

On Standing for Office

by David McReynolds

The record for the number of times running for office is not mine - it would go, I suspect, to Peter Diamondstone in Vermont, or Greg Pason in New Jersey. However I was honored to be the Socialist Party's Presidential candidate twice (1980 and 2000), as well as running for Congress in 1968 (on the Peace and Freedom ticket) and for the US Senate in 2004 (on the Green ticket).

Let me go way back to 1968, and what was probably the most dramatic of the campaigns I've been in. The Peace and Freedom Party was an experiment that fizzled after the election (though it is still very much part of the scene in California) but was interesting to look at - it was an effort, started in California, to forge an alliance between the Black Panthers led by Eldridge Cleaver, and socialists. In New York we got on the ballot in the old Lower Manhattan district that has been historically left wing. In addition to myself, the Liberals, Conservatives, Democrats, and Republicans all fielded candidates.

1968 was the height of the Vietnam War, it was also the year marked by radical actions around the world, from the hope of the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia (crushed by the Soviet invasion), to the uprising in Paris, to the police riot at the Democratic Party convention in Chicago.

We not only got on the ballot, but won the endorsement of the Village Voice. Rina Garst was my campaign manager, our offices in the West Village had a bomb scare, and we ended up with a police car parked outside the office 24 hours a day. Tense times, since Cleaver and the Panthers had spoken of the need for the armed defense of community rights and the police were often their target. Cleaver and I spoke together at one rally in Greenwich Village which had a surreal feeling, as his four bodyguards would move forward to protect him when he got up to speak, and then move back when I spoke, without body guards.

I took part in every candidates forum I could. In the end we got nearly 5% of the vote, coming in ahead of the Conservatives, and almost beating the Liberals for third place. But 5% is not 51% - I didn't stand a chance of winning. What we did do was help make the Vietnam War an election issue. And to give voice to the demand for unconditional and immediate US withdrawal from Indochina.

There have been some in our party who were critical of me for not spending more time in that campaign (and in later campaigns) talking only about socialism. I did do so, certainly, and pointed out that Vietnam was a symptom of imperial capitalism, not an accident. But I feel strongly that socialist candidates need to be tribunes of the people, raising, for the broader public, issues that are immediate - such as the Vietnam War, or, in 2000, the Iraq war. I felt, both in 1980 and 2000, in running for President, one of the most important things I could do was let the public see what a socialist actually looked like, and, by offering sensible ideas on a

range of issues, to make it clear we were not isolated from the great issues of the day.

(In the 1980 campaign I was, so far as I know, the first homosexual nominated for President - I felt what was important was not talking about gay liberation as much as simply being public so that a college audience could see what a homosexual looked like! I felt what was more crucial was to talk about the economic and political issues that affected everyone, not just a sexual minority).

As someone who has been arrested a number of times in demonstrations, I don't think elections are all we should do. They are part of a broad process of making visible a radical program, of giving flesh to the humane values of democratic socialism. An election is a rare chance for us to reach a broader public.

One reason I'm so delighted that many of us in the Socialist Party took part in the October 2nd rally in Washington is that socialists need to be with people, to make sure the real issues are raised, that we are a part of that moral and ideological vanguard which gives direction to the broader movement. I am not a very orthodox Marxist, but I strongly agree with the urgency Karl Marx felt about socialists not permitting themselves to be separated from the great issues of the day, but to link those issues to socialism. In no sense it is a question of following labor no matter what labor does, but finding as many ways as possible to relate to the issues that affect working people, and to bring to those issues a socialist analysis. There is also a need - let us not be ashamed to say it - not simply for a socialist analysis but for a sense of moral direction, and moral outrage.

I'm proud of the fact that during the Vietnam War those of us in the leadership of the peace movement never made the troops the enemy, but insisted they, also, were victims. We made efforts to reach the military, to aid men and women who deserted. What can save us from an embittered sense of hatred is the realization that the irony of the prison system is that the guards are also imprisoned. So too, the structure of capitalism oppresses even the oppressor. Our task is the liberation of all.

Electoral action is only one of several ways of doing this. In many areas of the country it is impossible to get on the ballot, so it is not a universal tactic in all 50 states. But where it can be done, it is a very important way of reminding people they do have alternatives to the two party system. It is one of the ways that we can offer visible leadership to the public, to make the socialist candidates tribunes of the people, speaking the truth, and offering an analysis of events. There is, let me add as an historical note, the irony that in 1968 the Socialist Party generally was so divided on issues such as the Vietnam War that I had little support from the national leadership. And in 2000 I was grateful that despite political disagreements, I had active support in the national campaign, including very useful support from Eric Chester and his partner, Susan Dorazio, in the New England campaigning. Finally . . . the real tribute always goes not to the candidate who has been honored by a nomination, but to the many who circulated the petitions and did the work that made such campaigns a reality.