

Electoral Politics

Missed Opportunities

at the 2000 Democratic National Convention

When the Democratic National Convention (DNC) came to Los Angeles in 2000, a series of meetings to plan coordinated protests were attended by lots of community organizations and activist groups. Three LA activists describe how the process broke down across class and race lines:



Cameron Levin

Cameron Levin, then with Rise Up and the Direct Action Network:

For me the biggest challenge was bridging the activist world and the community-based non-profit world, because in LA there is a greater divide than in other parts of the country.

The activist groups include leftist, police brutality, globalization, and antiwar groups. Except for the police brutality group, which includes low-income youth of color, most of them are majority middle-class. The community-based organizations (CBOs) who do community organizing on economic issues really have nothing to do with these activist groups. The CBOs have a mixed-class staff, but their members and constituency are 95 percent poor working-class.

The divide is along race lines too. LA is an interesting city because there isn't a large poor or working-class white community. So the activist groups are mostly white and the CBOs are mostly people of color.

Before the Democratic National Convention, the activist groups took the initiative, but we tried to include the CBOs. In the Direct Action Network, most of us had worked for CBOs, so we knew people. I had worked at LAANE (LA Alliance for a New Economy) and two others. We talked with them, and some decided not to get involved with the Democratic convention. But some came to the meetings, including the Bus Riders Union, and we began planning a series of protests, with a different issue on each day. The idea was that we would each support each other's issues.

Woodrow Coleman, Bus Riders Union:

The Bus Riders Union saw marching at the convention as a way to send a message to the Democrats. We had particular demands we wanted from Al Gore. We went to the planning meetings, but in the end we decided not to march with the Direct Action Network. They wanted every demonstration to include direct action. Some of our members, women of color, feared retaliation from the cops. The students would leave town, and we'd still be here. We had a more long-term and strategic view than the young middle-class protestors. They wanted to smash the state, and we wanted to build the movement.

Roxana Tynan, Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy:

Some of the young middle-class activists from LA were really thoughtful about working with the community. They were as frustrated as we were about the folks from the Bay Area who didn't respect enough the local work that was happening, who saw it as a fun party to show up and run from the cops. One example was protestors from out of town who came and smoked dope in the park – a park where the neighborhood was fighting to get rid of the drug dealers. Cameron Levin was one of the young middle-class activists who worked with us to figure out how to link it all up, how to build each other's power by trying to do things jointly.



Roxana Tynan

Cameron Levin:

The breakdown happened at the last minute, when the Bus Riders Union pulled out. It got kind of messy. They had organized their own march, and they asked us not to turn people out for it. The issue was civil disobedience. The activist groups wanted to include a sit-in or other illegal action as part of each day. The CBOs raised the concern that civil disobedience near-

by might jeopardize their members of color, who were more subject to police brutality, and especially undocumented immigrants. They pulled out and asked Rise Up/DAN not to mobilize people for it.

In the end, some of the events were done jointly, like the days focused on police brutality and education. Those were issues where the prior links were stronger between the activist groups and the CBOs. But the Bus Riders Union march happened separately. Some of them didn't trust us to keep their members safe.

The police were threatening to crack down and arrest everyone, and TV stations were showing footage of the Seattle protests and saying, "The anarchists are coming." The police chief actually went to community groups and warned them that these out-of-town protestors were coming to cause trouble. This hysteria raised the level of fear and mistrust. There was an us-versus-them mentality, with community groups saying, "This is our home and you don't respect it; we are going to have to live with the consequences."

At the end I started pushing DAN hard to drop civil disobedience connected to any legal demonstrations, to keep the community folks safe and keep our ties with them. It was one of the reasons Rise Up broke up, which was very painful for me. We had envisioned building a community/activist coalition, an ongoing relationship, and that didn't happen.

For me, a white middle-class person, civil disobedience is less risky than for a poor or working-class youth of color. The problem is the lack of awareness by white middle-class people about the different implications of the same action, which leads to an over-reliance on that one strategy. Historically civil disobedience was used as an escalation, not as the first tactic. That's how I see the class difference in using civil disobedience: for poor people it's the last resort, and for some white middle-class leftist activists, risking arrest is the first thing they do.

Community-based organizations also have to worry about their institutional sustainability, their funders, and their membership when they get involved with a movement like the globalization movement. They have to consider the long-term cost of working with ad hoc groups whose nonhierarchical nature can make them less accountable than more formal organizations. If a volunteer activist group falls apart, maybe feelings are hurt, but there are no larger consequences.



Woodrow Coleman with members of the Bus Riders Union

A coalition between CBOs and activist groups would take a lot of trust. Organizational structure can help provide accountability mechanisms and help build trust. But it's hard to create a coalition structure when some groups have constituencies and formal decision-making methods and other groups are a bunch of individuals, with no geographical or common identity.

Middle-class activists drive me crazy when they think, "We know what's best for workers."

– Dorian Warren

Class Enters the Debate

between the Dems and the Greens

blw

At the Presidential debate in Boston in 2000, I witnessed clashes between union Gore supporters and college-educated supporters of the Green Party candidate Ralph Nader. What appeared on TV that night was not either side's point of view, but chaotic scenes of shoving matches and shouting. This conflict exemplified some class differences in political culture and strategy.

The Nader supporters seemed to regard the conflict as a contest over intelligence and being right, and some seemed to feel superior in a blatantly classist way. When a Gore supporter yelled, "Get a job," a Nader supporter yelled back, "Get an IQ!" Some rural Green Party members came across as condescending when they yelled things like "We're your conscience" and "Don't you understand that Gore will send your job abroad?"

The taunts I heard by clean-cut union guys, on the other hand, tended to be about the non-traditional appearance of the Nader supporters: "Cut your hair, you freak!" and "Take a bath!" were depressing throwbacks to the 60s. I engaged one young ironworker in conversation and he said, "You seem okay, but why do all of *them* look so weird?"

The Nader crowd quite proudly displayed multiple causes on their buttons and t-shirts. To these professional middle-

class people, activism clearly meant individual expression of their values, and the more diversity of causes, the better. The Gore supporters had only one message: "Vote union, vote Gore," and their matching union caps and shirts made visible their "strength in numbers" unity strategy.

I talked with some of the most hostile people on both sides and found an honest bewilderment at the other group's position. At least eight union members told me, "Nader may be a great guy, but he has zero chance of winning. Why throw away your vote?" I heard from several Nader supporters, "Gore supported NAFTA and the China bill. Why are unions supporting an antilabor candidate?" The middle-class strategy was based on a long-term, big-picture strategy and individual stands of conscience. The working-class position was pragmatic in the shorter term and was based on group solidarity as a tool of power politics.

