

An exchange of letters on the Working Families Party

3 June 2002

Dear Editor,

I'm a subscriber to your web site and read your articles as often as I can. I was searching your web site today and didn't find an article on the Working Families Party (WFP) of New York State. The WFP is a political party that was formed in 1998 by labor unions (such as UAW and CWA) and ACORN. It is trying to revitalize the left in New York and has already achieved some marginal success. New York's unique political process of fusion voting, where candidates can run on multiple party lines, makes third parties here more influential than anywhere else in the US. In 1994, Governor Pataki received fewer votes on the Republican line than his opponent Mario Cuomo, but got the victory from 300,000 votes on the conservative party line. Now the WFP certainly is a bit more centrist than your organization, but the practical manner in which they are trying to shift the politics of New York to the left is encouraging. I didn't see an article out them on your website, and thought that the WFP might interest you.

Sincerely,

A devout Marxist

13 May 2002

Dear reader,

Thanks for your letter on the Working Families Party. Although this political organization is geographically limited to the state of New York, you are right in suggesting that its activities merit attention from the *World Socialist Web Site*.

As socialists, our task is to educate the working class as to its genuine social interests and the necessity to carry out an independent political struggle to achieve them. As a subscriber to the site, certainly you are aware that our conception of these interests and this struggle is fundamentally international in scope.

Flowing from these considerations, we are hostile to the type of opportunist electoral politics carried out by the WFP.

The WFP's mission, you say, is to "revitalize the left in New York." In practice, however, this consists of a campaign by a section of the trade union bureaucracy to win support for politicians of the Democratic Party, while creating the illusion of an "independent" third party with a social reformist program.

This is by no means an innovative tactic. You refer to New York's "unique political process of fusion voting," but are you

aware of the historical origins of this process?

The WFP has a political antecedent in the American Labor Party established in the 1930s. The ALP was the creation of that section of the American trade union bureaucracy that established the Congress of Industrial Organizations during the period of social unrest and political radicalization sparked by the Great Depression.

The union leaders who backed this political formation—in particular John L. Lewis, who headed the CIO, and Sidney Hillman, the president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers—promoted it as a step towards an independent political party of the working class.

Its practical purpose, however, was just the opposite. The CIO leaders sought to use the ALP as a means of competing with their rivals in the craft union-oriented American Federation of Labor in currying favor with the Democratic administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

At the same time, the ALP was designed to overcome a troubling political problem that the union bureaucrats faced in mobilizing labor support for the Democrats. Socialist traditions among the predominantly immigrant workers of New York City ran deep, and the militant struggles of the 1930s had convinced many others that the Democratic and Republican parties were both reactionary political instruments of the corporations and banks.

By creating a separate ALP ballot line, the union bureaucrats peddled the fiction that workers could vote for Roosevelt while maintaining their independence from the party that he led.

Thus the ALP served as a key weapon in the drive by the union officials and the Roosevelt administration, with the political support of the Stalinist Communist Party USA, to tame the militancy of the working class and channel it into an industrial union movement that accepted the profit system.

An unprincipled factional dispute within the union bureaucracy led to the ALP's breakup in the 1940s. One faction went on to found the Liberal Party, while the ALP itself dissolved. Today the Liberal Party is led by the right-wing political reprobate Ray Harding, who provided Republican Rudolph Giuliani crucial support in his mayoral campaign in return for patronage positions for his sons and cohorts.

There are substantial differences between the present political situation and that which existed 60 years ago. But in its

fundamental methods and aims, as well as its social base, the WFP shares a great deal in common with the ALP.

In New York, as throughout the country, millions of workers and middle class people, the historic popular base of the Democratic Party, have been alienated by that party's embrace of policies that are indistinguishable from those of the Republicans and serve only the interests of the financial elite. In New York City, they saw a series of Democratic mayors—Beame, Koch and Dinkins—as well as governors—Carey and Cuomo—carry out economic austerity policies, paving the way for victories by the Republicans.

The WFP's purpose is to step into this political void, corraling workers' votes by convincing them that they can simultaneously cast their ballots for Democratic politicians and support a program of social reform. The idea is that the politicians will be so grateful for the extra votes they pick up on the WFP line that they will adopt some, or all, of its platform. In reality, these politicians are happy to accept the support and even make speeches lauding the WFP's goals, only to carry out the policies demanded by big business once they have been elected.

The WFP's greatest claim to fame is having gotten 100,000 votes for Hillary Clinton in her successful bid for a US Senate seat from New York in 2000. In recent weeks she has emerged as a key figure backing legislation that would impose draconian expanded work requirements—40 hours a week—on welfare recipients, most of them single mothers.

Has the WFP repudiated this inhuman position—diametrically opposed to its ostensible program—by the candidate it helped elect? Of course not. If and when she seeks reelection, it will endorse her again, no questions asked.

The WFP's program of increasing the minimum wage, improved health benefits, education, etc., is merely window dressing for the party's real goal of funneling votes to the Democrats and thereby winning political influence for those who control the WFP: the bureaucrats of the Communications Workers of America, United Auto Workers, Teamsters, Social Service Employees International, American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees, and other unions.

This union bureaucracy constitutes a definite social stratum whose interests are different from and fundamentally opposed to those of the working class. It has zealously guarded its privileges even as the unions themselves have undergone a deep and protracted decay, seeing their numbers decline both as a percentage of the workforce and in absolute terms. While the bureaucracy's betrayal of struggle after struggle over the course of decades has decimated the ranks of organized labor, the union officialdom has managed to preserve its own fat salaries and extensive perks, primarily through its intimate ties to the corporations and the government.

While the WFP—like the ALP in its day—constitutes a useful tool for the trade union bureaucracy, this corrupt and reactionary layer will never allow the WFP to conflict with its

long-standing alliance with the Democrats and the capitalist state. What is the position of the WFP on the Bush administration's war in Afghanistan, on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or on the roundup of thousands of immigrants in the US and other repressive measures taken in the aftermath of September 11? No one knows, because its leaders don't say.

This is not merely because it is a statewide party and therefore oriented only to local concerns. The union bureaucracy has a definite outlook on these issues, one that is rooted in "America first" economic nationalism and anticommunism. It is the most enthusiastic flag-waver for US militarism and is organically opposed to any genuine effort to unite American workers with the workers and oppressed of other countries. The so-called "lefts" working in this party know full well that were they to advance a policy against war and repression, the union officials would give them a swift kick into the street.

You identify yourself as a Marxist. To be a Marxist, however, one must begin with a scientific assessment of the present crisis confronting mankind, characterized by unprecedented social inequality and a global eruption of militarism. The WSWS maintains that this crisis is not merely the result of this or that policy of the ruling elite, but is, rather, rooted in the fundamental contradictions of the world capitalist system.

It will not be resolved by clever "practical" initiatives aimed at shifting the existing two-party system in the US to the left, but only through the building of an independent revolutionary socialist movement based on the working class. Moreover, workers in New York and the US as a whole can achieve social equality and social justice only as part of an international struggle against the transnational corporations and global financial institutions that oppress and exploit workers all over the world.

This is the task to which the WSWS is dedicated, and it is irreconcilably opposed to the squalid political maneuvers carried out by the trade union bureaucrats through the Working Families Party.

Bill Vann, for the Editorial Board



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