that millions of people are adopting relatively radical slogans throughout the country.

Some big labor organizations, such as the giant Service Employees International Union, the Transport Workers Union and others supported Occupy Wall Street protesters from the beginning and joined in their big demonstrations because of a similarity of grievances. Finally, as a perhaps belated response to the economic crisis, a lot of labor’s old slogans have now percolated into social movement discourse.

The unions didn’t invent the 99% watchword but it was an easy fit for a major people’s movement representing millions of workers that’s being aced out of the political system by the power elite. The AFL-CIO now refers to the labor movement as “America’s original working class social network.”

Not all unions by a long shot are yet involved with social movements, and all too frequently social movements seem indifferent to union problems or view organized labor as just one more “interest group.” Some unions, indeed, have become antagonistic to certain causes such as the environmental movement. The Laborers International Union, for example, was highly critical of the fight against the Keystone XL pipeline because it “takes away jobs.” The actual number of jobs involved is not that large, but it’s important to a union with high percentage of unemployed workers.

This is not a new problem and a possible step toward resolution is fairly obvious. Social change movements must make genuine efforts to demonstrate concrete solidarity with the trade unions. The job issue is real in terms of the environment and other labor issues. What’s needed is a united campaign by the social/political movements and the trade unions to oblige the power structure to take forceful steps to put people to work, including the creation of “green” jobs and infrastructure repair. Social change movements should also provide active support for labor’s campaign to eliminate barriers to organizing workers.

Frankly – though this is a long shot – at some point labor should consider taking a portion of the multi-millions it spends on financing Democratic candidates and lobbying Congress and use part of it to build a mass coalition of unions and various social change organizations willing to fight the power. It’s obvious the unions aren’t getting an adequate return for their monumental investments in the system. It would take several million bucks and a few years, but a huge nationwide activist movement making radical economic and social demands on the government and political system could pay off in a big way.

This is an unusual election year. As all peace and justice organizers know, presidential election years are virtually a washout for all activism except that of an electoral nature. The enormous anti-Iraq war movement was totally sidelined in 2004 as its Democratic base

focused on supporting pro-war John Kerry. It happened in 2008 as well, and the peace movement nearly collapsed when Obama took power. Now there are numerous dissident actions taking place around the country in an election year. Occupy still gets considerable attention but other types of activism are in the streets and meeting halls as well.

Today's activism is a far cry from the dramatic growth of the political left and the union movement during the Great Depression — particularly in the formidable strike activity that characterized the period — but at least it has started after a relatively quiet couple of years following the onset of the Great Recession.

The May Day action and other manifestations are signs that economic and other activism will continue to grow. Another reason is that the government acknowledges that 14.6% of workers remain unemployed, partially employed or “discouraged and not working (a probable underestimate) — and this situation is expected to last for several years.

The American labor movement is under the gun and beginning to move in a good direction, too slowly for some, too fast for others. The big union federation only broke with decades of top leadership “business unionism” in 1995 that kept the movement distant and suspicious of progressive social forces. This is changing, though many unions are still foot-dragging.

Real solidarity between the movements and the unions will enhance positive change. The more the unions involve themselves in social struggles for equality, people's rights and labor rights, in the face of a political system in thrall to the 1%, there's a good chance it can become stronger. And a bigger and more viable union movement can lead the way to substantial progressive social change. Time will tell.

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