



# Labor, Democrats and the Third Way

■ *Ellen David Friedman*

This past winter the Massachusetts AFL-CIO made a striking gesture. Still smarting from the battle over the North American Free Trade Agreement, the state federation decided to withhold routine PAC contributions from Congressional members who had voted for NAFTA. The decision stood in stark contrast to the many decades in which organized labor offered fairly unconditional, uncritical support to the Democratic Party and its candidates, even when Democrats failed to behave as allies. And while the Massachusetts example is singular and perhaps not an example of broader currents, it should be seen in light of other phenomena: the dissolution of rank-and-file unionists as a predictable Democratic voting block; the assertive distancing by the Democratic Party from its traditional constituencies (for example, acceding to the popular image that minorities, women, and workers are “special interests”); the emergence of H. Ross Perot and his surprising appeal to some sectors of unionized voters; and the growing interest among local labor leadership in Labor Party Advocates, a pre-labor party organization.

This is a moment in which old certainties about organized labor and the Democrats are becoming less certain; it is a circumstance that progressives within the labor movement should welcome and work with.

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The possibilities for shaping a different relationship between the two seem to be increasing—whether the goal is to compel the Democratic Party towards greater respect for labor’s agenda, or to build a new party founded on labor’s agenda. Starting from a premise that labor’s position in U.S. electoral politics ought to be stronger, we can approach this discussion as we would other strategic questions: What are the current realities in which organized labor operates? What is there to learn from experiments already under way? What resources does organized labor possess? What are the options for action and the obstacles to success? Finally, can we envision a future in which those inherently progressive goals of organized labor—economic security for workers and their families, workplaces that are safe both for employees and their communities, elimination of discrimination on and off the job, protection of free speech and the rights of concerted action—can define the reality and not just the rhetoric of a major political party?

We begin by looking at Vermont, a state in which the labor movement has actively supported the only independent socialist to serve as a member of Congress in 40 years—Representative Bernie Sanders—and has involved itself in the progressive organization surrounding Sanders, the Vermont Progressive Coalition. Though not a state with a strong or broad labor presence, unions have significantly boosted this third party movement over the last 15 years.

When Bernie Sanders was elected to his first surprising term of office as Burlington’s mayor in 1981, it was widely understood that an endorsement from the local policeman’s union **was crucial**. At the time, the media were presenting Sanders as a wild-eyed radical. He had run a half-dozen earlier campaigns for high office on a third-party line (the Liberty Union Party, built by anti-war activists of the 1960s who had relocated to Vermont from the urban Northeast), never polling beyond single digits. His campaigns were considered symbolic, designed to raise issues rather than get him elected. And besides, he didn’t comb his hair or wear a tie. So the police union’s unexpected endorsement conferred sudden and powerful credibility to the campaign that catapulted Sanders into last-minute momentum and a 10-vote victory on election day.

### **NEW CITY POLITICS**

From the union’s point of view, as well, this was a valuable step to have taken. The pivotal nature of its endorsement was publicly understood, which enhanced the union’s standing as a political player. Plus, it had just helped place a pro-labor candidate in office—in essence, hiring its own friendly employer. Sanders’ election began a period of muni-

icipal labor relations in Burlington unprecedented for its respectful tone, innovation, and good contracts.

The election made other major differences in the political life of the city. With Bernie Sanders in the mayor's office, newly appointed progressive activists on the city staff, and an energetic clutch of Progressive City Council members, Burlington city politics became a tripartite battleground whose chief antagonists were the Democrats and Progressives, with Republicans **on the political fringes**.

Sharp neighborhood, class, and cultural antagonisms shot up between Democrats and Progressives. The hidden antagonism between these two factions, so often shackled unhappily together, **burst into the open**. Suddenly there was life and meaning in municipal political life. Public issues—their content, public discussion, and resolution—were infused with substance. People took sides. Voter turnout increased year by year, consistently exceeding national averages. The existence of a third party in Burlington was an antidote to political malaise.

Over the next 13 years Sanders ran for higher office. When he gave up the mayor's seat in Burlington, he was succeeded by another Progressive. Progressives were elected every year to the Burlington City Council and then to the state legislature. The movement building around these elections was decidedly leftist, but it was always reaching into other constituencies: working with Vermont's farmers on the issue of dairy price supports and bovine growth hormone; assisting tenants in mobile home park buy-outs; brokering creative deals for affordable housing and grass-roots community economic development; supporting anti-discrimination measures for gays and lesbians; working with South Africa and Central America solidarity groups; and building ties to organized labor. The election cycle itself offered the unifying thread: If a given constituency saw the Progressives working effectively on their issue, they could be drawn into a Progressive election campaign. It worked well, but not flawlessly.

In 1986, Bernie Sanders ran for governor with three mayoral terms behind him and a record of pro-labor activism unmatched by any elected official. His opponent was the Democratic incumbent who had never demonstrated particular advocacy for labor or its issues. Nevertheless, the incumbent got all the labor endorsements—including those from unions that had loyally supported Sanders in his mayoral bids. The difference was scale. In local city elections, individual unions endorsed Sanders because he was so clearly their strong advocate. But in a state election, the Vermont State AFL-CIO chose the incumbent because she was more likely to be re-elected. Clearly, the higher the office, the more the power of incumbency dominates over political content. The refusal

of organized labor to rally to Sanders' side dealt a blow that the campaign could not overcome, and the election results were disappointing.

But in 1988, with Sanders running for an open seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, the labor community again occupied a pivotal role and things began to shift. This election was a three-way race: a rich-boy Republican; a labor Democrat with the bona fides of several effective years of state legislative leadership; and Sanders. Organized labor locked onto the Democrat and, more or less, ran his campaign. Sanders was shunned by labor officialdom (such as it is in Vermont), but he grabbed the attention of the rank and file and stamped a defiant character on the campaign. The Republican limped to a victory only 3 percentage points in front of Sanders, whose showing stunned the state, while the labor Democrat ran far behind and retired from politics.

By 1990 the seismic political shift had moved the thinking of organized labor. Sanders announced again for Congress, and the unions, one by one, lined up behind him. Their earlier caution had succumbed to the tug of their own members. Bernie had gone directly to workers with his straightforward appeal, and the leadership was smart enough to follow. Now the trepidation shifted to the halls of international unions in Washington, as calculations were made about the cost of endorsing an independent candidate. The local AFL-CIO unions in Vermont waited until September and then made a single, joint endorsement of Sanders. Although the national AFL-CIO COPE committee's decision to concur was made easier by the presence of a wholly noncredible candidate on the Democratic line, its action provoked tremors of disapproval from both the state Democratic Party and the Democratic National Committee (two years later, when the Teamsters made a \$10,000 contribution to the Progressive Coalition to support its legislative candidates, the Democratic governor publicly reprimanded the union). But the dynamism of the 1990 race was palpable: unionists participated at unprecedented levels, and Sanders' 17-point victory over the Republican incumbent again demonstrated the centrality of labor's role.

The two major parties in Vermont have accommodated Bernie Sanders as an individual politician, who, with his unusual individual draw and power for the electorate, has enjoyed increasingly strong election victories. In 1992 and 1994, for example, the Democrats again opted not to field a serious congressional candidate against him. But this should not be confused with acceptance of a third party. In fact, like municipal politics in Burlington, the terrain of state legislative politics is contested. Unions, along with many other constituent and advocacy organizations, can find themselves caught in the complicated cross-currents generated by a third party.

## DEMOCRATIC PARTY UNION-BUSTING

Consider the still-unfolding story of an attempt by Vermont's Democratic leadership to bust the state's largest union. The Vermont affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA) represents nearly all of the state's 8,000 teachers, in 200 locals, under a collective-bargaining law that's been on the books for about 25 years. It is a small-d, and in general also capital-D, democratic union, which is aggressive, hard-working, and successful. It behaves like a union, often defying the wistful hope for professional gentility that the public holds out for teachers.

But despite its long and successful tenure, Vermont-NEA has just suffered a startling setback. In January, the Vermont House of Representatives voted through a bill dismantling the collective bargaining law for teachers. The bill, if it had passed the Senate and become law, would have unilaterally eliminated all bargaining over wages and benefits by local unions and instead placed teachers under a single contract with the state. Thus, teachers would no longer bargain with their actual employers, a foundational principle of U.S. labor law. Teachers would also lose the right to strike. Local school boards, while no longer setting wages and benefits, could unilaterally impose working conditions which had been subject to union negotiation for 25 years.

The bill's Democratic sponsors insisted initially that the union would be strengthened by uniting all the state's teachers under one contract. But their rhetoric a year later revealed their actual motive: this proposal, they now say, is really needed to control education costs, a feat more easily accomplished when the legal framework that gives teachers bargaining rights is abolished. In sum, a great setback to a large and well-organized sector of public employees.

What makes this situation startling is that it occurred in a House with a significant Democratic majority. It is a House with a Democratic speaker who is a teacher and a member of the union. It is a legislature that serves a Democratic governor, who was revered in his earlier political days as a friend of public education.

By way of partial explanation, Democrats were given a righteous rationale to vote for the new legislation, even if it meant alienating union members. The union-busting measure was linked to a highly progressive plan for property tax reform, ironically, one the union had enthusiastically supported for a long time. The liberal Democrats whose votes were needed were convinced that they were serving a greater good. They were told that it was really not union-busting to revoke the law. In the absence of a strong labor culture, they were too easily persuaded that a different kind of "decisionmaking" between teachers and their employ-

ers could happily replace collective bargaining. For some, there was the useful subtext that a statewide contract would surely lead to lower teacher salaries, and therefore greater state control over education costs. These Democrats were, in short, offered an attractive bribe to stab organized labor in the back—and they all took it.

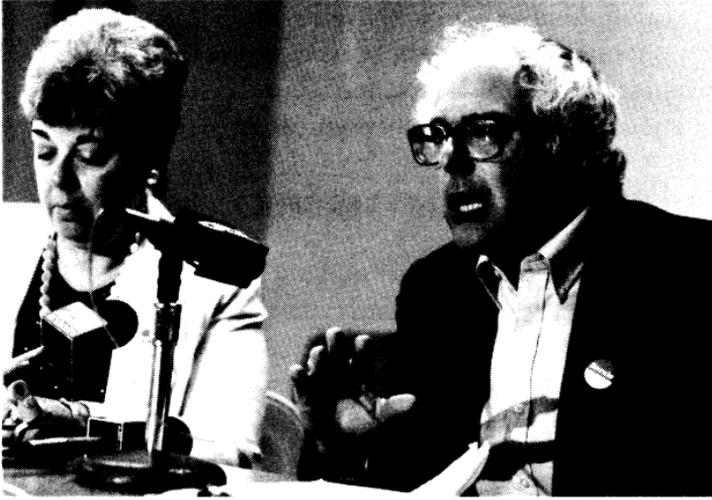
These are not enemies in a conventional sense. Far from it. The Democrats who voted with one stroke to bust hundreds of local unions are, by and large, liberal. As a group they generally act to support and enlarge the role of the state as a redistributor of social wealth. They raise taxes to put more money into schools, environmental protection, and housing. They have passed enlightened civil rights protections for gays and people with disabilities. But even in these liberal circles, labor is not part of the liberal definition. Rather, labor is viewed as a picturesque relic, both unfashionable and out of date.

Democrats, almost to a person, voted for the tax reform proposal, despite the bill's union-busting provisions. Virtually all Republicans voted against it—not for labor solidarity, to be sure, but to defeat the tax reform measures, which they considered far too progressive. Only Vermont's three independent Progressive Representatives voted, deliberately and vocally, with the union.

For many of Vermont's teachers, the behavior of the Democrats felt like a personal betrayal. They were forced to confront an astounding conclusion: "It's the Democrats who are union-busting! The same legislators who we endorsed, campaigned for, gave money to and voted for. The same ones who've always supported schools and teachers." And following the sturdy political adage that friends are to be rewarded and enemies punished, teachers who have been lifelong Democrats are bitterly turning away from the party and its officeholders.

In every other state in this country, Democratic officeholders could safely walk away from an issue like this, believing that, in the end, they would not lose these union voters to Republicans. They would reason, with justification, that a disgruntled union constituent would be crazy to try and unseat a Democrat. Ultimately, they would feel safe to take for granted those large constituencies—women, minorities, workers—who simply had no better place to go. In Vermont however, because of the existence of a pro-labor third party, there might well be a better place for unionized voters to go.

In the present instance, Vermont NEA leadership used a variety of public opportunities to show their appreciation of the stand taken by Progressive legislators, and by doing so defiantly placed the Democrats on notice not to take them for granted. But this was uncharted terrain. Clearly, there were risks to breaking off the historic ties. The powerful



August 1990,  
Bernie  
Sanders  
with VT-NEA  
President  
Marlene  
Burke,  
receiving  
endorsement.

Democratic Speaker of the House became arrogant and threatening. Democratic legislators regularly warned the union that the Progressives lacked credibility, and that any continuing alliance with the Progressives would further undermine the union's cause. The union and the Democrats are in an unprecedented war, provoked largely because the union decided not to sit quietly by and take the abuse the party served up. They had another political choice and they exercised it, but the union still faces real consequences because every facet of public education policy, school funding and public employee labor law is made by this legislature. Politicians will face their consequences when the union decides who to endorse and who to support financially.

But leaving aside for a moment the unique conditions in Vermont, it is possible in this example to see the outlines of the problem faced by the labor movement nationally. **The labor movement reaches its highest points of mobilization when faced with decisive enemies. During the Reagan-Bush years workers' rights were clearly under assault.** Democrats have been able to take organized labor for granted because **the party's candidates** have always been the lesser of two electoral evils.

The result has often been confusion and demoralization within labor circles, brought **to a head by a** set of crises with the Clinton Administration. What does organized labor do when its enemies are liberals? What are the rules for fighting a politician who behaves sometimes like a traditional "social contract" Democrat (championing the Family Leave Act), and sometimes like a financier (trading bribes for NAFTA votes)? What are labor's leaders to think and do with a liberal President who finally decides that his marketability rests on being able to strike a blow against workers of three nations and all colors? What lesson do we draw

for rank-and-file union members in the NAFTA vote—a vote in which Democrats, shame-faced or not, did more to suppress the social wage, blunt the effectiveness of organized labor, and secure the bounty of super-profits for multinationals than in any other political act in recent memory?

### **APPLYING THE LESSONS**

One lesson—a cheap, dead-end, and no-gain one—is cynicism. It might be satisfying to join that current of hard cynicism that eddies through the ranks of American workers faster all the time. And it is the one political lesson that comes readily after a typical encounter with elected liberals. We're diminished and dismissed, taken, and taken for granted. Why not savor this well-earned cynicism and really walk out of politics in a serious way. Take our money. Stop collecting PAC contributions and giving big checks to every municipal, county, state, and national Democratic Committee that sends us a fund-raising reminder. Stop organizing the requisite phone banks every other October. Just wish the conservatives and liberals a pox on both their houses and turn our backs.

We could certainly take that path. Our ranks are halfway there on their own. In the union I work for—a union of professionals who are public employees to boot, whose members are thoughtful, altruistic, civic-minded, and activist—we have routinely had to shore up the rationale for candidate endorsement, campaign shoe leather, and lobbying.

Many rank-and-file members chafe at their union's involvement in politics. They are cynical: about the candidates themselves, the motives of a politicized union, and the process of endorsement; about any authority that will attempt to "tell them how to vote" and about the concept of ideological homogeneity within a union membership. They are cynical about the efficacy of an endorsement, should one bother to make one, and cynical that even a successful endorsement will lead to something better in their lives, their paychecks, or their workplaces. In fact, union members—like an increasing number of Americans—are deeply cynical about the whole project of politics. They vote, but find nearly everything else worthy of suspicion.

There certainly could be a temptation for labor's political organizers and leaders to embrace the political cynicism they see among their members. But organizers understand that the appeal of cynicism is a dangerous seduction because it deeply undermines organizational cohesion and encourages passivity. Cynicism creates an ambience of second-guessing, dismissal, inaction, and resistance and can diminish the stature of leaders and paralyze a membership. Labor's leaders cannot afford to encourage political cynicism.

Yet political optimism about either of the major political parties is pretty thin, at best. The major issues of concern to workers both unionized and unorganized aren't effectively addressed by the Democrats or Republicans: a national economic strategy; reindustrialization; dealing with structural unemployment; overhauling the labor law; establishing workplace equity for women and minorities; and providing adequate day care and health care for workers and their families. Not to mention the affirmative damage done to American workers by NAFTA—conceived by Republicans but delivered by Democrats.

Even in the face of real betrayal, giving up on the Democrats is not so easy for many laborites. Ask many of us, "Should labor have hope about the Democrats?" and we're likely to respond with pangs of loyalty, feelings of nostalgia, and a hope that Democrats will return to "traditional Democratic" labor values. We want to believe that Democrats are our allies because of history and because the present might seem bleak and friendless without them. But a more objective assessment, rooted in recent facts, would lead us to a different conclusion. Labor may be right in allying with the Democratic Party *given the choices at hand*, but we should not delude ourselves that the Democrats constitute a *good* choice for us. We are left then looking for a strategy that is neither cynical (and therefore ultimately self-isolating) nor naive (and therefore perpetually disappointing).

In this light, a strategy of independent politics is worth a long look. The first phase of such a process would be evidence of the weakening bond between labor and the mainstream of the Democratic Party. In 1984 and 1988, the pull of Rev. Jesse Jackson's presidential campaigns on rank-and-file union members and an important cross-section of their leaders, was apparent. While these campaigns were conducted within the Democratic Party, they were sparked by defiance against the party and always existed on its fringe. In 1992, labor's leaders chose various Democrats during the primaries and then dutifully closed powerful ranks behind Clinton, but have been in public discord with him ever since over health care, NAFTA, labor law reform, and welfare. Independent H. Ross Perot did not galvanize many formal labor endorsements, but he pulled votes from unionized workers equally frightened by recession, NAFTA, and the deficit.

The next ascending step on this path is actual labor involvement in independent campaigns, or in consideration of third-party efforts. We have already examined the support of unions, both within and outside of Vermont, for Bernie Sanders. Other unions are actively attempting to build independent electoral activity in other parts of the country. Leaders such as Jan Pierce of the Communication Worker of America

and Ron Carey of the Teamsters have been open and vigorous on this subject. The UAW's Tony Mazzocchi has, for many years, **pushed for the creation of** a labor party; a growing Labor Party Advocates membership and plans for a founding convention **are signs these efforts are bearing fruit**. There is labor interest in the New Party, whose strategy of supporting progressive third-party candidates, primarily in municipal and county elections, is showing strong early results.

These are disparate fragments, to be sure, and they aren't part of any considered, overall strategy—but they do share something: a vitality and integrity that is painfully absent in most conventional politics. The electoral efforts, particularly the lower-level campaigns that are part of a party-building effort, certainly escape the pull towards cynicism. In fact, they can *only* rise on a tide of hope and risk-taking, and in this way reflect what is best about the labor movement itself. And they also attempt to solve the endemic problem in labor's relation to the Democrats: that is, choosing the lesser of two evils. Candidates, or parties, who stand up in a robust way for a consistent value-based politics can engender great activism among their followers. And an energized constituency does not want to settle for anyone—they fight like mad for what they really want.

The labor movement brings unique resources to the daunting project of building an independent labor party: unionists know how to pick winning fights, time our victories, recruit and train promising leaders, build sturdy units of members who are accountable to one another, and keep our sights fixed on concrete goals. We have had decades of experience in running our own organizations, experimenting with democratic self-governance, and learning how to make sound decisions in the interest of the majority. We have had to raise our operating budgets from membership dues—not private grants, corporate sponsorship, or government subsidy—which we get to collect only as long as we keep serving our members' interests. We have been kicked in the press, tested by hostile politicians, weathered by strikes and endless disputes. Some of our unions have faced the hard test of rooting out corruption and cronyism. The resources that we bring are unique, because the opportunities and challenges of unionism are unique, keeping us both grounded in reality and held aloft by high principle. Organized labor is well equipped to build itself a political party.

The impediments to this strategy, however, should be given serious weight in any discussion. The preeminent strength of the two-party system in the U.S. is a fundamental fact. The numerous structures that keep this system in place—from restrictive state and federal election laws to bi-partisan corporate PACs and a complicit and compliant

media—are each hugely powerful institutional forces.

The American political system itself is glued together by a sturdy national ideology that abhors basic political division, an ideology most pointedly manifested as anti-communism during this century, but present to different degrees in the politics of racism, homophobia, and misogyny. A key to the effectiveness of this ideology is that it seeks to marginalize its opponents and cut them away from the political life of the population. This obviously poses a danger for insurgent social movements of any kind, but particularly so for an electoral movement, which depends on access to the broader population for its continued existence. Therefore, achieving enough credibility to withstand political marginalization becomes key to building a progressive third party. Such a party must surpass charges of spoilerism, irrelevance, and ineffectiveness while it is on its way to maturity. But the labor movement itself had to face this challenge on the way to its own maturity.

Keeping mindful of the fact that a strategy must always be driven by its final goals, it is useful to take another page from the book of labor history when envisioning the possible accomplishment of a progressive labor party. Namely, it seems that labor should not be preparing itself to build the successor to the Democratic Party, but rather creating a firm institutional place within the electoral arena from which to advocate its collective self-interest. Organized labor has not sought to become management, but to contend with management over economic and workplace rights. Similarly, an independent labor party cannot be the majority governing party in the foreseeable future in a society so thoroughly dominated by capital. But it can secure for itself a reserved spot in U.S. political life and act as a powerful focal point in debates critical to its interests. In the debate over welfare reform, for example, a labor party would be forcing the issue of structural unemployment to the fore and thus restrain the tendency towards the victim-blaming that characterizes the current discourse. The identifiable interest of labor in most public issues would become a permanent thorn in the sides of Democrat and Republican leaders when even a very small number of elected labor progressives begin operating with the impunity of a third party.

Our unions' members and the millions of unorganized American workers, who are victimized by politics-as-usual, need the vitality and dynamism of a political movement that is founded on progressive labor values. They can't afford the fruits of cynicism or passivity. The experience and resources to mobilize and build a labor party are in our hands. It's time. ■