

Can “Corporate Free” Candidates Win?

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Since 2004, members of the Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA) have won ten out of the sixteen city council and mayoral races they have contested in their majority minority city of 110,000.

Last November, progressives gained an unprecedented “super-majority” of five on Richmond’s seven-member council—despite more than a decade of heavy spending against them by Chevron Corp. and other big business interests. For 12 years, RPA candidates have distinguished themselves from local Democrats by their lonely, Bernie Sanders-like refusal to take corporate contributions.

Now two Progressive Alliance leaders—city councilors Jovanka Beckles and Gayle McLaughlin—are preparing to run as “corporate free” candidates for higher office. It’s the first time either one has sought a ballot line outside their own blue-collar refinery town. Both hope to capitalize on the energy and enthusiasm (and campaign donations) of thousands of former Bernie Sanders supporters, including those who tried to reform the Democratic Party at its statewide convention in Sacramento May 20-21.

At a lively pre-convention gathering of 500 “Berniecrats” last in May, McLaughlin discussed her not-quite-final decision to run for lieutenant governor of California as a progressive independent. Like Sanders during his 2014 visit to Richmond—when he was still soliciting advice from out-of-state audiences about running for president—the former Richmond mayor asked the crowd for its “input.” (The response when she finished her speech, was loud chanting: “Run, Gayle, Run!”)

Introduced by Beckles, McLaughlin faithfully echoed the post-campaign message of the Sanders-inspired national group known as Our Revolution and stressed her personal support for OR. She urged the assembled delegates to “organize locally for political power! Be corporate free! Be the progressive leaders you are waiting for and run for office yourself!”

A four-time winner at the polls herself, McLaughlin advised Bernie-inspired state and local office-seekers to “denounce corporate control of our democracy. Make this the issue. It’s a winning issue. People are ready.”

Taking The Pledge

Throughout the state party convention, Beckles rounded up support for her own recently announced

bid to replace Tony Thurmond in Assembly District 15, which includes Richmond and other parts of the East Bay. Thurmond decided to run for state superintendent of public instruction instead of seeking re-election to the Assembly. Ironically, he began his political career as an up-and-coming young African-American Democrat who sought RPA backing for his first Richmond city council bid in 2004.

But, like others at the time, Thurmond refused to join the group or take the “no-corporate money” pledge required for RPA support. At the polls that year, Thurmond was defeated while McLaughlin, a white newcomer to the city, a California Green, and a co-founder of the RPA won a city council seat for the first time.

The Beckles/McLaughlin message last weekend—delivered in person and via convention leafleting by their supporters—was pretty simple: the influence of big money in California politics can’t be curbed by sending people to Sacramento who are beholden to business interests (even if they say they aren’t).

“Billion dollar corporations buying elections are not going to create the future we want for California,” Beckles said. “I’m running a campaign built on individual donations and support from ordinary people—not on interest groups that trying to influence the process for the benefit of the few.”

The timing of the Richmond councilors visit to Sacramento couldn’t have been better. During the three-day meeting, restive delegates interrupted speech-making at one reception with the chant, “Hey hey, ho ho, corporate Dems have got to go.” On Saturday, several hundred environmentalists staged a protest directed at Governor Jerry Brown and state legislators too often swayed, during the last ten years, by \$266 million worth of oil industry lobbying and political spending in California. “We need champions who are looking out for our communities, not the profits of the oil industry,” the sixty sponsoring organizations declared.

Among them were a few political heavyweights—like Greenpeace, the California Nurses Association, and Clean Water Action. But most endorsers of the rally against corporate pollution of air, water, and politics were local branches of 350.org or the Green Party, anti-fracking groups, and on-line networks like RootsAction or the Courage Campaign.

McLaughlin and Beckle certainly look like the ideal “champions” for such groups to support. Few “electeds” in California have done more to hold Big Oil accountable than the Richmond municipal leaders who pressed Chevron to pay its fair share of taxes, sued the company over its 2012 refinery fire, lobbied for stronger refinery safety rules, better emissions controls, and other community health protections. Plus, Beckles and McLaughlin survived Chevron’s \$3.1 million campaign to defeat them when they ran for re-election three years ago. (For more on that victory over big money in local politics, see <http://www.beacon.org/Refinery-Town-P1229.aspx>)

Rounding Up Support

So far, Beckles’ AD 15 campaign has gained endorsements from former State Assembly member Tom Ammiano, BART board member Lateefah Simon, former Berkeley Mayor Gus Newport, and current Berkeley City Councilor Kriss Worthington. Worthington was among fifty activists and elected officials at an “East Bay Progressive Round Table,” hosted by the RPA on May 13. Participants from within AD 15 expressed strong interest in making Beckles’ campaign one priority for coordinated activity by like-minded municipal reformers in Contra Costa and Alameda counties.

Beckles herself is the personification of Bay Area intersectionality. In addition to being a black-

Latina lesbian, she's a longtime child protection worker for the county, past shop steward, and now a Teamster member. She is seeking her own union's backing, plus endorsements from the CNA, National Union of Healthcare Workers, SEIU Local 1021, and other labor organizations who've backed Richmond progressives in the past.

Beckles and McLaughlin are also lobbying hard for official support from Our Revolution, with its accompanying boost in small-donor fund-raising. A registered Democrat and strong Sanders supporter, Beckles more neatly fits the profile of most local, state, and federal candidates OR has assisted since its launch last summer.

But one of OR's biggest 2016 victories was the election of Vermont Progressive Party leader and state senator Dave Zuckerman as lieutenant governor in the Green Mountain State. No other left-leaning third party in the U.S. has been able to elect a statewide office holder in the modern era. McLaughlin hopes to duplicate Zuckerman's success in an electoral arena seventy times larger, where Gavin Newsom, the leading candidate for governor has already raised \$14 million, more than the total donations raked in by the next top three contenders for Jerry Brown's job.

A Green Party member when she served as Richmond mayor from 2006 to 2014, McLaughlin changed her registration to NPP, or No Party Preference, so she could vote for Sanders in the California primary last June. In a recent letter sent to Our Revolution on her behalf, the RPA steering committee reported that McLaughlin "hopes to be able to support a 2020 Bernie presidential campaign and to rally many independents to that cause." The not-yet-official candidate has reached out to all of OR's forty new affiliates in California seeking their endorsement as well.

"I remain registered NPP and consider myself an independent," she says, adding that "a mass-based third party in the future is something that we really need." In the meantime, McLaughlin and Beckles may be a catalyst for something other than business as usual in two "jungle primary" contests next June, when Democrats, Republicans, independents, and third party candidates compete for two ballot slots in November.

Steve Early belongs to the Richmond Progressive Alliance and is the author, most recently, of Refinery Town: Big Oil, Big Money, and the Remaking of An American City, a new Beacon Press book about political change in Richmond. He can be reached at Lsupport@aol.com.