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Strategic Thinking and Organizing Resistance

By Kim Scipes
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The first few weeks of Donald Trump’s presidency has seen an amazing explosion of mobilizing to oppose him and his administration on oh-so-many levels. And that has been heartening.

But it is not enough.

The fact is, as things now stand, Trump and his minions can outlast us. And even if we get Trump out of there—which I think is an impossible dream with the Republicans holding both the Senate and House, unless he leaves on his own—we will still have to deal with Mike Pence who, as an ideologue, is arguably even more dangerous than the opportunistic Donald.

In other words, even with this incredible mobilization, it will be extremely difficult to stop them if they really want to do something, and if they come up with a coherent plan to implement it. They have the institutional power to push things through, no matter how much we scream and shout.

And, to be honest, part of me actually thinks they may be consciously screwing up, so as to get us mad, in the streets, just to exhaust us so we’re tired, worn-out, and can’t mobilize again to stop them when we really need to do so. (I haven’t seen that they’re this together, but we have to consider the possibility.)

It's time that we take a few minutes to think about how we want to proceed, because there is no way that I can see us sustaining this level of mobilization. We have to think strategically about what we want to do.

What I propose herein is not some "final" plan or something like that, but I advance it to get others to think about what is being proposed, appreciating what makes sense and rejecting what does not, and to advance our thinking further: I see this as a collective project moving forward.

TWO ARENAS OF ACTIVISM

We need to recognize that there are two arenas of activism: movement politics and electoral politics. Now, I'm not going to focus on movement politics right now, but want to write about ideas on proceeding in the electoral politics arena. (There will be ideas helpful to movement folks, so keep reading, but the emphasis here is on electoral politics.)

Right now, there is tremendous irritation/anger, whatever, among folks who believe in the electoral realm: Hillary folks blame Bernie for her loss, and Bernie folks blame the DNC for the Dem's loss. We can fight this out until hell freezes over—and undoubtedly some will—but the rest of us need to shut up and realize that, for whatever reason, rightly or wrongly, the Dems lost and we have to deal with Trump and his gang for the next four or more years.

I haven't seen anyone say how we do this. The one thing I know for certain is that we cannot count on the Dems to save us: despite what Move On, Progressive Democrats, Bold Democrats, Our Revolution or anyone else says—and while I appreciate each of these groups' efforts to put some spine into the Dems—nonetheless, we cannot count on the Dems to address the problems of the people of the country. Period. The fact is, while there are a few good Democrats in office, many of the Dems are just as slimy, self-serving, backhanded, and pro-corporate, pro-capitalist and pro-US Empire as most, if not all, Republicans. And that's one part of the reality that we must face.

And the really bad news is that we must enter the electoral arena so that when we get the chance, we can institutionalize the gains that movement folks drive. (I can understand why it wasn't done at the time, but failing to institutionalize our movement gains in the 1960s-70s, is why we have to deal with this shit 40-years on.)

PROGRESSIVE ELECTORAL POLITICS

So, how to proceed? First of all, most of us recognize—to one extent or the other—that liberal capitalist politics is not sufficient to meet the needs of our people. We have to create a viable alternative politics, whether it is called "socialism," "ecosocialism" or something else. (This needs to be addressed, but I'm going to leave it for now.)

First of all, and most importantly, we're going to have to organize state-by-state. Electoral power is based at the state level in this country, and without establishing a firm foundation in every state that we can, we will fail at a national level. Let's say the Green Party won the presidency: great! But then what? Because they—or no other left "party"—do not have a solid

foundation, they would be turned out of power quicker than Trump. We have to understand this down to our bones: we must build a solid foundation before trying to build a national “house” to sit on that foundation.

If that point is accepted, then the question that demands an answer is: how do we do it?

Here’s where we need to think strategically. We have to take an honest look at where the Dems are stronger and weaker. I’m not an electoral person, so those more experienced will have to help, but my years of organizing experience tell me that we can divide the states up into three, uneven categories: (1) states where the Dems are well-organized and generally progressive; (2) where they are not well-organized, albeit generally progressive; and (3) where they are not well-organized and not generally progressive.

I would argue that we need to approach these categories differentially. In those category 1 states, leftists should organize and try to push the Dems to be even more progressive, but that we don’t see them as the enemy, and we don’t put too much effort toward organizing a left party, at least for now. In category 2 states, we intervene when possible to support progressive candidates and processes, and to organize to help them get their act together, but that we start building our left formations so that we can ultimately win; in the meantime, we provide a threat to the Dems, hopefully providing some backbone to them. And in category 3 states, we ignore the Dems, and have electoral folks make creating a left-focused party a priority.

Now, in the #3 states, that’s where people and resources are probably the most limited—and that’s where we have to generate national-level support for them. That doesn’t mean going to that state with the idea that everything is screwed up, that people don’t know anything (and certainly not that outsiders have all the answers!), and that outsiders are going to “save” those people. It means we need to seek out good people, especially those who are experienced and well-rooted—and they are almost always there, even if outsiders can’t easily find them—and ask them what their situations are, and ask what can we do from outside that could help them? Do they need training, education, or money (or what?) to help them build an organization in their state?

Once we find out what they need, we need to organize in our home areas to support them. Again, I’m not a strong electoral person, but I’d say California is a #1 state, and that the Dems are too strong (and generally too progressive) to make a priority to challenge. Obviously, activists would have to fight local battles, etc., as they come up, but what if they agreed to support organizing in South Dakota, Indiana, Alabama, or some other state in the #3 category? If we got the resources to good people in these states, I would guess that there could be a lot more done that matters than fighting the Dems in California, at least for the foreseeable future. Does this make sense? I think we need to “pair-up” between states, with the stronger locations supporting those in the less organized areas. And we have to build electoral organizations in every one of the states where the Dems are non-existent or totally useless.

Now, is this an argument for the Green Party or any other existent party? Certainly not intentionally. I’m arguing that we need to basically forget a national party at this time, and to focus state-by-state. We need to encourage people to start a progressive electoral party in each

state that fights for life-enhancing projects and candidates to concretely address issues and social problems that are harming people, and to try to improve things. Now, the situation facing people in each state are different, so we must organize to address those problems in those states. I personally think we should name our parties after our various states; say the Progressive Party of Indiana, of Alabama, etc. I don't think we should prioritize any particular issue or cause in the name—things will change over time, and that could be disastrous when that happens.

One thing that doesn't really fit here, but must be kept in mind: Federal office holders, such as in the Senate and House, matter. We need to elect the most progressive candidates possible in these elections. For example, whoever wins the House of Representatives in 2018 will set the rules for the 2020 Census, and that will affect Congressional politics nationwide for the next 10 years. The Dems will probably be better than the Republicans regarding these issues. Therefore, we will have to support probably all but the slimiest Dems in this election—but we should do it as an organization, and not just submerge ourselves as individuals inside the Democratic Party.

In any case, electoral activists (at least) will need to build organization across their state, and will have to meet—say in a state-wide convention—to decide their priorities and their policies. I would argue our (minimum) standard be that we demand that anything that is adopted be life-enhancing or reactionary-challenging. How that gets worked out will have to be decided by people living in those states.

Yet, I wouldn't try this until some certain predetermined criteria has been met—agreed to in advance by activists in each state. In other words, there are probably informal networks already existing, but there has to be some level of formal organization established before you have a state-wide convention. Should there have to be 50, 100 people in each county contributing a minimum of \$5, \$20, whatever a month, plus able to donate two hours of work a month, before a county is deemed organized—and should there be 40%, 50%, 75% of all the counties in the state organized before a convention is held? (Similar criteria would have to be met before seeking to develop a national party.)

So, in other words, instead of just getting something together so you can intellectually masturbate, no matter how pleasurable, there has to be some level of organization already in place on which to build. Also, you want the greatest level of participation in the convention that you can assemble, so you have the people power available to build on convention accomplishments.

Key to building—and sustaining—any level of formal organization is establishing a fair and supportable decision-making process. In other words, *before* formalizing the organization, there has to be a clean, decision-making process elaborated and accepted. If you don't take the time and do this carefully and thoughtfully at the beginning, you will almost certainly run into disaster down the road. And, when you do confront a major problem, as it almost a certainty, it will be especially difficult to then come up with a solution that doesn't favor one side or the other; raising questions about the legitimacy of the decision, and causing major dissention, if not splitting, in the organization. I think this is a very important issue, and must be addressed from early on in the organizing process.

An experience from my anti-war veterans group in San Francisco suggests a way forward that works, even though we established this during the mid-1980s. (And believe me, an organization comprised mostly of combat veterans is not the most stable of organizations to be found!) What we did was divide issues into two categories: some were issues that were relatively simple and straight-forward, while others had major implications for the organization, especially over the long term. We always strived for consensus, but rarely achieved it.

We set different levels of acceptance for these two categories. For the issues that were relatively simple—do we endorse and participation in this march or rally, or do we send someone to this conference or not?—we went with a simple majority, 50% plus-one.

For the issues with major implications for the organization, we always required a “super-majority” (I forget exactly what level of agreement we decided to use), but it could be as high as two-thirds, 70 or even 75% agreement being necessary for that issue to be adopted by the organization. The reason a supermajority is important is that you don’t want your organization to fall apart over 50% plus-one decisions; a supermajority requires that a good number of members think a certain way on particular issues, not that someone has cobbled together a bare majority.

However, notice that we rejected the requirement of total consensus, even for the most critical issues. The reason is simple. If you go for 100% consensus, even one person can immobilize the organization. (An infiltrator can wreak havoc all by her/himself.) And while discussing/arguing all night in college dormitories might be fun for those so inclined, very few of us has the time, energy or even desire to discuss things for hours; and most who work or who have young children simply cannot. So you have to develop a decision-making process that works, but one that also protects the integrity of the organization and its’ members.

Once you get the necessary level of organization built, and you establish a good decision-making process, then you need to create an “organizing committee” to strategize what you want to come out of the convention. You want to have necessary committees set up, so that work gets accomplished—including outreach, fundraising, education, media, etc. Ideally, you’d have an internal organizing plan so as to ensure your people are trained to do the work they want to do successfully—you can’t assume that, just because they volunteer, they know how to do things; those more experienced must be prepared to develop every person they can into a leader.

With that accomplished, you need to develop a plan, and be prepared to implement it, to develop further your state party.

But there’s one more thing I want to address, and that’s organization building on the local level. There seems to be a fascination with numbers and/or mobilizing crowds on the left today. Along with that is the concept of the “mass” party.

I am going to argue against this approach. I’m going to argue we need to organize by affinity groups.

As far as I know, the first affinity groups were developed during the Spanish Revolution of the 1930s. Basically, they are small groups of people—say 12 to 14 members—that get together to create a long-term organization to engage in “political” work, however they define it. The key to the strength of an affinity group is that it is based on a small number of people who each gets to know well and, ultimately, who can trust each other totally. In other words, people take the time to get to know each other well, and from there, engage in long-term political work, whether in the electoral or movement arenas, or even both!

An affinity group organization requires that you get to know each person in it. This takes time, I know: the house is burning, and you say take time to respond!?!? Yes. We have to build our foundation well, because it’s going to be subjected to stresses over time, including opportunism, withdrawal, police provocations, etc.

A mass party almost never can withstand such stresses, as it doesn’t have that internal structure that provides the resilience against such stresses; a carefully and well-built affinity group can.

So when you’re seeking recruits for your party-building efforts in town A, you should be seeking out people who you think you’d like to work with over time. As you get people together, talk to them about building an affinity group, and be ready to explain what you mean—generally, they are based on some commonality. See who’s interested, and who’s not. You can build affinity groups on the basis of any commonality you wish: students, women, workers, poor, white, black, Latino, Asian, seniors, the particular neighborhood/community, whatever it is that brings people together. The idea is to build small organizations who can operate democratically, based on a commonality, who share an interest in working toward creating a more just, life-enhancing society.

Now, you may establish one affinity group in town A, but what about towns B, C, D, etc., or even rural locality, in your county? Obviously, you’d want to establish as many affinity groups as possible in each town, city or local area.

How to coordinate them? If you envision a center “hub,” with an empowered representative from each affinity group in each agreed-upon geographical area, then you have the basic idea of a “spokes council.” A spokes council meets periodically, and ideally, issues have been discussed within each affinity group beforehand, so the representative is empowered to enter into agreements, vote particular ways, etc., and the affinity group will act in accordance to the group decision. If an issue hasn’t been discussed before the spokes council meeting is conducted, then the issue has to be taken back to the affinity group for discussion and decision, which then is communicated back to the spokes group. The point being that no one is coerced into any campaign that they don’t agree to democratically; but when they agree, they have committed themselves to act accordingly.

The nice thing about the affinity group approach is that you get to meet new people, and get to know them well—as they get to know you. However, it also recognizes that people have different skill levels, experiences, etc., and allows members to respectfully teach each other their skills; in other words, each person gets to enhance whatever they’ve got and build those things they don’t have. In this process, leadership development of each person is key. That way,

should someone leave the area—say they get a job elsewhere, or go to college/grad school—then they have the skills to take with them to begin building affinity groups there as well....

CONCLUSION

In short, we need to sit back and think about how we want to not only build a resistance movement, but we want to build a new social order in the future. Rushing into the streets, as exhilarating as it can be, is not enough for the long haul. And if we want to win, we have to be prepared for the long haul.

While this article has discussed the electoral arena, many of the ideas for the movement arena can be thought through similarly. We cannot collapse the opposition into just electoral politics, and should not want to; a bird needs two wings to fly. Yet, thinking strategically and organizing on the basis of affinity groups will focus folks in the movement arena as well. And as we get our respective acts together, we can start weaving the web between them.