

Extolling the politics of expediency: an interview with US Green Party leaders

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On June 23-25, the US Green Party held its national convention in Denver, Colorado and chose Ralph Nader as its presidential candidate for the 2000 elections. This reporter covered the convention for the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The Nader campaign has received considerable media publicity. Polls indicate that it could have a significant impact on the vote for Democratic candidate Al Gore in certain states, possibly affecting the outcome of the presidential race.

But to what extent do the Greens represent a genuine break from the big business-dominated two-party system? The interviews below shed some light on this question.

Among those with whom I spoke at the convention, two delegates were particularly well-placed in the organization. They were John Resenbrink, one of the principal founders of the Greens in the US, and Scott McLarty, a media coordinator and adviser in Nader's 1996 Green Party presidential campaign. McLarty is also the party's candidate for city council in Washington, DC.

Resenbrink, a retired political science professor, helped launch the US Greens at a meeting in Augusta, Maine in January 1984. He is the author of the 1999 book *Against All Odds: the Green Transformation of American Politics*.

Like many of those who helped found the US Greens, Resenbrink was involved in liberal protest movements in the 1960s and 1970s against racial discrimination, poverty and the Vietnam War. Like many of those who would go on to found the Greens, Resenbrink was active in Democratic Party politics.

It is significant that Resenbrink and other founders of the Greens did not break with the Democratic Party over the Vietnam War. Despite their opposition to the war, they did not draw the conclusion that the Democratic Party, as well as the Republican Party, was an instrument of a definite class—the American capitalist class—and represented in essence the interests of US imperialism. Their eventual departure from the Democrats had far more the character of a pragmatic and tactical move, rather than a principled political break.

When they left the Democrats in the early 1980s, it was not from a theoretically clarified standpoint, based on an historical assessment of the class character of the Democratic Party. Instead their estrangement developed largely because they found it increasingly difficult to influence the party on such issues as women's rights, environmental protection and nuclear power.

In the 1970s Resenbrink had been a leader of the Reform Democrats of Maine, a short-lived faction that sought to pressure the state party. As the Democratic Party in the early 1980s adapted itself to the right-wing politics of Ronald Reagan, Resenbrink supported Jesse Jackson, in the hope that the party could be returned to its liberal past. Resenbrink only quit the Democrats when Jackson's 1983-84 bid for the party's presidential nomination was rejected.

As he told this reporter, "In 1984 activists from the anti-nuclear,

tenants' rights and back-to-the-land movements came together in the first organized meeting of the Greens in the US. A number of us had been active in the Democratic Party, and some would later go back to the Democrats. I had been very excited about Jesse Jackson's campaign and was very angry by the way he was treated by the Democratic leadership."

Resenbrink said the founding members of the US Greens were galvanized by the election victory of the West German Greens in 1983. "They won six percent of the vote in the West German elections and had 27 members of parliament elected. At our second meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota later in 1984, we discussed a book, written by Charlene Spretnak, that focused on what lessons we could take from the success of the West Germans for the US movement."

For Resenbrink and other founders of the US Greens, the predominant measure of "success" was the number of seats gained in a bourgeois election and the extent to which their West German counterparts obtained a foothold in the institutions of the state. Success was not measured from the standpoint of effecting a fundamental change in economic and social relations, or advancing the political consciousness of the masses to fight for such a change. Having failed to influence the Democratic Party from within, Resenbrink and his co-thinkers looked to the example of the West German Greens as a model for influencing the US political establishment through electoral activities.

I asked Resenbrink for his assessment of the political record of the German Greens, particularly their role as partners in the ruling coalition headed by the Social Democrats, which has slashed social spending and taxes on big business, and participated in NATO's war against Yugoslavia. Resenbrink did not attempt any explanation for the Greens' embrace of German imperialist interests, and only said that the Kosovo War had "caused a big conflict in the party, with many supporting the position of [Green Party leader and German Foreign Minister] Jokscha Fischer, and many who didn't."

Significantly, in Resenbrink's book, published on the eve of the 1999 Balkan War, he condemns various European and Latin American Social Democratic parties for being co-opted by the powers-that-be, but says nothing about the German Greens.

Like many of the ideological forebears of the Greens, Resenbrink regards the conception of the class struggle to be outmoded, arguing it has been superseded by an impending ecological disaster which has drawn all social classes into a common struggle for survival. "For Greens," he writes, "ecology is a central factor in all of the issues...especially, the structure and operations of the economy and its allocation and treatment of resources. It's not enough to contest and try to overcome the dominance of megacorporations, or to separate them from the pockets of politicians, or even to seek to make them, internally, compatible with democracy." He continues: "For Greens, it is a blazing necessity that businesses of all kinds, from small to very large, develop a new relationship with nature, one that radically reduces waste, eliminates pollution and ecological degradation, and ends the mindless depletion of

natural resources.”

In the course of our discussion, Resenbrink made it clear that the Greens’ proposals were not anti-capitalist. “What we propose is not necessarily bad for profits,” he said. He praised Richard Grossman, the author of a recent book entitled *Natural Capitalism*, which argues that the profit system is not inherently hostile to the environment, and that corporate executives can be good environmentalists and successful capitalists at the same time. “We can influence capital and show them how environmentally sound decisions can be good for profits too,” Resenbrink said.

Scott McLarty, 42, began his political activity in the 1980s. After many years in and around the Democratic Party, including working with Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition and Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone, McLarty left the Democrats in 1995 and soon after went to work for Nader’s 1996 campaign.

In our discussion, he described the Green Party as the defender of “small, independent entrepreneurs” against “global corporations.” McLarty elaborated: “We would say it is no longer a question of socialism versus capitalism, because capitalism has split into two directions now. There is the level of the local entrepreneur—let me call that entrepreneurial capitalism. Family farms, mom- and pop-owned shops, family businesses, small businesses. On the other hand, we face this increasing rule by global corporations, and that is a much different kind of capitalism from low-level, entrepreneurial capitalism.”

In this way McLarty spelled out the Greens’ basic class standpoint—that of the petty proprietor who is being crushed by big capital. In reality, the “free competition” stage of American capitalism was superseded by monopoly capitalism well over a century ago. And contrary to McLarty’s rose-colored portrayal of what he calls “agrarian capitalism,” the days of subsistence farming and rural backwardness were far from a paradise for the masses of working people.

What McLarty and the Greens are arguing for, in the name of anti-globalization, is a retrogression to a more primitive stage in the development of man’s productive forces. Their ideal is a reactionary utopia.

There is no question that the transnational corporations and organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) contribute to the further impoverishment and exploitation of the world’s working people. That, however, is the product not of the global integration of economic life per se, but rather the fact that this essentially progressive development remains within the reactionary framework of the capitalist market and the system of competing nation states.

The technological and scientific progress associated with globalization presents man with unprecedented means to raise his material and cultural level. This, however, requires that the working class liberate the productive forces from the control of capital, which subordinates all advances in technology to its drive for private profit. The Greens, however, explicitly reject such a struggle by the working class.

Their backward-looking perspective is linked to their calls for economic nationalism and their defense of the nation state. Nader and the Greens denounce the “subversion” of US sovereignty by transnational corporations and institutions like the WTO, and call for trade restrictions to protect “locally-based industries” against global competition. This nationalist perspective aligns the Greens with the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy. The logic of this standpoint—and the social forces whose outlook it articulates—inevitably bring the Greens into political proximity to extreme right-wing forces, including the fascist tendency headed by Patrick Buchanan.

This was underscored by McLarty’s response to a question about Nader’s common front with the AFL-CIO and Buchanan against trade agreements with Mexico and China. He said, “The tension between socialism and capitalism, which drove a large part of the twentieth

century, is no longer quite so clear. What we have now is more of a conflict between global corporate power and whatever resists that.”

I asked, “Whatever resists that? Is Pat Buchanan resisting?” McLarty replied, “Yes, he is part of the resistance.”

“Is Le Pen in France?” I asked. “Yes,” McLarty said.

Clearly uncomfortable with such an admission, McLarty added, “Actually I divide the resistance into two groups. There are the neo-theocrats, which include Le Pen, Pat Buchanan, the Islamic and Christian fundamentalist movements—who speak about blood or soil or the supernatural. The other kind of resistance is a democratic resistance that stresses human rights, economic justice and the environment. Between these two groups, there is a certain amount of overlap.”

Notwithstanding McLarty’s misgivings, the reality remains that the Greens’ promotion of economic nationalism and its alliance with the AFL-CIO bureaucracy help create a political climate for ultra-nationalist and fascist forces to grow. But this is not a consequence about which the Greens seem to concern themselves. In fact, they tend not to think beyond the most immediate, pragmatic level, and are generally consumed with whether or not a given tactic will gain them votes.

For example, McLarty acknowledged that the United Auto Workers and Teamsters bureaucracies had “long ago sold out their members,” and that the union officialdom’s xenophobic campaigns served to block the international unity of workers. But, he said, “they are also throwing a certain kind of credibility to Nader and the Greens at the same time.”

Nader’s appeal to the Teamsters leadership, McLarty admitted was a “political maneuver” but, he said, “In spite of the fact that they [the labor bureaucracy] are a hierarchical power, they still have influence.” He continued, “I have no idea how things will play out in the long run, but for right now they are effective in pushing the Green Party forward.”

Underlying this type of crude political opportunism is a lack of any firm foundation in theory or program. McLarty himself described the Greens as practicing a “kind of catch-as-catch-can political strategy.” But he added, “I don’t think that any kind of pure theory is effective anyway.”

Pragmatism, opportunism, eclecticism are held up as positive goods. In McLarty’s words: “I think what is going on right now is that the Green Party is getting stronger, and it is getting stronger through Nader’s campaign...We are doing a lot of things without a very clear theory behind it. I think just the emergence of a strong third party throws politics into a chaos, in which we are not sure how things are going to sort out.”

Such an unprincipled and eclectic approach to politics is characteristic of the social layers upon which the Greens are based. The middle layers of society exercise no real independence from the two main classes—the working class and the capitalist class—and swing, sometimes wildly, between the two. A party based upon such variegated and heterogeneous elements of the population is incapable of a consistent and scientific approach to politics.

The Greens may ignore the class struggle, but the class struggle does not ignore them. The right-wing evolution of the German Greens demonstrates the bankruptcy of such petty-bourgeois politics. In the fire of war and class conflict, the German Greens dutifully defended the interests of their ruling class. If given the chance, their American counterparts would do likewise.



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