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The Left and the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election

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The Left and the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election

Abstract

This is a conversation among Ronald W. Cox, Bryant Sculos and Daniel Skidmore-Hess about how the left in the U.S. should analyze the broader societal and political ramifications of the 2024 presidential election. Each of the authors contributes separate essays that reflects both complementary and differing views regarding how those on the left should vote in this election and why.

Keywords

Left, U.S., Presidential Elections, Socialism

The Left and the U.S. Elections
Ronald W. Cox

Every four years, those of us on the left are faced with the choice of deciding which wing of the capitalist party will do less harm to working people in the United States. For some, the answer is “none of the above” and third party or abstention is the response, though the fraction of the left that abstains or votes third party is very small—about 1-3% of the voting eligible population in most Presidential election years. Most of the left holds their collective noses and votes for the Democratic candidate, without much enthusiasm.

This November 5 I will check the box for the Democratic nominee for President Kamala Harris, with no illusions that her corporate-dominated party aligns with me in any fundamental way. There is only one purpose to my vote: to keep Donald Trump out of the White House. Dan Skidmore-Hess and I co-authored an article in 2022 that provided an assessment of the threat represented by Trump and his allies around the world. The article, titled “How Neofascism Emerges from Neoliberal Capitalism,” published in *New Political Science*, identified a global neofascist current that occupies similar terrain to 1930s fascism but is also different.

Like 1930s fascism, Trump poses an extreme threat to the working class in the U.S., with policies already being implemented by Republican governors to dismantle the political and legal architecture that enables the existence of labor unions. Trump also identifies immigrants, people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals as specific threats to the “U.S. way of life,” invoking a nostalgia for the days of Jim Crow segregation—the real meaning of “Make America Great Again.” To the extent that there is a clear antecedent and inspiration for Hitler’s 1930s fascism, it was the Jim Crow segregation in the U.S., cited by Hitler himself as a model for part of the fascist program he implemented in the 1930s. These reactionary currents in American politics have roots that are deeply anchored in institutional racism, xenophobia, misogyny and homophobia, with the most recent manifestations being an all-out ideological war by the far right to censor educators who speak honestly about any of these issues. These are not simply Trumpian policies, but are anchored in the long history of conservative politics in the U.S., often aided and abetted by liberals. On immigration, both parties have practiced exclusionary and punitive policies toward immigrants who are systematically denied rights to asylum requests, in violation of domestic and international laws. Trump wants to take this further and create an expanded internal surveillance and detention apparatus to jail and deport undocumented immigrants inside the U.S.

Trump does not yet have the full-blown machinery to implement Hitler-style fascism, but if elected a second time he would have the potential to create such an apparatus—those on the left that reject characterizations of Trump as a fascist would be wise not to test your thesis by aiding and abetting a Trump re-election by refusing to acknowledge the very real differences between Trump and Harris. Also, there is evidence of a fascist support base among Trump’s most ardent supporters: mobilization for an attack on the U.S. capitol, encouraged by Trump, as part of an effort to illegally maintain power and to deny the results of an election; fascist-like networks and organizations whose members threaten poll workers and intimidate voters; Republican governors such as in the state of Texas who are using the police to intimidate and harass immigrant and

voting rights groups as part of a sustained effort to eviscerate any democratic accountability and to focus hostility against minorities as opposed to sections of the capitalist class that they represent; and a well-mobilized effort to contest the 2024 election and try to reverse the results if Trump gets defeated.

The prison and border industrial complex gives money to both parties, but the biggest jump in the stock market after Trump's 2016 election victory was registered in the stocks of private prisons and border security corporations. In addition, the oil and gas sector, despite being given more land for drilling by President Biden, is enthusiastically funding Trump just as readily as they engage in climate denial. According to the work of Andreas Malm, the oil and gas sector and more broadly the extractive sector, has aggressively supported a neofascist current in global politics, since their profits rest with unfettered accumulation of finite resources dependent on never-ending destruction of the environment, a set of policies enabled by a neofascist political current that traffics in climate denial, myth and lies. Hedge fund speculative capital has also gravitated toward Trump, especially those sectors of financial capital who want to weaken all existing financial regulations and restrictions (this sector of speculative finance supported Brexit as well). Neofascism, then, incorporates sections of capitalist interests that combine aggressive domestic militarization, policing and accelerated detention of immigrants, minorities and the poor (admittedly bipartisan but with explicit plans to create new and more extreme institutional capacity and enforcement under Trump), weakening or eliminating existing environmental regulations, loosening regulations and taxes on corporations and the wealthy, and cooperating with a neofascist group of religious organizations to sever barriers between the state and organized religion: the outlines of a neofascist theocracy are apparent.

This neofascism is not to be confused with the big state capitalism of the 1930s, where fascists like Hitler built a militarized machinery into an ever-expanding state that sought total victory over its opponents at home and abroad. Instead, this neofascism is indebted to neoliberal capitalism, whose global corporate-funded think tanks have long supported many of the policies being advanced by Trump. These include a radical expansion of "free enterprise zones," tax havens, increased corporate subsidies, and replacing public infrastructure with for-profit corporate infrastructure, funded at considerable taxpayer and working-class expense. In the words of neofascist ideologue and Trump advisor Steve Bannon, the goal is the "deconstruction" of the capitalist state to enable more unfettered profiteering, crony capitalism and unaccountable acceleration of climate destruction and targeting of already disenfranchised poor communities underscored by a war on immigrants and minorities, alongside a frontal assault on reproductive rights. These are not "culture war" issues. They are class issues that are connected to a set of policies that would further weaken the capacity of the working class to mobilize, organize and defend their existing rights, let alone advance toward more ambitious working-class organization that is urgently needed to advance radical reforms capable of challenging the system of capitalism that gave us Trump.

The Democratic Party is not an ally of the left or the working class. The box that I will check for Kamala Harris is one that is tactically designed to combat neofascism and the movement that Trump represents. If I were not in a state that is somewhat competitive, I would most likely vote for a left third party or abstain, if only to express my moral opposition to the genocide being funded and endorsed by the Biden Administration and by Congress (it would just be a "moral"

vote, as the genocide policies are thoroughly bipartisan, and that vote will change nothing). My vote for Harris in the state of Florida is not an endorsement of a Democratic Party whose militarism, anti-immigrant policies, corporate support base, and all-out support for Israeli genocide should be rejected outright by anyone that considers themselves on the left politically.

Indeed, Trump is far from an aberration. His emergence has deep roots in capitalism as a system of accumulation and the rightward drift of the policies of capitalist parties. Transnational corporations as the dominant economic and political powerbrokers within this system have more power within and over more capitalist states around the world than they have ever had in the past, which is a function of the wealth that they have captured in a global capitalist system, as well as an intensification of capitalism as a thoroughly global system of integrated production and value chains. As a result of more unaccountable corporate power, capitalist governments face a legitimacy crisis due to their incapacity and unwillingness to develop policies that give ordinary people a voice. These voters have turned to Donald Trump due to a combination of misplaced economic grievances, racism, xenophobia and misogyny that is a combined response to the increasing illegitimacy of the capitalist state.

Corporations that give money to, and have influence with, the Democratic Party are okay with the Biden economic programs that provide expanded subsidies to capitalist manufacturing and high technology production as incentives to create jobs in the U.S. The Biden infrastructure and CHIPS bills were justified by invoking China and Russia as global security “threats” (manufactured by the military-industrial complex) that required massive increases in military spending, buttressed by bipartisan support for an aggressive U.S. empire and what Kamala Harris called “lethal force” in a chilling phrase invoked during her DNC nominee acceptance speech, amidst the unquestioning and choreographed chants of “USA, USA” while a genocide underwritten by her administration is being carried out. Justified as a “strategic necessity,” the Biden administration provided lavish subsidies to corporations to encourage domestic investment. Though there were some efforts to attach these subsidies to pro-union policies, mostly they were designed to accommodate the amount of government expenditures thought necessary to get the private sector to produce chips and semiconductors in the U.S., to manufacture more goods in the U.S. (especially in “red” states), and to provide aid to corporations deemed to be leaders in an increasingly militarized global competition with China.

Yes, there were differences in the design of these spending programs compared to what Trump has proposed: much more money given toward addressing climate change, whereas Trump is in complete denial and has offered only the opposite: full steam ahead on fossil fuels and gas, and a direct attack on any support for renewable energy. Biden also has emerged as a much more friendly President to U.S. labor unions, both in his appointees to the National Labor Relations Board and his inclusion of at least some pro union and pro working-class reforms in his signature legislation passed by Congress. The most progressive of such legislation, by far, was the American Rescue Plan, which at least for a short-time, provided substantial decreases in child poverty—but it did not get renewed or expanded.

What is the strategy, then, to defeat Trumpian-led neofascism? The answer is only partly in preventing Trump from taking office. The best way to defeat Trumpism, which is broader and more deeply entrenched than Trump himself, is to be part of an anti-Trump organizing campaign

that calls both for his defeat and for an economic populism that is capable of bringing working class and oppressed people together in mass organized movements from below. For me, that means working with grassroots labor activists and organizers, immigrant rights advocates, reproductive rights advocates and LGBTQ+ advocates to deepen the base of movements from below as part of a broad anti-fascist coalition. In order to be effective in defeating Trumpism, we must take on the corporate oligarchy whose privileges are systemic and entrenched in a militarized capitalism that is unsustainable. We have to vote against Trump while also opposing the bipartisan militarism, the genocidal bipartisan policies in Gaza, and the oligarchic privilege that has been the hallmark of both parties. We have to continue to build mass movements that are capable of being independent of the Democratic Party, but right now the left does not have the movement base nor the luxury of time to simply allow the worst outcome to happen on Nov. 5: a Trump victory which would make it even more difficult to organize and develop a mass-based alternative to militarized capitalism.

*Building Working Class Power:
The Political Ethics of Socialist Electoral Strategy for 2024 and Beyond*
Bryant William Sculos¹

Introductory Remarks

What follows is an argument for a specifically *socialist* strategy for the 2024 election. It is not a progressive liberal argument. It is not a social democratic argument. While reasonable people could disagree about how likely or unlikely achieving progressive liberal or social democratic policy goals are in the contemporary United States (US)—I for one think these kinds of reforms would require a historically unprecedented mass movement akin to what would be needed for a wider political-economic transformation—but those motivated by or satisfied with progressive liberal or social democratic achievements could logically come to different strategic conclusions. We shouldn't assume that people who have fundamentally different political goals should agree on political strategy. In other words, if we're trying to get to different restaurants, why would we follow the same route? This piece is making a broader argument, but it will take up some of the claims made by Ron Cox in his essay in this issue—and I'm taking it for granted that Cox and I share broadly similar ideas about what a just democratic postcapitalist world would be: namely, a socialist world.

The question before us is, fundamentally, whether to vote for Democratic Party nominee Kamala Harris or not (as well as the other implications of this choice and related choices). And while I will be making the case for not voting for her (nor Donald Trump), whether one chooses to vote

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for her or not would not be *the* determining factor in whether such a individual is practicing the socialist strategy articulated here. What matters is building the movement for socialism.

For some people, it is possible to vote for someone and not have it occupy any wider significance in terms of how they engage politically otherwise. However, for most people, I think this is not the case. Voting for a Democrat or Republican, even reluctantly, typically entails a decision that will affect the person's approach to politics, especially in the short-term. In my experience, people who are able to effectively compartmentalize their vote from their political activity otherwise tend to be very highly politically educated and have significantly above average activist experience. It could be anyone though. I'm not going to decide that a certain category or person can or can't do this, so for whomever this applies to, if you're meeting the other criteria I lay out here, we're potential comrades, even if you're voting for Harris. Ron Cox is such a person. In fact, he is one of the few people I know or am aware of on the socialist Left who never carries water for the capitalism-defending, warmongering Democratic Party and remains actively opposed to the Democrat-Republican corporate duopoly year-round regardless of whether its election season or not—not just in words but in action. For the purposes of the argument here, I'm assuming that most people do not practice the kind of committed compartmentalization that people like Cox do—even if they are just as intellectually and politically capable of doing so.

Socialist Electoral Strategy in 2024: Neither Harris, Nor Trump

There is no reason to think that we're on the verge of some kind of socialist revolution in the US or around the world. Revolutionary transformation is in the short-term off the table. However, this doesn't make a revolutionary political outlook moot. Revolution may well be years or decades off, but the building for the possibility to achieve that goal, to make it more likely, makes revolutionary socialist strategy enduringly relevant. One could make the same case for more reformist strands of socialist strategy. Despite how long-off transformational change may be, no matter how much regression occurs, the struggle for radical reforms remains important. This essay takes no strict position on revolutionary or reformist *socialist* perspectives, but instead will treat them as demanding identical approaches in the short-term.

The core of the argument here is not that there are no differences between Kamala Harris or Donald Trump, nor will it be argued there are no differences between the Democrats and the Republicans. There are differences. However, the differences between the two are insufficient to justify supporting one over the other—and this is a horrific state of affairs the US and the world finds itself in. More specifically, it will be argued that voting for Kamala Harris does nothing to build working class power and in fact could further legitimize an overtly anti-worker, anti-socialist politics. Whatever amount of time and energy leftists spend advocating or defending Kamala Harris is time taken away from building independent working-class, socialist political forces. It might not always be exactly zero-sum, but a decade of political organizing and close study tells me that for activists and organizers, there is only so much time, energy, and money. Any amount in any of those three categories spent electing one's political opponent—and that's what Kamala Harris is for socialists—is counterproductive.

How does voting for—electing—Kamala Harris bring us closer to a socialist world? Even Cox would agree that it doesn't. Cox and many others argue that by keeping Trump out of the White House it keeps socialism from getting further away. Donald Trump and the proto- or neo-fascism that surrounds him and permeates his political agenda and motivates his followers is a massive danger to socialist politics (and to basically every other person in the US). We can accept Cox's (and Skidmore-Hess's) 2022 argument about the rise of neo-fascism and the enormous danger that Trump and Trumpism represent and still reject the claim that voting for Kamala Harris is an effective alternative. It is vital to the socialist project that Trump and Trumpism be opposed in every effective way possible. The problem is in thinking that supporting Kamala Harris and the Democrats does that. There is a deep body of scholarship—some of it done by Cox himself—that shows how the Democratic Party's policies (broadly definable as "neoliberal capitalism") are a major part of what has produced a context where someone like Trump can gain sufficient popularity to become President. And over the past several decades, the Democratic Party has only moved rightward. More will be said on the harms of the Democratic Party in relation to Trump and the Republicans. Similarities will be highlighted but not reduced to each other, but for each policy area, the question remains: how does choosing to vote for one of these candidates over the other contribute to the overarching goal of achieving a socialist world? I don't see how it does, and instead this November I'll be voting for either Jill Stein of the Green Party or independent candidate Cornel West, depending on ballot access in Texas. I don't imagine this vote will make much of a difference either, but it at least makes a public statement against the gross inequalities and injustices that define the platforms of the two major parties.

Again, if you're going to be spending the vast majority of your political efforts building the working-class movement and you decide to vote for Harris and nothing more, it's unlikely that that act will undermine the pursuit of the broader goals. But if you're going to hold your nose and vote for Harris reluctantly, why stop at merely voting for her? If there is sufficient reason to justify voting for her in order to keep Trump out of the White House, why not donate money? Why not volunteer for her campaign? Yard signs? Bumper stickers? If it is important enough to vote for her to beat Trump, then why not these other actions, which would surely do more to accomplish that goal than merely voting for Harris? At the risk of putting words in his mouth, I suspect Cox and others supporting his position would argue these additional acts would be too close to an endorsement of her as a good candidate—and would be helping building a violent, capitalist force. I agree. For me, the vote is already too much of an endorsement. I find too much arbitrariness in the position that is arguing on strongly pragmatic terms for a vote for Harris but draws the line at voting because it is not as meaningful as donating to or volunteering for her campaign. Why is the act of voting so different? And if one thinks these additional acts are not problematic from a working-class or socialist perspective, the history of failure of the Communist Party, USA's popular frontism provides a great case study for exactly why actively supporting Democrats doesn't contribute to the building of a socialist movement.

I've heard countless times that those who vote "third party" are privileged dogmatists or purists. I'm sure some of them are, but most are not. Most are people who have suffered at the hands of both parties or know people who have. Most do not have the privilege of supporting either of the two parties who will assuredly make their lives worse. I'll also hear that voting isn't a moral or ethical issue, it is a practical one. It is clearly both. No matter how you try to reduce voting to a practical-relational decision, as opposed to a full endorsement of a candidate and their policies,

the decision about which candidate is the practical choice is also always an ethical decision. Why prefer “practical” defined as “that which makes Donald Trump becoming President again less likely”? Because this makes socialist organizing easier? Why is that preferable? I’m not saying any of that is true, but the chain of justificatory questions shows the problem; it becomes an infinite regress if we refuse to acknowledge that our preference for certain outcomes, however “practical,” is justified on the basis of certain ethical principles. Therefore, it is always the case that the decision to vote for a candidate, even if only reluctantly and in relation to the other major party candidate, is an ethico-political decision.

If we’re going to support a particular candidate based on the idea that support for such a candidate pragmatically advances our ethical vision (in this case, the achievement of a socialist world), there needs to be evidence that such an endorsement, however passive, can do that work. So then, how does supporting Harris help build socialist politics? There is simply no such evidence in existence that it would. There is not a single example of modern socialist politics being advanced through supporting Democratic Party candidates. Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and all the other members of the so-called ‘Squad’ have failed nearly without exception to advance socialist politics. If anything, especially more recently, they have each tamped down their socialist inclinations and softened their prior criticisms of the Democratic Party.

We can go back further to Jesse Jackson in the late 1980s working within the Democratic Party attempting to pursue a strong progressive campaign. While not a socialist platform, many on the broad Left supported Jackson’s effort. He successfully drew thousands, if not millions, into the corrupt fold of the Democratic Party machine. Bernie Sanders provided a devastating sequel. These are the examples we have, and neither were particularly socialist in their politics. Critical of extreme inequality, poverty, and corporate influence? Yes. However, these are possibly the far-right of the leftist tradition if not entirely outside of it. These most moderate (arguably conservative) variants of socialist politics, which were quite popular in their respective moments did nothing to advance socialist politics in the long-term and could be argued to have undermined the cause of socialism.

We can look to the failures of the Democratic Party with respect to the Occupy Wall Street movement. Occupy was never deeply connected to the Democratic Party but there was little to no support—and plenty of outright opposition—for the movement from the Democrats. Many supporters of Occupy would eventually come to back Bernie Sanders, who, again, sold out millions of optimistic leftists.

The two waves of Black Lives Matter (BLM) tell another version of this story. Although the leadership of BLM didn’t endorse a candidate in the 2016 election, local activists achieved reforms across the country, including normalizing the requirement that police officers wear body cameras, that police departments “look like” the communities they’re policing, and increased equity/implicit bias and de-escalation training. Unfortunately, these reforms didn’t produce a critical decrease in racist, classist police violence. And despite taking a stance against endorsing any candidate in 2016, the leadership of the BLM movement during the second wave of BLM (in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor) ended up endorsing Joe Biden in 2020, getting sucked in by the electoral blackmail that the Democrats would be much better on

issues of policing than Trump and the Republicans. Even if that were true, and it would be hard to prove, the Biden administration allocated *more* money for policing with no significant reforms tied to that increased funding. Police violence against people of color has only continued to rise in the US. These cases show that progressive change of any kind is an exceptionally difficult task in the US, but there is no benefit to dissolving one's independent base of support into the Democratic Party.

For working-class people, there is an additional problem beyond the failures of electorally supporting Democrats and our social movements being destroyed or captured by the Party. For what amounts to generations, unions in the US have habitually endorsed the Democratic Party candidate for President. All that has happened over this period is the progressive *destruction* of organized labor across the country. The National Education Association (NEA)—of which I am an active member, representing the Texas Faculty Association and the Texas State Teachers Association at the NEA Representative Assembly in 2024—endorsed Joe Biden in June 2023 without a vote of the members and without any explicit concessions or promises from the Democrats. The NEA has endorsed the Democratic Party repeatedly and over the time of those endorsements we've seen the erosion of public education in the US. What are workers getting for their organizations' endorsements of the Democratic Party? They're getting worse than nothing; they're getting harmed. Biden did appoint some fairly progressive members to the National Labor Relations Board and got some moderately pro-worker policies included in pieces of legislation, but the Biden/Harris administration are also the same people who broke the railroad workers' strike and forced a contract—hardly a behavior we'd associate with the self-proclaimed most pro-union presidency in modern times.

What have national Democrats done to fight back against the criminalization of gender-affirming care and LGBTQ+ education? What have they done to beat back the onslaught of ostensible book bans? The Republicans are the ones pushing for these terrible policies, but the diverse working-class is harmed time after time by the fecklessness and complicity of the Democratic Party. Working-class socialists of course have no alternative in the GOP, which is a rabidly anti-labor party pushing worse and worse "right-to-work" laws everywhere they can. These efforts have national dimensions to them, but they're largely carried out at the state level. This is also true for many of the most aggressive anti-women, anti-LGBTQ+, anti-immigrant, anti-poor policies being enacted in the US. All of this is being done with the endorsement and protection of the reactionary US Supreme Court. How does electing a Democrat to the presidency contribute to the fight against far-right state governors and the US Supreme Court? What has the Biden/Harris administration done to protect reproductive rights? Nothing—the Supreme Court has prevented everything from the federal level. Biden has come out in support of decent reforms for the High Court but with precisely zero strategy for achieving those goals.

What has the Biden/Harris administration done for immigrant rights? After continuing many of the draconian Trump-era immigration restrictions well into Biden's presidency, Democrats co-authored and supported an extremely far-right piece of immigration legislation (a set of policies you can absolutely expect a second term President Trump to support, perhaps in identical form). And the only reason this policy isn't the law of the land already has nothing to do with the Democrats opposing it. Again, they fully supported it. They wanted to get it passed. They had plenty of Republican support to do so too, which tells us a lot. The bipartisan immigration bill

failed because Donald Trump got it in the ears of key Republicans that he wanted to keep the immigration issue alive for the election. The Biden/Harris administration has also expanded the border wall on the US-Mexico border. Not just maintained what Trump had built but expanded it—and waived over two dozen federal laws, most related to environmental protection, in order to do so. President Biden won a Supreme Court case against Gov. Abbott in Texas, and has refused to federalize the Texas National Guard to enforce it. He had the power to. If he was at all interested in being an effective force against the fascistic regime governing Texas, he would have long ago federalized the national guard—but he refused. And though it appears the governor eventually took down the razor wire at issue in the Supreme Court case, this was seven months later and only after adding more in the months immediately after the decision.

Democrats at the local level are no picnic for activists and organizers on the left either. At a certain point in the wake of the second wave of BLM, there were more protesters facing charges in Democrat-run cities than in Republican ones. We have also seen this carceral logic in Democrat-run states and cities applied to the student protests against the genocide in Gaza. President Biden endorsed the use of violence against these encampments. Harris has not offered any public disagreement with Biden's approach—which again was the use of militarized police against teenagers protesting against a genocide that their government is perpetrating.

And this gets us to the biggest reason to refuse to vote for Kamala Harris: the genocide in Gaza. The genocide in Gaza has the full support of nearly the entirety of the Democratic and Republican Parties—and supporting a genocide is antithetical to socialist politics (to say nothing for a profit-making genocide). The devastation in Gaza is near-total. It is truly difficult to imagine how any President could support the illegal, eliminationist warfare of Israel more than the Biden/Harris administration continues to. Promoting an endless weapons supply and endless public support for a genocide should be enough on its own to make anyone reject voting for any candidate, whatever their party affiliation. The activists involved in the pro-Palestine movement know that the Democratic Party is a part of the problem and have since the early days of the 2024 primaries called for opposition to any candidate who refuses to take a humane position. Veteran and novice Pro-Palestinian activists alike know better than most just how counterproductive supporting Democrats is.

It should then come as no surprise that far-right war criminal and former Vice President Dick Cheney has endorsed Kamala Harris. While not a perfect heuristic, if your strategy aligns with Dick Cheney's, it may be well-past time to rethink that strategy.

Socialists and the working-class more broadly need their own independent bases of political power and influence. That cannot be attained through either of the two corporate parties. It probably won't be attained through supporting Green Party candidates or other independent electoral campaigns either—but the key difference is that these campaigns are at least trying to build support for the idea and the practice of opposing the two capitalist parties and building a movement to challenge them. At worst, such support is pointless, but at best there is genuine possibility. Both the Stein and West campaigns have truly progressive platforms that are aggressively pro-labor (including calling for a federal minimum wage of \$25/hour or more), and they're demanding an immediate suspension of arms sales to Israel and an end to the genocide. Supporting these campaigns are an opportunity to build something that will outlast the election

cycle, an opportunity to build independent working-class power that can continue to build into a movement and mass party—or at least plant the seeds for these potentialities. Supporting Kamala Harris undermines these efforts, so I say, hold your nose and don't vote for Kamala Harris.

Every Four Years We Repeat the Same Parts
Daniel Skidmore-Hess

Every four years the U.S. left engages itself in what is apparently a never-ending performative debate about electoral politics. Since the New Deal, one side of the debate has been in favor of backing the Democratic candidate, whatever his or her limitations and shortcomings, as the only viable path to progressive and even the outside possibility of social democratic reforms. From a practical progressive's point of view, even in the absence of legislative victories, the presidential appointments determine the tenor of the courts and federal bureaucracy. Better surely, to have Democratic appointees on the agencies that govern labor, environmental, civil rights, and a host of other regulatory agencies. The reversal of Roe alone surely puts paid to any simplistic notion that there is no difference between the two major parties where the power of women to control their own bodies and lives is concerned, not to mention the fates of the precious hard won gains of civil and voting rights of African Americans, the LGBTQ community and others that are presumably fundamental commitments of anything worthy of being considered progressive.

Another side of the debate emphasizes the regressive features that have accompanied every presidential administration, especially vis-à-vis the perpetuation of policies that further the international political economy of violence, ecological devastation, and imperialism pursued by both major parties. When it comes to the role of the U.S. in the world, partisan differences appear less salient. Regardless of the outcome of this year's election for example the U.S. will almost surely continue to support and subsidize the Israeli government's slaughterhouse policy in Gaza. The merchants of death will continue to profit in the global arms market itself but a subsidiary of the unsustainable technologies of the Anthropocene, driven ever forward by the demands of capitalist accumulation, in the face of which liberal Democratic efforts to promote peace and green capitalism seem no more than feckless posturing. The need for an authentically eco-socialist perspective is not only a preference but a necessity in the face of the emerging global wave of what Andreas Malm has aptly described as "fossil fuel fascism."

These are poles of difference within a spectrum of left opinion within which there is considerable room for nuance depending on the specific candidates or state context within which the debate is articulated. One could reasonably, for instance take the view that independent left campaigns should be pursued in jurisdictions where there is little chance of the state or district being part of a "swing" that will determine the outcome. Why not run an explicitly socialist campaign in Massachusetts, Vermont, or for that matter a "deep red" state if ballot access can be attained. While, on the other hand, rallying left forces to the "lesser evil" in the swing states and districts. We have, arguably, witnessed the electoral effectiveness of just such an approach quite recently in the U.K. where Independent left and Green candidates won in seats safe from right wing victory, while massive tactical voting in swing constituencies buried the Tories. The candidate

also matters of course, the politics of George McGovern were a far cry from those of Bill Clinton to be sure, but such differences are from a left point of view something that must be considered in historical and material context.

Historically speaking it is now a full century since any third-party candidacy on the left has registered a vote of real significance. That was the 1924 Progressive campaign on Robert LaFollette, a coalition formed out of the collaboration of progressives disaffected by the conservatism of the two major parties and the Socialist party, which by then had been decimated by the repressions of the first Red Scare as well as internal divisions. LaFollette received better than 4.8 million votes, about 16.6% of the popular vote and the electoral vote of his home state of Wisconsin. The result was considered at the time to be a disappointment, the electoral coalition disbanded, and the Socialist party returned to its former policy of running its own ticket rather than support a capitalist candidate no matter how ameliorative. Yet in the century since this now largely unsung campaign, nothing even remotely close has emerged. Since LaFollette, the most notable left candidacies in terms of popular support have been Henry Wallace as Progressive candidate in 1948 and Ralph Nader as Green party nominee in 2000, each of which garnered about 2% of the popular vote and neither of which came remotely close to winning electoral votes. The Socialist party had its best showing of the last hundred years in 1932 when in the depth of Depression Norman Thomas won 2% of the popular vote, a mark we should note, as it still seems to indicate the upper end of the portion of the electorate willing to support a strong voice to the left that would pose an electoral challenge to global capitalism. The historical point of departure to note is that the Socialist vote collapsed in 1936, and the culprit is apparent, it was none other than the rank-and-file supporters of the socialists. From Milwaukee to Reading to New York, the most militant and class-conscious trade unionists of the time switched their votes to FDR, rallying to the New Deal and its program of public works, social security, and the recognition of the right to organize. In some instances, the Socialists continued as a force in local politics up to the McCarthy era but in no case since has electoral socialism been a viable factor in national politics. From Marcantonio and Rhodes through the era of Dellums and on to AOC, socialists have won congressional elections but operating within the two-party nexus as local conditions (ex. Sanders in Vermont) and state laws (ex. Electoral fusion in New York) have permitted. That our quadrennial argument about what the left should do about the presidential campaign is really a debate among voices crying in the political wilderness is a cold hard historical lesson we must recognize as the first step in coming to terms with the situation at hand.

Our socialist forebears who rallied to the New Deal made a choice and a bargain that was both understandable and rational in context and yet had consequences that weigh heavily upon the present. From a materialist point of view the New Deal coalition is hardly an alliance between equals. Rather it needs to be understood as a bloc of interests in which the globalist corporate interests that fund the Democratic party have continuously exercised hegemony and the mass base of organized labor and later civil rights and other social movements including the environmental justice movement have been continuously playing a subordinate role. That gains have been made is undeniable, but we recognize that it is only when there is energy and pressure from below that the subalterns receive any tangible benefit in exchange for their votes. When the strategic needs of global capitalism shift, so too do the policies of the major parties. Hence the triumph of neoliberal deregulatory policy in both parties by the 1990s. The Republican party is of course similarly constituted, funded by the financial resources of fossil fuel capitalism and

other corporate interests that seek lower taxes, less regulation, as well as a strategic realignment of US trade and foreign policy in their best interests. Those phrases of course aptly describe the Democratic party as well although the latter is clearly not fascist while the GOP certainly is,¹ the Democratic party remains unable to clearly define itself, to provide tangible reasons to energize its base to vote **for** their own interests nor provide a full-throated call for more robust democracy and global peace and justice. To advance from the abysmal place where we now find ourselves requires far more than the immediate defeat of Trumpian fascism, although that it surely necessary, but an arduous struggle, historically grounded analysis attuned to the changing needs and aspirations of working people across national borders and cultural boundaries:

“I'm not partial to the martial
Or the plutocrats in their beaver hats
And the fascists have the outfits
But I don't care for the outfits
What I care about is music”
- They Might Be Giants

¹ Cox, Ronald W., Daniel Skidmore-Hess. 2022. "How Neofascism Emerges from Neoliberal Capitalism." *New Political Science*: Taylor & Francis Online. doi: 10.1080/07393148.2022.2121135
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