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LABOR AND POLITICS--SOME BASIC ISSUES) by Sidney Roger

Ed. Note: This guest article first appeared as LCR 48, in November 1981. It is an excerpt of comments about labor's reaction to the Reagan Administration, made by the author at a U.C. Berkeley conference. His observations appear even more relevant as the presidential election campaign gathers momentum. Mr. Roger was formerly Editor of the ILWU Dispatcher, and is now a labor educator and consultant in the Bay Area.

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"The most basic issue for labor is not trying to salvage the Democratic Party or trying to gain more clout within it. The most basic question is how can labor leadership regain some real influence with its own rank and file? What is not often said by the leadership is that despite labor PACs and COPE, working people rarely pay much attention to their leadership in politics. New possibilities may be in the offing. But I keep reminding myself that it always seems easier to gather a coalition **against** something than a working majority **in favor** of something.

"The big job ahead of us--if we intend to make a meaningful re-entry into politics--is to realize that labor people cannot assume they are the sole and natural leaders. We cannot hope for new vitality by just being in opposition to Reaganism. And we cannot build meaningful coalitions with one-shot issues--such as Social Security--because such coalitions rarely last until election day. Coalition politics means learning to give as well as take--on a variety of issues.

"I know that a lot of old-timers, those of us from the 1930s and '40s, keep making comparisons based on New Deal experiences. But too many of us have forgotten that the New Deal was built during a vital period, with new ideas coming at us a mile a minute. It was a sort of revolution after a dark and depressed time of life. It was a time when we had something the other side could never buy: tens of thousands of enthusiastic volunteers from the newly-organized ranks of labor! You cannot buy the people who go out and ring doorbells. You cannot buy the spirit of those who go out at dawn to pass out leaflets and spread the word at factory gates!

"Now, if the labor movement wants to find its political muscle again, it will have to convince its own ranks, especially its younger members. Perhaps the most hopeful note is that the same leadership that usually shudders at the thought of any public demonstrations is now actually leading some massive protest marches. That's at least a beginning. But if we are to find our strength again in politics, it will be with issues around which a continuous coalition can be constructed.

"For example, there's OSHA. The subject of safety and health is something the average person can identify with, an issue that can attract very active people. Some of them have a lot of political savvy, like the ecology and environmental groups. This is something we can work on together every day. But labor will certainly lose the chance for a coalition with a significant political ally if labor keeps supporting the proliferation of nuclear power plants! We'll also lose a lot of potential allies among young people who have strong feelings about 'nukes.' Construction jobs are important, but do they have to threaten whole communities?

"Labor is not friendly to those who have been picketing PG&E's Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant. By the same token can labor expect those pickets to respect our picket lines? Or vote with us? It's a two-way street! Thousands have marched in protest against the Diablo reactor. They carried signs, wheeled

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baby carriages and held American flags. They made a political statement and they made it spontaneously. I think labor would be mighty thankful if it could get that kind of spontaneous public support at one of our picket lines!

“I recall sadly how Hubert Humphrey was defeated in 1968, in part because he couldn’t detach himself from the Vietnam war; and how George Meany turned his back on George McGovern; and how young people began to see the AFL-CIO as cold warriors with hearts embedded in concrete. It may take some kind of ideological dynamite to shake things loose but I am convinced there are large numbers of Americans—especially among the young—who would welcome labor leadership in any coalition that recognized the need for peaceful resolution of international tensions.

“After all, who knows better than the labor movement about resolving conflicts and tensions across a bargaining table? We are experts. And who knows better than we that we could have a better balanced budget—and guarantee social programs and education and health and safety, and much else—if the formidable expansion of military spending was trimmed, and if the insane arms race was ended? If labor could join a coalition for peace we might be amazed at the number of allies we might discover, and how much political strength we might exert—even without the old line Democrats.

“The labor movement was born battling to win a better life for its people. Then we became so tied to the Democratic Party we forgot to keep battling. We forgot how to stand up to politicians who kept the party label but wouldn’t live up to their promises. The Democrats began to take labor for granted, figuring they’d get the votes even if they occasionally sold us out.

“Now, some fifteen AFL-CIO leaders are on the Democratic National Committee. But the basic problem is still the same. Will they be able to pump any new ideas into that party? Will labor be able to pump some new rank and file votes into the political process? Will labor be able to reach any of those great numbers who no longer even bother to vote? Not unless labor is willing to reassert its independence and stop allowing itself to be co-opted.

“Lane Kirkland exhorted the vast Solidarity Day crowd in Washington: ‘Let us pledge to each other to return to our communities and to build a new mandate for a humane and just America.’ It was a powerful statement. And we must ask: who are the people in the communities to whom we shall make this pledge for a better America? Only fifteen million are organized, and 60-70 million are not organized. Many are very poor, invisible, forgotten—but they too can vote!

“Once labor represented the poor. No, labor was the poor. Now I believe, if labor is to restore some of its political vitality, its biggest task will be to get out and start organizing as never before—especially among those who need us most—the poor, the minorities, service workers, women, youth. It’s not by chance that the only labor action in recent times that captured the loyalty and imagination of workers and young people in our country and around the world was the farm workers’ crusade.

“I know there are many among us who keep hoping we can defeat Reaganism because Reagan and his advisors will keep making too many mistakes. Many keep hoping we can mount new organizing campaigns because Reagan represents his class well, but not wisely. We say he will organize for us. Let’s not depend on it.

“The best we can hope for is that Reaganism will encourage labor to become part of larger coalitions which work together to throw the rascals out. Let’s not forget the words of that old labor song, because the question still is, ‘Which side are you on?’”

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