

A Socialist Campaign in Ohio

January 19, 2011



THE DAN LA BOTZ Socialist for Senate Campaign in Ohio in 2010 was one of the most successful socialist electoral campaigns in more than 60 years. The 25,000 votes cast for La Botz compare favorably with earlier Socialist Party candidacies in Ohio, with other socialist parties, and with reformist parties to the left of the Democrats. The La Botz campaign, in fact, compares favorably with all Socialist, Communist and Socialist Workers Party and other leftist party campaigns since the heyday of socialism. Only Eugene V. Debs and Norman Thomas, received more socialist votes in Ohio than Dan La Botz. These 25,000 votes for La Botz in 2010 represent one of the most significant votes for social justice in the United States since the 1940s.

No socialist candidate has received so many votes in Ohio since the 1940s. In the 2008 presidential election, the Socialist Party candidate Brian Moore won 6,528 votes nationwide, of which 2,731 were from Ohio. In general in statewide elections, Socialist Party candidates get around 5,000 votes, though in some small states that can be larger percentage of the vote. For example, in 2010 Jane Newton, candidate for the House of Representatives in Vermont got 3,222 votes, coming in fourth out of four candidates with 1.35 percent of the vote. While those represent impressive showing in small states and local contest, the 25,000 votes for the SP in the larger, more moderate state of Ohio, though less than one percent (.68 percent) of the vote represents something qualitatively different in this more conservative region of the country.

When we compare the La Botz vote with candidates who described themselves as socialist in recent national elections we can see its significance in a different light. In the 1970s, the Socialist Worker Party candidates received about 100,000 votes nationally, while in the 1970s and 1980s the Communist Party candidates received between 25,000 and 60,000 votes. Since then socialist presidential candidates have received between 3,000 and 5,000 votes.

The La Botz vote in Ohio also compares favorably with the Green Party statewide candidates. While they are to the left of the Democratic Party and take good positions on many issues and should be supported, Green Party candidates do not run as anti-capitalist candidates, much less as socialist candidates. Ohio Green Party candidate for Governor in Ohio Dennis Spisak got 56,734 votes or 1.51 percent, while Howie Hawkins of New York also got over 58,123 or 1 percent. In Illinois, Rich Whitney got 99,625 votes or 3 percent. Though the Green Party candidates got higher votes, they are not of a different order of magnitude than our showing in Ohio.

Where the Support Came From

THE GREAT MAJORITY OF VOTES for La Botz came from Ohio's largest metropolitan areas. These urban

areas contributed over 20,000 votes to La Botz, while rural areas contributed less than 5,000. Almost half of all of La Botz votes, some 12,459, came from the three largest urban areas—Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati—while almost one third, 6727 votes, came from the second tier cities—Dayton, Akron, Toledo, Youngstown and Canton.

TABLE 1		
Votes for Dan La Botz in Ohio 2010		
URBAN AREA	VOTES	PERCENT OF LA BOTZ'S URBAN VOTES
Cleveland	4,713	23
Columbus	4,257	21
Cincinnati	3,489	17
Dayton	1,706	8
Akron	1,527	7
Toledo	1,488	7
Youngstown	1,063	5
Canton	943	5
Mainsfield	280	1
Total Urban Votes for La Botz	20,571	
Total Rural Votes	4,797	
Total La Botz Votes	25,368	
<i>The table above thanks to Taki Manolakos</i>		

Cleveland, Cincinnati, Dayton, Akron, Toledo, Youngstown, and Canton are historically major manufacturing centers, today fallen on hard times, while Columbus, the state capital, is a major administrative, health, and education center. The residents of these cities are overwhelmingly working class people, wage earners, and the level of labor union organization is higher in Ohio at (about 14 percent) than that of the U.S. as a whole (about 12 percent). We can reasonably conclude that workers and union members contributed to this vote, though students and other groups must also have voted for La Botz.

The Election and the Vote

GEORGE VOINOVICH, Republican Senator from Ohio, decided not to run for office again in 2010. The Republican candidate to replace him was Rob Portman, a former 7-term Republican Congressman and member of the George W. Bush cabinet as U.S. Trade Representative and Director of the Office of Management and the Budget. The Democratic Party candidate was Lee Fisher, a former state representative, state senator, Attorney General, and unsuccessful candidate for governor. Also seeking the seat were two Tea Party conservatives, one on the Constitution Party ticket and one running as an independent.

The Socialist Party had not run candidates in Ohio for a long, long time. I was the first Socialist running for the Senate in Ohio since 1936 and the most recent socialist candidate in the state since Norman Thomas's write-in campaign for the presidency in 1940. Other socialist party candidates

had appeared on the ballot in the state in the 1970s and 1980s, though they had won no significant percentage of the vote.

Since the 1940s, Ohio had had laws which restricted and in effect made it impossible for parties other than the Republicans and Democrats to get on the ballot. A series of lawsuits brought in the early 2000s and court decisions had eliminated those restrictions and the Ohio Secretary of State created rules which made it quite easy to get on the ballot. We only needed to collect 500 signatures and we collected 1,200 and were certified.

The May 4 Primary Elections

THE MAY 4 SOCIALIST PARTY PRIMARY elections represented the first response to our campaign. Greens, Democrats and independents could not vote in the Socialist primary, unless they wanted to become registered as Socialists. To vote for me as the Socialist candidate, one had to go into the polling place and in front of friends and neighbors, poll workers, and strangers request a Socialist Party ballot from the poll workers. Many were unaware of this option and some of those who were aware found it difficult to publicly declare that they were socialists. Still, in the primary I received almost 400 socialist votes.

The most important result of the primary election was the victory of Lee Fisher over Jennifer Brunner in the Democratic Party. Fisher, a rather typical, not very militant liberal Democrat from Cleveland, had defeated Brunner, a candidate who was considered more progressive on social issues. He was able to win because the national and state Democratic Party organizations came out strongly on his side and pushed Brunner out of the way. Many Brunner supporters deeply resented what they saw as the party organization having stolen her factory. The large numbers of disgruntled Brunner Democrats were potential voters for me.

The Election Nationally and in Ohio

THE NOVEMBER 2010 ELECTIONS saw many Americans vote against the administration of President Barack Obama and the Democrats. Polling organizations reported that the Democrats had lost the support of Catholics, women, gays and lesbians, and voters over 60. For the first time since exit polls began asking, more women voted Republican than Democrat. African-Americans, Latinos, and working class voters were less motivated than before to vote for the Democrats.

The election represented a victory for the Republican Party and a resounding defeat for the Democrats who lost the House of Representatives and some Senate seats. In Ohio, the Republican John Kasich defeated Governor Ted Strickland, despite campaigning in Ohio by Obama and Biden. Republicans defeated Democrats for all statewide offices. Ohio has 18 Congressional Representatives, and out of ten Democrats, five lost their seats.

TABLE 2		
Votes for U.S. Senate Candidates in Ohio (2010)		
CANDIDATE	PERCENT	VOTES
Rob Portman - R	57	2,125,810
Lee Fisher - D	39	1,448,092
Eric Deaton - C	1.7	64,017
Michael Pryce - I	1.3	48,653
Daniel La Botz - S	0.7	25,368

Arthur Sullivan - WI	0.04	1,512
SOURCE: Ohio Secretary of State at http://vote.sos.state.oh.us/pls/enrpublic/f?p=130:6:0		

The Tea Party movement has been particularly strong in Ohio where various groups backed right-wing Republicans, Constitution, and Libertarian candidates, and rightwing independents. Libertarian candidates, rightwing but generally anti-war, got about 3 percent of the vote in several congressional districts.

The Campaign Organization

THE VOTE FOR LA BOTZ in the three major cities reflected the campaign's priorities and its efforts over the nine-month campaign. The Dan La Botz, Socialist for Senate campaign had several objectives: 1) to educate people in Ohio about socialism; 2) to meet, engage, link and strengthen activist networks in the state; 3) to build unity on the left; 4) to win votes for my campaign on Election Day as a measure of the success of our educational work. To carry out these objectives we had to build an organization.

At the beginning of this campaign, I and my key collaborators decided that, since there was virtually no existing Socialist Party organization in the state, the most important thing was to build a campaign organization. We naturally focused on building the organization first in Cincinnati, Columbus and Cleveland, the state's three greatest population centers. We identified local left leaders and naturally they had their own organizations or networks made up of local activists. We worked to incorporate those leaders and their fellow activists into our campaign.

We created local organizations in those cities and a little later in Toledo. Our local campaign organizations were usually led by a handful of three to five local activists in each city who held small meetings usually of not more than five or 10 people. Those attending those meetings varied from week to week. Our campaign organizer kept a data base of local activists, created a listserv through which they could communicate with him and each other, helped to convene local meetings, and sometimes attended those meetings.

Who Made up the Campaign?

THE LA BOTZ SOCIALIST FOR SENATE campaign was made up of socialist, labor, peace, and housing activists. Many of those led the campaign locally were involved of the years in many of these movements and others such as LGBT, environment, and immigrant rights.

In Cincinnati where I live and work, my key supporters came from Cincinnati Progressive Action (CPA), a small activist group that grew out of a fight over police racism and brutality about 10 years ago. Since then the group has worked on other matter of criminal justice but has also engaged in anti-war activity and in support for the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) based in Ohio. Members of CPA were also active in several labor unions, some of them local officers of those unions and some delegates to the Cincinnati AFL-CIO Labor Council. One is a longtime housing activist.

In Cleveland our key supporters came from two distinct groups: first, a group of older peace activists associated with Women Speak Out for Peace and Justice (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) and, second, a few young left and labor organizers involved in the Industrial Workers of the World who had created something called the Cleveland Economic Democracy Network. Also supporting us in Cleveland was a leading member of the Ohio State Labor Party, a local branch of the Labor Party founded by labor unionist Tony Mazzocchi in 1996.

The Columbus group was more diverse than the groups in Cincinnati and Cleveland. In

Columbus, Mary Loritz, SP Ohio State Chair, played a leading role. We were also supported by my campaign treasurer, a member of the DSA, and by another couple of DSA members and a couple of Solidarity members who are also local Teamster activists. We were slow in getting an organization in Toledo/Bowling Green. A former FLOC organizer, now teaching college, took on the role of our local organizer. He brought together about ten people who functioned as an excellent local committee.

By the end of the campaign we had 380 supporters active throughout the state. There were 119 in Cincinnati; 45 in Columbus; 48 in Cleveland, and 20 in Toledo/Bowling Green. We also succeeded in building groups of supporters on local campuses: Ohio University at Athens, 25; Kent State, 5; Miami University, 13; Oberlin, 21; Ohio Wesleyan, 21; and Wooster College, 27. In the best case, at Oberlin, we got 20 percent of the student vote.

Information and Communications

WE RAISED MONEY from a small base of generous supporters, less than 200 contributors who gave on the average \$25, though many gave \$100, a couple \$500, and our largest contribution from one individual was \$1,000. We received donations of as little as \$5 or even \$1. We had by the end of the campaign raised a little over \$10,000. I contributed none of my own money to the campaign. We estimate that we traveled around 15,000 miles throughout the state as well as on trips out of state related to the campaign. We believe that we printed and distributed between 50,000 and 100,000 pieces of literature.

We created good electronic communications from early on in the campaign. The DanLaBotz.com website was established on Feb. 26, 2010 and by Nov. 2, 2010 we had had 16,839 unique visitors to the site. On Nov. 1 and Nov. 2 we had about 1,500 visits each day. There were a total of 23,875 visits, 94,324 page visits. I also wrote a book for this campaign, *Vision from the Heartland: Socialism for the 21st Century*, which by Nov. 2 had had 900 downloads.

In addition to DanLaBotz.com, we also had two Facebook pages, Dan La Botz and Dan La Botz, Socialist for Senate. Each of those sites had over 1,000 "friends" from throughout Ohio, around the United States and around the world, many of whom commented on the campaign as it developed. We also had a YouTube channel where we put up about 30 videos. The basic "Dan La Botz, Socialist for Senate" video received 2,728 views and a few others received about 500 views. We created listservs for our local organizations and for all supporters.

In addition to our own communications, we filled out many media questionnaires and were interviewed by TV stations about our views. The newspapers carried our opinions to tens of thousands of voters and the TV stations aired our interviews which may have been seen by hundreds of thousands.

Our Strategy

WE HAD TO MAKE STRATEGIC DECISIONS about where to spend our time, where to deploy our supporters, and how to use our economic resources. Our strategy was always to build on our strengths and to avoid undertaking tasks beyond our capabilities. We concentrated on those groups most likely to support us and did not attempt to reach either those who opposed us or those who might have been in the middle. I decided that I would spend my time speaking where I could build our local organizations or where I could speak in urban areas with large numbers of working class, African-Americans and students.

Similarly, we directed our supporters to work in those areas where we were likely to receive a good reception: universities and student communities, liberal communities, urban (as opposed to

suburban) working class neighborhood, African-American neighborhoods. We simply did not have enough supporters to be able to take our message to less sympathetic areas, such as the big city suburbs. While we recognize that two-thirds of Americans live in suburbs, they are a much greater challenge both logistically and politically, so we concentrated on the cities and on our most likely supporters.

A political campaign's central activity is the candidate's speech making and the candidate's and supporters' talks with the public. Early on in the campaign I developed a speech concentrating on three issues: 1) the economy and jobs; 2) the environment; 3) the U.S. wars abroad. I spoke about the country's problems and our proposed socialist solutions in down-to-earth language without jargon, without academic terminology, without radical rhetoric, and without sarcasm or nastiness.

Altogether I gave my basic speech, in versions from 5 minutes to one hour in length (usually about 40 minutes) about 50 times either at candidate forums to which I had been invited or at meetings that we had organized. I probably spoke to between 1,000 and 2,000 people in that way. In addition, we handed out literature and engaged in conversations with many thousands of others at public events or in public places.

Conversations with the Public and Supporters

WE HAD SOME BRIEF CONVERSATIONS with voters while gathering petition signatures, while leafleting mass events, and while speaking at public candidates forums. We found that African-Americans were much more open to discussions with us, as were young people. Middle aged white people were the least willing to engage in conversations with us.

Everyone recognized, and conversations with voters confirmed, that the economy and particularly unemployment were the issues foremost on the voters' minds. Ohio lost 400,000 jobs since 2006 and the state's average unemployment rate was 9.5 percent officially, 17 percent unofficially and 30 percent in African-American and Latino communities. Many young people were finding it impossible to get that first job out of high school or college. Voters expressed to us their concerns about the economy and jobs.

Most of my conversations, however, were with people who were being drawn to our campaign because they were on the left. They were happy to see someone speak out on the war, on the environment, and on LGBT rights. And they were pleased to hear someone offering socialist ideas to deal with the economic crisis. Many of these people on the left appreciated my call not simply for nationalization, but for socialization of industry, for a democratically planned economy, and for workers' and consumers' involvement in the productive process.

Many on the left, of course, were concerned that supporting a socialist candidate would take votes away from the Democratic Party and help the Republicans. This argument got easier after the "progressive" Democrat Jennifer Brunner was defeated by the machine Democrat Lee Fisher. And it got easier still after Fisher fell 10 to 20 points behind Republican Rob Portman and then threw in the towel by giving his money to the party for other races.

We were fortunate from the beginning to have the pro bono services of an attorney and professor at Capital University in Columbus. He offered advice and help in the filing of our petitions, in dealing with some irregularities in the May 4 primary, and later in filing a complaint with the Federal Election Commission (FEC) because I had been excluded from the Ohio U.S. Senate candidate debates sponsored by a consortium of local newspaper and broadcasters. While the election is over, we are still pursuing this case.

Left Unity

FROM THE VERY BEGINNING we built this campaign based on cooperation between several left organizations, both as a matter of necessity and as a matter of principle. Since the Socialist Party had only a handful of member in Ohio and no organizational infrastructure it could not function as the basis of the campaign. We had support early on not only from the Socialist Party but also from the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and from members of the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA). Later we met members of the Young Democratic Socialist (YDS) at local colleges. Socialist Alternative, while not active in Ohio, endorsed my campaign. A leading member of the Ohio State Labor Party (OSLP) called my campaign to the attention of its members, and many of them supported the campaign.

Inspired in part by my campaign, all of these left groups and others joined in a Socialist Contingent at the October 2 demonstration in Washington. Also in late November my campaign organized the Ohio Young Progressives Conference at Ohio State University in Columbus attended by 27 young activists, many from the ISO and YDS, and Solidarity and SP staff were also present. (<http://scrupulo.com/ohprog/index.html>) Finally, on October 31, 14 supporters from Toledo and Detroit—members of the SP, Solidarity and the ISO and others—canvassed 500 houses in Toledo. All of this represented a remarkable example of left unity and helped to make the campaign a success.

Weaknesses of the Campaign

WHILE WE SUCCEEDED IN BUILDING an organization in several of the state's major cities and among a variety of social activists, the campaign did have some serious weaknesses.

Though we had local union leaders and members in our campaign, we did not find a way to speak in union halls and to union members. The labor bureaucracy's alliance with the Democratic Party made it virtually impossible for us to get a hearing.

While we had a few African-American activists involved in the campaign and while I spoke at state and local NAACP meetings, we never made any serious inroads in the black community.

Similarly with the Latino community which is important in Columbus and Cleveland. While I did attend a large Latino community meeting before the primary in Cleveland and was received with applause and cheers when I spoke, still we never had any Latino base.

While we created organizations in the Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati, and Toledo, we never succeeded in creating an organization in Dayton, Akron, Canton and Youngstown. While we had some supporters in those cities, we never got a group together there.

While we did have organizations on several Ohio campuses, we also failed to establish organizations on many campuses, most notably Cleveland State. We did not establish bases on any community colleges.

We failed to organize and mobilize our supporters to conduct door-to-door canvassing in neighborhoods in our key cities.

Conclusions

I OFFER SOME CONCLUSIONS here based on our experience in Ohio in 2010 for explicitly socialist campaigns run by socialist organizations.

The Socialist Party and other groups on the democratic and revolutionary left should continue to

mount election campaigns as part of their repertoire of activities alongside labor and movement organizing, recruitment, and training of cadres. Elections provide one of the few situations where socialists, because they are candidates or their supporters are seen to have a legitimate right to speak to meeting, disseminate literature at public events, knock on doors, make phone calls, and attempt to recruit to the movement. We must take advantage of such opportunities.

We can as Socialists be successful in getting a hearing from the American people. Throughout this campaign we had hardly a hostile remark or even a critical comment. People received us with politeness, toleration, and generally with respect even when they differed with us.

While socialist electoral campaigns are largely about the mass dissemination of socialist ideas to the working class, the labor and progressive movements, and to society in general, they should not be approached as educational or public relations matters. Socialist electoral campaigns must be approached as organizing campaigns aimed at building campaign committees, developing local leaders, and winning committed supporters.

The U.S. democratic and revolutionary left is small, limited to a handful of groups none of which has more than 1,000 members in the entire country. When the Socialist Party or other socialist groups undertake socialist electoral campaigns, they should attempt to conduct them on the basis of cooperation with other democratic, revolutionary, and left socialists. Unity on the left redounds to the benefit of all of the groups involved and to the movement as a whole.

We have to develop a way to reach working class voters in their unions, in their workplaces and in their communities. The Socialist Party and other socialist organizations will be able to do this only if they are oriented both to doing work in the workplace, the union and the community, and to conducting socialist education and recruitment as part of that work in the working class.

The Socialist Party and the revolutionary and democratic left made a small but significant advance with this campaign, but its real value will be seen in the ability of the left to prove more successful in reaching the American working class with its values, principles, and program.

Footnotes