

## **After the Elections: What Next?**

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There is no question that the outcome of the 2004 elections must be seen as a stunning defeat for working people. Bush will use his “mandate” to attempt to steamroll a series of radical new initiatives aimed at the very heart of working people’s ability to survive and to organize on their own behalf. Once implemented, many of these changes will take decades to reverse.

Even more disturbing is *how* the election was apparently won. The Republican Party has crafted and perfected a message that couples pro-corporate economic policies with a populist social conservative appeal. They have turned the class anger of millions of mostly unorganized, mostly white, workers into a revolt against a bi-coastal liberal “elite”. This is the stuff of which fascism is made.

This does not mean that anywhere near a majority are fundamentally committed to the GOP’s divisive, punitive politics. The real problem is that the Democrats cannot and will not offer an alternative vision that speaks to people’s real, everyday concerns. As Tony Mazzocchi constantly pointed out, “If we don’t lead the way, groups with an ugly agenda will capture the minds of our members.” Others will drop out altogether, convinced that the entire system is corrupt and irrelevant.

How long will labor and its allies continue to prop up the hollow shell of a party that can’t win elections and promises, at best, to implement a kinder and gentler version of the corporate agenda that has devastated the lives of so many working people?

Now is the time for the labor movement to commit its resources and activism into shifting the terms of debate and building a new working class majority.

### **The Betrayal of the Activists**

The stakes were high in this election and the drive to defeat Bush mobilized unprecedented numbers. Tens of thousands of rank-and-file union members volunteered to work on this campaign. Many took unpaid time off or traveled to distant states at their own expense. They saw this election as a fight for their survival. New forms of organization also emerged that used the Internet and new technologies to educate and mobilize in creative and exciting ways.

But the disjuncture between the hopes and aspirations of these activists and the policies and positions of their candidate was truly striking. Legions of anti-war activists campaigned their hearts out for a pro-war candidate. Laid-off textile workers and steelworkers went to the wall for a man who had never voted against a single trade agreement. Lifelong advocates of health care as a right devoted their every waking hour to elect someone who promised to throw another half a trillion dollars down the sinkhole

of private, for-profit health insurance. It was not Kerry's rhetoric or charisma that brought out the passion of these people. Rather it was their passion that animated a directionless and vapid campaign and almost brought it to victory.

And now that the election is over, the Democratic Party will surely move further to the right. They will run away from their natural base and toward some fictitious "center" that itself keeps shifting to the right the faster they run toward it. They will frame this call for retreat in the "scientific" language of poll results and computer simulations. The stalking horse of the mythical "swing voter" will be used to supplant the aspirations and values of the very real activists who keep them in the game.

### **Change the Terms of Debate**

This approach flies in the face of the lessons we learn in our daily lives as organizers and leaders: people are not one-dimensional. Their consciousness is constantly being shaped and reshaped by the swirl of events, conditions, beliefs, relationships, hopes and fears that surround all of us. Even those who don't believe in evolution worry that their grandmothers have to cut their pills in half to make them last until the next social security check. Even those who think abortion is immoral fear for their children's future in a world where a college education is rapidly becoming a luxury for the rich. Even the most passionate of gun owners wonder how they will pay their heating bill this winter.

We cannot build a new majority by pandering to irrational fears and prejudices or privately held moral and religious beliefs. The Republicans already own that turf. But we can create a new working class constituency by changing the terms of political debate. History has shown that people will transcend their personal ideologies and lifestyle choices if they believe that politics can make a real, material difference in their lives. We must also reach out to those 40% of eligible voters -- overwhelmingly poor and working class -- who did not vote in this election. They are the sleeping giants who could form a new majority if they believed that government could provide positive improvements in their lives.

Kerry did not come close to advancing such a vision. His campaign seemed bent on lowering expectations from the very beginning. He openly asserted that he would not stop job outsourcing and his jobs program boiled down to wonkish tax breaks for corporations. Unwilling to take on the insurance and pharmaceutical industries, he could not promise to make health care a right for all Americans. He largely ignored the women's, civil rights and environmental movements. Heavily dependent on organized labor for funding and ground troops, he never once mentioned unions in the four and one-half hours of nationally televised debates. And he couldn't find a way to forthrightly and unambiguously oppose the war in Iraq.

All that Kerry's supporters could do was to point out how dangerous his opponent was to the well being and security of the American people. While this was itself a powerful message, in the end it wasn't enough.

This is the tragedy of American politics: People no longer trust government to make a positive difference in their lives. An entire generation of workers has grown to maturity without any experience of government proactively advancing their interests. And as the labor movement declines in both numbers and influence, many of the same workers have had no experience with unions. For decades, our political debates have been dictated by the global corporate agenda. A vision of politics organized on behalf of the vast majority of people who work for a living never makes it to the starting gate.

### **Politics As Usual**

Like the Whig Party of the 1850's, the Democratic Party seems headed toward oblivion. Riven by its own internal contradictions, it is incapable of breaking with its corporate masters and presenting a clear program that can bring together a majority of the American people. While it would be naïve to expect that labor and its allies can afford to completely abandon its relationship with the Democratic Party, it would be equally naïve to expect that relationship to produce any real alternatives for working people.

In the absence of any alternative, our political activity over the next four years will be reduced to preventing catastrophe. Victory will be defined as simply surviving for one more day. If that is all we do, we will be in the same weak position in 2008 that we found ourselves in this year.

We need to do more. Our challenge is to create a new politics and set the terms of the debate. We can do that by organizing around the issues that neither political party is capable of addressing because of their corporate ties. The right to health care and education; the right to organize, bargain and act in solidarity with one another; an all out assault on the corporate criminals who are looting our future. These are issues that can move millions into a new political alignment.

A project this vast cannot be accomplished in the six months before an election. We need to start now if we hope to build a new movement. And the only force with the resources and independence to take on such a project as this is the labor movement.

### **The Crisis in Labor**

The unions and activists who came together to found the Labor Party in 1996 were part of an upsurge that also swept new leadership into the AFL-CIO, began to win important national strikes for the first time in 15 years and seemed on the verge of organizing a million new members a year. Fed up with four years of Clinton administration sellouts and betrayals, we felt that we would fairly rapidly bring in the broad labor support necessary to become a mass electoral party.

Today, the labor movement is under siege and consumed by internal divisions. Its weakness is measured not only by the lost strikes and failed organizing drives but also by its diminished political capacity to speak on behalf of the interests of working people. In some states and regions, more workers identify with the populist social conservatism

of the Bush/Rove team than with the lunch bucket politics of the AFL-CIO. That we have failed to capture the hearts and minds of these workers is a disgrace and a shame.

The debates now raging within labor about its future are long past due. They need to be about more than just building density and allocating jurisdictions. How do we begin to build an independent politics of labor? How do we become a real movement again that is seen to speak for the vast majority of workers both organized and unorganized? How can we build real power for working people?

Labor needs its own political party. The opening lines of our Electoral Policy say it best: “The Labor Party is unlike any other party in the United States. We stand independent of the Democratic and Republican parties. Our overall strategy is for the majority of American people—working class people—to take political power.”

And here we must be frank: we do not have an effective Labor Party in this country because the labor movement has not met the challenge of creating and sustaining one. That is the task at hand.

### **What Next?**

How we respond to the loss of this election will determine our very survival as a movement. There are some basic steps that we need to take *now* to prepare for the kind of bold and visionary independent political party that will have the power to build a new majority of working Americans:

**1. Abandon the Inside Game.** We need to embrace the reality that we stand on the outside, confronting global corporate power. There is no chance that we will be called back to the table to get our piece of the pie. The sooner we realize this, the easier it will be for us to act like a real opposition and seek out new allies and new strategies.

**2. Promote Clear and Bold Solutions.** This is no time for policy wonks. Instead of tinkering with the Medicare drug negotiating authority, we should declare that health care is a right. Instead of trying to expand the Pell Grant system, we should call for free higher education. We need to build a movement from the bottom up around clear and easily understandable principles.

**3. Shift Resources.** The labor movement contributed massive amounts of time, energy and resources to the failed Kerry campaign. In four years, we will be expected to contribute even more to the next Democratic candidate. We need to learn from the example of right wing social activists and invest in building a real *base* around boldly articulated issues. If we move our activists and organizations into well-financed strategic national campaigns around issues of concern to all working people, if we declare our political independence, we can change the national political landscape.

**4. Deepen and Broaden the Debates.** The future survival of the labor movement concerns all of us. The debate over that future should not be confined to the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO. Workers need to be involved from the local union level on up. We need to talk about political density as well as market density. We need to talk about ways of building real power for working people that go beyond simple technical fixes.

**5. Act Like a Real Movement.** All too often labor is seen as an interest group that is divorced from the reality of the millions of workers and poor people struggling to earn a living. While they might hope for the wages, benefits and security that go with a union job, they may not see that our struggles are intertwined with theirs. Whenever we have found ways to make our issues resonate with large numbers of unorganized workers, we have made advances. We must restore our ability to create large-scale social turmoil—which is the only real source of our power.

Sometimes a defeat can act as a catalyst for change. The crushing of the Pullman Strike over 100 years ago led unions to reconsider how they organized workers and led Eugene Debs to organize a new movement that broke with the Democratic and Republican parties. The activism unleashed by this year's election changed many people's lives. Fed up with Bush and all that he represents, they yearn for a better world. We must speak to those millions and build a new politics of hope. We must reach out to those who have fallen under the sway of populist conservative demagogues and present them with an alternative that will make a real difference in their lives. We must convince those who have concluded that politics is nothing more than a corrupt rich man's game that activism can bring real change. We must build a Labor Party out of the ashes of this election.

Don't mourn, organize!

This is our first contribution to the debate over the direction of the labor movement in the post-election period. Let us know what you think at [elections@thelaborparty.org](mailto:elections@thelaborparty.org).

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