

Introduction

The every-four-year U.S. presidential elections are important historical junctures in which forces across the political spectrum assess the current conditions facing the U.S. nation state and present competing strategies for the future of the country. Whatever strategies contend, all political perspectives are analyzing the same conditions of the new world order, and all agree that the U.S. imperialism is the leader, indeed dominator, of the transnational capitalist system. All of us on the Left in the U.S., by which we mean the anti-racist, anti-imperialist Left, can use the presidential election as an opportunity to examine the state of our own work, the state of the nation, and the state of the world, in order to clarify our strategy and to evolve specific tactical interventions. The superficial and in some ways self-important question currently consuming many progressives—“Who should ‘we’ vote for?”—masks a far larger problem for the Left: *the anti-racist, anti-imperialist Left in the heart of the world’s imperialist superpower is weak and has painfully limited options in the electoral arena.*

In the post-sixties decades, as the Left has been in decline and the Democratic party has moved further to the Right, this problem has become more pronounced. Today our electoral choices are extremely limited. We can refuse to participate as part of an effort to highlight the large percentage of the population that does not take part in the process (whether by exclusion or choice). We can make a protest vote for a marginal candidate representing a Left organization like the Peace and Freedom Party. We can vote for Ralph Nader, a disenchanting liberal Democrat, because he is running on the Green Party platform and there is some chance of a viable third party status for the Greens. Or we can vote for the anti-Left centrist

internationalist Democrat Al Gore—the would-be leader of U.S. imperialism’s global domination—whose most compelling argument is that his anti-Left centrism is a conscious tactic to defeat the truly dangerous reactionary George Bush.

Our purpose in writing this article is not to resolve the issue of selecting a candidate to vote for, but rather to use this moment of national, indeed international, focus on the strategies contending for leadership of U.S. imperialism to articulate and extend our anti-imperialist strategy and to strengthen the anti-imperialist movement.

Towards this end, we at the Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union (BRU) have focused on mass work that can be strengthened during this period of national elections. As one tactic, we placed a full page ad in the Western edition of the *New York Times* that posed the question to Al Gore and the Democrats, “Which Side are You On, Racism or Civil Rights?” The ad challenged Gore to intervene in the Bus Riders Union civil rights campaign against the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA.) On August 15, the Bus Riders Union organized a march of more than 1,000 people to the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles demanding that Gore and the Democratic Party take action to enforce Title VI of the 1964 civil rights act by immediately cutting off all federal funds to the Los Angeles MTA’s multi-billion dollar rail projects and force allocation of more than \$1 billion to improve the inner-city bus system for people of color. In a second tactic, at a public meeting in Los Angeles, the BRU leadership challenged Ralph Nader and the Green Party to focus on anti-racist and anti-imperialist demands rather than a narrow white

consumerism. The Strategy Center is also using our publication *AhoraNow* to present our contending strategy, *Toward a Program of Resistance: We Make These Demands Against the Institutions of U.S. Imperialism*, and to expand a national debate about the elections by encouraging people to write commentaries such as ours. Finally, as the Strategy Center continues our ongoing work to strengthen the anti-racist, anti-imperialist network in Los Angeles, we are encouraging all people and organizations to use this moment of national focus to place demands on all the political parties and candidates.

Our tactical proposal is for the self-identified anti-racist, anti-imperialist political tendencies in the U.S. to make a coordinated set of demands on all candidates, and to focus on building a unity of program, more than a unity of vote. We propose to make our decisions on who to vote for after a period of trying to struggle with and influence the Greens and yes, the Democrats. We understand that some will choose to bring those demands primarily into the Gore campaign whereas others will focus on pressuring Ralph Nader and the Greens. But the goal is to build a greater unity of politics that can last far after the election.

The remainder of this article follows this outline:

1. A discussion of the particular problem in electoral politics of how “voting rights” structurally obliterates minority rights
2. A review of our strategy by way of reference to the Strategy Center’s programmatic demands
3. A brief review of how the issues that concern us have been addressed by the Clinton administration’s practices
4. The pro-imperialist candidates Gore and Bush
5. The opposition candidate Nader
6. An assessment of what is at stake in the electorate’s choice and its impact on the concerns of the Left (which will likely influence how we actually register our vote), and
7. A review of possible tactics during the time of the election and some thoughts on where we go after November.

I. Voting Rights vs. Minority Rights, Human Rights and Self-Determination

The ground rules of the U.S. electoral system construct the context for the pro-imperialist political parties to contain challenges to their power. The United States is built on conquest, slavery, genocide and empire. This history shapes the political culture today, as elections are dominated by a chauvinist, punitive, and aggressively racist white majority, with minority communities badly split on ideological and class lines, and with many of society’s most oppressed members and groups unregistered, undocumented, and incarcerated. This is a fundamental systemic contradiction embedded in the very structure of voting in the U.S.

The U.S. electoral system is structured to give power to those who are entitled to vote and does not protect the constitutional and human rights of racial and ethnic minorities from the abuses of racist voting majorities. U.S. constitutional theory acknowledges the rights of the minority at the level of concept, but its history has shown it is not so in practice. The U.S. Declaration of Independence and Constitution evolved certain theories of “inalienable rights” and a “bill of rights” to protect members of society from the invasive use of police and military force and “the tyranny of the majority”—initially in revolutionary war against the British monarchy. These lofty and in fact progressive theories of protecting the individual and groups from state repression, such as freedom of speech and assembly, were restricted from the outset based on the assumption that “society” meant white male property owners, and “rights” pertained to the white, male, bourgeois class that was in antagonism to the crown. Thus the term “bourgeois democracy” means the rights of the capitalists against the King, not a working class democracy opposed to the capitalists.

For centuries, in a nation built upon the genocidal conquest of indigenous lands and black African slavery, the concept of “majority vote” has enabled white male property owners to determine the rights of others. Those with votes have argued among themselves as to whether those without the vote can vote; those with rights have debated whether those without rights can have rights. Thus, after the Civil War, it took a white male electoral majority to pass the 13th Amendment freeing the slaves, the 14th Amendment making them citizens with equal protection under the law, and the 15th Amendment, giving them the “right” to vote. It was also white male voters who, by 1877, overturned the

progressive and revolutionary achievements of the post-civil war Reconstruction and imposed Jim Crow laws to literally re-enslave the recently freed blacks. In 1919, a male electorate finally voted for women's suffrage. Still, to this day, it is the unwillingness of the white male voters in representative bodies across the country that have prevented the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. In each of these situations, the vote-less have had to find ways to pressure, appeal to, and compromise with those with voting power in order to gain any rights. The norm of majority voting behavior, on the other hand, has been to further institutionalize exclusion at every opportunity.

In California over the past decade, racist, conservative majorities have voted in favor of cleverly crafted attacks on minorities using the general election initiative process. Proposition 187, "Save Our State" denies medical care, education, and even food to undocumented immigrants; Proposition 184, "Three Strikes and You're Out" imposes mandatory life sentences on many low-income black, Latino, Native American, and Asian men; Proposition 209, "The Civil Rights Initiative" outlaws state-supported affirmative action programs; Proposition 21, "the Juvenile Justice Initiative" imposes adult sentences on black and brown youth; Proposition 227, "English for the Children" eliminates language rights and bilingual education programs for Latino and Asian immigrants.

At the national level, in the past eight years, a steady stream of Supreme Court decisions have given the police expanded rights to elicit coerced confessions, allowed tainted evidence to be admitted in court, overturned minority electoral districts, and restricted the authority and remedies of civil rights laws. The U.S. Congress and the Clinton administration have passed the Effective Death Penalty act that violates habeas corpus rights that have existed for centuries in an effort to make sure they effectively execute the far over-represented black and brown prisoners on death row. Today, nine states have life-time bans on the right to vote for felons who have been released from custody. The Sentencing Project in Washington D.C., as Earl Ofari Hutchinson reports in the Los Angeles Times, estimates that 40% of black men will be permanently barred from voting in those states. The Clinton administration that talked about voting rights has been conspicuously silent as the states first arrest black and Latino men on unjust charges and then deny them the vote when they get out of prison. These measures amount to the latest version of the poll tax and other legal maneuvers designed to deny black people the franchise.

During the height of the anti-racist movements of the 1960s in the U.S., the Black Panthers called for a referendum by all black people to determine their relationship to the United States, and while Malcolm X proposed that black people go to the United Nations to assert human rights independent of the U.S. system. During that period, anti-war resisters denied the legitimacy of the U.S. government to "legally" wage a genocidal war in Vietnam and engaged in a wide variety of draft and anti-war resistance tactics to challenge an unjust and imperialist war. This extra-legal, extra-electoral perspective is the unique contribution of the anti-imperialist Left to the electoral debate, and it retains compelling relevance, perhaps even greater, today.

The worst error for the anti-imperialist Left would not be to vote for the "wrong" candidate, but rather to raise illusions about the electoral system in the heart of the U.S. empire at a time when our unique responsibility is to challenge its fundamental precepts.

The anti-imperialist Left has the responsibility to raise the most fundamental but revolutionary challenge to the system itself: *The human rights of all peoples, but especially minority groups and groups without suffrage, are inviolable. The rights of oppressed nationality peoples, indigenous peoples, and immigrants cannot be voted away or abrogated by the dominant racial group or any other form of electoral or political majority.*

When we take this perspective on electoral politics, we can see that there is, in fact, a need for a strong movement—rooted in civil disobedience, the refusal to abide by unjust laws, and militant direct action—to challenge the entire legitimacy of the electoral system, and to prevent the enforcement of racially-biased and class-biased "initiatives."

II. Towards an Anti-Racist, Anti-Imperialist Program

As we look at our options in 2000, we face a daunting international situation. The anti-imperialist U.S. Left has in the past been invigorated by revolutionary international conditions; yet the current conditions—collapse of the first socialist experiments, the weakness of the Left in most countries, and the virtually unchallenged hegemony of the

U.S. in the world today—create a sense of restricted historical possibilities. Within the U.S., a predominantly white, affluent, conservative-to-reactionary electoral constituency wants to participate in the spoils of U.S. ascendancy, reinforcing a situation in which the electoral “debate” between the two pro-imperialist Parties has never been more narrow or based on more common assumptions. Whatever plan the contenders carry out, it will most likely be a variation with the same imperialist strategic objectives: *stabilize the system so it lives as long as possible, keep the U.S. on top, and consolidate the two party consensus for empire that prevents the development of an effective anti-imperialist Left resistance.*

Since the electoral ground rules construct a stacked deck, there is not presently the possibility of an anti-racist, anti-imperialist electoral majority. That is why we have chosen to prioritize organizing mass struggles, whenever possible placing them in an international context, to directly challenge the corporations and the government, and why we have been wary of proposals to enter into a struggle for power within an electoral system in which the most privileged classes and strata debate their division of the spoils. However, is not inconsistent to understand the fundamental undemocratic nature of the electoral system and yet decide to participate in electoral campaigns, to exercise one’s “right” to vote or urge that others do so.

Indeed, there have been important junctures in U.S. history when the stakes of elections are high, and the Left, whatever its strength, could see differences that warranted intervention in the form of support of specific Parties and candidates. Such instances involving the presidency have included:

- The Radical Republicans and Reconstruction in the post Civil War period in which liberal capitalists, anti-feudal northerners, the freed slaves, and some poor white workers allied in a very progressive coalition to keep federal troops in the South and enforce the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments.
- The Franklin Delano Roosevelt New Deal progressive alliance with the Left, communists and the trade unions inside the U.S., and the international united front against Fascism, in particular Nazi Germany, fascist Japan and Italy, including a tactical alliance with the Soviet Union.
- The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenge to the Democrats in 1964.

- The McGovern campaign in 1972 that was explicitly for civil rights and against the war in Vietnam and which also challenged some of the most reactionary forces inside the Democratic party.
- The Jesse Jackson/Rainbow Coalition insurgency within the Democratic party in 1984 and 1988.
- The Clinton campaign in 1992 in which a centrist Democrat tried to head off 12 straight years of far-right Republican control and the danger of a permanent Republican presidency.

But in the present situation, the two pro-imperialist parties are so very close in their overarching strategies, and as we will argue, the Nader/Green party is marred with terminal white chauvinism. *Thus, however we choose to exercise our vote based on an assessment of the stakes, we are not proposing that this is a time in history that warrants the Left to actively support any party or candidate.*

Our tactical approach, instead, focuses on using electoral politics to fight for expansion of rights while exposing the structural racism and moral bankruptcy of the electoral system as well as deepening the understanding of all involved about the operations of imperialism. We believe this can be done by challenging those who seek election with specific demands that are simultaneously achievable under the so-called “democratic rights” system of governance and are wrenching to the political economy of U.S. imperialism. As referenced earlier, at the BRU our main choices have been to fight the MTA service cuts, to put resources into the bus drivers strike, to formulate demands that other forces in the U.S. could bring to bear against all major parties, and to explore tactics in which social movements with specific demands could try to find points of leverage in the electoral campaign. Such campaigns include Free Mumia, end the racist death penalty, and the BRU’s three major demands, 1) Federal government—Enforce Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Bus Riders Union’s Civil Rights Consent Decree; 2) Federal government—Place an Immediate Moratorium on All Federal Funds for rail projects in Los Angeles, and 3) MTA—Allocate \$1 billion to purchase and operate 1,000 new buses for the city’s minority bus riders. To further this goal, the Strategy Center’s Program Demand Group document, *Towards a Program of Resistance* focuses on six categories of challenges to the practices of the institutions of U.S. imperialism:

1. Responsibility for Interventions Around the Globe
2. Responsibility for National Oppression and Racism Within the United States
3. Responsibility for the Subjugation of Women Around the Globe and Inside the U.S.
4. Responsibility for the Degradation of the Environment and the Destruction of Public Health
5. Responsibility for Attacks on Social Welfare Within the United States
6. Responsibility for Denial of Rights Internationally and Domestically

The document crafts strategic demands as well as specific campaign demands in each category to create a programmatic baseline from which organizers and activists can proceed to questions of strategy and tactics. Several specific campaign demands are listed below to help frame our approach to the examination of the candidates to whom we will make challenges.

- U.S. government—cease exploitation of indigenous peoples and destruction of their lands.
- U.S. government, Group of 7 countries and their various U.S. dominated international apparatuses—cancel all Third World debt without conditions.
- U.S. government—open the borders, allow free passage of immigrants, abolish the Immigration and Naturalization Service.
- U.S. federal and state governments—free the U.S. Two Million by immediately releasing from prison all indigenous, black, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Latino colonial subjects; fund community controlled education, detoxification, and job placement services.
- U.S. government and corporations—reverse all policies that foster, explicitly or tacitly, the super-exploitation of women, trafficking in women, particularly at U.S. military bases, and acts of hatred and violence against women.
- U.S. government—reinstate Aid to Families With Dependent Children and guarantee jobs or income, free childcare, transportation, and health care.
- U.S. government—implement a zero tolerance for carcinogens policy, prohibit the manufacture, use, and distribution of a specific list of known carcinogenic and toxic chemicals by U.S. corporations and the Pentagon.
- U.S. government—make environmental racism and degradation by U.S. corporations a criminal offense.

- U.S. Congress—increase and expand, rather than reduce or eliminate, gift and inheritance taxes, and earmark to fund social welfare programs.
- U.S. government—nationalize and fund all medical care, so that all residents, regardless of immigration status, including prisoners, receive equal and free medical care.
- U.S. government—support and facilitate the basic rights of self-determination for black, Latino, and Asian populations and indigenous peoples in the United States, including the right to devise electoral proposals for political representation.

It is from the point of view of the struggle for these demands that we look at the electoral campaign and the candidates for U.S. president, leader of U.S. imperialism.

III. Clinton/Gore: A Balance Sheet of Eight Years of their Center-Right Strategy

Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore tries to simultaneously claim the achievements of his partnership with Clinton while distancing himself from what he perceives as Clinton's personal vulnerability. While Gore blithely proclaims "I am my own man," it is his past record that can best predict his future practice. Let's look at the carefully-crafted center-right Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) plan that Clinton and Gore perfected.

The Clinton administration opened its campaign with gestures to the Left, moved to consolidate the Center, and then to draw support from the Right.

During the 1980s, when the Democrats became convinced that there was no historical possibility of a pro-black, liberal Democrat who could get elected, and traumatized by Reagan's defeat of Carter and Mondale, and George Bush's trouncing of Dukakis, they created the Democratic Leadership Council, a "centrist" caucus of Democrats trying to become "New Democrats." They consciously distanced themselves from federal funding of social programs, afraid of Reagan's clever charges of "tax and spend liberals;" they deliberately distanced themselves from any defense of civil rights, implicitly agreeing with the Right's

defense of white rights and claims of “reverse discrimination;” they consciously courted the business community, trying to distance themselves from “anti-business” Democrats in the age of the free market. Bill Clinton and Richard Gephardt were among its founders, and Bill Clinton was its first successful nominee in 1992.

It is hard to remember now that the Clinton/Gore campaign in 1992 drew from the Left and Right to form its centrist political strategy. It needed Left campaign workers and Right voters in order to seize the presidency. Appealing to the Left, the Clinton administration outlined a bold plan for universal health care—not the progressive “single payer” Canadian plan, but one in which the government would subsidize the insurance companies who in turn would finance, and profit from, a fundamentally private medical system. His plan was mauled by the strong male chauvinist backlash against the administration’s chief health-care advocate First Lady Hillary Clinton, and by the power of the medical insurance lobby to influence Congress, including members of the Democratic Party. Clinton dropped this single most publicized campaign initiative and never touched it again.

Clinton/Gore campaigned with a promise to expand gay/lesbian rights, very courageous in itself, but the effort was beaten back by the reactionary U.S. army. Clinton quickly collapsed, deferring to his electoral constituency on the Right. “Don’t ask, don’t tell” is a massive violation of first amendment and gay/lesbian rights, and in many ways is worse than the status quo ante.

By 1994, Clinton was confronted by the success of Newt Gingrich’s brilliantly organized Contract With America, which led to a massive Republican victory in the Congressional elections. In response, Clinton developed a plan called “triangulation” in which he posited himself as “independent” of both Democrats and Republicans. These voters were the conservative, racist working class and middle class whites who were the primary beneficiaries of the New Deal, but defected to Reagan and Bush in explicit opposition to civil rights, abortion rights, and anti-war politics. Democratic liberals meekly protested, but they had no where to go. It worked—Clinton landed on his feet and was re-elected in 1996.

Bill Clinton became the king of the bull market, the soldier who “breaks down” obstacles to U.S. capitalist penetration, the architect of an international neoliberal program of inclusion and co-optation.

In his 1992 presidential campaign, Clinton ran on a muted populist theme that economic stability is good for everyone in the United States, and reached out in particular to the white working and middle class. This appeal was popularized by advisor James Carville with the slogan, “It’s the economy, stupid.” The new wave capitalist class in the Silicon Valley, which Clinton and Gore had long since courted in anticipation of the global political impact of the high tech stock market, understood that whatever appeal Clinton made to the electorate, what he meant was “It’s U.S. imperialism, stupid!”

A recent *New York Times* article explained that in the eight years of the Clinton and Gore administration, the “wealth gap” between rich and poor in the U.S. has widened considerably. The fact that America Online, an internet startup only a few years ago, was able to take over Time Warner, the largest traditional media conglomerate in the world, is symbolic of the enormous capitalist revolution under Clinton. It’s no surprise that an email joke circulating in Europe recently made the front page of the *International Herald Tribune*: “In a surprise announcement, AOL Time Warner announced Friday that it had acquired France. This marks the first time that a multimedia company has purchased an entire nation.”

Indeed, Clinton has used the Department of Commerce, the Agency for International Development, and the State Department—shaped in its early stages by corporate lawyer Warren Christopher and Third World trade manipulator Ron Brown—to help U.S. transnational corporations penetrate Europe, east and west, China, and every Third World nation possible. This complex penetration of foreign markets and the effort to integrate them into a world “American system” led by U.S. transnationals has defined the Clinton/Gore foreign policy.

In search of new markets and in defense of old ones, Clinton virtually invented the military invasion and aerial bombardment of Kosovo and led the U.S. takeover of NATO. Clinton has continued, rather than abandoned, the Bush administration’s scapegoating of Iraq, including eight more years of U.S. air strikes and starvation of

civilian populations. He has refused to challenge the Helms-Burton embargo of Cuba. He has appeased the Pentagon at every turn, often allocating more funds than they even requested.

Clinton/Gore ran as environmental candidates and yet in eight years their policies contributed to U.S. and world ecological devastation by implementing neoliberal deregulation policies.

When Clinton and Gore were elected, there was enormous enthusiasm among mainstream environmentalists, as well as among black, Latino, Asian, and indigenous leaders of the environmental justice movement, some of whom were included in the “transition team.” But within a few years it became clear that Al Gore’s book *Earth in the Balance* had become reduced to a bed-time fairy tale.

In our own work at the Strategy Center, we have seen the Clinton/Gore administration support the buying and selling of air pollution credits and the gutting of strict air quality standards in Los Angeles, while virtually every democratic Party candidate and trade union official has attacked environmental regulations as “killing business and jobs.” A new group, Environmentalists Against Gore, has developed a detailed critique of the Clinton/Gore administration constant practice of breaking promises on the environment in a “cynical orchestrated charade” that has included:

- turning his back on people of Appalachia by allowing mountains and streams to be destroyed by strip mining
- increasing the logging of what’s left of publicly owned native and old growth national forests and monuments
- encouraging big sugar plantations to continue to pollute our everglades
- promoting offshore oil drilling in Florida, California, and Alaska
- turning the Endangered Species Act into a tool of extinction.

The deep-seated chauvinism of Clinton/Gore populism has celebrated “working family values” while cutting social welfare and successfully co-opting the black and Latino congressional caucuses, the AFL-CIO, and even many in the environmental justice movement—the very forces positioned inside the system who could resist it.

Clinton and Gore, as white Southerners, well understand the deeply conservative and racist ideology that is at the core of the entire society—north and south. They also understand that those same white working class families desperately need economic relief, but would rather starve to death than accept government benefits they believe are associated with minority peoples—this is the powerful material force of white racism.

Clinton worked a brilliant political alchemy—turning the Reagan/Bush appeal of “family values” into the slogan coined by the AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, “help for working families.” Clinton reached out to the white working class by calling it what it likes, “the middle class,” or “those who work hard and play by the rules” and focused every appeal to “the family” such as family leave, tax cuts for working families. It was as if a woman had to be in a nuclear family dominated by a man in order to have any benefits at all. Unfortunately, this had appeal even to sectors of the black, Latino, and Asian middle classes who have also developed a desire to distance themselves from the poor, low-wage working class of their own nationalities.

The flip side of this appeal to “working family values” has been the attack on those who receive government welfare benefits—begun ideologically by Reagan’s attacks on “welfare queens.” While Reagan began the racist diatribe, it was implemented into policy by Clinton and Gore. Aid to Families with Dependent Children was a mandate of the New Deal, and was dramatically expanded by the anti-racist movements of the 1960s. Clinton’s attacks on social welfare protections, forcing women into the workforce without living wage jobs, transportation, or childcare—done in the most cynical manner right before the 1996 election—threw black and Latina women and children to the Gingrich wolves.

Clinton’s ultimate feint-Left-turn-Right exercise was the sacrifice of progressive black law school professor Lani Guinier, who Clinton initially proposed for director of the Justice Department’s Civil Rights division. As an anti-racist

judicial theorist, Guinier had tried to address the concerns we share about the intractability of white racism by proposing a series of administrative measures that would protect black constitutional and civil rights from the tyranny of the white majority—such as black electoral districts and guaranteed rights for blacks that white majorities could not abrogate. She was attacked by the Right as the “quota queen” (not much different from “welfare queen”) using the rabid mix of misogyny and racism that fuels white supremacist ideology in this country. Clinton dropped Guinier’s nomination like a hot potato, claiming he had never inhaled any of her law review articles. The black liberals in the administration put up little fight, focusing instead on their own appointments to higher office.

Combining threats with offers of inclusion, the Clinton/Gore team so successfully co-opted their liberal critics that in the face of the dismantling of welfare, there was no organized resistance by the Congressional Black Caucus, nor has there been any serious challenge on the blockade of Cuba, the institutionalization of a permanent prison industry, or the growing U.S. intervention in Colombia. With the goal of curtailing mass protests, the Democratic Party has built ties to many progressives and grassroots groups. The Party has convinced many liberal black, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, and women elected officials that achieving civil rights means getting elected, and easily persuaded liberal “advocacy groups” and AFL-CIO unions that any militant challenges will end their “inside” influence.

The Clinton/Gore administration has made conservative judicial appointments and ushered in reactionary criminal justice policies.

With the executive power to make judicial appointments, Clinton has approached his choices from the perspective of whether they would be approved by the U.S. Senate, meaning the conservative and racist wings of the Democratic Party and the Republican right wing led by Senate Judiciary Committee Chair Orrin Hatch. During the Reagan and Bush administrations, the Republicans made test cases out of the nominations of right-wing ideologues Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas, losing with Bork but eventually wearing the Democrats down with Thomas. While Clinton has proposed a few liberal and black appointments to less powerful judicial positions that were rejected by the Republicans, he has never chosen a

public showdown with the Right. Consistent with this capitulation, if not consent, to the racist Right take-over of the legal system, Clinton did virtually nothing to challenge that arrangement; instead, for the historically critical positions on the Supreme Court he appointed moderate to conservative jurists, Stephen Breir and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. On cases regarding criminal justice—questions of searches, warrants, prisoners rights—Breir and Ginsburg have often joined in a bipartisan reactionary agreement.

Further, the Clinton administration, in the name of “reform,” supported the Effective Death Penalty and Anti-Terrorism Act. The act limited the grounds for appeals—restricting death row inmates to only “constitutional” violations, as opposed to, for example, procedural violations—as well as tightening timelines (a limit of one year for appeals), when death penalty lawyers are overworked and can often not meet the time table. It also prevented U.S. citizens from having virtually any contacts with “foreign” organizations arbitrarily declared “terrorists” by the Secretary of State, also without appeal, such as the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) that is fighting the U.S. ally Turkey. Further, the Clinton/Gore team ushered in an Immigration Reform Act that now gives all the power to the INS to deport immigrants, destroying the previously held right of immigrants to challenge INS actions in court. The use of the word “reform” to signal reduction in rights, as in Welfare “reform” and Immigration “reform,” is one of the pernicious Clinton/Gore maneuvers that has helped their plan of co-optation.

Make no mistake about it, Clinton and Gore, and the Democratic Leadership Council created an effective paradigm, the Center-Right “New Democrat” that has, like Ronald Reagan before them, dramatically set, and restricted, the terms of the debate today. The public perception that there is little to choose between Gore and Bush is partially the product of the narrow differences that the electorate will really tolerate these days, limits that were significantly shaped by the last eight years of the Clinton administration.

IV. The Pro-Imperialist Candidates Contend

The Gore/Lieberman Campaign

The Gore/Lieberman continuation of the Clinton/Gore plan is difficult to carry out; the campaign must try to synthesize a broad pro-imperialist united front. It must appeal to the Reagan Democrats and the socially conservative and racist white male voters while solidifying its base among black, Latino, and women voters—all the while simultaneously running against and courting big business.

Gore began by running to the Right in the primaries, attacking Bill Bradley for his unequivocal support of affirmative action, and picking Joe Lieberman, in another overture to the party's Right. By the August convention, Gore could see that his effort to appear more conservative than Bush was failing and his liberal base was dispirited; he dusted off the racist populism theme which appeals to the white working class family as well as the liberals. This brand of populist campaign rhetoric demands that he rail against easy targets—the HMO's, the tobacco companies, the drug companies, and the oil companies (especially ironic when in fact he has been on the Occidental Petroleum dole since he was a kid and has his hand in every corporate coffer and trough). The large corporations understand that at election time the Democrats, with the larger working class and minority base, have to attack them as a ritual, but they continue to contribute large sums of money to both the Democrats and the Republicans. "Big business" understands that Gore and Lieberman are completely tied to the corporate agenda, and they will all get along just fine—indeed, many corporate giants believe they will fare better—if Gore and Lieberman are elected.

Since our central strategic demands are focused to combat national exploitation and oppression by the United States, we were initially pleased when we learned of Gore's choice of Joseph Lieberman for vice president—not knowing very much about him. We are deeply and personally motivated to fight the anti-Semitism that grips many nations, including the United States. But after some investigation, it became clear that Lieberman is a dangerous conservative who is hated by many Jewish progressives and even moderate liberals in the Congress. The facts speak for themselves. Lieberman was elected as U.S. Senator from Connecticut by defeating an independent liberal Republican Lowell

Weicker. Lieberman was supported by arch-conservative William F. Buckley. Lieberman red-baited Weicker for his courageous stand to lift the blockade of Cuba, "You're closer to Fidel Castro than to Ronald Reagan." He has been one of the leaders of the conservative, pro-business Democratic Leadership Council caucus in the Democratic party. When Lieberman was nominated, DLC chair Al From gloated that this was another step in the DLC's takeover of the Democratic Party. Lieberman has been an aggressive opponent of self-determination for Palestine, and if elected, will be a force to further sabotage negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Lieberman, and Gore's Harvard mentor, Marty Peretz, are Israeli hawks in the Netanyahu mold. As Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun* magazine pointed out, "the documentation of Israeli torture of Palestinians, the denial of human rights, and the oppression of another people were all irrelevant and uninteresting" to Lieberman. Rather than illustrating religious freedom and an advance for civil rights, Joe Lieberman's aggressive display of his orthodox Jewish religious beliefs interjects religion into politics in ways that are hailed by the religious Right and insult all liberal commitments to the separation of church and state.

The Gore/Lieberman team can unify their pro-corporate/working family constituencies by positioning their administration as aggressive in defense of U.S. national economic interests in foreign affairs. When criticized by Bush as being soft on military spending, Gore retorted hawkishly that it was George W.'s father who first tried to reduce military spending after the fall of the Soviet Union—shortly thereafter the Clinton/Gore administration volunteered a plan to increase the Pentagon budget. To dramatize his intent to lead U.S. military aggression, Gore bragged in his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention that he and Joe Lieberman "broke with our party to support the Gulf War," essentially attacking those Democrats who had the courage to try to stop the Bush/Powell/Schwartzkopf massacre. This was tantamount to warning the idiotic delegates who were applauding their own castigation that they can expect another eight years of "triangulation" if Gore gets elected. While the issue has subsided in the campaign because the bipartisan militarism leaves little room for debate, we can make no mistake in understanding Gore's intentions.

The Bush/Cheney Candidacy

As we have said, we see George W. Bush and Al Gore as sharing the same fundamental aim of sustaining U.S. imperialism. But their tactical plans are significantly different. Bush proposes a more bellicose international stance, and domestically has shown he will move against people of color and women in a coordinated and vindictive manner.

George W. is attempting the sleight of hand formerly practiced by his father, CIA director and then president, George Bush. He promotes himself as a “compassionate conservative” who wants to lead a “kinder, gentler America.” Just like his father and Reagan who kicked the hell out of people of color for twelve years, George W. is super-tough on the death penalty, military aggression, and free-market economics, which secures the white men who are the base of his support. His efforts at moderate and centrist Republican themes—such as the embarrassing staged minority night at the Republican convention—is calculated to appeal to white working class women and minority voters who tend to favor Gore on healthcare, social security, and abortion rights, the voters he must draw in order to win. But any fantasy of Bush’s centrism masks a hard Right wing political program.

Bush will try to create a virtually unregulated economy, in that he and Dick Cheney are, as Nader says, corporations masquerading as people. Bush virtually pledges the destruction of every major regulatory agency—the EPA, OSHA, Food and Drug Administration, and the anti-trust and civil rights divisions of the Justice Department. Dangerous drugs will be put on the market sooner, Microsoft will get off with a slap on the wrist, and every cop in the U.S. will be able to abuse with impunity. The oil companies, to which both Bush and Cheney are joined at the hip, are already salivating about exploiting presently restricted off-shore oil reserves that will generate excess profits and excess ecological damage. And many of the high-tech companies, such as Cisco, Dell, and Oracle, despite getting rich through Clinton and Gore, are aggressively contributing to the Bush/Cheney campaign.

If elected, Bush will offer federal support for the growing Right-wing racist movements that have attacked bilingual education, affirmative action and minority youth. And the Civil Rights division will, as it did under Reagan, focus on the “rights” of white people suffering “reverse

discrimination.” Bush will fight for school vouchers and will attack teachers and teacher’s unions in order to undermine public education and build popular support for a privatized and balkanized school system.

George W. Bush’s record as Governor is frightening on the question of the death penalty alone. As Governor, he has refused to overturn any of the more than 100 executions on his watch, even when it was shown in one case that a defense attorney was drunk during a defendant’s trial. He prefers to hold the record for the most executions in any state in the U.S. He will bring this approach to the presidency.

While Gore is a true military hawk, supporting Clinton’s move to bloat the U.S. military budget, Bush has continually claimed the Gore/Clinton administration has defunded the Pentagon, giving us some idea of the military buildup he intends.

This racism, male supremacy, and saber rattling has served Bush well, and reinforces our observations about the fundamentally reactionary nature of the U.S. electorate. Recent polls show that even with Gore’s efforts to placate the white male electorate by playing down his most minimal support for civil rights and women’s reproductive rights, Bush holds a massive twenty point lead among white men, and his support is growing among white married women, those most influenced and at times intimidated by the white men to whom they are married.

The Nader forces have often, in their efforts to justify their candidacy, tried to minimize or at times obliterate the differences between Gore and Bush. A cold sober look at George W. should cut through such facile analysis. Bush and the Republicans are overt reactionaries of the most dangerous sort, and the electoral feint to the center makes them even more so, for their worst damage of course will be done if they are elected.

VI. The Electoral Opposition: Nader/La Duke

At first reaction, it seems impossible to even consider the difference between Bush and Gore, since the contention between them is not over their shared aim of U.S. world domination. In that light, a serious engagement with the Greens and the Nader/La Duke campaign seems exciting, especially with the promise—or at least very real possibility—that a large vote for the Greens will open the future for a Left third party. Therefore, our more lengthy consideration of Nader begins with a question, “Is the Nader/Green candidacy a challenge to Gore and the Democrats from the left?”

Nader is a crusading muckraker, a liberal Democrat who has broken with the Democratic party. He is not a Leftist and does not claim to be.

Ralph Nader is, as he named one of his organizations, a Public Citizen. He has organized a national network of Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) to challenge corporate abuse of power, particularly when it injures the consumer. Nader’s fundamental strategy is the creation of a progressive capitalist regulatory state, buttressed by consumer advocacy groups in Washington D.C. whose front line tactics would be class action lawsuits and administrative complaints: By adopting the liberal vision of “countervailing power” proposed by John Kenneth Galbraith, that is, protecting capitalism from capitalists, Nader is a man who believes in the system and demands that it works.

Nader supports state’s rights.

Nader argues that the state’s rights movement of Republican judges is in many ways positive, for he does not fear the violation of constitutional protections against blacks and Latinos at the state level as much as he fears the overturning of environmental and consumer initiatives at the state level. This position trivializes the danger of racist terror at the state level, and is totally out of synch with the essential weapon of federal intervention to enforce civil rights at many critical points in U.S. history. Nader claims, in an interview with Harold Meyerson of the L.A. Weekly, “There’s never been a retrenchment in civil rights since the

Dred Scott decision. These things are not going to be pulled back—and if they are it would probably be the greatest source of revival of civic action in our generation.” Despite being an attorney, Nader has a chilling ignorance of the law when it deals with race and racism and an arrogant white chauvinism when he conveys a flippant reassurance to black, Latino, Asian, and indigenous peoples that they can depend upon the states to protect their civil rights.

Nader’s support for “U.S. workers” is based on a chauvinist U.S. protectionism against Third World competition.

Nader’s appeal to “labor” is in actuality a narrow appeal to the most privileged, white, and male sectors of the U.S. working class—in direct contradiction to the interests of the international working class. Nader’s politics on trade focus on “protecting” U.S. workers from the ravages of international competition. Nader’s opposition to granting Permanent Normal Trade Relations to the People’s Republic of China is based on chauvinist arguments. He asserts that the U.S. is a democracy, that China is a dictatorship, and that the U.S. can be the arbiter of the social systems of the nations with which it trades, in this case singling out China for “human rights” abuses when the U.S. is directly and through its organized proxies, among the worst human rights violators in the world.

Nader has focused his appeal to the most protectionist, chauvinist, xenophobic trade unions—such as the United Auto Workers, the Steelworkers, the Teamsters—whose members work for companies that compete with Third World producers. Officials of these unions often work hand in hand with their own corporations, fight against every environmental law that would possibly threaten one of their jobs, suppress union militancy and democracy in their ranks, and attempt to block imports into the U.S. and break down the doors of any nation that imposes tariffs to protect its domestic industries from U.S. exports. These trade union aristocrats want complete control over the U.S. market and complete control over the world market.

Nader, quoted in the *New York Times*, told a group of workers, “You’re the guys who work hard. You’re the guys who pay the taxes. You’re the guys who fight the wars. And then they say, ‘Tough. We’re closing down the factory—it’s globalization.’ And then they use factories overseas where dictators repress the wages to compete

against you.” Nader’s “you’re the guys” accepts the maleness of the workforce as a given. He shares Bill Clinton’s appeal to conservative workers, calling them taxpayers, a code word to Reagan Democrats. He commends them for fighting the wars—the invasions of Korea, Vietnam and Grenada, the bombing of civilians in Iraq and Kosovo? He plays into the image that all nations in the Third World are run by dictators, an assertion that the U.S. is a democracy against which the social systems of others can be judged. The issue Nader uses to motivate these workers is not class struggle with their own employers and union bureaucrats, or an international movement of workers and oppressed nationality peoples against imperialism, but rather, a xenophobic hatred of foreigners.

Nader is soft and evasive on issues of police brutality and abuse.

In a recent campaign mailer, Ralph Nader discussed “law enforcement” without making any mention of police abuse and brutality or the racism of the criminal justice system. Instead, he again reduced the role of the capitalist state to consumer issues saying, “Law enforcement—which is supposed to protect the interests of consumers from corporate crime, fraud, and abuse, is a farce, devoid of resources and the will to actually enforce the law.” By this Nader means government agencies like the anti-trust division of the Justice Department, EPA, and OSHA while, while for most people in communities of color and the civil rights movement “law enforcement” means the police. He fosters the illusion that the law is “supposed” to protect the entire population when there is widespread understanding that the law protects the wealthy and white society.

Nader assumes the legal system is good and proposes the most minimal reforms. This is why, when asked about police brutality in Seattle, he asserts “Don’t stereotype the police.” His observation, “the police in Seattle overreacted because they had never seen a demonstration before” goes beyond naivete to hint at dishonesty for political gain. Nader actually displays hostility to an analysis of racist police violence and has chosen to distance himself from the growing movements against police violence and brutality.

Nader trivializes and deflects serious discussion of the U.S. as an imperialist power—and does not challenge pro-imperialist ideology or policies.

In the *L.A. Weekly* Nader observed that “We’re not very good at waging peace. We spend untold billions preparing to wage war, but you don’t see a Department of Peace. This means we’re weak on preventive diplomacy and preventive defense. So we’re always stumbling into crises, and having to make instant decisions that are difficult—and having to send our own troops. We don’t have well trained stand-by multi-lateral peace keeping forces. So we get into NATO and all kind of U.S. dominated situations that tend to backfire.” Nader uses the imperial “we” as if he and the Pentagon are both representing the same “national interests” but simply disagree about the tactics—an identification with the ruling class and the nation state that characterizes the populist liberalism he shares with Al Gore.

With regard to the military budget, Nader’s focus is the misuse of funds. In his L.A. speech, Nader said, “We have a 330 billion dollar military budget, defending prosperous allies who can defend themselves against non-existent enemies. We spend tens of billions of dollars to protect ourselves from the North Koreans who can barely feed their people, how could they scare the U.S.? Our defense policy is based on who wants more and more government contracts, its an unworkable boondoggle.” For Nader, the entire military-industrial complex of imperialism is a corporate boondoggle, motivated by the immediate profits of defense contractors, the greedy militaristic tendencies of lobbyists getting rich against imaginary enemies. Nader entices gullible, often privileged, white audiences to chuckle at the waste of money and corporate greed of the Pentagon, but does not agitate them against the U.S. blockade of Iraq and Cuba, the U.S. aerial bombardment of civilian populations in Iraq and Kosovo, the next Vietnam in Colombia. He talks about how U.S. military policies have “backfired” when in fact they have painfully succeeded in advancing the interests of U.S. imperialism. Nader does not challenge the ideology of empire; worse, he contributes to it by portraying the U.S. as a well-meaning but bumbling colossus that does not know how to make peace. A department of “peace” run by U.S. imperialism? Give us a break.

The Nader campaign is not a movement campaign; it represents a subset of the white progressive movement, and is riddled with white chauvinism.

Nader has done virtually nothing in the four years since he last ran as president to ally with or learn from militant social movements. Nader ran for president in 1996, and as several liberal as well as more radical activists observed, “Where the hell has he been for 4 years?” By contrast, Jesse Jackson ran for president in 1984 and did very well in the Democratic primaries. For the next four years Jackson was seen at every picket line from the GM Van Nuys campaign, the Hormel strike, every police brutality demonstration. Nader’s only identification with activism has been the white student protests against “globalization”—but not against imperialism—in Seattle. He has essentially sat out the last four years, and his present campaign continues his isolation and lack of connection to social movements—in particular anti-racist, anti-imperialist movements rooted in communities of color or significantly working class of color based.

Further, the Seattle protestors he supported were more than 90 percent white, as were the members of the Direct Action Network at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, as were the 400 people who attended Nader’s speech in Los Angeles in August, as were the more than 12,000 people in Minneapolis who heard him speak in September. A viable and historically relevant New Left must be built on a solid multiracial base in which people of color are represented in very significant proportion, preferably in the majority, and definitely in the leadership. The Greens, the student groups among whom he is most popular, and Nader himself, see little wrong with their virtually all white world, and instead talk about “integrating and diversifying themselves.” There is no historical instance, ever, in which a predominantly white structure evolved into a majority people of color structure. The Greens do not understand the existence, let alone the profoundly reactionary nature of, white chauvinism as a culture or an ideology, but they exude it in every organizational and political representation of themselves.

Nader and the Green Party’s white chauvinism is endemic, systematic, and dangerous. Nader, and the white Greens, are very hostile to challenges by people of color and anti-racist whites to their own chauvinism and their liquidation of the struggle against racism.

There is a growing criticism in the civil rights/anti-racist movement that Nader is downright dangerous and harmful in the struggle against racism. The core problem is that Nader knows what he thinks. He states clearly that he sees the struggle against racial discrimination as subordinated to and incorporated into “class” and indicates that any efforts to prioritize the challenge against racism and white supremacy, in society and in his campaign, are distracting and divisive and will be dealt with harshly.

In August, more than 20 Bus Riders Union members went to attend Nader’s August speech in Los Angeles. After Nader had spoken for more than an hour, detailing corporate abuse after corporate abuse but avoiding any discussion of racism and national oppression in the U.S., Martín Hernández from the Strategy Center yelled out from the audience, “What about racism?” Nader countered, disdainfully, “Well, what do you think my position is? I’m against it.” He then went on to say, however, that in his view, “Race is included in class.”

In the question and answer period, Maria Guardado of the BRU asked Nader what his position was on U.S. intervention and aid in Columbia, and he answered again, “What do you think it is? I’m against it.” He then went on, again, somewhat sardonically, about the hypocrisy of the drug war in Columbia, went off on a bizarre monologue about the benefits of legalizing hemp, but seemed to have no understanding of the seriousness of the U.S. intervention in Colombia’s internal affairs, the murdering of guerrillas and campesinos, or the anger that Maria, a veteran of the FMLN in El Salvador, felt about U.S. domination of Latin America. In the sum-up after the meeting, BRU members expressed that they felt like outsiders had no interest in working on the Nader campaign, and observed that the feeling was mutual on the part of Nader’s staffers.

Vanessa Daniel, in her article in *Color Lines* magazine *Ralph Nader’s Racial Blindspot* reports a chilling story that confirms our direct experience. In a mass meeting in Seattle, Nader scolded a leading black activist Hop

Hopkins of the Brown Coalition, saying “You ask what I have done to reach out to the black community and address racial issues and I ask you how many black people did you bring here today to hear me and support this campaign.” In fact, the only time Nader voluntarily talked about communities of color in his L.A. speech was when he proposed them, not represented in the room, as a tactical wedge to help his campaign. When he was asked how we planned to address his exclusion from the national debates, Nader said, “If you can go get Latino and African American groups to organize a debate, and have me invited, the other two candidates will be forced to show up, they would look cowardly if they didn’t.” So, the very blacks and Latinos who did not show up to hear Nader are now supposed to be organized by the white Greens to set up a debate to embarrass Gore and Bush.

There are Democrats and Republicans running for national office who are far more outspoken and courageous than Nader in confronting some issues of racism and empire.

Jesse Jackson Jr., a Democratic Congressman from Chicago, has said that he will work for Gore while holding his nose, he will work against the Democratic Leadership Council and the Southern Dixiecrats in his own party, he will demand to open up the debates to include Ralph Nader, and he feels that the racial divide is the central contradiction in U.S. society.

Tom Campbell, a moderate Republican running for U.S. Senator in California, told a Republican fundraiser, “I am proud of my record. I voted for the impeachment of Bill Clinton, I voted against the unlawful war in Kosovo, and I oppose the use of U.S. troops to suppress people in Third World countries like Colombia.” Both Jackson and Campbell have a lot to lose, including retaliation from their parties, and neither is positioning themselves as Left or radical, and yet they speak with an independence and radicalism far more compelling than the repetitious rants of Nader as he rails against corporate power in the most narrow and economist manner.

Since Nader is not running to win, his contribution to the election is that he can raise issues far outside the bounds of thinkable thought, to launch a frontal challenge to the racism and world domination of U.S. society, to focus on the human rights abuses of the United States instead of

China, to challenge white activists and well-paid union workers to confront their own chauvinism and class privilege as seen on a world scale. Nader’s narrow focus on challenging the corporations for immediate economic benefit for the “consumer” is so similar to Gore’s populism that Nader is reduced to saying that the main difference between he and Gore is that, if elected (which he doesn’t expect), he will *really* carry out what Gore only promises. There is no challenge to the system in these formulations. Perhaps, Nader is the true compassionate conservative.

VI. What are the Stakes in this Election that Might Motivate an Answer to the Question: “How to Vote?”

Given these contenders and the fundamental understanding that only a small portion of the population of this country will cast a vote to decide, what difference should it make?

We share the great concern that the Democratic party is moving further and further to the right, but the Left does not need to equate Bush and Gore in order to score its points. The Democratic party is a racist, pro-imperialist party. That said, the Left cannot simultaneously denounce it for what it is, and also denounce it as if it is selling out a Left program it has never claimed to embrace. In the present period, the differences between Gore/Lieberman and the Bush/Cheney Republicans are substantial. The Left does want some presidential actions and not others, especially if we are not a strong enough force to compel either party to significantly change their policies at this point in history. For example, there is a major breakthrough of establishment opinion against the death penalty and thanks to the work of Senator Russell Feingold of Wisconsin, and many of the scandals coming out of Bush’s record in Texas, there is significant Congressional support for a moratorium on executions—which would include Mumia Abu Jamal. A Gore administration would never initiate such a measure, but if there was a very powerful liberal/left united front, his signing such legislation is at least historically possible. By contrast, a Bush presidency would make a moratorium on the death penalty virtually impossible, in that it would require a 2/3 majority to override a Bush veto.

We want an end to defense spending and to U.S. government intervention in sovereign nations.

Neither Gore nor Bush, will reverse the posture of military intervention that guides U.S. imperialism—and Nader, while “against it” has chosen not to make it central to his campaign. But it is of great historical importance that President Clinton recently made a major intervention against the Pentagon, by opposing the use of federal funds to continue to build the missile shield which the Republicans in Congress and his own Republican Secretary of Defense, William Cohen argued for. This missile shield is far more than a boondoggle; the Star Wars concept is a recipe for a first-strike strategy in which the U.S., believing it has enough protection against “enemy” missiles, can choose to attack. The Republicans were willing to threaten the Russians that even though building such a missile shield would violate the nuclear arms treaty with them, the Russians should acquiesce, whereas Clinton refused to break that treaty. Clinton dodged the final action by saying he would leave it to the next president. There is at least a significant chance that Gore/Lieberman will continue the Clinton policy of opposition—especially if there is some mass organizing and broad coalition building on this issue. By contrast, Bush and Cheney will undoubtedly rebuild a missile shield, challenge Russia and China, and introduce a grave danger to world peace. As we know, Nader’s concern is inefficiency of expenditures, and he does not seem very concerned about world nuclear annihilation as an issue in his campaign.

We want expansion of civil rights for subjugated people, enforcement of all hard-won federal laws—from the Civil Rights Act to Row v. Wade—and protection of federal powers to enforce this expansion of rights.

We do not expect any candidate, Bush, Gore, or Nader, to protect and expand civil rights. However, there is a very critical difference between the candidates. Yet another late act of the Clinton/Gore administration captures a focus of our concern. The Justice Department recently sent Bill Lann Lee, director of the Justice Department Civil Rights Division to Los Angeles to threaten the Los Angeles Police Department and Mayor Richard Riordan that unless they sign a federal Consent Decree to have a federal monitor on police brutality, the Justice Department will—after years

of having compiled voluminous evidence of racially-biased police brutality—take them to court. Lee, as one of the NAACP/Legal Defense Fund (LDF) attorneys who represented the Bus Riders Union in its civil rights law suit against the L.A. MTA, negotiated an historic Consent Decree. Although it is a matter of public record that the BRU disagreed with Lee about some provisions of the final settlement, the overall role of the LDF was essential and positive and the Decree has become a nationally recognized instrument for expanding civil rights in Los Angeles—and a model for similar suits in other cities. Lee’s involvement in the monitoring of the LAPD would be another advance. Gore/Lieberman will likely maintain the policies of federal regulation of police brutality. Bush, by contrast, will aggressively dismantle the entire Civil Rights department—in content if not in form—and will abandon federal inquiry into civil rights violations in Los Angeles—allowing unchecked police frame ups, beatings, and murders to continue unabated. As we know, these matters are of no concern to Nader.

The issue of federal and state “separation of power” has a hollow ring to it, in that all branches of government are essentially divisions of labor of the same ruling class. Nonetheless, these formal distinctions have been the site of significant progressive struggle within U.S. history and the issues of state and federal rights are critical arenas of tactical interventions by social movements. From the point of view of our strategy, we oppose the many pro-imperialist/racist policies of *all* levels of government in the United States. However, we place great emphasis on the interrelationship of federal powers and protection of the inalienable rights of minority peoples.

For example, the particular history of the United States is best defined as a settler nation built on the oppression of whole nations and peoples. Yet the revolutionary fight against national oppression and racism has often succeeded in forcing the federal government to intervene in order to uphold civil rights. A case in point, at the end of the Civil War, the only way to guarantee the newly achieved and fragile rights of the freed slaves—reflected in the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments—was to impose federal military control over the defeated states of the confederacy. Unfortunately, those federal protections were soon nullified with the Hayes-Tilden deal in 1877, by which northern capitalism allowed the defeated Southern aristocracy to re-enslave the black population under the banner of “states’ rights.” From that time to the present, states’ rights has been the cry of the enraged slave owners, Klansman, and

segregationists—and for another century they got their way. Indeed, this states' rights doctrine has completely overlaid the racist perpetuation of exclusionary voting rights, economic impoverishment, and massive Klan and police terror. In this context, the democratic advances of the anti-racist movement in the United States have been critically aided by winning federal protections against “the tyranny of the majority” (the 14th Amendment), federal laws against discrimination (the Civil Rights Act), and federal powers to enforce the protection of subjugated people, including the use of federal troops to integrate schools.

As we write this article, the Bus Riders Union, is awaiting a long-overdue decision from the Ninth Circuit Federal Court of Appeals. In 1999 we won a federal court order that required the MTA to purchase 350 new buses and hire sufficient drivers to reduce overcrowding levels on the buses for 400,000 overwhelmingly minority bus riders. The MTA appealed the decision on the grounds that “states' rights” theory allows them to disregard the Consent Decree, arguing it was an improper intervention by the federal courts in the running of a local government agency. If the courts uphold the MTA's challenge, it will set a terrible precedent that in 2000 local entities can violate civil rights and get away with it.

In this context, the stakes are high for the anti-racist movement across the country and specifically for bus riders in Los Angeles. Gore's verbally articulated commitment to federal protection of civil rights—and to affirmative action and legal abortion—are responses to demands from the mass social movements of women and people of color. Bush/Cheney are adamant soldiers for the right of states to oppose federal law and the Right wing maneuver to use the federal powers of the Supreme Court to ensure states' rights. They explicitly oppose affirmative action and have no intention, stated or otherwise, to uphold, let alone strengthen, Civil Rights law.

Nader's confusion on this point calls for further clarification of our approach to the role of government in the protection of rights. This takes us back to our fundamental challenge to the discriminatory voting rights formulas of the electoral system, which originated at the federal level. As we know, the federal government has used protection of “inalienable rights” to privilege the dominant social classes, and it uses charges of “human rights violations” to intervene in sovereign nations. Yet it is, itself, capable of gross violations of human rights, such as, internationally, saturation bombing of civilian populations, and domestically, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and the recent

imprisonment of the Chinese American scientist Wen Ho Lee. We are dedicated to restraining the U.S. government any time it acts to deny rights. Our support for federal powers in relation to “states' rights,” therefore, is historically specific to the expansion and protection of the rights of subjugated people and expansion of the social welfare state to satisfy the basic needs of oppressed people. The principle is that the rights of oppressed, exploited, subjugated peoples must be protected.

The principle is not that the federal government should have more power than a state or region. There are many instances in which “local” “regional” “statewide” or other struggles are in direct contradiction to the power and “authority” of the federal government and must be supported—such as support for indigenous nations, state-specific expansion of legal rights such as legal marriage among same-gender partners, regional autonomy for concentrated populations of an oppressed nationality, special voting districts, local environmental regulations that provide greater protections, etc. In past years, there have been Supreme Court decisions that overturned specially created minority electoral districts in particular states to concentrate black and Latino voters, overturned the right of a state to curtail corporate sales to a military junta, overturned the right of a state to prevent nuclear waste from being trucked through its borders, dramatically reduced the rights of women to file sexual harassment suits. In such cases, we believe any effort by the federal government to overturn *expanded* rights at the local and state level is an abuse of federal power. Therefore, it is not only possible but historically necessary for the Left to defend regional autonomy rights to oppose oppressive acts while maintaining a commitment to federal powers to enforce protections from oppressive acts. Returning to Nader, he confuses progressive demands for regional autonomy to set higher environmental protection standards—“keep nuclear dumping off our land”—with reactionary states' rights powers like the LAMTA's “hands off our segregated transportation system.” In this case Nader once again aligns with the forces of structural racism.

We want appointment of progressive federal court justices who will secure the social welfare state and defend the rights of subjugated peoples at all times.

We will not get the justices we demand, but the justices we will get will make a significant difference in the years to

come. Since Supreme Court Justice Stevens, the most determined voice for criminal and prisoner rights, is in his 80s, and both Ruth Ginsburg and Sandra O'Connor are ill and may choose to retire for health reasons, there may be as many as three Supreme Court appointments to be made during the next presidential term.

Most likely Gore will follow the Clinton approach, appointing centrists and trying to get them past Orrin Hatch. While we despair of more centrists like Breier and Ginsburg, we do think they are committed to the legal framework of civil rights, which addresses our most central democratic demands within the limits of the existing system. This takes the form of protecting voting rights, which ensure the federal government's powers to regulate state irregularities when voting rights have been denied based on racial discrimination.

We would be crazy to say we would not worry that Bush could appoint as many as three justices with the same vitriolic hatred of workers, women, and people of color as Justices Scalia and Thomas. Any possibility of the federal government examining judicial improprieties in Texas on death penalty cases, for example, would of course be eliminated if Bush gets to make any more appointments. The addition of even one more judge who emphasizes the right of states to resist federal enforcement will effectively dismantle the power of the federal government to enact social welfare. Further, almost all the decisions that have protected the right to abortion in recent Supreme Court rulings have been tenuously won on five to four votes, for example the critical test decision to allow late-term abortions. The appointment of only one anti-abortion judge could destroy the most significant right women have won in this century.

We want an open field for counter-hegemonic direct action.

We know that we will not get this open field under the presidency of any candidate. There are several leftists who have argued that while the Republicans are a known enemy, the co-optive powers of the Democrats make them the main enemy. We know only too well the treachery of the Democrats, but the struggle against liberals and even Democratic conservatives is not the same as the struggle against reactionaries. The very groups that are most vulnerable to further attack under Bush—the low-wage working class, the homeless, immigrants, communities of

color, those facing the death penalty, and the organized Left—are least able at this point in history to effectively fight back against the organized Right. Since the Left is very weak, we do not wish upon ourselves struggles that we cannot win against forces far more powerful than ourselves — unless there is a very compelling reason.

The Nader forces argue that there is a very compelling reason, the advance of a progressive Third Party in the U.S. They argue that 5 percent of the ballot would allow federal funding and, with it, approximately \$12 million in federal matching funds for a 2004 presidential election. They argue that Nader is pushing the debate to the Left, putting pressure on Gore to move in a more populist direction, and injecting urgently needed class issues into the election. In particular, Nader's warning of the grave danger of corporate power and its undermining of democracy is so compelling that it requires, according to his supporters, a protest vote to show the Democrats they cannot take workers and environmentalists for granted. A strong vote for Nader will, they argue, push Gore away from the Right, and presuming he is elected by a narrow margin, the Nader threat in subsequent elections will push Gore to keep his populist promises. Of course, there is no assurance that Gore will defeat Bush.

For us, the disappointment with the Nader campaign is that it simultaneously downplays the danger of the Right while in fact, not providing the excitement and challenge of a Left campaign that would warrant the risks. It has consciously chosen to avoid any challenges to the structural racism and empire of our society, while refusing to address the serious threat that votes for Nader may contribute to the election of Bush. We support the idea of Third parties, and we would face squarely the danger of electing a right-wing Republican if an exciting anti-racist, anti-colonial candidacy ever materialized.

While we respect the insurgency of the Nader campaign, we feel its economic narrowness, its national and white chauvinism negates its progressive promise. Nader's facile conflation of his two opposing candidates, calling them "Gush and Bore," indicates a lack of compassion let alone passion for the entire arena of civil rights and civil liberties; in this arena almost all the leading activists and attorneys explain that while they are furious at Clinton and Gore for their trespasses, they are absolutely terrified of a Bush election. For us, we will struggle even harder against the Democrats if Gore is elected, but we fear for the people and the Left if the mass executioner from Texas is elected.

VII. Where do We Go From Here?

Having indicated how we weigh the stakes in the issue, our main belief is that there are similar challenges in the next critical weeks before the election for those who choose to work for Nader, for those who choose to work for Gore, and for those who will work for neither.

Again, our tactical proposal: Focus on building and strengthening independent, anti-racist, anti-imperialist networks in each city that can make a coordinated set of demands on all the parties and candidates.

Encourage the formation of a civil rights and Third World rights caucus inside the Democratic Party.

We encourage liberal and left supporters of Gore to use ads, leaflets, public forums, demonstrations if necessary, to push well known Democrats, such as Jesse Jackson, Maxine Waters, Barney Frank, Paul Wellstone, Bernie Sanders, Russell Feingold, and others to advance specific demands during the campaign—such as “free Mumia Abu Jamal” and “end the racist death penalty.” Jesse Jackson Jr. has begun such a process by challenging Gore to allow Nader in the debates, and continuing to talk about racism and the death penalty during the campaign. He is already practicing more independence and initiative in the united front than some on the Left who are directly supporting the Democrats. Following this path, the anti-imperialist Left should focus on the most liberal Democrats, the ones with whom we have a modicum of influence, and try to push them to push Gore. We need to pressure the Democratic Party, not just write it off, especially at election time.

Encourage the formation of an anti-racist, anticolonial caucus inside the Green Party.

We encourage those trying to create grassroots pressure on Nader from within the Party to focus on articulating an independent political program. There are many good people inside the Greens fighting for an anti-racist anti-imperialist politics who are critical of Nader for driving away many people of color and anti-racist whites who checked out the Nader/Green campaign and rejected it, feeling alienated and refusing to vote for Nader, much less work for him. So far, they, like Leftists working for the Democrats, are in a small minority and don't seem to have much influence. Like their Democratic counterparts, they should talk less about what they plan

to do “after the election” and experiment with independent anti-racist political organizing that can shape the Green Party in the present.

Encourage greater cooperation among independent anti-racist, anti-imperialist organizations throughout the U.S. We encourage developing structures that can build organizational unity and expand visibility for demands—through web pages, emails, correspondence, mailings of articles, and hopefully direct coordination in different cities. The elections are a time when the national political debate, as dormant and bankrupt as it is, is raised to a more visible level in which the Left should try to maximize its influence. By November 4, the election will be over, the political operatives and apologists will move on, the nation will go back to sleep, but the Left will still face profound challenges—either stronger or weaker based on our tactics of trying to intervene in this historical moment.

Encourage greater alliances between anti-imperialist political forces within the Democratic Party, the Greens, and the social movements who can focus on building a unity of long-term program, more than a unity of vote. Such alliances are critical to challenging the existing system, regardless of who is elected to run it. If Gore wins, such alliances can try to put even greater pressure on those liberal Democrats who promised, “after the election” support for key demands. If Bush wins, the Democratic party liberals will feint to the left, or move to the Left; a broader united front will be possible. But again, they will work to co-opt and suppress Left social movements, to cut deals with the Republicans, to confuse people more than help people. Given how many concessions they made to the Republicans when they were in power, imagine what they will do when they are out of power. Without pressure from their Left, at the universities, in the factories and sweatshops, in the black, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander and indigenous communities, on the buses and in the streets, the Democrats are a hopeless out of power opposition.

The system is racist, the electoral structures corrupt and reactionary, the Democrats have moved far to the Right and the Nader candidacy is light years away from a thoroughgoing challenge to the U.S. empire. But politics exists in actual time, place, and conditions, not the ones we dream of, and this election offers some openings, some opportunities, for a forceful and constructive intervention—challenging the elections from the bottom up.

About the Authors



Eric Mann is the director of the Labor/Community Strategy Center in Los Angeles. He has been a civil rights, anti-Vietnam war, labor, and environmental organizer for 35 years with the Congress of Racial

Equality, the Students for a Democratic Society, the August Twenty-Ninth Movement and League of Revolutionary Struggle (ML), and the United Auto Workers, including eight years on auto assembly lines. He was the lead organizer of the labor/community campaign to Keep General Motors Van Nuys Open that stopped GM from closing the auto plant for ten years. He is the author of three books, *Comrade George: An Investigation into the Life, Political Thought, and Assassination of George Jackson*; *Taking on General Motors: A Case Study of the UAW Campaign to Keep GM Van Nuys Open*; and *L.A.'s Lethal Air: New Strategies for Environmental Organizing*. He is a founding member of the Strategy Center and of the Bus Riders Union (BRU) and sits on the BRU Planning Committee.



Lian Hurst Mann is editor of the *AhoraNow* document series published by the Labor/Community Strategy Center. She is a founding member of the Strategy Center where she writes, edits, and produces publications, teaches theory, and works to

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***We welcome your responses
to this **AhoraNow** commentary!***

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Excerpt:

It is from the point of view of the struggle for the following demands that we look at the electoral campaign and the candidates for U.S. president—leader of U.S. imperialism.

- U.S. government—cease exploitation of indigenous peoples and destruction of their lands.
- U.S. government, Group of 7 countries and their various U.S. dominated international apparatuses—cancel all Third World debt without conditions.
- U.S. government—open the borders, allow free passage of immigrants, abolish the Immigration and Naturalization Service.
- U.S. federal and state governments—free the U.S. Two Million by immediately releasing from prison all indigenous, black, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Latino colonial subjects; fund community controlled education, detoxification, and job placement services.
- U.S. government and corporations—reverse all policies that foster, explicitly or tacitly, the super-exploitation of women, trafficking in women, particularly at U.S. military bases, and acts of hatred and violence against women.
- U.S. government—reinstate Aid to Families With Dependent Children and guarantee jobs or income, free childcare, transportation, and health care.
- U.S. government—implement a zero tolerance for carcinogens policy, prohibit the manufacture, use, and distribution of a specific list of known carcinogenic and toxic chemicals by U.S. corporations and the Pentagon.
- U.S. government—make environmental racism and degradation by U.S. corporations a criminal offense.
- U.S. Congress—increase and expand, rather than reduce or eliminate, gift and inheritance taxes, and earmark to fund social welfare programs.
- U.S. government—nationalize and fund all medical care, so that all residents, regardless of immigration status, including prisoners, receive equal and free medical care.
- U.S. government—support and facilitate the basic rights of self-determination for black, Latino, and Asian populations and indigenous peoples in the United States, including the right to devise electoral proposals for political representation.
- U.S. government—act to free political prisoner Mumia Abu Jamal.
- U.S. government—in keeping with international conventions on human rights, abolish the death penalty.

These demands originally appeared in the bilingual (English and Spanish) **AhoraNow** document, *We Make These Demands Against the Institutions of U.S. Imperialism*, written on the occasion of the 2000 Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, available on line at www.thestrategycenter.org.

Hard copies of both documents, *The 2000 Presidential Elections and the Anti-Imperialist Left*, and *We Make These Demands*, are available for \$3 each for the first copy and \$2 for additional copies (plus shipping and handling). The bilingual version of *The 2000 Presidential Elections and the Anti-Imperialist Left* will be available soon. Credit card purchases accepted.

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