

The Organized Left and the Death of “Pragmatic” Politics

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Shifting political winds are battering the establishment, as the breeze flows to the back of the populists. The left-populist Bernie Sanders didn't conjure the hurricane but adjusted his sails to it. As the political storm grows apace with rising income inequality, new social attitudes are bringing fresh expectations, transforming politics as we know it.

What seemed impossible yesterday is suddenly necessary. This newfound urgency is testing the establishment, that looks unsteady in the face of Black Lives Matter, 15Now, climate justice, tenants rights, and opposing the public service cuts that devastated Flint Michigan and destroyed public education.

The populist-fueled organizing helped expose the wide gap in the establishment's politics, whose corporate interests prevent the satisfying of such demands. Bernie recognized this was happening and seized the moment, running on a platform that connected with the emerging mood.

He's [far from perfect](#), but the Left could learn from Bernie's approach. This political moment is a precious gift, but to receive it you need an open mind and a change of habit. The thousands of new activists across the country engaging in the above issues are largely being ignored by the organized left — Labor, progressive and even socialist groups, most of whom seem too timid to get their hands dirty organizing with the new movements.

The failure to engage with populism has exposed the bureaucratic stasis of the organized left, whose core mission has morphed into “maintaining the organization,” usually in total isolation from the broader working class. The administrators of the organized left excel at administering; but this strength turns into a weakness when it becomes a political-organizational strategy, detached from the world around it.

This strategy mislabels itself as a kind of “pragmatism,” falsely advertising itself as “common sense” politics. As they claim the monopoly on what's “practical,” they dismiss the populist organizing as “unprofessional,” “unrealistic” or “too radical.” But the political ground is quaking beneath the pragmatists' feet, exposing cracks in their strategy. The organized left is under fire from the corporations on the one hand and the new movement activists on the other.

The low wages, high rent, and other issues have created a crisis in the working class that is rejecting the lifeless politics of the organized left. The tiny victories won by the left are getting drowned in a sea of poverty. The relevancy of the organized left is being tested. Their shrinking political niche is slamming shut. In this new political context it becomes “pragmatic” — for survival's sake — to skillfully engage with populism, helping lead these movement to success.

This is the only common sense solution: “plan A” went bust. But for the slow moving pragmatist any change is awkward. They’re notoriously bad about sensing shifting moods until they’ve manifested in fresh poll numbers, after the fact.

For example, when Obama entered office it was “pragmatic” not to support gay marriage, and when the polls shifted sharply Obama “pragmatically” changed his position. The left pragmatist uses a similar approach. In this way pragmatists are followers incapable of leading. But movements require real leaders who strive to move polls, not be shackled to them.

Polling still dominates the actions of some big unions and community groups: a political campaign may begin if polling indicates an easy victory, while a campaign is abandoned if it means actual struggle. Ending Jim Crow segregation probably didn’t poll well in many states before it was crushed, by bold organizing.

Polls are inherently conservative for many reasons. Relying on poll numbers wrongly assumes that politics takes place at the political center, but Bernie proved that the life-force of politics occurs on the margins. Inspiring a minority of people to take action is the lifeblood of a healthy, dynamic body politic.

The minority of passionate people who took action for Bernie spilled over to infect the centrists, moving the polls and re-setting the political equilibrium to such a degree that a “Democratic Socialist” has the highest favorability rating out of any candidate. Through these actions Bernie exposed the dull, uninspiring routinism of the organized left, most of whom are still stupidly campaigning for Hillary, their own members be damned.

The organized left has a fetish for polls because pragmatists assume that power dynamics are permanent and accepts their own limited power position in relation to their more powerful opponents. They believe, wrongly, that the balance of power between workers and corporations is static, which distorts their view on what is possible politically.

Once you believe a goal is “unachievable” it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, since you won’t commit the resources to organize and win. Luckily this losing logic wasn’t applied to ending slavery or Jim Crow, nor applied to demanding woman, immigrant and labor rights.

Because they often believe winning bold demands are impossible, the organized left aims low and achieves less. Just hitting the board is itself labeled a “victory,” no matter how far from the bullseye. This milquetoast approach doesn’t inspire members and encourages attacks from politicians and corporations, since acting like prey attracts predators.

The “pragmatic” approach is ultimately fear-based. As the organized left’s power shriveled, they “pragmatically” limited their actions to fit the ever-shrinking political confines, while the establishment took up ever-more room.

Over time the organized left evolved to survive in the tiniest political crevices. The unions, for example, excel at this approach and believed themselves safe until Friedrichs threatened to stomp them like ants. Justice Scalia’s death put a pause to the massacre but the corporations will not quit until their enemies are squashed.

As the left pragmatist’s power shrinks, their fear grows, and all political risks are shelved. Instead of demanding from management, a pragmatic union asks nicely. Or doesn’t ask at all. Instead they “partner” with the boss, showing good faith by taking strikes “off the

table”: the union’s greatest weapon was tossed in a lock box and forgotten. And in exchange unions got nice rhetoric and lower wages.

Instead of educating and mobilizing their members and the community, the pragmatic leaders prioritized elections, campaigning for establishment politicians who were mislabeled as “progressive.”_After the election “victory” the bland lobby campaign begins. The “pro-worker” candidates are never held accountable post-election, since this would require challenging them instead of groveling.

To avoid embarrassing the politician, “unreasonable demands” are taken off the table. As a rare last resort an online petition might be distributed, but rarely in tandem with a powerful campaign that publicly challenges power.

This approach ensures that only the most watered down laws are passed. The organized left has no political champion, yet the label “champion” is freely given to anybody making the tiniest pro-union/“progressive” gesture. The political strategy alienated the community and ignored the membership of the organized left. It was 100% top down. The union leaders engaged politicians and disengaged from members.

The strategy had limited success until the politicians recognized what labor leaders didn’t: the power of unions doesn’t reside in the labor lobbyist, but the labor membership. The politics from the lobbyist are only effective if they can be backed up by action, and the more members who were left out of the equation, the more that politicians ignored the labor lobbyists.

As inequality created more billionaires, politicians cared less about smaller union donations. Hillary Clinton will gladly take union money, but before she even launched her presidential campaign she’d already [received \\$21.5 million](#) from the banks and corporations for “speeches” she gave since leaving her Secretary of State position and before declaring her candidacy, a form of legalized corruption that the organized left gets left out of.

The above strategies of “pragmatism” have disempowered the labor movement to the point where its very life is threatened by anti-worker “Right to Work” laws and other legal challenges. Fortunately, there are sections of the labor movement that recognize this as a problem and have taken some important steps.

SEIU initiated the 15now campaign in 2012, a demand that seemed like ultra-left lunacy at the time but has since ricocheted across the country. The bold risk was a sound investment that has raised political consciousness nationally, empowering working people to re-think their value at work._It’s also given unions more leverage organizing new workers and power at the bargaining table. Community groups, unions, and socialist candidate Kshama Sawant have all successfully used the \$15 demand to organize and win power.

Unfortunately, the full potential of this movement is being artificially restricted by the same groups promoting it. The organized left sees \$15 through a pragmatist lens, distorting its purpose and devaluing its potential.

Instead of inspiring the community or pushing workers into action, \$15 is often used as a “bargaining chip” with politicians, to continue the top-down political games. Instead of breathing fresh life into the movement, \$15 is sucked up in the final gasping breath of the pragmatist.

A great example of this is the many unions that have endorsed Hillary Clinton for president. The former Walmart Board member and NAFTA/TPP champion doesn't deserve a passing glance from labor, which has overwhelmingly endorsed her.

Unions are thus miseducating their members about Clinton, and some unions are blatantly lying — [such as SEIU in Nevada](#) — that falsely claimed that Hillary supports \$15. She doesn't.

But Bernie Sanders was pushed into adopting \$15 into his platform by the movement's power, and Hillary is being shamed for supporting only \$12 by the establishment New York Times, [that wrote:](#)

“Economic obstacles are not standing in the way of a \$15-an-hour minimum wage. Misplaced caution and political timidity are. The sooner Mrs. Clinton overcomes those, the stronger her candidacy will be.”

Some unions are also misusing \$15 at the local level. In Oregon, for example, a strong 15now movement arose independently of the labor unions. The 15now groups sought support from unions as they gave direct support to unions bargaining for \$15. It was a winning formula, as several unions fought and won \$15 with direct aid of the 15now community group.

The whole Oregon labor movement went on record to support a \$15 minimum wage, but tensions quickly arose with Oregon Democratic politicians who wanted a much lower increase. In response, some union leaders [launched a \\$13.50 ballot initiative](#), which many speculated was aimed squarely at crushing the \$15 ballot measure.

The pro-union \$15now activists were unnecessarily given a reason to dislike unions, while Oregon politicians pounced on the disunity, by creating a new [reactionary minimum wage system](#) with three 3 tiers- \$14.75, \$13.50, \$12.50- with a 6 year phase in time

The \$15 now demand was watered down, waterboarded beyond recognition. The urgency of “now” that made \$15 powerful was maimed, yet celebrated as a victory by the unions who bargained against themselves.

The power of \$15 cannot be fully harnessed while it's simultaneously undermined. If the goal is to achieve cheap victories — as it often seems — the labor leaders have badly misjudged this political moment, unnecessarily smearing their own reputations in the process. Instead of building a powerful independent movement, the union leaders betraying \$15 are building yet more divisions.

The future of the organized left will be decided on the issue of bold leadership vs. “pragmatism.” As millions of people demand human dignity in the face of rampant inequality and injustice, they'll be looking for strong organizations to join to champion their cause.

This demands that the organized left adopt a dynamic, inspiring approach. When an organization adopts lifeless politics, the prognosis is death. The organized left must meet the challenge head on; it's now a matter of life and death.

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