

## **On Comrades and Cops: A Nader Campaign Memoir**

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In the spring of 2000, I became one of many hibernating progressives who decided to get involved with the Nader campaign.

Following Nader's instructions, I logged on to [www.votenader.org](http://www.votenader.org), navigated to the volunteer menu, provided my contact information, and logged off to wait for an email or a phone call informing me where to show up and when. Weeks passed without any response. Eventually I was to receive a phone call from Pete Ellner, the head of the New Haven chapter of the Connecticut Green party asking me whether I would be willing to hand out flyers opposing the construction of a shopping mall at a Fourth of July celebration. I was somewhat taken aback by the request: I had volunteered for Nader and like many Nader supporters, I was not entirely in sympathy with what I knew about the Green party here. (I was even less sympathetic to the German Green party Foreign Minister Josko Fischer who had recently endorsed the bombing of Kosovo.) Also, I was ambivalent about the shopping mall project. I have had a visceral hatred of malls since my childhood and was receptive to Nader's bashing the Galleria as corporate welfare in an appearance in New Haven not long before. But I also recognized that most of New Haven-one of the country's poorest cities (shamefully in the nation's richest state)- was in no position to turn it down and the thousand-odd entry-level jobs which would derive from it. Here was yet another wedge issue which would be used to pit the left against the

communities that should be most receptive to our message. Moreover, Nader's supposed elitism and his "insensitivity to peoples of color" had already emerged as a frequent charge. Picking up the ladder of corporate welfare before they had a chance to climb it wouldn't help.

But I was tired of haranguing friends, writing unpublished letters to the editor, even calling talk radio shows when I couldn't stomach the hallelujah chorus of market fundamentalists any longer. I was tired of leftist purity and bland multi-culturalist orthodoxies which had prevented any organized opposition from appearing as even a blip on the increasingly corporatized media's radar screen. So while I certainly did not see eye to eye with the Greens on this issue, I recognized that we shared firm common ground in seeing corporations not as neutral forces of nature but as distinctly malevolent man-made social institutions.

While Nader articulated this position more forcefully than most Greens, his choice to run with them was a vote of confidence that the party could work out some of its own contradictions and grow into a force capable of challenging cash register politics, eventually at the national level. Whether or not Nader was correct remains an unanswered question. At the time, it seemed reasonable to accept the ambiguities of working for Nader through working the for Greens. So I began to get involved, with some trepidation, in the Connecticut Green Party.

## **Meet the Greens**

Part of the difficulty I had in making my decision was that it was not clear whether there was any such thing as the Green Party on a national level. While they have since more or less unified under the newly formed GPUS, during the Nader campaign, there were, in fact, two competing national Green Parties, the ASGP (Association of State Green Parties) and the GPUSA, (Green Party USA). Neither organization exerted control over the agendas which the state parties or had any role in overseeing the operation of the state organizations. Not surprisingly, the state parties vary enormously in their size, effectiveness, and political sophistication. Nader's positive evaluation of the Greens probably had something to do with his having been aware of the Green party in Connecticut, by most accounts one of the more functional and effective of the state organizations. The nine chapters meet on a regular basis and while only one Green candidate had been elected to office, the CT Greens led several effective and successful grassroots campaigns. The most impressive of these was an initiative turning back a sports stadium boondoggle which would have put the taxpayers on the hook for hundreds of millions of dollars in corporate welfare and returned little in the way of jobs or economic development. The party also successfully mobilized opposition to the so-called Filthy Five, a group of power plants located in the predominantly black and hispanic urban centers of Connecticut, responsible for high rates of asthma and other respiratory conditions.

These successes indicated some level of organization and political pragmatism, but while I knew something about the Greens, I should say that before attending my first meeting I was prepared for the worst. In volunteering for the 1996 Nader campaign I had had a brief encounter with the New York City Greens. The experience consisted of visiting several times the apartment of the nominal head of the party: a Grateful Dead admirer who met me at the door in full regalia. After a few addled discussions, it became clear that his main interest in the candidacy was Nader's position on marijuana legalization. The numerous scraps of paper in random locations around the room which constituted his electoral database gave a clear indication that this was an issue of deep personal concern for him. It also gave me an indication that this would not be a highly effective campaign organization.

A few of the CT Greens I would meet in the next few months would recall my experience in New York. Some were in tie-dyes, others were incapable of, or seemed not to put much stock in rational thought. Most, however, were nothing of the kind. For example, there was the Vice President of the state AFL-CIO, Tim Bowles, who had abandoned the Democrats to run for State Senate on the Green line. Mike deRosa a forceful, not to say abrasive Senate candidate from Hartford displayed solidly pragmatic political instincts and a knack for glad-handing. John Magnesi, a resident of the proudly reactionary town of Wallingford, worked for the State Department of Labor in the wage enforcement division and knew about unions and organizing from the inside. Laura Smith was a housewife from New Haven attempting to bring up four children on the salary of her

husband, a Yale security guard. John Battista, a psychiatrist was certainly at least “middle-class”, but by no means counter cultural. In short, the description of the Greens as “wingnuts” and “flaky” simply did not apply to most of the Greens I came to know.

While most of us were politically aware and well informed, few of us had much experience with electoral politics. Also, we were all volunteers and our schedules did not permit us to devote a sustained effort to setting up a state-wide campaign organization, even if we knew what form it was to take. My having to wait for weeks before receiving a call-back from the Greens was, it turned out, the norm. But it was not a consequence of flakiness or incompetence. Pete Ellner, whose mailbox would be flooded by the names from the national office was an accountant—as organized and detail-oriented as the professional stereotype would lead one to expect. Nader, in making his call for supporters to become “citizen activists” and donate \$100 and 100 hours to the Green party gave little thought to those like Pete who would have to manage the flood of names. Activist organizations of any size usually have a full time staff to develop volunteer activities and “volunteer coordinators” to contact volunteers and schedule volunteer participation. We had no one with sufficient time and skills to do the job, and it was some time before most of us even gave any thought to what sort of organization was required to make use of volunteer energies.

Furthermore, while the Green Party had been effective in, for example, getting its membership to write letters to state assembly members and in staging demonstrations with hundreds in attendance, statewide electoral politics requires mobilizing numbers in

the six and seven figure range. The party lacked the expertise, time, money and infrastructure required to operate on a scale two orders of magnitude higher than it was accustomed. Compounding the problem was a contingent in the party which preferred to operate as a club composed of friends rather than as a party made up of allies and supporters, many of whom one might not choose to have as friends or acquaintances. The decentralization of the party resulted, in part, from the instinctual need to keep the business in the family and would be responsible for any number of logistical absurdities. Through the end of September, campaign materials would be stored not at a central location available to everyone but at members' houses. Anyone wanting a yard sign or a button would be given the member's phone number to schedule an appointment to pick up the materials. Not surprisingly, by election day many of those who had ordered signs on the website hadn't received them. I would be continually asked by friends whether I had any way of getting them a button, as if they were tickets to the Superbowl.

Still, we did manage to accomplish something in the campaign. Nader achieved a respectable 6% in New Haven (Joseph Lieberman's home city), significantly higher than his statewide percentage. Most impressively, in several New Haven wards, Nader polled well into double figures, acquiring more votes than Bush in a few. Whether we can take credit for this showing will, obviously, remain uncertain. On only one or two occasions during the campaign did I have a clear indication that something I said or I did succeeded in changing anyone's mind or vote.

And we did succeed in at least partly breaking through the resistance of some in the party against thinking on the scale required to win. The office which we finally got the got ahead from the state to set up (and which remains open) would receive a steady stream of volunteers, and from it we would distribute Nader/Green paraphernalia, receive calls from the press and try to get the word out any way we could. We would organize 200 volunteers handing out some 30,000 Nader palm cards (which we designed and printed) at most of the polling places throughout New Haven County on election day. In the weeks before the election we blanketed area supermarkets with informational tables, arranged teams of volunteers to do phone canvassing, and sent out a mass mailing to 1000 county Green Party supporters. Squads of high school students would emerge from the office to repost signs and flyers which would last usually a day before being torn down by Democratic operatives. Unfortunately most of this activity would occur within the last days of the campaign, after most minds had been made up. But we did learn a lot about what is required to get out the vote, and our efforts resulted in a database of 1000 names many of whom were ready and willing to get involved in citizen activism. The lessons we learned and the contacts we made throughout the community put us on the map and in a position to build the local organization, something we are continuing to do.

### **Organizing in the Ivory Tower**

From the beginning of my work on Nader's campaign, it was clear that, as an academic, a natural place for me to direct my energies would be on college campuses around the state. When I attended my first statewide meeting at the beginning of the summer, I proposed to

serve as the statewide “campus coordinator” which meant recruiting representatives from all of the campuses in Connecticut and serving as a liaison between them and the national Green Party. Several campuses already had students who had expressed interest in the Green Party, and they agreed to serve as campus organizers. On my home campus at Yale, it turned out that I was the only one who had attended a Green Party meeting or contacted the party directly. So in addition to serving as Connecticut Campus Coordinator, it fell to me to “organize” Yale. I confess that when I took on these responsibilities in the early summer, I didn’t have much understanding what organizing a campaign meant. I did understand that at a minimum, it meant making contact with students, faculty and staff who might be interested in spreading the word when the school year began. This was by no means as easy a proposition as it might appear.

Universities’ reputations as hotbeds of leftist political agitation are by and large a figment of the far right’s imagination-such, at least, has been my experience having spent most of life around alleged “tenured” radicals.

For example, in my immediate circles in the Yale music department, the idea that any more than one or two of us would be a Nader supporter was unimaginable. All are responsible, decent, erudite, and humane with politics ranging from moderate to conservative to reactionary. A good indication of the department’s politics was its hostility to graduate student organizing during the drive for union recognition the year before I came. Some music faculty became notorious by refusing to write letters for those students who were most actively involved in GESO, the fledgling graduate student union. While only a minority showed themselves to be virulently anti-labor, most of my

senior faculty colleagues judging by external appearances would not be sympathetic to leftist politics. The attitudes and lifestyles of one or two faculty indicated a bohemian/artistic sensibility, if not progressive values, but the rest were comfortably and unashamedly upper middle class and some positively reveled in the elite social and economic status which a tenured Yale appointment afforded them.

So it was clear to me from the beginning that if I were to find allies, they would be elsewhere in the university. The problem with looking outside was that I had almost no personal acquaintance with any Yale faculty outside of my department. This was, no doubt, a product of my own insular temperament, but it is probably to some degree by design. Yale is, after all, directly modeled on the Cambridge University cloistered grounds, separated into walled off colleges and a bewildering variety of private, secret or semi-secret societies and clubs (Mory's and Skull and Bones being the best known). Junior faculty have little place within the elaborate social networks at Yale and our social circles tend to remain those we established before coming here.

My first pass at organizing consisted, then, not of contacting those faculty with whom I had actually talked about politics-or anything else, but of attempting to contact those faculty whose reputation indicated some sympathy for social justice or labor rights. I had heard of, for example, a Marxist reading group at the Whitney Humanities Center for three decades which continued to limp on into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I had read the work of other Yale faculty in various progressive magazines over the years and had heard several of them speak at conferences. I had also joined with a few other faculty members in

signing a letter of support for GESO the year before. Having accumulated the names of a number of potential sympathizers in this way, I sent out the following email with a request that it be forwarded to other faculty who might be sympathetic:

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

I write this message in my capacity as the Green Party campus organizer of the Yale Campaign for Nader. I am sending it to those who I am hoping, based on personal or mutual acquaintance with you or your work, might be sympathetic to the Nader candidacy and might consider lending support to it on the Yale campus.

As you are aware, the organization of a political campaign at any level requires a significant investment in time and energy, usually undertaken by the paid staff of the major parties and augmented by the staffs of supporting organizations, frequently unions.

Since the Nader campaign lacks these sorts of resources, the normal functions of a campaign must be undertaken by volunteers. These include canvassing of voters, creating and administering an email list to contact supporters on election day, setting up informational tables on the Yale campus to pass out literature and, most immediately, organizing Nader supporters (and others) to lobby for Nader's inclusion in the debates, and if necessary, to travel to Boston on Oct. 3 to demonstrate against Nader's exclusion.

I am, of course, aware that our schedules are such that few of us will be able to devote significant amounts of time to volunteering. I am also aware that many are not sufficiently enthusiastic about the Nader candidacy to feel inspired to support it.

I do hope, however, that a few of you might consider helping the campaign in one or more of the following ways:

- 1) Replying to this email indicating that you would be interested in getting more information about becoming involved the Nader campaign.
- 2) Forwarding this email to others who you think might be interested.
- 3) Volunteering a few hours between now and election day in organizing in the activities mentioned above.
- 4) Suggesting other ways that you, and others, can usefully participate.
- 5) Responding with a statement of support-even qualified support-of the goals of the Nader candidacy which could be shared with others who are considering participating.

I very much appreciate your consideration of this message and very much hope we can count on some measure of your support.

Best regards,

John Halle

A resounding silence followed. Following up the message over the next few weeks, I would post several other messages and gradually receive requests to be taken off the list, usually polite, but often with some annoyance. These would be issued by faculty with ostensibly impeccable progressive credentials, some of whom probably identify themselves as “radical-left” or “Marxist.” Whether Nader was too radical, or not radical enough was a question I never received an answer to and remains mysterious to me to this day; the request to be removed indicated to me that the party was not interested in exploring this matter. This pattern would be, it will be seen, a recurrent theme in my attempts to organize.

The one positive response I did get came from what should have been a predictable source. Robert Johnston of the American Studies department had, about a year back, published an article in the “Chronicle of Higher Education” in which he reported that many scholars sympathetic to organized labor regarded the prospect of graduate student organizing in their own backyard with distinct alarm. The gap between preaching and “praxis” which Robert exposed was already becoming apparent to me in my awkward attempts to get faculty to sign onto the Nader candidacy. The same “tenured radicals” who joined forces with a distinctly reactionary Yale administration to prevent union organizing at Yale, were, predictably, no less comfortable casting a “pragmatic” vote for

a candidate who supported the death penalty, drug war, increased defense budgets, star wars, NAFTA and GATT, and welfare reform.

Furthermore, of the faculty members sympathetic to the GESO recognition drive, many would not be included among Nader supporters. Their reasons were partly understandable. The prospect of a Bush administration could spell tough going on the ground, namely, for graduate student recognition at Yale. While massive donations to the Democrats did not win the national unions affiliated with GESO consideration on the major issues, most notably global trade, repeal of Taft-Hartley, these did buy something, namely neutral appointments to the NLRB. On this specific issue, the greater evil's victory might have real consequences for organizing at Yale, and it was understandable why some Yale faculty sympathetic to organized labor would want to insure a Democratic victory.

Other laborites on the Yale faculty went beyond narrow pragmatic grounds and were more generally dismissive of the Nader/Green candidacy, regarding any party not grounded in organized labor as inherently flawed—"the wrong way to build a party" as one of them said to me. A few years ago, I would have been sympathetic. Indeed, many of us would have preferred that Nader had run on the Labor Party line and would have been even more enthusiastic advancing it rather than the Greens through the Nader candidacy. Not only was an endorsement from the Labor Party for Nader not forthcoming, either in 1996 or 2000, but the LP had, in the ten years of its existence failed to run a single candidate at any level of government. Whatever hopes many of us had for the Labor

Party, it was completely moribund by the 2000 campaign leaving the Greens as the only game in town to confront the Clinton/Gore history of betrayals. This is not the place to discuss the reasons for the failure of the Labor Party, and by extension the problematic relationship of the leadership of organized labor to the Democrats. I bring them up here to note that the same fissures within the blue and green alliance which would increasingly come to the fore during the Nader candidacy would prevent a consensus for the Nader candidacy from emerging among progressive Yale faculty.

Several Yale faculty would come out of the woodwork to support Nader during the last weeks of the campaign. A letter drafted by Johnston, Michael Denning, David Watts and myself would be signed by fourteen faculty members. Two others faculty members who I had not managed to contact would write short endorsements of Nader's candidacy for the Yale Daily News. (Interestingly, these were the only faculty who agreed to write endorsements for any candidate.) Those who took an active role in the campaign, however, could be counted on one hand and the local Green Party would remain terra incognita to almost all of them. This was unfortunate since their rhetorical skills and impressive stature both locally and nationally could have served to at least blunt the edges of the more egregious slanders which were emerging from the all quarters during the last few weeks. Those who had been organizers in the past could have pitched in with desperately needed nuts and bolts advice on how to manage the volunteer forces we had at our disposal. Alas, none felt sufficiently enthusiastic about the campaign to make the step from advocacy to activism.

## Organizing Yale Students

While my attempts to organize Yale faculty had an inevitable shot in the dark character, my attempts to organize Yale students could be more directed. In three years of teaching, much of it one-on-one in private lessons, I had come to know many students more or less well. While most were, from what I could tell, completely apolitical (some may find it even more surprising that many-perhaps the majority- were born-again Christians, orthodox Jews or devout Catholics) I did know a few who were likely to be sympathetic.

One in particular had been conspicuously absent from my 19<sup>th</sup> Century Styles and Techniques class last November. I would notice in “Yale Daily News” that he was one of a contingent of several Yalies jailed in Seattle. I myself was on the verge of flying out for the action but backed out at the last minute. I assuaged my guilt by giving him an A for my class, a mark which was, unfortunately deserved so that he was none the wiser that it constituted an expression of solidarity. Responding from California to my email to his Yale address over the summer he expressed some interest in the Yale Nader campaign, but made it clear that he had many other political commitments which would prevent devoting much time to the campaign. He did promise to send the names of other potentially interested students. Based on the ferment of political activity at Yale, (Students Against Sweatshops which had camped out in front of the President’s office for a month last year), as well as being the founding campus of STARC-Students Allied to Reform Corporations, I was optimistic that other names would follow.

That this assumption was overly optimistic became apparent when, as the weeks went by, my former student would only supply me with one additional name. I have no idea whether a consensus emerged in the activist community over the summer that support for the Nader candidacy was tactically unwise, whether there was debate on this point, or whether certain liabilities of Nader were so obvious to them that debate was not even necessary. What was striking to me was how the reaction of nominally progressive students mirrored that of the faculty. A wall seemed to go up when I would try to initiate discussion on the “Nader question.” As the summer came to a close, my yale.nader address book entry remained filled with only two names, and I was none the wiser as to what I, or Nader, was doing wrong.

Fortunately the two students I had contacted were helpful showing me the ropes in how one goes about getting students involved in what is, ultimately, just another extra-curricular activity for most of them. The extra-curricular demi-monde of Yale is introduced to freshmen at the annual Freshman Bazaar held on Beineke plaza on the first day of classes and my two activist friends arranged a table for me at the event. And so I found myself pretending to be half my age, surrounded on all sides by undergraduate fencing teams, choral groups, improvisational comedy troupes, taking names of eligible “frosh.” To my great relief, my neighbors were sympathetic-I traded pleasantries with the Yale Turkish Students organization on one side, and, on the other, traded jokes with the charming editor of a rabidly right-wing student publication having the headline, “Kill a Commie for Mommie.” (The experience reinforced a point of agreement I had reached in

my sole conversation with William F. Buckley over Bach's Goldberg Variations years ago: conservatives are much nicer people than liberals.)

Two tables down the Yale Environmental Action Coalition had set up shop. Expecting solidarity- if Nader is not a hero to campus environmentalists, its hard to know who would be- I attempted to introduce myself in the hope that they might have ideas on how the campus Nader campaign could get off the ground. Rather than the polite welcome I anticipated I received a decidedly cold shoulder. At the time, I attributed my reception to discomfort at having an authority figure-these are undergraduates and I am a faculty member, after all-in their midst. I was wrong. While the New York Times, Katha Pollitt, and Eric Alterman had yet to provide them with a full-fledged lexicon with which to express it, the icy reception was, in retrospect, meant to signal a firm rejection of Nader's candidacy from these groups. Evidently, the word had already come down from the upper levels of establishment environmental groups that Nader was a "spoiler," endangering the chances of Al Gore predicted by Sierra Club President Carl Pope to become the "greatest President in history." Students at Yale, I should mention, were not unique falling into line with the green establishment. I had heard from other students on other campuses that their reception from environmental groups on their campuses was also chilly if not hostile.

### **"Social Justice" at Yale**

Fortunately, the chill emanating from the YEAC would not prevent me from acquiring some twenty-five names at the Bazaar. While most of those signing up were freshman,

some not yet of voting age, my efforts did seem to provide the basis for the beginnings of a Nader organization at Yale. The names and conversations also gave me hope that I would be able to pass the “campus coordinator” baton on to one of those who signed up. More importantly, my appearance at the bazaar led to my receiving an invitation from the Dwight Hall Center for Public Service and Social Justice at Yale. The Social Justice Network (SJN), which serves as an umbrella organization for the activists groups on campus, had scheduled an orientation session at its headquarters at which I could make an announcement of the formation of the Yale Campus Coalition for Nader-as it was now called.

On appearing at their conference room in a few days time, I glanced at conference room bookshelf and was comforted to find familiar works of David Dellinger, (*From Yale to Jail* caught my eye immediately), Chomsky, Ehrenreich and Fanon. Posters on the wall celebrated victories achieved by radical student activists going back decades. Here, I felt, I might actually be able to find supporters or at least opponents who would be willing to engage in a discussion of real issues including the increasing inability of activists to respond to the corporate agenda of both parties. While my remarks were, as instructed, limited to announcing the Nader campaign and our first meeting, I did mention that I felt genuinely appreciative to have been asked and even moved that so many students were concerned with social justice issues and were willing to commit themselves to advancing them.

The illusion that I was among kindred spirits would soon be broken when the next speaker, the President of the Yale College Democrats addressed the group. Steering clear of any discussion of the substance of the Democratic platform (including support for the death penalty, welfare reform, increased defense spending, the drug war etc.), he spoke of need to “take your vote seriously” and mentioned the Yale Dem’s work on homelessness in New Haven. While I did not expect active displays of partisanship, I was a bit taken aback by the studied neutrality of the assembled social justice activists. I had hoped that at least some would give some indication of their disappointment in the Democrats responsibility for “the homelessness problem” which had, after all, increased under two terms of the economic boom under Democratic rule. I also hoped that some would show a little enthusiasm for Nader’s candidacy which at least gave lip service (and in my opinion, much more than lip service) to the ideas promoted in the books on the SJN bookshelf and on the posters on the wall. I was even more disappointed that no one from any of the organizations represented there would ask me for more information about the campus Nader campaign or even enter into a casual conversation with me. A few gave clear signs, through tightly pursed lips, and barely stifled yawns, that I was distinctly unwelcome. I remember slinking off into the night feeling depressed and a little ridiculous. The wall of silence had gone up, and I felt powerless to even chip away at it.

Having failed to make the case for the importance of the Nader candidacy strongly among those most likely to support it, I attempted to find other ways to try to re-engage the group. A hopeful avenue seemed to be the list-serve the sjn provided for its members. I took the name of the list, sjn-discuss at face value: namely, I assumed that it existed to

promote “discussion” of social justice issues. Whether the Nader candidacy held promise for achieving the stated goals of the social-justice movement was, it seemed to me, the question of the moment and I would attempt in the next week to make use of the list to raise it. It was likely that the conversation would become polemical, and possibly even heated, but that was what discussion groups were for, it seemed to me. Furthermore, that polemics had a place on the list seemed apparent after I made my first posting which simply announced our first meeting. The notice precipitated a barrage of abusive emails of which the following were typical:

Do you want eight years of the Republicans in the White House? How about an income tax cut for the rich? More guns, flag-burning amendment? If you enjoy all of these, vote Nader and send W to Washington.

And what would become a mantra of the liberals:

A vote for Nader is a vote for Bush

Soon after these one-line salvos were posted, a Nader supporter responded questioning Gore’s progressive credentials, specifically his spotty record on “choice.” (Gore had, in fact, been a staunchly pro-life Congressman, and had recently described himself as having “a firm personal belief that abortion is wrong.”)

This would be responded to by the most vocal anti-Nader contingent on the sjn, “Feminists for Gore.” While the responses by the anti-Nader forces were in general less than substantive in most cases, any dialogue is better than no dialogue at all, it seemed to me, particularly given the media blackout which had been imposed on the campaign throughout the summer.

Unfortunately, soon after this exchange, the strategy of the anti-Nader forces would change from annoyed engagement to attempting to stifle the debate. Another “feminist for Gore” would take the lead in demanding cloture:

I feel inclined to respond to this long-winded article, if just to point out how incredibly condescending it is, how its principal brunt is insulting the intelligence of any feminist who is putting her or himself on the line for Gore. Rather than being "bullied" by "cynical Democrat spinmeisters," we are precisely in the thick of these issues, and are not by any means blind to the political realities. This author seems deeply misinformed about what is at stake here, and about what there is to win. If you are going to broadcast Nader fantasies, at least don't do it over the sjn-discuss-list. And if you would like to understand why this feminist is REALLY voting for Gore, contact me personally.

While a reasonable response to the article, which was indeed long-winded, striking here is the assumption that a Yale student's support for Gore, a candidate backed by \$161 million in campaign funds, favorable press coverage, and the full weight of the executive branch, constituted “putting one's self on the line.” Also revealing, although not surprising at an elite institution, is the assumption of a feminist vanguard-“we in the thick of the issues” charged with setting the agenda. Those who challenge the leadership's framing of the issue must be “deeply misinformed” and “broadcasting fantasies” and, the poster suggested, should not be given access to the sjn-list to do so.

These matters would not be subjected to any further scrutiny on the sjn list. For this was followed by a posting which amplified the request that the sjn-discuss be made off-limits to discussions of the sort we were trying to engender.

Hi--

I feel like the sjn-discuss list is an inappropriate forum from which "Yale for Nader" derives its email list. How about this? Can

anyone who wants to remain on the Nader list (I am only sending this to the sjn-discuss list) please email Prof. Halle, (john.halle@yale.edu) so he no longer sends emails to all of us?

Soon after I would receive a posting from the director of the sjn. I had it wrong, according to him. It turned out that the sjn-discuss list was not for polemics; it was to be limited to basic organizational announcements from the sjn groups. When I asked him what the “appropriate forum” was for these discussions, he replied that “it would be nice if there were one.”

He was, in fact, correct that the sjn-list was an inappropriate forum. Its primary function would become clear to me in the following months as messages would come in from establishment environmental, civil rights, feminist, and religious organizations. These announced “awesome” or “really cool jobs” generally with an indication that the position has a history of advancing the recipient into “leadership positions” in the “movement.” From reading these it would become clear that the sjn would be as likely to harbor future Carl Popes, Ron Browns, Toby Moffets and Katie McGinty’s than future David Dellingers, David Browsers, Howard Zinns and Barbara Ehrenreichs. Advancing the movement by “working within the system” had an honorable, if somewhat problematic lineage. But by the end of the Clinton administration, and the era of triangulation which it ushered in, it was also clear that “doing well by doing good” were increasingly dangerous words to live by. Welfare “reform,” NAFTA, the abandonment of the Kyoto accords and the string of Clinton era concessions to the right wing would be enabled by liberals who came to Washington with “the best of intentions.” In capitulating to the Washington consensus, by continually retreating rather than standing and fighting, establishment

liberals, both in Yale and New Haven, became, for many of us in the Nader camp much more the problem than the solution.

Nader himself would come to recognize this fact increasingly during the campaign. The campaign, however, had operated under a misconception in expecting to find support in the pre-existing network of campus labor, environmental, feminist and social justice organizations. It should have been obvious from the beginning that these would turn out to be what they would become-the constituencies most actively hostile to the Nader candidacy. The campaign should have developed a strategy with this in mind and recognized that those supporting the Nader campaign most strongly, both on and off college campuses were individuals who found themselves alienated from official activist organizations. I was surprised to discover how many students-not so much at Yale, but at less “elite” campuses- recognized not only that two terms of a brilliantly managed triangulation strategy had effectively co-opted and muzzled the establishment opposition but that this pattern trickled down to their own campuses. It was inspirational to discover that not only did many students take as obvious what was essentially a Chomskyan analysis of power and liberal capitulation to it but also how many who might otherwise have ended up demobilized and cynical found the Nader campaign to directly address their concerns. As Alexander Cockburn wrote, “Even if the Nader/Green run vanishes off the margin of history. . . it still will have given many young folk a taste for the excitement of radical political organizing. People carry such hours and days with them for the rest of their lives.”

## **Choosing Sides: Everybody Hates Ralph**

My attempts at organizing Yale by the end of September had led to a few meetings, a few informational tablings, and an email list of some seventy or eighty students. I had also succeeded in transferring my position as “campus coordinator” to two undergraduates who, I hoped, would be more likely to be successful getting the campaign off the ground. This was something I was particularly grateful for, having found myself both temperamentally and organizationally unsuited for the job of “organizer.”

One of the main objectives of the campaign during September was to prepare for the Nader east-coast visit scheduled for the first week of October. Included among the events was the fourth of seven “super-rallies” the first of which had occurred in Portland in September. Completely unprecedented from the standpoint of recent politics, Nader packed the Portland colliseum with 8,000 supporters, each paying \$10 to listen to several hours of political oratory. The campaign events of the majors were considered a success if they could get 1,000 bodies to turn out for free, many of these arranged by unions offering paid afternoons off for their rank and file. Whatever the super-rallies accomplished, at minimum they succeeded in wreaking havoc on the conventional wisdom manufactured by the establishment media that “Americans hate politics” and votes for both parties could only be obtained by moving to the vital center. Wherever it was, no one was referring to the center as “vital” in the fall of 2000. Nor was the establishment even attempting to sell the idea that Americans were happy with their

presidential choices. While giving fits to the corporate media who did their best to ignore and trivialize the rallies, the huge turnout also forced a major reconsideration among the progressive establishment whose pre-existing strategies for “movement building” were challenged by this string of huge events which seem to emerge out of nowhere. Leftists were naturally thrilled by the crowds and were happy to receive the validation that what they were more than voices in the wilderness. But the success also caused, somewhat paradoxically, considerable consternation and friction in the ranks. Nader was, for a variety of reasons, far from a favorite of the official left.

From the early spring throughout the summer, I was not the only progressive to spend countless hours on line responding to “radicals” indulging in what were, to many of us, familiar fratricidal instincts. Every opportunity which was presented to bash Nader was taken advantage of and, seemingly, gleefully exploited. The charges were a hodgepodge. Some, for example, cited Nader’s ties to the eccentric right-wing billionaire Roger Millikan, a charge first circulated by Chip Berlet of Political Research Associates, a group whose main purpose is to discover fascist brown-shirts behind every potentially broad-based populist movement. Others, often those with ties to mainstream feminism, or with lingering guilt over the new-left’s history of sexism and misogyny, cited Nader’s “discomfort around women” and his failure to make overtures to established feminist leadership as a reason for dismissing his candidacy.

Another frequent complaint, even among Nader’s strongest supporters was Nader’s failure to address the concerns of African-Americans, a charge which even Adolph Reed,

himself highly dubious of the candidacy, would call “a red-herring.” Still Nader’s “racial blindspot” would be endlessly resuscitated by leaders and pundits, both white and non-white, who scrutinized Nader’s record for a confirmation of their pre-conceived assumption that Nader was an enemy of racial justice. Some did not even require evidence and went so far as baldly stating that they would refuse, on principle, to support any “movement leader” who was not “of color” and/or a woman. (In debating on line with one of them, I never received an answer to whether he supported the candidacy of Alan Keyes.) A frequent guest on WBAI in New York, disbarred New York attorney Alton Maddox Jr.-later a supporter of the Christmas coup staged against the station by its Washington based licence holder, the Pacifica network-would broadcast charges of Nader’s racial insensitivity attributing to them the most sinister interpretation. Nader’s sins? He had, according to Maddox, baldly stated that he was concerned with “consumer rights” not “civil rights” during a visit to the University of Georgia’s law school during Maddox’s student days in 1965. Asked whether it would be possible for a man’s opinions to evolve over three and a half decades, Maddox responded that “The leopard doesn’t change its spots.”

On the neo-liberal side of the establishment The New Republic would eventually come around to indulging in its preferred form of slander and accuse Nader of latent anti-semitism, citing as evidence an article published by Nader in the American Mercury in 1960. The Jewish Forward would pile on, using Nader’s courageous stand for Palestinian human rights during the suppression of the initial stages of what has become the second intifada as grounds for Nader’s designation as persona non grata among Jews. (Some

Jews would call Nader, in private, Al-Nadir and take Nader's fluent Arabic as an unmistakable indication of anti-semitism.)

On the left side of progressive consensus, Adolph Reed's tepid endorsement of Nader's candidacy in the Progressive would be typical of the quality of the support which Nader received from leftists. While having very little positive to say about the positions staked out by Nader, Reed would use the opportunity primarily to identify what he believed to be a left "pathology" of searching for a "messiah" or a "man on a white horse" to rescue us every four years. Having been suckered by Jesse Jackson's exploitation of the rainbow coalition in the late 80s, Reed's suspicions were understandable. But in accusing the left of falling victim to a "messiah complex" in 2000, Reed was willfully blind to Nader's explicit intention to use his candidacy to boost a party, namely the Greens, which was committed to continuing electoral and grassroots activism after November.

From the moderate left at the American Prospect to the extremes of Znet, the Nader candidacy was subjected to a full complement of criticism, from supporters and detractors alike, much of it baseless and unfair. Furthermore, many of the most negative attacks emerged at the earliest stages, providing not only faux progressives but also reactionaries with an arsenal which would be recycled for the remainder of the campaign. In the Nation, Katha Pollitt would be among the first to circulate some of these charge and would reiterate them at various points along the way. (Though it should be noted that, adopting the standards of 5<sup>th</sup> grade journalism, she would mitigate her attacks in the wake of a personal phone call to her placed by the "courtly" Nader.) It was of course,

predictable that moderates would be the first to jump at an opportunity to tear down any serious progressive insurgency. As Chomsky has pointed out, the job description of the establishment liberal includes taking the responsibility for “policing the fringes of left discourse”, to establish a boundary beyond which acceptable and serious and responsible discourse cannot transgress. That the boundary was well on the right side of the challenge emerging from Nader was apparent from the beginning.

The response among the brie and latte left who took on the job of trampling the Nader candidacy, (Pollitt, Eric Alterman, Todd Gitlin and others) bordered on the hysterical. For those of us who had long since written off these pundits as shallow opportunists, their hostility was gratifying. More disconcerting was the response of the principled radicals, among them were several whose opinions, in addition to those of Adolph Reed, mentioned earlier, I generally take very seriously. Mike Albert would hold forth on his Znet forum throughout the spring, referring to the Nader candidacy as “seriously flawed” citing among other faults the usual charges of Nader’s “insensitivity to minorities and women” and his problematic working relationship with his staff some of whom saw Nader as exploitative. (A piece by Tim Sharrock revealing union busting at Nader’s Multinational Monitor was indeed troubling on this score.) Chomsky was largely dismissive, regarding electoral politics as a waste of time, and a diversion from serious activism. Tim Wise would be particularly hostile to Nader, confidently stating that since P.O.Cs (i.e. “peoples of color”) “know that Nader is full of shit” he was unworthy of progressives’ support. Albert, at least, would by the summer change his tune and recognize the potential of the Nader candidacy. However, most old-new leftists

associated with Z Magazine would maintain their wariness. Even in late September I wasted an afternoon responding in excruciating detail on the Znet forum to a particularly mindless, bilious, and nearly incoherent regurgitation of the well worn litany of charges by a small liberal arts college Marxist.

The bewilderment and even the occasional truculence among the left was, while wrongheaded, understandable and maybe even healthy in some respects. It was only natural that much of the now old new-left was missing the boat just as the old left had missed theirs in the sixties. The street demonstrations in Seattle had been close enough to the old-left's experience in single-issue activism to be familiar. The Nader candidacy represented something broader in that it was explicitly focussed on an essential core of class conflict. Nader did not take the final step and "name the system" nor did he offer even the slightest nod to any theoretical framework according to which capital and its workings should be understood. But while he was in no way a Marxist, Nader never shirked from naming the institutional overseers and beneficiaries of the system of exploitation-namely corporations. Even more inspiring was Nader's evolution as the campaign went on. Rather than retreat or dilute his message to achieve "legitimacy" Nader relentlessly narrowed his focus onto corporate power. He would continually ratchet up his attack coming up with almost poetic descriptions of corporations' (and media's) role in deceiving the public and deadening its sensibilities. "Like a gag in your mouth and novocaine in your brain" he would say in an electrifying moment at a rally here at Yale.

By the early fall it had become apparent that, even on the left, nothing succeeds like success. Nader's message was strong, consistent and increasingly uncompromising and seemed to resonate with huge audiences. The dissonant voices among progressives were effectively silenced by the sheer numbers which were being mobilized by the campaign. Mike Albert would eventually come to say that at this point that we, meaning graying radicals, "would do best not to stand in the way," something which they had indeed been guilty of since the beginning.

### **Boston: The Rally and Debate**

At the beginning of October –what was, in retrospect, the peak of enthusiasm for the candidacy- about 50 of us made the three-hour trek up from New Haven to the Nader super-rally in Boston. And our numbers would have been greater had word not gotten around that Nader was planning a speech at Yale the following Thursday. The bus ride which brought together an assembly of Greens from around the state gave me a better chance to assess who I had thrown my lot in with. I was surprised, given what I had read, by the near total absence of nose rings and dread-locks. I was also surprised by the gender balance and the reasonable representation of African Americans-six or seven out of fifty. Most of all, I was pleased by the political awareness, sober good sense and basic decency of those whom I had a chance to talk to.

The Boston visit also gave me a chance to see my family. Nearly all of them, to my surprise, were supporting Nader, including my parents, my brother and sister-in-law-both

of whom work in the high-tech industry, (for her the last straw was the Clinton era proliferation of SUVs as the earth warmed) and my brother, a truck driver. The one holdout was my sister-in-law. A devout Catholic, she had voted for Nader in 1996 but was going with Buchanan this time. (By this point, these sorts of seemingly irreconcilable sympathies were no surprise to me.)

The event itself was not hugely inspiring. Winona LaDuke seemed-to me at least- nice enough, but not particularly charismatic or much good at delivering a convincing argument. While Michael Moore was entertaining, Phil Donahue was, for me, not much less annoying than when he wore a dress on his talk show two decades ago. Nader had yet to shift to the take-no-prisoners stump speech of the final weeks of his campaign, and seemed a little bewildered by the huge crowd, the bright lights, and the sterile arena. The high point was Howard Zinn, and his forceful evocation of what we all knew to be Nader's "fatal flaw-he tells the truth."

These doubts aside, the nearly sold out Fleet Center (or the Garden, as Nader called it and I remembered it) indicated that the campaign of censorship directed at Nader was beginning to backfire. I had had some inkling of this by the response the weeks leading up to the Boston events. The feeling that Nader's exclusion from the events was unconscionable and brought into question the legitimacy of the electoral process seemed to be very much in the air. Those who came to our table in the final weeks of September included many who did not support Nader but were interested in picketing the sham-debates which would follow the rally on Tuesday. So after returning to New Haven from

Boston Rally on Monday, I made arrangements for transportation for sixteen of us back up to Boston on Tuesday morning.

At the rally, the almost total absence of calls from the stage to show up at debate site at U Mass (which I later learned from Nader himself had to do with concern about possible charges for inciting a riot) was conspicuous. Since the national organization kept its distance it fell to a group called the Boston Campus Action Network to organize the protest. They provided information on their website and it was this that a group of fourteen of us consulted before leaving New Haven again on Tuesday. Unfortunately, we ran in to traffic on our way back so that we were unable to get to the march when it began in the mid-afternoon in Roxbury. The march was billed by the BCAN as a protest against the death penalty and the criminal justice system along with the usual demand-guaranteed to turn-out a substantial dread-lock contingent- to Free Mumia.

Rather than attempt to find the march en route, we decided to park after getting stuck in traffic downtown and take the subway out to the debate site at the U Mass Boston campus. When we got there, the spectacle was at first disconcerting. A few Nader supporters milled aimlessly around, discouraged at not being provided with information about where to go. Meanwhile a large pro-Gore demonstration of building trades workers, including the pipe fitters, steel and construction worker locals was in progress. I'm not sure of their numbers, but it was impressive both for its sheer mass, and in dollars invested: the whole throng in Gore-Lieberman T-Shirts (at eight to ten dollars a piece) carrying hundred of signs the smallest of which, cost somewhere around \$3.00 a piece.

(This figure I knew well having busted the Green Party budget ordering 500 of them.) It was also impressive for the contempt which some of them showed for us bringing back childhood memories of the New York counter-demonstrations where hard-hats for Nixon set on “hippy-freak,” “pinko” and “commie” anti-war protestors. These, it will be remembered, would give rise first to the cult movie “Joe,” the eponymous hero of which would be the inspiration for the character of Archie Bunker. By now unions had been subjugated to the extent that they were on the streets for a corporate democrat, one pledged to preserve a low-wage workforce and unimpeded mobility of capital to right-to-work states and union-free foreign nations.

Some have commented on the fraying of the green-blue alliance which the pre-debate set-to represented--the Altamont to Seattle’s Woodstock. In a discussion on “Democracy Now!” U Mass professor Gary Zabel noted that the failure to attempt to communicate with the unions in advance was misguided on the part of the organizers and led to the predictably unpleasant standoff. Zabel is correct that this was a serious organizational oversight as is his description of the consequences: indeed, Labor for Gore showered obscenities on us, some of us shouted back, and a few small melees broke out. My memory of the experience, however, revolves around a something quite different and arguably more significant. After stupidly joining in a few shouting matches, I decided to try to engage whichever Laborites for Gore would talk to me in a quiet, civilized discussion. My objective was to convey to them what they probably already knew, namely, that they had won already: Gore was going to win Massachusetts, as Democrats always do, by a landslide. So why be a sore winner? Why not at least allow yourself to

think about, say, whether you like your HMO, or whether you could remember a time when a single income could support an entire family, or whether you appreciate the fact that, because of Ralph Nader, you are a lot less likely to get maimed in your automobile than a few years back.

Soon after the ice was broken, sometimes after trading a few comparatively good-natured insults, most of them would drop their hostility. Several told me they respected Nader and what they knew about him (one even said, with what seemed like complete sincerity, “God bless Ralph Nader”). But as soon as any grounds for discussion were established, the organizers of their rally, union stewards, I assumed, would take notice and immediately descend on whoever was fraternizing with “our side” and demand that he or she move back. I experienced this sort of intervention several times, and would hear that many others attempting the same tactic as me would be similarly disrupted. So while I would also learn later that it probably would have been futile for the BCAN to try to negotiate with the Boston building trades union leadership, as individuals we should have been we should have been ready and willing to find common ground.

On the other hand, it might not have mattered at all in that no matter how much of a ruckus we had raised nothing would have been heard about it other than on indymedia.org or Amy Goodman’s Democracy Now!. That any demonstration took place at all was barely mentioned in the reports we heard driving back late that evening, and when numbers were mentioned, most reports indicated “a few hundred” with possibly as many as a thousand.

That these were gross under-estimations was apparent to anyone who was there. For while the pro-Nader demonstrators were initially outnumbered by the unionists, in short order reinforcements in the form of the march through Roxbury which had begun earlier materialized. To see the group appear in the distance and approach the debate site was overwhelming—a sea of bandanas, home-made signs and puppets. They easily outnumbered the Labor for Gore contingent by a factor of five or ten, who then quickly dispersed.

The 500 state police who stopped our group at the campus entrance a mile from the debate site looked as nervous as we were exhilarated by the throng emerging in the distance and they soon received orders to set up a barrier dividing us into two groups. Had we been able to merge forces we might have been successful in what many of us wanted to achieve—to block the road leading to the hall and preventing the debate from coming off as scheduled. However, this would have required considerable centralized organization and this was not Seattle. We didn't have cell phones or even anywhere to call to get instructions on what to do or where to assemble. Since we didn't have any strategy to combat police tactics, the division between the groups would be successfully maintained by the police for at least an hour until around the time of the beginning of the debate. Many demonstrators would become bored and leave during this time, partly dissipating the energy, enough to prevent us from blocking off the Gore and Bush advance teams.

Still, many more would continue to arrive throughout the evening, swelling our ranks. An injection of energy was provided when a bus passed by with a thin figure peering out a bus window at us giving us the thumbs-up. It turned out to be Nader. He would be turned back from the debate and reappear not long after, this time with a clenched fist. While we were in the dark about what had happened, the tension seemed to rise as rumors circulated that Nader had been arrested.

Not long after, several demonstrators would break out of our ranks and attempt to penetrate the police line. They were beaten and peppered sprayed before being turned back to receive attention from medics who materialized within in our ranks. Most of those making the attempt were from the black bloc anarchist contingent. Having heard about them elsewhere I was ambivalent at their presence, regarding them as slackers at best and provocateurs at worst. The growing frustration had the effect of making them appear in a much more sympathetic light. The only problem many of us now had with the contingent is that there were only about a hundred of them. If there had been a thousand willing to risk police beatings, pepper spray, rubber bullets and possibly even real bullets, we might have been able to make our presence and numbers noticed.

Undoubtedly, the demonstration would have been condemned as “violent” but so were the non-violent demonstrations in Seattle. For that reason, we had nothing to lose by doing whatever would be necessary make ourselves impossible to ignore. If we could break through the police lines, we would force the media to enter damage control mode as they had in Seattle. At the very least, for the media to pretend that only a few

hooligans, rather than thousands of committed and angry demonstrators, overcame the blue wall of armed state troopers would require even more egregiously transparent distortions and dishonesty on the media's part. Such brazen dishonesty would reduce their credibility even further among an increasingly skeptical public and might trigger a backlash.

Unfortunately, this romantic scenario was nothing more than a fantasy and never had the potential to materialize. The black-bloc made a few attempts to break through the police lines but recognized they were outnumbered and that the rest of the crowd couldn't be organized to support them. After the demonstration, a group did succeed in barricading the street preventing the press and the audience from leaving the cordoned off campus for several hours after the end of the debate. There would be at least thirty arrests in clearing the streets. These would be reported as routine lock-ups of the "usual suspects" expected at these sorts of things and did little to challenge the legitimacy of the sham debates.

Most the evening involved milling around with mixed feelings of elation mixed with frustration that we could not convert the mass of bodies there into tangible political currency. We all knew that our numbers and commitment, but most powerfully, the indisputable fact that we were right to be protesting a mockery of politics mattered not one iota to those who made the decisions for what was or was not news. Nader's exclusion from the debate was a clear and brazen attempt to limit the public's exposure to two varieties of corporate apologetics. Censorship, we knew, was just a piece of the larger agenda which would not allow any indication of a challenge to see the light of day.

## **Nader at Yale**

Having sold out arenas across the country, Nader's visit to Yale, scheduled for the upcoming Thursday did not need to be publicized. Though we had tried to negotiate for a larger hall, the speech was held in Battell Chapel which seated no more than 1,000. Even without a single flyer being posted, word had gotten around so that well before the time the program was to start the hall was full with a line snaking around the block of several hundred who would not be able to get in.

As the only Green party member at Yale, I was to serve as the de facto emcee for the event and was charged with lining up warm up speakers. While I was more than a little uncomfortable with being thrust into the former role, I was grateful for the opportunity to be able to choose speakers who would present a public face for the Nader campaign in New Haven. In particular, it gave me the chance to challenge the repeated charge that the campaign had succeeded only in attracting an upper-middle class following, largely among undergraduates on college campuses. While having some basis in fact, there was much more to the story. Nader's support at Yale was typical of most college campuses in that while it turned out to be substantial, it was also ambivalent, sometimes tortured and almost always qualified. Had Yale students been as sold on the Nader candidacy as the media has made them out to be, our office-one block away from the Yale campus, would have seen many of them pass through our doors. Rather than being over-run with students, we saw no more than a trickle of them.

The enthusiastic supporters of Nader in New Haven doing the bulk of the work in our office, those willing to pass out flyers in front of supermarkets, call voter lists, stuff envelopes and post flyers included a truck driver, a nurse at Yale-New Haven hospital, a tennis teacher, the wife of a security guard (with four young children), and an accountant. Not a student in the lot; in fact they were distinctly unlike Yale students in that they were among the victims , as opposed to the beneficiaries of high housing costs, union busting, and urban environmental racism. They were among those with the most to gain from Nader's call for social and economic justice, from a repeal of Taft-Hartley, from living wage legislation, from a fully functional OSHA, FDA and EPA.

Unfortunately, what was missing from this picture of class based allegiance to Nader was, alas, organized labor which was almost universally intensely hostile, on the national level at least. Fortunately for us, New Haven boasted an active chapter of the Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers union in New Haven, the only national union to endorse Nader. Best of all, Ray Pompano, the president of the local, was right of out central casting, or would be had Hollywood ever attempted to portray a union leader in a sympathetic light. He was a natural choice to represent one sort of New Haven Nader supporter and as an introductory speaker at Battell he acquitted himself brilliantly. Articulate, serious, resplendent in his UE windbreaker, Ray turned out to be an inspiring, and to some of the students perhaps a slightly frightening reminder of the potential for working class radicalism-something which they knew about only as a theoretical possibility from their history classes.

The choice for our other speaker was also obvious. Anita Seth, a GESO member, reminded students that class/labor politics were going on right under their noses whether they chose to recognize it or not. Not only were their meals served and their dorms swept by an increasingly subcontracted non-union labor force, 60% of their classroom hours were presided over by graduate students and adjuncts. The fig leaf of genteel manners and Ivy league prestige which a Yale affiliation afforded those doing the bulk of the teaching constituted an increasingly small consolation for eking out a precarious existence on a lumpenproletariat income. GESO was a powerful reminder to students of the direct relationship between their privileges and labor exploitation, much more immediate and uncomfortable than their relationship to the sweatshop workers who assemble their sneakers.

The overall statement which we hoped to make by choosing these speakers was that while Nader's politics were Green politics, more fundamentally they were populist politics- radical politics with venerable roots in the age old conflict of labor and management, wage slaves and capital, or as Nader formulated it, between corporations and the citizens. When Nader appeared on stage, he left no little doubt that these themes were at the core of his campaign:

This concentration of (corporate) power has taken a great leap forward in the last 20 years and has congealed to the extent that the government has become now more than ever a servant of corporate interests, a surrogate, a proxy, becoming a funder, a guarantor, a bundle of accounts receivable for one industry after another. One could look at the problem writ large and say that the concentration of corporate power and the influence of

corporations on government is so large that it has resulted in an almost total disenfranchisement of the citizenry, and in massive economic deprivation and environmental destruction.

For many in this Ivy League audience, probably many more than would admit it, Nader's analysis was neither new nor troubling. Rather, it expressed the natural order of things embodied in the words of Supreme Court Justice John Jay two centuries ago that those who own the country should be those that run it. Of course, dyed in the wool plutocrats were probably a minority at Yale, though their numbers should not be underestimated. But even the most idealistic undergrads had, through no fault of their own, "grown up corporate." Unlike their parents who attended college in the 60s, the current generation has never been provided with an alternative to joining and administering what Mario Savio called the machine.

In identifying corporations as a malign social influence rather than as a neutral fact of life, as a fundamentally anti-democratic influence on society and culture rather than a mere economic construct Nader was treading on dangerous ground at Yale, even violating a taboo. Many of these corporations, after all, are run by Yale graduates differing from the fresh faces at Battell only in having acquired business suits, gray hair and eight figure investment portfolios. And it was they who as Yale benefactors were responsible for the splendor in which these students were living: the immaculately tended grounds, the tranquil courtyards, the leisurely teas with and mentoring by distinguished professors. Subconsciously or consciously, even the most radical Yale students recognize their debt to CEOs of the present and the robber barons of the past.

Furthermore, from the awareness of future Vanderbilts, Rockefellers, Kravitzes and Icahns in their midst, corporations and corporate management which is for most of us distant, faceless, and menacing becomes demystified, personalized and softened. To be explicitly anti-corporate at Yale is, therefore, more than political; it is personal. Anti-corporate activism insofar as it is understood, is understood, in part correctly, as an anti-social behavior. Thus, Nader's critique of corporate power clearly cut close to the bone in that it connected the conditions which are in front of our eyes in nearby neighborhoods to Yale's hallways. The responsibility for New Haven's third world levels of infant mortality, 25% rate of child asthma, 1 out of every 50 residents in prison, should be layed where it belongs-at our own doorstep. The enemy in New Haven is clearly us and fighting it means fighting ourselves, our classmates, our professors, our girlfriends and boyfriends, our fathers and mothers.

Most fundamentally, confronting the problems means confronting the fact that while we may have thought otherwise our expertise, our scholarship, what we were doing in our think tanks and academic studies has functioned to consolidate power and wealth among those already privileged. The solution must implicate a fundamental shift in power and this observation was the point of departure for Nader's speech:

Politics as usual hasn't worked very well in our country since it hasn't addressed the central contention of politics which is the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few. Now there's nothing new about this. We need to keep relearning the lessons of history. When the cotton plantations held human beings as slaves, the only way they lost that power was through the abolitionist movement and the civil war. When women didn't have the right to vote, the only way they got it was to build their own power and take it away from the opponents including the industries who

didn't like the women's movements' stands against child labor and other hard edges of the early industrial revolution. When workers were being brutalized in factories and mines more than a hundred years ago, what did they do? They formed trade unions to wrest some power away from the corporations who were mistreating them and paying them so little they could hardly afford to feed their families.

So if you look closely, every social justice movement is marked by the shift of power. Every social justice movement, whether it articulates it or not, defines freedom as the freedom to participate in power and that was Cicero's definition more than 2000 years ago.

Cicero's definition was, albeit subtly, profoundly subversive of the underlying assumptions of a Yale education which views participation in power not as a right of all those who can be considered "free" but as a privilege earned by those with the intellect to exercise it "responsibly" in the service of "virtue." Yale is the heart of the meritocracy- and the audience in Battell had the most to gain from ignoring that which Nader made patent and ignorable: that the policies of the recent past have been great for places like Yale and an unmitigated disaster for everyone else:

Most of you are from the contented classes or on the way there, and you're going to have certain options to exit human problems and misery because you can do it, instead of to lead by voice or advocacy. The point is that when people with power, people who have status, people who get their calls returned, exit the system instead of locking arms with the less fortunate here and around the world, they are part of the problem, they're not part of the solution. You're part of the solution when you're out there taking a risk and fighting power.

What does it take to convert Yale students from being the problem to working for the solution? What does it take for the privileged to question privilege, to renounce their privilege? These were the questions which were the essence of my random and

sometimes frantic efforts to organize Yale. They were at the core of the stony silences I received from future insiders, corporate lawyers, fixers and Washington deal makers and power brokers in the midst of their youthful dalliance with social justice. Just as I obviously had failed to, somehow Nader had magically found the right words not just to convince but to inspire.

For Nader's speech was as inspirational as is possible for political oratory to be in an age of cynical politics-one in which the very idea of "inspiration" itself has been co-opted. Inspiration requires the right words, but it is not enough for them to appeal to the head, it also requires an appeal to the heart. At times, one could almost sense Nader stifle the impulse to marshal the emotional language which the context seemed to call for. But after eight years of Clintonian "I feel your pain" bathetic cynicism, the impulse would be continually hemmed in by the imperative imposed by a hostile media and the flat-earth perception of the world they have manufactured, to reinforce even the most obvious and intuitive conclusions with reams of unimpeachable evidence. It would be only in the last two sentences of his address that he would allow a veiled sentimentality, all the more powerful, to pass his lips:

What do you want come out of Yale? You want to come out strong citizens knowing how to shape the future for yourselves and fellow human beings all over the world knowing how to take the solutions we have in hand and apply them to the horrendous problems in the world. There's never been more pain more malnourishment, more hovels instead of decent housing, never more environmental degradation, polluted air, polluted soil, polluted food, never been more tuberculosis and malaria in history of the world. Where's modern medicine? Where's modern science? Where's all this so called technology? Where's the genius of the third world which has never been given the chance to flower because our

foreign policy has supported dictators and oligarchs instead of workers and peasants.

You want to be a pioneer? You should act according to your conscience the way your forebears did when they cut away from the beaten path and beat back slavery and gave women the right to vote and gave workers and farmers a higher standard of justice and living. Do you think they settled for least-worst? You think the abolitionist said, “you know the cotton plantations are very big and powerful.” Think what it must have been to be an abolitionist in Mississippi in 1934. You want to talk about courage? We feel sorry for ourselves working against overwhelming odds you just look at what our forebears went through, what they layed on the line. We feel like jerks if we feel we’re up against too much.

Do you want to be the last generation to be able to give up so little to achieve so much? How little do we have to give up to deal with global warming and ozone depletion? But where do we get our motivation from? We get our motivation from our forebears from our forebears and their great political and civic courage. We get it from our sense of empathy and sense of intelligence and a sense of our ability to make things happen because we have a high estimate of our own significance and we’re not going to trivialize our lives not matter how lucrative that trivialization may be. And we get our greatest motivation from what we want to hand forward to future generations what kind of earth what kind of intellect what kind of civic society what kind of science and technology and most importantly what kind of democracy.

We will make the election a referendum on progressive politics. We’ve got to take a stand and got to realize that after November win or lose there will be millions of votes we will have the most significant third party in modern times one that really lasts and is cohesive has its feet on the ground. A green watchdog saying to the two parties that if you don’t shape up, you’re surely going to shrink down because there’s a Green wind of justice coming across the country to D.C.

It would be an exaggeration to say that there’s wasn’t a dry eye in the house after the conclusion of Nader’s speech. But even the most hardened future policy wonk, future corporate raider, or techno-nerd had to feel that something was in the air. Perhaps the idealism, what Nader called “the politics of joy and justice”, that which college

administrators have spent the past two decades trying to repress was finally reasserting itself after two decades of what Barbara Ehrenreich called “premature pragmatism.”

That optimism on this score was justified became clear a month later. Nader received over 20% of the vote at the two Yale polling places, beating alumnus G. W. Bush at both. It also became clear to me hearing from my students in the music department, several of whom emailed me with thanks for making it possible. Perhaps the most telling immediate indication that Nader had made a real impact and that the political tide was turning came in a column by the President of the Yale Democrats, Lex Paulson, in the Yale Daily News who accurately articulated what was apparent to everyone there, namely that “Al Gore is not the future of progressive politics. That future was sitting all around me in Battell Chapel Wednesday night.”

### **The Final Backlash: Cops and Comrades**

Of course, not everyone was so moved. The one sour note of the evening for me was provided by a nationally syndicated columnist who exercised his fourth estate privilege to cut through the throng outside and enter the hall through the fire exit in back. He took his seat in the section the Green Party reserved for itself, and talked loudly to his neighbor throughout most of Nader’s speech, making clear that he found the whole affair a little tedious. Even though he had recently written a column dismissing “the Nader option,” his presence in our section indicated that, in his own mind at least, he was on our side. In other words, he was not, to borrow Alexander Cockburn’s description, a cop, like Irving

Howe, his criticisms were those of a comrade like E.P. Thompson. They were an expression of pragmatic solidarity, not an attempt to undermine the movement.

The piece in question written for a national weekly, would typify a superficially milder form of the backlash from the major “liberal” media which followed Nader’s ascent in the polls in early fall. Almost invariably, these pieces would admit Nader’s actual virtues. Sadly, usually with gaseous self-importance, the pundit would report that “the stakes are simply too high” in this election to “risk” a vote on Nader. The essentially dishonesty of these pieces lay in their failure to mention the strategic voting option which had been repeatedly suggested by Manning Marable and Molly Ivins, namely, vote for Nader in states where you can, vote for Gore where you must. By not even mentioning this option, and by ignoring the winner-take-all structure of the electoral college these columns insured that Nader’s would lose much of his support in “safe” states such as Connecticut. Thus they were insuring that whether or not Gore managed to defeat Bush, the Green party would not achieve the 5% which many regarded as the benchmark of success or failure. If the writers of these columns were unaware of the consequences of their failure to discuss the strategic voting option they were stupid, but we knew they were not stupid. Rather they weren’t comrades at all, they were cops patrolling the left border to insure that the range of dissent remained within acceptable bounds, to insure that a real challenge to power didn’t emerge in 2000. So while a vote cast for Gore in Connecticut or New York had no impact on the Gore eventual loss it did insure that the Greens would be perceived as having failed. Unlike votes for Nader, it was a truly wasted vote. To my great annoyance, I knew of several otherwise reliable and intelligent progressives who

had been convinced to waste their vote for Gore having been influenced by this column. My best efforts in persuasion couldn't compete against the stature of a national platform available to the local bigfoot to hold forth on what constituted "responsible" expressions of dissent.

What was perhaps most striking and surprising to all but the most cynical among us was the extent to which the backlash revealed the ubiquity of cops masquerading as comrades among the opinion making classes of the left. Throughout the month of October, a continuous stream of articles poured forth testifying to the iniquity of Bush without the slightest indication of Gore's agreement of much of Bush's reactionary agenda. The Times "liberal" columnist Bob Herbert would devote column after column to Bush's reprehensible criminal justice record in Texas, each time failing to mention that Gore had been an enthusiastic supporter of the death penalty from his earliest days in the congress. Nor did he bother to mention that Gore was the key figure in the Clinton administration responsible for the Crime Bill which provided the resources for the militarization of local police forces and the federal Drug War. Pacifica Radio, whose true colors as a propaganda organ for the Democratic party had yet to be revealed would take a similar line. But they would ratchet up the invective and directly attack Nader by name as a spoiler. Eric Alterman's "Not a Single Progressive Vote!" in the Nation would constitute perhaps the most hysterical attack on those of us committed to Nader and the Green Party and his slanders have would have direct consequences for us in New Haven. At her show New Haven pop singer Ani DeFranco would make made no mention of Nader or of our table set up in the back of the hall. A letter which appeared in the Nation not long after

indicated why: she was backing off from her support of Nader having been influenced in part by Alterman's column. Not all negative press was entirely demoralizing however. A clear indication that we were doing something right occurred when the Democrats dispatched the pre-eminent liberal cop to Yale. In mid October, Jesse Jackson appeared on campus to "pimp for Gore" to borrow a phrase from the New Haven Advocate's Camille Jackson, one of the first African-Americans to call Jackson's bluff in print.

The attacks from above would trickle down to reach liberals who responded with a thinly veiled lynch mob mentality. Obscenities would pour from the mouths of the most effete liberals, old ladies in tweeds and even from a local rabbi. Gestures directed at us ranging from middle fingers to weird two fingered crucifixes would become so routine that they would eventually lose their power to shock. (At least, for me: I also fielded two telephone calls from two women in tears who, after I sent them to watch polls in the lily-white community of Guilford were subjected to a torrent of abuse by what I imagined to be a Volvo driving yuppie.) Email spamming, apparently organized by the Democratic national office was both annoying and added another element of menace. It also partly succeeded in its intention of disabling our communications with the national office and other supporters. While I would not hear directly of any physical assaults, I would be confronted by what could only be called a union goon when I attempted to set up an informational table at a union rally at which virtually every local Democratic hack, from the municipal to the national level, was allowed to be represented. He ripped out the yard sign I had posted on public property and made quite clear that he would become physically violent with me if I did not leave immediately. Most sadly for me,

representatives of GESO whom we invited to speak at the Battell Chapel event would be spotted handing out Gore and Lieberman literature. We also heard rumors that a few of the more hot-headed members of the local had been among those responsible for some of the numerous instances in which our flyers were torn down and our lawn signs stolen off of private property-even off of our own office.

Alas, the panoply of tactics directed against us turned out to be more successful than we had imagined. While the Gore campaign couldn't succeed even in winning Gore's home state it did succeed in slaying what Gore and his handlers in the DLC understood to be the real enemy: a mobilized and functional progressive movement which could begin to unite the opposition to corporate power. What we could have done to counter the offensive remains unclear to me. The real lesson has to do with recognizing the extent to which the campaign was a purely grassroots enterprise as any which has ever existed in American politics. It existed and even thrived almost completely without the blessing of, and in direct opposition to the wishes of even the furthest reaches of the progressive establishment many of whom did everything in their power to sabotage what was perhaps the best hope for radical change we will have in our lifetimes. While Julien Benda's phrase "la trahison des clercs" would not necessarily spring to the lips of all of us who worked on the campaign, we all knew all about the thing, if not the phrase. And we knew it would be a big obstacle for the movement to overcome from now on.

### **Epilogue: Georgia with the Greens and the Real Beginning**

One of the numerous small but effectively placed canards successfully attached to the Nader's candidacy was the claim that Nader himself expected that he would achieve 5% of the popular vote in his presidential bid. If he failed to do so, so the story went, Nader himself would regard the campaign as a failure and would be a strong indication that the Greens would remain an insignificant political force on the national scene. In fact, Nader, unlike many of us in the campaign, never made any such prediction or set any electoral benchmark for the success or failure of his candidacy. This showed considerable wisdom on his part, not only in that it partly cushioned the blow resulting from unrealistically high expectations being dashed. More importantly, it reflected the recognition on his part that the success of his candidacy was to be judged not in his own popularity but in terms of long term effect on building an alternative party. On numerous occasions he made clear that the primary function of his campaign was not to win the election, to push the Democrats to the left, or even to advance the numerous issues on which Bush and Gore saw eye to eye and were thereby marginalized. Rather his primary objective in running was to initiate the long slow process of making the Greens the alternative to two parties hopelessly compromised by corporate influence. He was willing to use his considerable eloquence, his celebrity and even sacrifice much of his basic and richly deserved credibility with the establishment to help us make the first step in this direction. That it was only a first step one which would have to continued long after Nader has departed the scene was apparent to anyone seriously involved in the campaign. The real work of

party building would begin after the election with the Greens beginning to compete for the local offices which would form the foundation for higher office with real power.

It is probably true that the six million dollars in matching funds from the Federal Elections Commission would have been helpful. This is by no means certain, however. For one thing, the money would have certainly have aggravated the already serious centrifugal tendencies in the party-further dividing the two warring wings represented by the ASGP and the GPUSA whose conflicting platforms had caused problems during the campaign. Furthermore, it is by no means clear that the money would have been spent wisely and or whether it would have necessarily strengthened the state organizations to whom it would have been channeled. Some of these were highly functional, pragmatic and politically savvy operations. But others, interestingly, I observed, those in large states with the strongest progressive traditions tended to attract the least competent, least realistic, and least politically sophisticated members, whose displays of eccentricity were eagerly put on display by a media increasingly hungry for fodder for hit pieces during the campaign.

All of these tendencies were on display at a national meeting of the Green Party I attended in December of 2000. Held in a mountain resort three hours north of Atlanta, Confederate flags graced the front porches of nearby houses and adorned the bumpers of pick-up trucks. It was no surprise that only one African American, in what may have been a display of real courage or perhaps recklessness, took the risk of making the trek back to the heart of Dixie. Predictably, the meeting did very little to challenge the

lingering stereotype of the Greens as overwhelmingly white and privileged, and while one of the first orders of business was the formation of a “diversity caucus” deliberations offered little other than vague good intentions expressed in annoying post-modern rhetoric. Other organizational hassles were indicative of serious limitations on the ability of Greens to operate with the minimum of professionalism which we should have all realized by this point had become necessary if we were going to call ourselves a legitimate third party: Not only was the location out of cell phone range, one telephone had to serve for several hundred guests. Temperatures were below freezing in the communal bunkhouses and blankets were in short supply. The food, vegan, of course, was nearly inedible. Most bizarrely, the proprietor of the establishment, a wild eyed holy-roller, stalked the grounds on the lookout for any signs of alcohol consumption which was expressly prohibited on the premises. We felt ourselves time-travelling to our high-school days, playing cat and mouse games with the vice-principal as we managed to sneak in a decent stash of beer. Fortunately, all of these annoyances were overcome by a seemingly inexhaustible supply of goodwill and patience of the attendees. But at worst they did trigger more than occasional serious doubts as to the essential viability of the organization.

Nor did the meeting do much to alter my own conflicting impressions of individual Greens. Some of those I met in Georgia came as close to personifying the shape which progressive electoral politics might take if it is to have any chance of success. Mike Feinstein, the mayor of Santa Monica, cut an impressively slick figure as he described his five-figure budget for his winning campaign, assembled from donations from a range of

local businesses. His in your face radicalism and his track record as an activist, both in an out of office, reassured me at least that the deals with capitalist devils were justifiable at least at this stage of the Green Party's development. (The aggressive living wage bill which passed in late May of 2001 would be a strong vindication of Feinstein's strategy.) Other attendees were activists who had come to the Greens after realizing that their local struggles were ultimately against national or international forces too large for them to fight on their own. I talked to an editor of an alternative newspaper in Vail, Colorado who described his fight against ski-resorts encroaching on the habitat of migratory species at least one of which was thereby threatened with extinction. An activist from the Maine Green Party drew a connection between the decline of Atlantic salmon population which turned out to be rooted in the clear-cutting practices of the big paper companies. A stunning grey-haired woman from Georgia who spent most of her time listening from behind a spinning wheel turned out to be a felon having served a stiff mandatory sentence for marijuana possession, and had understandably strong and sophisticated opinions on the subject.

My favorite discussions were with an itinerant political gun for hire who had in the past worked as a campaign manager for several Democratic state legislators in the Northeast. He had just returned from Seattle where he helped organize the workers at amazon.com- the new economy icon which has turned out to be little different from any other anti-union sweatshop wolf albeit one dressed in 21<sup>st</sup> century high tech sheep's clothing. Part of Dan's interest in the Greens was ideological, but part of it was purely professional: no third party has managed to assert itself in nearly a century and a half. A strategy which could lead to one being formed, on an abstract level at least, has to be a problem of

profound interest to political organizers whatever their ideology, and whoever solves the problem deserves the equivalent of a Nobel Prize in applied political theory. Dan was typical of what I have found among professional campaign managers of either party in that they are always eager to talk about third party organizing strategies and ready to provide tactical information which, treated with appropriate caution, is often very useful.

While rational discourse was the norm rather than the exception, a fair amount of utter lunacy was also well represented in Georgia. A flyer promoting the New Jersey Green Party candidate for US Congress from and proudly displayed by them represented what was perhaps the nadir:

Platform:

Equal Rights for All. Promoting a Vegan Life. Animal Protection

I spent the first 22 years of my life eating and killing animals. I have spent the last 11 as a vegan fighting for them. The hinge that swung the first closed and opened the latter was what I saw embedded in the dark brown eyes of an abused dog that I took in when I was in college. It was through my time with her, Shakira, that the blindfold covering my conscience was torn away.

Many of you have probably lived with a cat or dog at some point in your life. I would like you to think of him or her for a minute, and roll your thoughts across the landscape of their souls. See how their emotions, though bereft of spoken words, were expressed in all their wondrous ways. See their smile, carried on the waves of shaken tail, and how they shared it with you when they licked your face etc. etc. etc.

“Try selling that candidate to Joe Six Pack,” was Dan’s response. I was grateful for the reminder that most Greens still maintain residences on the planet earth.

It was also reassuring to recall that even at its height, leftist politics has always included among its ranks a significant lunatic fringe. With a few alterations, George Orwell's notorious screed directed against 1930s socialists could easily apply not only to the Greens in Georgia, but to the Socialist Scholars Conference, the Save Pacifica Alliance or the Global Action Network (all of whom, I should mention, I support.)

"Socialism calls up a picture of vegetarians with wilting beards, of Bolshevik commissars (half gangster, half gramophone), of earnest ladies in sandals, shock-headed Marxists chewing polysyllables, escaped Quakers, birth control fanatics, and Labour party backstairs crawlers. If only the sandals and the pistachio-coloured shirts could be put in a pile and burnt, and every vegetarian, teetotaller and creeping Jesus sent home to Welwyn Garden City to do his yoga exercises quietly!"

Whether the wingnut contingent is a serious impediment or merely a minor annoyance to those like myself having a particular aversion to "lifestyle politics" is an open question. In any case, I was glad to discover I was not alone in my concerns. Many Greens I met would have agreed with me that Orwell had it about right when he remarked that anyone who is serious about a cause "will begin by figuring out which forces are on his side and then, as cold-bloodedly as a toothpaste advertiser, he will think out the best method of appealing to them." The converse of this is that a test of your seriousness is your willingness to make whatever superficial compromises-in your appearance, in your rhetoric, in your style of speaking- are necessary to advance your cause. Mike Feinstein recognized this when spoke of his making what was to him, the huge sacrifice of cutting his hair and posing in a suit and tie for his publicity photos. The fact that many Green

candidates were unwilling to make even this miniscule concession required to pass the voter laugh test was troubling. In fairness, it is indicative of a larger problem in the left generally of failing to distinguish between expressions of “transgressive” style and radical substance, a subject Tom Frank and the Baffler writers have written about eloquently.

Whatever my concerns about the public face of the Green Party, I came away from Georgia with new ideas and new insights. Most importantly, nothing I encountered in Georgia gave me any reason to alter my larger conclusion with respect to the Nader candidacy and what the Green Party might have to offer in the long term. My basic assessment can be boiled down to three points. 1) Nader’s campaign, while inspirational and important, should be seen as the beginning rather than the end of a process by which a broad range of progressive issues, rather than single issues, are advanced through making use of existing democratic institutions. 2) Whatever their organizational and political liabilities, the Greens remain the only game in town as far as electoral politics were concerned. 3) Major electoral victories, for the Greens or for any third party, can only be achieved by an organization built from the bottom up by engaging in the unglamorous but absolutely necessary work of running and winning elections at the lowest levels of government.

All of these realizations rest on a more fundamental tactical assumption: that electoral politics combined with grassroots activism offers the only viable means to begin to effect a fundamental change in the political, social and economic structure of capitalist

democracies. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, whether based on temperament, suspicion (reasonable and unreasonable) of authority, or simple ignorance, the movement which has developed in recent years has by and large rejected organizing around electoral politics. It has focussed instead mainly on issue-based activism, whether around international trade agreements, environmental degradation or labor rights. My nearly year long work within the Greens was predicated on the belief that what is again beginning to be referred to as “the movement” will only succeed if there is a real commitment to succeed at both. That relatively few progressives agree with me on this point became apparent on the few occasions when I was able to engage activists outside the Greens in discussions about the larger strategy the movement needs to adopt and refine for it to truly succeed. It became more apparent when, following the election, we attempted and failed to generate interest in a Yale chapter of the Green Party to run student candidates in New Haven’s student wards. It was most apparent when we tried to get activists from outside the Greens to run with us in upcoming municipal elections. Without exception, students involved in anti-sweatshop campaigns, global action network members, labor rights activists all turned us down.

### **Where We Go from Here**

I should admit that these rejections did give me pause and while I feel confident that I’m on solid ground, I recognize that my opinion is at this point a minority one. If I’m right, if it does turn out that electoral politics is a necessary component of achieving the aims of the movement, the future of the movement hinges on whether those who share my

tactical analysis manage to convince issue oriented activists to make some investment in electoral politics. I will therefore close off this memoir with an attempt to make a case for the importance of electoral activism. I hope that I have by this point demonstrated that whether or not my overall analysis is astute or sophisticated, my intentions in offering it are sincere. In other words, I'm speaking as a comrade and not as a cop.

I should make clear at the outset that I am not suggesting that electoral politics should constitute the exclusive or even primary focus of the movement or even of the Green Party, which is after all, defined by being an electoral party around an activist core. The movement needs always to keep at its side the hammer of bodies ready to act outside of the electoral realm on the streets, through boycotts, strikes, and demonstrations to force the system to increase avenues for popular participation. Furthermore, in the absence of direct participation by the grassroots, electoral politics easily degenerates into deal making by vanguardist elements within the leadership of the movement and at worst into the authoritarianism which Bakunin identified as that which uses the people's stick to keep the people in line. But in forsaking active participation in the electoral process, however compromised and corrupt, the movement needs to be aware of what it is giving up. And here one needs to look at activism purely pragmatically as requiring an investment in time and energy by many which, when successful, results in a pay off.

In these terms, the potential return derived from investment in electoral victories for principled, uncorrupt (and one hopes, uncorruptable) progressives is enormous. While it is a speculative investment, the possible upside, namely, the control of even a portion of

the government-its trillion dollar budget, its million member workforce, its ownership (albeit diminishing) of public lands and the airwaves, its bloated military-justifies making the gamble.

It is true that there are only a few really dramatic instances in history when progressives of the sort managed to develop real power and use it. One thinks of Texas populist Wright Patman attempting to sell the building housing the Federal Reserve out from under them. Or one thinks of the investigations into the Church committee hearings on intelligence which are still today providing ammunition to victims of third world death squads. More recently Congressman Major Owens's hearings on the Pacifica crisis gave the campaign to remove the Pacifica National board much needed credibility and pruned out some useful information.

But even when we don't win at the polls, strong electoral showings by progressive insurgencies, just as much as large single issue mobilizations, strike fear into the heart of the establishment and force concessions from either wing of the duopoly. The potential of Henry Wallace building an electoral power base among African-Americans forced Truman to integrate the military, this despite Truman's personal bigotry and the opposition of almost all of the military hierarchy. The left coalition which formed around the antiwar movement and resulted in the McGovern nomination was successfully beaten back. But Nixon's landslide was achieved by making huge concessions necessary to open up fissures in the coalition one's which, by today's standards would appear virtually

socialist-e.g. a hundred-fold increase in the budget of the NEA, the founding of the EPA and OSHA, expansion in job training programs, and investments in public housing.

Large-scale movement on a range of policies can only be achieved either by electoral success or by the threat of success. Single issue activism must by definition resign itself to success on single issues-stopping the opening of a power plant, preventing the logging of a virgin redwood grove, the establishment of a local police review board. And even when these successes are achieved, usually only after herculean energies are expended, the tide of reaction has gained on us in all of those areas which we could not organize around in the meantime. A recent success of single issue activists here was typical of the one-step forward two steps back result. A three year organizing in Connecticut finally succeeded in forcing the clean up of the "filthy five," a group of power plants which, having received an exemption from the 1977 Clean air act, have been responsible for nearly half of all point source air pollution in our state. While this was a major success, it required a nearly single minded focus. Nearly every activist organization was required to put its shoulder to the grindstone to achieve the basic protections of the state's public health which the most minimally responsible state government should have provided to the its citizens as a matter of course. And while activists were pressuring legislators, holding letter writing campaigns, sponsoring demonstrations, any number of assaults on common sense and basic decency sprouted up from business and government like so many boils: a huge highway expansion project which will increase car and truck traffic on the interstates and will further subsize already grotesque levels of urban sprawl in the

eastern part of the state was passed by the state. And, more depressingly, the death penalty was re-instituted in Connecticut.

On the national level, the liabilities of issue based activism are in some ways even more pronounced. The massive and successful Seattle and post-Seattle mobilizations managed to extract concessions from those negotiating international trade agreements. But, as inspiring as these were, as we focussed on GATT and the FTAA, our eyes were necessarily averted from domestic unions are being busted by sophisticated anti-organizing campaigns. And, while a few remaining stands of old growth forest were protected by scores of heroic activists descending on the Pacific Northwest, clear-cutting continued unchecked on private lands and in national forests in the north and southeast. As anti-sweatshop students forced one or two universities to modify their investment practices and expose the hypocrisy of Nike, international finance capital's exploitation of brutalized labor continues apace, student activism constituting only the tiniest thorn in its side.

Only by taking control or by threatening to take control of those institutions which have the power to regulate the terms on which corporations operate, which can negotiate treaties, which can establish codes for the foreign practices of corporations will the range of changes which we are seeking and are so desperately needed be effected. Elections offer the only clear means (short of revolution) by which a comprehensive progressive program, as opposed to sporadic piecemeal victories can be achieved. This, then, is the

goal of progressive electoral activism, but equally important to where elections can take us, is the process by which it take us there.

One of the attractive feature of engaging in elections is that they naturally function as highly effective grassroots organizing and recruitment tools. By petitioning for candidates, handing out leaflets, knocking on doors, a candidate and those working on the campaign accumulate information about who is willing to get involved on what issues. Win or lose, the campaign is left with a list which can be used in either issue oriented or future electoral campaigns. Most importantly, it provides a context in which the political and the social become merged, in which politics takes on a human face. Along the same lines, electoral politics also provides a socially and governmentally sanctioned context in which to engage your friends and neighbors in political discussions, where information and ideas can be traded unfiltered by the media. And while at first these must necessarily concern the minutiae of local politics, the loud bar down the street, the bus stops being moved, or their taxes it is a natural and inevitable that these lead to larger issues. The bar turns out to be a local symptom of business's ability to hold government hostage. Bus stops removed to create additional parking spaces leads naturally into a larger discussion of transportation priorities. High property tax rates in inner cities link to a discussion of government subsidizing suburban sprawl.

But most importantly, winning elections requires that the candidate talk to and get to know everyone who has the slightest chance of pulling the lever for him for whatever reason. This means getting to know and finding common ground with people very

different from one's self, and can mean, certainly does mean for me, to be blunt, getting to know those having a different skin color. The notorious whiteness of the Greens will, I'm fairly certain, no longer be an albatross around our neck the more we make serious runs for local office. Here in New Haven, the charge was made against us by an activist who was concerned with a similar unbearable whiteness within the anti-globalization circles in which he organizes. Two months after our discussion, our chapter had begun to lose its previous Jim Crow hue and a reasonable fraction of our core members are African American. This was a predictable outcome of the minimally committed electoral outreach we conducted during the Nader campaign. We are continuing it and it is continuing to draw new members. Success achieved by anti-globalization coalitions requires 60,000 bodies in one place. And while this is a large number, it is drawn from all over, and can, therefore easily draw from a homogenous, largely white and privileged pool. A local campaign in a post-industrial city requires not just celebrating diversity, as the bumper sticker puts it. It means leaving the self-selected enclaves in which leftists feel comfortable and meeting and getting acquainted with insurance agents, telemarketers, short-order cooks and muffler replacement shop employees in the hopes that "they" might become "us." It requires that you get some of these folks to know you, to like you, feel comfortable with you, and want to do you the favor of voting for you. There's no element of selfless sacrifice involved. You either do this or you embarrass yourself by losing big.

### **Epilogue-I run for Alderman. You should too**

As my year off (one in which I was supposed make major contributions to the cultural and scholarly life of the nation) draws to a close, I have decided to put my money where my mouth is: I am on the ballot as the Green Party candidate for Alderman of New Haven's ninth ward. The special elections is on July 10. If I do the job right, there is no reason why I can't win. All of you should be doing the same. If you're not, I want a good reason why.