

The Democrats and ‘Lesser Evil’ Politics

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Global Research, June 03, 2011

3 June 2011

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

Why is it that people in the United States enjoy far fewer social benefits than the working class, middle class and the poor who live in many other industrialized capitalist countries?

Why is it that the major social benefits Americans do have — such as Medicare, Social Security and food stamps — are constantly in danger from right wing Republicans and conservative Democrats? Why is it that the modern Democratic Party always seems to compromise and retreat, even when it is the stronger of the political duopoly? And why is it that there aren't more viable choices at the ballot box to help overcome this situation?

These and many other questions have been coming to the fore since the Democrats gained the White House and both houses of Congress in the 2008 elections but did not mobilize their majority to fight for social gains or pass important social and labor legislation. Now, following the Republican domination of the House since last year's midterm election, the entire edifice of social advances won over the decades seems up for grabs.

Further, though the majority of Democratic voters opposed the Bush era wars, they are being continued by Democratic President Barack Obama, not just in Iraq and Afghanistan but spreading to Pakistan, Yemen and now Libya, where the White House, while trying to hide in the background, is leading the U.S./NATO campaign for regime change by bombing the residence of Col. Gaddafi and his family. Had George W. Bush done that when Democrats used to be in the peace movement they would have protested in droves.

A key to these contradictions, which many Americans often do not recognize, begins with the fact that that America is a class society. The capitalist social-democratic countries of Europe are also class societies, but some of them enjoy far greater benefits from their governments because their left mass parties fought hard to gain and retain those benefits.

The political, educational and communication systems that mold popular thinking in the U.S. work overtime to conceal the class nature of our society. The notion of a “classless” America is largely believed even though it is contradicted by the cold statistics of wealth, income, poverty, power, powerlessness, housing, education, jobs, healthcare, the biggest prison population in the world and an aggressive hegemonic and militarist foreign policy.

The facts also show that many millions of Americans are further oppressed by racial as well as class stratification, although the generality of white people seem to believe that racism and the barriers to racial equality are no longer serious problems. Why else is African American unemployment double that of jobless whites, and black family assets are less than half that of white families? Why else the cash-starved inner-city schools, or the de facto residential segregation?

The nature of the American political system vitiates against social reforms for the masses of people. There are two ruling political parties in the United States — the Republicans and the Democrats — and both these parties are positioned right of political center, the Republicans to the farther right.

It is hardly controversial to suggest that these ruling parties primarily serve the interests of wealth, the corporations and Wall St., and that they exercise dominant influence over the Republican and Democratic leadership and a large majority of political office holders. To our knowledge there is not one decisive indicator to demonstrate this assumption is false.

For example, the two parties combined neoliberalism and globalization to benefit the big corporations at the expense the American working people and the society in which they live. Both supported the financialization of the economy and then deregulated the financial markets. Both presided over the deindustrialization of the United States. Both facilitated the greed and gambling that led to the Great Recession. Both do little to seriously alleviate unemployment. Both refused to take effective steps to prevent millions of home foreclosures or to fight for programs to rebuild America's neglected infrastructure

The Democrats gesture politically toward the middle class, working class, minorities, unions and the poor — their principal voting blocs — though in the last 40 years this broad constituency has received nil-to-negligible benefits from the arrangement. In fact many of the gains won in struggles of earlier years are in deep jeopardy today, with little more than a rhetorical fight-back from the Democratic Party. It is true that the Democrats are fighting back on Medicare — one of the most popular programs in America which the Republicans foolishly attacked — but only a small minority stand up for new proposals serving the mass of working people.

This is the “genius” of the American political system. The class of wealth and power has devised a structure where only two fairly similar mass political alternatives are available on Election Day, as opposed to the three and four viable mass parties, including those of the left, in other rich capitalist countries, especially in the social democratic societies.

As we have noted before, the U.S. is the only such country without a mass left party — and every effort to form one over the decades has been weakened by red-baiting, repression, the opposition of a formidable commercial and governmental propaganda apparatus, and the reluctance of the progressive left and labor to turn away from the Democratic Party and work with others on the left to build a mass third political party to challenge the hegemony of the two parties of big business.

The American people are told that the only way to bring about a good government that really cares about the people is in the voting booth. But at the booth the choice for the upper classes usually consists of “good” and “lesser good” political candidates, with “evil” and “lesser evil” candidates for everybody else.

Many Democrats in 2008 thought President Obama was a “good” candidate who would govern from the liberal or progressive “left,” but in practice this was shown to be fictitious. They will now vote for him again in 2012 as a lesser evil candidate because he is the only available viable alternative is some god-awful reactionary who will strip them of their Social Security. This tends to bedevil the liberal/progressive voting bloc every four years. (Note: We say “viable” in the sense of being able to win; there are left candidates from small parties who are better and deserve a vote, but the system is stacked against them.)

At this point, because many of the Democratic House members who lost last November were center-rightists and Blue Dogs defeated by far-right Republicans backed by the reactionary Tea Party, there are more liberals and progressives among the Democratic ranks than usual. A total of 83 out of 193 Democrats belong to the Congressional Progressives Caucus — and they are rendered virtually powerless by President Obama, House leaders, and the bigwigs and money people behind the Democratic Party. In April the caucus introduced a liberal People’s Budget to challenge Obama’s center-right offering and the GOP’s ultra-conservative proposal, but as *The Nation* noted May 9, it was simply “ignored by establishment Democrats.”

The Republican Party has moved considerably farther to the right in recent decades. Just look at its antics in Congress and in the state legislatures today. They are trying to break the unions and destroy all the social advances of the last 75 years. It’s not that the GOP is so powerful, but the Democrats are compromising and weak, partially because they are moving to the right themselves behind a leadership hell-bent on compromise with the right wing.

It hasn’t always been this way. The old Democratic Party, going back nearly eight decades, harbored a vibrant center-left wing for several years during the 1930s and a few more during the 1960s.

Now, the Democratic Party is positioned on the center-right (similar to the old “moderate” Republican tendency that was drummed out of the GOP decades ago), though it continues to harbor a minority center left faction of remnant liberalism and a smattering of social democrats. This worthy but sidelined vestige, which defends the old victories and remains guided by the ideals of modern liberalism, inadvertently provides the backsliding party with an undeserved liberal patina.

In the 1930s the Democratic Party moved partially to the left in order to save capitalism during the Great Depression by inaugurating a number of social-democratic reforms that pumped money into the economy and kept the working class away from socialist revolution. (Remember, there was a swiftly developing Soviet Union at the time and it was essentially the only country in the world untouched by the Depression.) This was the period of President Franklyn D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, which began dissipating with the approach to World War 2 (1941-45).

Though largely unwarranted, the party’s center left reputation lingered for years afterwards, because of its continuing defense of the Depression-era programs (such as Social Security), and due to the phenomenal post-war growth of the union movement. At the same time, it was the Democrats who ruled Dixie and were the prime supporters of racial segregation, as they were of the Cold War.

In the mid-1960s the Democratic Party again moved to the center left, partially because the ’60s were more radical times. There were two main reasons.

- One was in response to the extraordinary struggle against racial segregation and injustice led by the African American people’s movement (and white supporters) since the mid-1950s that had become acute by the mid-1960s. Had the economic/political elite that governs America continued to ignore the battle for racial equality and withhold democratic reforms, there was a possibility of a mass social upheaval. (The social struggle — not the ballot box — principally obtained these civil rights reforms, as it has virtually every significant social

advance in American history.)

- The other reason was the mass rebellion — initially led by youth and the left and ultimately extending to much of the middle class and other sectors of America — against conservative social/cultural strictures and right wing ideology, the Vietnam war, the anti-left political repression continuing from the 1950s, de facto racial injustice, male supremacy, overt female oppression, sexual hypocrisy, homophobia, and various other backward ills.

During this period, despite his vast expansion of the unjust Vietnam war, Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society social-democratic reforms — racial integration laws such as voting rights, and important social programs such as Medicare/Medicaid, food stamps, etc. — constituted a worthy continuation of the New Deal reforms of a generation earlier.

The Democratic Party lost the 1968 election to Republican Richard Nixon, mainly due to Johnson's foolhardy imperialist war. Ironically, due to continuing radical momentum for a few years, the last of America's social-democratic reforms took place during the right-wing Nixon Administration in the late 1960s-early 1970s. He approved two important new departments — the Occupational Health and Safety Administration and Environmental Protection Agency. Among the legislation he backed was the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act.

The great right wing backlash against the social and integration reforms of the '60s, accompanied by big business attacks on the unions and working class incomes, began in earnest during the mid-'70s. This right wing counterattack is continuing to this day and accounts for the present widespread conservative context of American politics.

There have not been any important social programs fostered by the Democrats since Johnson left office. By the mid-1970s the Democratic Party had abandoned its center left leanings and was simply a Cold War centrist party that occasionally exuded liberal rhetoric without practical results for another dozen years.

The economic assault on working families beginning in the mid-'70s was perhaps the fiercest aspect of the backlash. According to statistics gathered by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, during "the 30 years following the Second World War [1946-1976]... income for the bottom 90% of American households roughly kept pace with economic growth. Now [1976-2007], the bottom 90% have seen their income rise only by a tiny fraction of total growth, while income for the richest 1% has exploded by upwards of 275%."

During these years, as unions were weakened by pro-business legislation and other barriers to labor organizing, and as working class incomes stagnated, the Democratic Party hardly did anything to protect the workers despite labor's near-total support for Democratic candidates.

Aside from a small minority of Democratic politicians, liberal rhetoric virtually disappeared from the party's vocabulary by the end of the reactionary 1980s, when the "L" word became unfashionable. This set the stage for the assumption to power for eight years (1993-2001) of Democratic President Bill Clinton, a self-proclaimed centrist with no use for what remained of the center left or its grand victories of yesteryear. Clinton's greatest social accomplishment was getting rid of "welfare as we know it." The "L" word seems to be slowly returning (to no political avail, however) but the "W" word? — forget about it. The welfare of

the American people had gone out of style, and welfare programs followed.

Eight years of Clinton centrism and compromise with conservatives were followed by eight more years (2001-2009) of Bush neoconservative/ultra conservative governance during which time the Democratic Party gravitated from the center toward the center/center right, always seeking the “center” by shifting to the right.

And then, of a sudden, the Democratic leadership discovered what it viewed as a political *deus ex machina* — the African American freshman Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, an extremely intelligent, attractive family man with a disarming smile and persuasive, golden-voiced oratorical skills. He was without serious political experience or accomplishments but he had opposed the Iraq war from the beginning and articulated an abundance of glittering generalities on the campaign trail sufficient for the hopeful to interpret as liberalism, and for the excessively hopeful to identify as a progressive in the tradition of FDR.

Party insiders well understood that Obama was the corporate candidate backed by Wall St. and would finally put the Democrats back into power after eight dreadful Republican years. When he took office, as liberals were bursting with anticipation, he proceeded to govern not from the center, as did Clinton, or from the center/center right to which most of the party leadership had gravitated during the Bush years, but directly from the center right, with no intermediary to bar the passage to a “Grand Compromise” between the right/far right Republicans and the center right Democrats.

Today’s raunchy, virtually dysfunctional political situation in the U.S. is in part the product of Obama’s misunderstood campaign pledge to form a government, and a relationship between the White House and Congress, not of Democrats and Republicans but of “Americans” — sans party labels — working together toward a unified goal.

The Republicans responded by slandering Obama and calling him a socialist and a foreigner, and by virtually wilding in the streets and fighting the Democrats 27/7. Of course, that’s how center rightist Obama’s ruinously naïve pledge is carried out in reality.

Keep in mind, however, that (1) each time the Republican’s unfairly and in a racist manner attack Obama, or go far, far to the right, attacking pensions and Medicare, they probably do more harm to themselves than the Democrats. Republican excesses and Obama’s bending-over-backward-for-unity characteristic will probably get him more votes in 2012. (2) And recall, each time there’s been a big fight there’s a big compromise, toward the right, even during the two years when the Democrats controlled both chambers of Congress and the White House. That’s how Obama and the majority of today’s Democrats govern. Look at the record:

Remember what happened to single payer/public option health care. Remember deficit reduction, Wall St., financial reform, foreclosure protection, bank bailouts, and jobs-jobs-jobs. Remember Guantanamo, the Patriot Act and civil liberties. Remember the environment, global warming, offshore drilling, clean coal, and nuclear energy. Remember immigration reform, the Pentagon budget, repair of the infrastructure, military commissions, the suppressed torture photos, education reform, the U.S.-enabled coup in Honduras, the continuing Cold War sanctions on Cuba, the Palestinian situation and the Obama wars, wars. Remember restrictions on abortion, the Employee Free Choice Act, the Bush-Obama millionaire tax cuts.

Add them all together — there's a lot more to come — and that's the meaning of the "Grand Compromise" between right/far right and the center right.

Comes 2012, virtually all the Democrats — from the "betrayed" progressives, the "disillusioned" liberals, and the "disheartened" labor movement will join together with center and center right rank and file against the right wing menace. Many will do so because they share Obama's politics. Many will do so, as they have done in election after election, because he's the current "lesser evil."

But in case all this remains unnoticed, it must be pointed out that while "lesser evil" politics may elect Democrats to the highest office from time to time, the long-term consequences have been a quite substantial shift to the right in American politics over the last 40 years. For instance Obama's touted healthcare plan is considerably to the right of the plan championed by Nixon in the early '70s (or the single-payer plan advocated by Democratic President Truman in 1948).

So far, there's no end to this in sight, and continuing to wait for the Democrats to execute a political U-turn is like waiting for Godot. The alternative is to think the unthinkable, and all the progressives and many of the liberals know precisely what that is — to join with the left, win over as much of labor and the movements for social change as possible, raise the money and start to build a left third party. This will be the beginning of change, not the end, but the process must begin somewhere.

It will be said: But this is risky. It will take many years. It's been tried and failed in the early '20s and late '40s. The left will get nowhere in America. The right wing will make advances while we try get our act together.

There's some truth in all of this, but today is a new day with different circumstances and problems. It should be obvious to many by now that the two party system has become a fetter upon progressive change, and that the United States is a superpower in serious decline. We have climate change now, and an infrastructure crisis; a militarist and imperialist foreign policy with faltering pretensions to empire that eventually may lead to a world war; a political system fast growing dysfunctional as the capitalist economy weakens, the educational system founders, and the right wing itches for more power.

The labor movement — which is key to any progressive independent third-party manifestation — shovels hundreds of millions of dollars every two years into the maw of the ineffective "lesser evil" center right party. A relatively small percentage of those dollars could begin to fund a strong third party of the left.

Labor is clearly disturbed by the lack of basic reciprocity from the Democrats. AFL-CIO leader Richard Trumka declared May 20 that the federation might withhold funding from conservative Congressional Democrats who vote against the interests of labor, as it did to anti-union Democratic Sen. Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas, who lost last November. But clipping the wings of some Democratic Blue Dogs is as far as labor will go under its present leadership.

At what point, we wonder, will it be "prudent" to break with the prevailing system and power structure to take a political risk to bring about true progressive change in America, to end the needless wars, to create a society of genuine equality, and to solve the many problems confronting our country and world today? Frankly, we passed that point some time ago, and

time's running out. The necessity to act is palpable.

Meanwhile, the distance between the rich and the working class and middle class is huge and growing, while the poor, of course, get poorer. Corporations and Wall Street are taking over what remains of our democracy, and national politics moves ever further to the right, year by year.

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