

A Comment on the East Bay Mayoral Campaigns

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In the past few weeks, New Politics has published two valuable commentaries on the role of socialists and the Left in local electoral campaigns, first a broad overview by Dan La Botz and then a response by David Judd specifically on Dan Siegel's campaign for Mayor of Oakland. Both of these contributions come from a starting point that I think is valuable for the Left—that even though the capitalist system cannot be reformed through elections, the Left still can use electoral campaigns to build the struggles of the working-class and the oppressed. If the media is going to shower candidates with attention, there might as well be one candidate with good politics. But there must be a caveat here. The key question, as La Botz writes, is this: “Can these political campaigns begin to interact with the social and labor movements in such a way as to inspire a virtuous circle of rising movements with militant strategies and more political challenges raising left political visions and programs?”

I agree with this sentiment and would take it a step further—the purpose of Left electoral campaigns should not be to win an election, but first and foremost to build struggles from below. Winning should never be the primary goal if you don't think electoral victories themselves can change much. Some will join these efforts with the sole purpose of winning—fine, but we shouldn't let them shape the politics of the campaign. Victory itself can also be a disaster, as a Left candidate with no social movements behind them will simply feel pressure to carry out the same austerity measures they are supposedly against. Suddenly, a small but growing movement can turn into its exact opposite once placed into power. This genuine danger is rarely discussed in these campaigns—after all, how dare you suggest our candidate might sell out!—though La Botz does a good job of pointing out how this dynamic played out in Jackson, Mississippi, for example.

The role of Left campaigns should be to build struggles first and win election as a distant second, so distant that in most cases it is not even remotely a goal at all and there is no illusion that winning office can change much. If you really think that winning a seat is going to have a big impact, your social movement strategy can be vastly distorted, if there even is one. It is not “ultra-left” to take this view—it is simply a good social movement strategy. Putting winning first is a bad social movement strategy, as it will ultimately assume the movements should be subordinate to the campaign and not vice-versa. Campaigns with this strategy can even be quite harmful, no matter how many “opportunities” we see dangling before us.

The discussion around Dan Siegel's campaign for Mayor of Oakland is a useful starting point for considering this. La Botz is fairly critical of Siegel's campaign, stating that his pro-investment rhetoric could come from any Democrat or Republican. Judd disagrees, pointing to many of Siegel's platform issues, such as a \$15/hour minimum wage and public broadband Internet. But he gets to the critical point when he says, “The question is whether Siegel's radical ideas will get highlighted, and with luck capture the imagination of large numbers of people in Oakland and sweep an activist mayor into office.”

I agree with the first point—although I think Siegel's campaign has come up short—and disagree with the second. The point, to get back to La Botz's quote, which Judd also quotes approvingly, is whether or not Siegel's campaign can strengthen social movements and various acts of struggle and resistance to the status quo. I believe that it could, as do many activists I know and respect in Oakland who are involved in this campaign, including those that Judd and I worked with alongside

Siegel and the family of Alan Blueford, an African-American teenager killed by the Oakland police.

Unfortunately, so far, the campaign has retreated from radical politics and has missed important opportunities to strengthen social movement organizing and give voice to the oppressed.

On August 4, 23-year-old Jacorey Calhoun was killed in East Oakland by an Alameda County Sheriff's deputy in circumstance strikingly similar to the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. According to reports, the deputy stopped Calhoun, suspecting he was involved in a robbery, and when Calhoun ran he was shot in the head and killed even though he was unarmed. The Calhoun killing has been completely ignored by the entire political establishment in Oakland including every candidate for Mayor—including Dan Siegel. There are probably a number of reasons for this, among them the extensive work and planning in place by staffers and volunteers which cannot be easily unwound. The real problem is that shedding light on police violence and giving a voice to the people in East Oakland who deal with law enforcement as an occupying army every day *should have been the entire point of the campaign in the first place*. Apparently, it was not.

Had Siegel not been running for Mayor, there is no doubt in my mind that he would have been an outspoken critic of this killing, as he has in the past. For example, during the Blueford campaign, Siegel wrote that the Oakland Police should be dissolved. He is the first person I ever heard use the phrase “police abolition,” congruent to how some discuss prison abolition. During the Blueford campaign, he regularly and publically said that the cop who killed Alan Blueford was “just doing his job,” pointing out that the job of the police is to terrorize the Black population. This was Siegel at his best. But now he argues that the Oakland Police can do a perfectly good job as currently constituted with a bit of reorganization that would put more police on the streets. The point here is not to insist that Siegel arbitrarily insert far-left rhetoric into the campaign. Perhaps the term “police abolition” is a bit abstract, but the idea that the cops are an “occupying army” would not be lost on anybody in East Oakland. The point is that the logic and realpolitik of electoral campaigning promotes a retreat from radical politics and resistance to austerity and oppression in order to appeal to moderate voters.

It is hard not to believe that the campaign's reluctance to do anything around Calhoun's case is a result of this retreat. This should be a serious problem for the Left, again, not simply because Siegel has crossed some line with his political terminology. The problem is, rather than creating a platform for these issues, the campaign has convinced people who have tirelessly spent hours and hours of their lives fighting this sort of injustice that they should now prioritize doing other things like having house parties and putting up door-knob hangers about their candidate. Part of the problem is organizational, but part of it is almost certainly political—that it is based on the idea that Siegel speaking out about this now would hurt his chances to *really* do something about it as Mayor.

Siegel could potentially transform the election by making Calhoun's case a central issue. Just as every politician in Oakland was quiet about the murder of Alan Blueford due to their unwillingness to rock the OPD boat, Siegel could put this killing at their doorstep and force them to deal with it. It could create a small crisis for City Hall and for most of the candidates for mayor—one of whom is the current Mayor and two others are on the City Council. These three are the main contenders in the race. None of them will criticize OPD or the Sheriff's office as they want their support in the race. Putting Calhoun's killing at the center of the campaign would be a controversial move that would probably alienate a lot of voters, not to mention some supporters deeply involved in the campaign who really just want Siegel to be a mainstream liberal who is a bit better than the current mayor.

Judd hints at this, pointing out that there is disagreement about how to win in Oakland's ranked-choice voting system, where voters can rank the candidates in order of preference. The second and third choices of voters come into play if no candidate wins a majority in the first round. Judd's

conclusion is fine—that some in the campaign incorrectly want him to appeal to a broad mass of “second place” and “third place” votes and therefore tame his radical politics. However, I disagree with Judd’s assertion that this is about appealing to voters who want to rank Siegel as their first choice. The math of ranked-choice voting is completely irrelevant. Ultimately, this is a political question about what sort of campaign this should be. Appealing to “first place” voters will likely lose the election and we should not argue otherwise, as there are currently fifteen candidates in the race and there is little likelihood that anybody will win in the first or even the second round. The real issue—*the only issue*—is the politics of the campaign, and whether these politics and strategies directly further the goals of social movements and weaken the status quo.

There are two visions for this campaign, one that the Left could get behind and the other which should be rejected. It is not too late for Siegel to shift his campaign, but there is not much time left either.

It is, however, too late for Mike Parker’s campaign to become Mayor of Richmond, California. La Botz documents many positives about Parker, a lifelong socialist and member of the Green Party and Solidarity. Richmond is a city just north of Berkeley, whose largest employer is the Chevron oil refinery, where a Green has held the Mayor’s office for the last eight years. At the last minute, however, Richmond City Council member and Democrat Tom Butt entered the race and Parker dropped out. The result is a mess that only further discredits the Green Party in one of its only strongholds, a city filled with Black and Latino residents who face not only deep racism and economic inequality but regular environmental pollution from Chevron.

As Parker says, “My supporters and I determined that in this race the progressive vote would likely be split.” The thinking was that he should not “split the vote” between himself and Democrat Tom Butt, thereby allowing Democrat Nathaniel Bates, who is heavily backed by Chevron, to win. Yet the real spoiler, when the Mayor is currently a Green, is Butt. Imagine the day when the Democrats step aside so as not to spoil the opportunities of the Left! It simply will never happen, especially when the Left gives up so easily. If the goal was to build an alternative to the Democrats then this should have never happened. That, apparently, was not the goal. We cannot complain that working people are not attracted to a Left that cannot even fight for itself. They are right to be distrustful and skeptical of Leftists who cannot even carry through with their own stated plans. It would be a disservice to working-class people to try to convince them otherwise when the evidence before them is so clear.

All too often, when Leftists gain some prominent role or position, they suddenly decry how they are handcuffed by their limited options and suddenly have to quietly go along with every austerity measure or sellout because there is nothing that can be done. The Left is handcuffed all right, by its own failed strategies. Usually, being “handcuffed” involves having an *abundance* of opportunities, but taking one of these opportunities and actually doing something useful with a momentary position of power would forestall better opportunities down the road. There is always a hypothetical future opportunity that handcuffs us now. Unfortunately, the future never arrives.

There has been a vast disparity between the failure of the Left and the resistance of working-class people from below over the past week. Just as the candidates were quietly mulling their limited options, Black people in Ferguson have launched a rebellion against the police shooting them down in the streets and against the military occupation of their neighborhoods. None of the people rebelling in Ferguson are worried about sounding too radical or splitting the vote. On the contrary, the revolt is a consequence of the fact that the entire political establishment has failed them.

The Left could learn something from this revolt and, at the very least, worry less about spoiling its future and more about the battles in front of us today.

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