**We’ve been down this road before: Jesse Jackson, the Democrats and the left**

**NICK EVERETT**

“With few exceptions, the Rainbow Coalition was just another name for keeping progressives in the Democratic Party.” – Peter Camejo.[[1]](#endnote-2)

“You don’t change the system from within the Democratic Party. My own feeling is that the Democratic Party is ideologically bankrupt. We have to ask ourselves, ‘Why should we work within the Democratic Party if we don’t agree with anything the Democratic Party says?’” – Bernie Sanders, 1986[[2]](#endnote-3)

When *Jacobin* editor Bhaskar Sunkara made his first pitch for Bernie Sanders’ 2016 presidential run, he argued that “Sanders’s candidacy could strengthen the Left in the long run” and “raise the possibility for the realignment of progressive forces on a totally different basis”. This was however no fail-proof strategy, he conceded. Previous attempts “to grow social movements through outsider primary runs – like the 1980s Jackson campaigns – were dead-ends, and possibly even weakened independent political efforts”, he wrote. Yet this time around, according to Sunkara, it would be different:

Sanders’s candidacy doesn’t have to channel left forces into what will likely be a Clinton nomination. Instead, it could be a way for socialists to regroup, organize together, and articulate the kind of politics that speaks to the needs and aspirations of the vast majority of people. And it could begin to legitimate the word “socialist,” and spark a conversation around it, even if Sanders’s welfare-state socialism doesn’t go far enough.[[3]](#endnote-4)

Despite Sanders’ endorsement of Clinton’s 2016 presidential run – and the channelling of his supporters into a suicidal Clinton campaign that eased Trump into the White House – every issue of *Jacobin* over the last 12 months has championed Sanders’ 2020 candidacy with great enthusiasm. *Jacobin* and the Bread and Roses caucus of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), with which it is associated, have been at the forefront of making the case to the 60,000-strong DSA that they should throw themselves into backing Sanders. Their arguments for endorsement are that Sanders’ campaign will raise class consciousness, further divisions inside the Democrats and strengthen the DSA as a vehicle for advancing “independent socialist politics”.[[4]](#endnote-5) The mid-term elections of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and Rashida Tlaib to Congress, and Julia Salazar to the New York State Legislature, are held up as evidence for the potential of this strategy.

The argument that the DSA’s enthusiastic campaign for Sanders’ nomination is advancing the cause of “independent socialist politics” has also been put forward by some former members of the now dissolved US International Socialist Organization (ISO). They argue for a “dirty break” strategy: by working alongside a leftward moving constituency of Sanders supporters inside the Democrats, they can supposedly be won over to supporting the construction of an independent working class party.[[5]](#endnote-6) This argument is also advanced by Reform and Revolution, a self-described “Marxist caucus” within the DSA:

It would be a serious mistake for socialists to stand aside and argue against trying to make sure Bernie wins. Instead, our job is to help the left wing of Sanders’ campaign be politically conscious of this conflict, get organized, and develop a program and strategy to defeat the Democratic establishment and establish a party that is 100% on the side of working people.[[6]](#endnote-7)

However, neither *Jacobin* nor Reform and Revolution offer any serious critique of previous attempts to advance “independent socialist politics” by joining a campaign for the nomination of a liberal Democrat outsider. In 1968, much of the anti-war movement threw their support behind Senator Eugene McCarthy, who had promised to wind down the war in Vietnam. At the Chicago convention, the Democratic Party machine imposed their pro-war candidate, Lyndon Johnson’s vice president Hubert Humphrey, as the nominee despite anti-war candidates having won the popular vote. While McCarthy’s campaign served to disorient and derail liberals within the 1960s New Left milieu, it is Jesse Jackson’s 1984 and 1988 Rainbow Coalition presidential runs that offer the most similar precedent to Sanders’ campaign.

While never claiming to be a socialist, Jackson popularised the term “economic justice” in rebuttal of Democrat and Republican candidates’ embrace of neoliberalism and “unfettered capitalism”. In contrast to his Democrat rivals, Jackson opposed US intervention in Latin America and called for a redirection of US military spending to poverty alleviation. He advocated a New Deal-style infrastructure program, a single-payer health care system, a reversal of tax cuts for the rich and free college education. Jackson’s campaigns were remarkably successful in electoral terms. In 1984, Jackson garnered more than three million votes (20 percent of the primary, including 80 percent of the Black vote) and in 1988 increased his vote to nearly seven million. While the Black establishment within the party pilloried Jackson’s 1984 bid, his 1988 campaign gained their endorsement. Nonetheless, Jackson left the 1988 party convention empty handed, with no policy concessions from presidential nominee Michael Dukakis. Jackson had faithfully served his party by strengthening the Democrats’ appeal among liberal and progressive voters. Several far left and ex-Maoist organisations went into the Rainbow Coalition advocating an “inside out” strategy, based on the premise that they could work both inside and outside the Democrats to build the base of a future working class party. Some never re-emerged; others dissolved soon after, having failed in their mission.

This Rainbow Coalition experience serves as a historical example of the dangers of electoralism, opportunism and liquidation when socialists throw their support behind a candidate for the “B team” of the US ruling class. Like Sanders, Jackson was a liberal who advocated social democratic policies that promised much to working class voters, but were never likely to be enacted by a Democrat administration. Like Sanders, Jackson framed his proposals in the interests of the country as a whole; not on the premise that the working class needed to act independently, not only to win reforms, but to strengthen its own power. In his second run, Jackson, like Sanders, ran a much more mainstream campaign, shorn of much of his earlier radical rhetoric. Most significantly, Jackson, like Sanders today, was firmly wedded to the Democratic Party and fundamentally unwilling to break with it.

## A groundswell of support for Jackson

The precursor to Jackson’s presidential bid was Black Democrat Harold Washington’s campaign for mayor of Chicago. A coalition of sections of the labour movement and the Latino and Black communities from the city’s most impoverished neighbourhoods registered 100,000 new voters and secured Washington a stunning victory, in April 1983. Washington’s defeat of two Democratic career politicians, including the incumbent mayor, added momentum to Jackson’s proposal for a Black presidential candidate. A strong showing by Black socialist Mel King in the Boston mayoral contest a few months later offered inspiration for a “Rainbow Coalition” of communities of colour, white progressives and elements of the union movement. When on 27 August, 350,000 marched in Washington DC calling for “Jobs, Peace and Freedom”, Jackson was cheered with chants of “Run, Jesse, run!” On 3 November 1983, Jesse Jackson announced his candidacy in front of an audience of nearly three thousand supporters, where he condemned president Ronald Reagan as “pro-rich, pro-aristocratic, pro-agribusiness, pro-military, and pro-big business”. He criticised Democrat front runner Walter Mondale for remaining “too silent and too passive in the face of the Reagan administration’s reduction of funds” for civil rights enforcement and his support for “repressive foreign governments”.[[7]](#endnote-8)

Jackson, with little funds and few endorsees, was an unlikely contender. To the Congressional Black Caucus he was an outsider; the Black political establishment was overwhelmingly hostile to his candidacy. Clarence Mitchell, president of the 357-member National Black Caucus of State Elected Officials, told the media that a Black candidacy could “be divisive and hurt local efforts to gain more influence”.[[8]](#endnote-9) Detroit’s first African American mayor, Coleman Young, declared, “The major task of Black America today is to get rid of Ronald Reagan. We cannot afford to support a Black candidate who cannot win”.[[9]](#endnote-10)

The politicians described above formed part of an ascendant Black middle class, which had come to view Black Power as a means to advance political careers from within the Democrats, and in the process demobilise and demoralise the militant Black movement that had swept through the urban ghettoes in the late 1960s. In the years preceding the cry of “Black Power”, a sustained mass civil rights movement had employed militant direct action tactics, such as boycotts, sit-ins and freedom rides, as well as mass action, like the 250,000-strong March on Washington in 1963, to force an end to the Jim Crow system of segregation and political disenfranchisement of Blacks in the South. Yet the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act did little to ease the economic discrimination faced by Blacks: *de facto* segregation in housing, employment and education remained a fact of life in the North, as well as the South.

The Johnson administration responded to the pressure coming from an increasingly militant Black movement by declaring a “war on poverty”. The Great Society programs significantly increased spending on infrastructure and job creation in inner city ghettoes. For the Democrat establishment, the spending spree offered a means to blunt the rising militancy and co-opt the movement, channelling discontent through official channels. They had good reason to fear this militancy. By 1967, civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King and Stokely Carmichael had come out clearly against the war in Vietnam, linking the US war machine to the impoverishment of Black communities. Following King’s assassination, anger turned to rage as 115 cities burned. Radical Black caucuses emerged within trade unions, making their presence felt in industries such as Detroit’s auto factories. Organisations like the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, based inside the United Auto Workers, emboldened worker self-confidence in Black communities in a way not seen since the sit-down strikes of the UAW’s early years, in the 1930s.

However, social spending soon petered out as the US economy went into recession in 1973. The limited economic gains won by Black workers as a consequence of their new found militancy were quickly eroded. Even before the economic slowdown, the Nixon administration had launched a war against Black militancy. The FBI’s COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program) made militant and left wing organisations, such as the Black Panthers, the targets of surveillance and infiltration. Within a few years, much of the radical Black leadership had been imprisoned or assassinated. The result was the consolidation of an increasingly moderate, middle class Black leadership that asserted a role for itself within the Democratic Party.

The strategy of advancing Black interests by seeking elected office via the Democrats displayed remarkable success on its own terms. In 1966, there were only 97 Black members of state legislatures, six Black members of Congress and no Black mayor in any US city. By 1985, there were 20 Blacks in Congress and 286 Black mayors, including newly elected Black mayors in Chicago, Philadelphia and Baltimore.[[10]](#endnote-11) While African American politicians, organised within the Congressional Black Caucus, were making their presence known, the situation for African American workers and unemployed continued to worsen.

Jackson had long been estranged from Black radicals for his embrace of Black capitalism. In Chicago, Jackson established Operation Breadbasket, a project of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and later People United to Save Humanity (PUSH) to encourage business to hire Black workers and invest in the ghettoes. Jackson used the threat of consumer boycotts to pressure corporations to establish hiring and training programs for African Americans. While these efforts brought some jobs to the poor, they failed to address the root causes of Black impoverishment and inequality in capitalist America.

Jackson’s campaign for the Democrat nomination, which articulated a platform radically opposed to Reagan’s agenda, represented a shift to the left. Jackson argued:

Blacks have their backs against the wall. They are increasingly distressed by the erosion of past gains and the rapidly deteriorating conditions within black and poor communities. As black leaders have attempted to remedy these problems through the Democratic Party – of which black voters have been the most loyal and disciplined followers – too often they have been ignored or treated with disrespect. Mounting a serious presidential candidacy is one way of insisting that black leaders play significant roles and help to shape policy and programs for the party.[[11]](#endnote-12)

Yet Jackson’s leftward lurch ran counter to the direction of the Democrats and official US politics as a whole. The post-war economic boom had come to an end and the stagnation of the US economy in the mid-1970s necessitated a sharp offensive to drive down wages and living conditions in order to restore the rate of profit. This impacted Black workers in particular, who were concentrated in manufacturing industries, such as auto, which were hardest hit by the economic crisis. As Manning Marable observes:

The intense socio-economic crisis of the 1980s within Black America created the social foundations for a Black revolt against the Democratic Party; but given the lack of a socialist alternative, that revolt occurred within the Democratic Party. Jackson, long the representative of the Black entrepreneurial elite, became the conduit of the Black social revolt.[[12]](#endnote-13)

## The Reagan Revolution

Reagan’s election in 1980 ushered in a period of neoliberalism worldwide and sharply polarised American society. Cuts to public spending and attacks on living standards that had begun under the Carter administration were ratcheted up with zeal by Reagan. Reagan’s fiscal policies accelerated downsizing, plant closures and relocating production to areas with cheaper labour. Between 1968 and 1981, the real standard of living for average US industrial workers and their families dropped by one-fifth for those still employed. By 1982, 34 million Americans – one out of every seven – were living below the official government poverty line.[[13]](#endnote-14)

Determined to defeat any potential resistance to his big business agenda, Reagan launched a frontal assault on the trade union movement. When the Professional Air Traffic Controllers (PATCO) went on strike in August 1981, Reagan refused to negotiate, instead giving the strikers an ultimatum to return to work. All those who refused were fired, their jobs filled with permanent replacements. This move gave a green light to employer assaults on unions. Unionisation rates slumped from 25 percent in 1970 to 19 percent by 1984 and 16 percent at the end of the Reagan-Bush era in 1992.[[14]](#endnote-15) The AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy, which had been closely tied to the Democrats from the time of Roosevelt’s New Deal, was incapable of mobilising any serious opposition to Reagan. As Mike Davis observes, in the 1984 Democratic Party nomination contest “it was Jackson, not Mondale, who insistently denounced plant closures, supported labour law reform, attacked the open shop and stood up for the organizational rights of undocumented workers”.[[15]](#endnote-16)

Black workers were hardest hit by the 1981-82 recession. Throughout 1982-83, official Black unemployment was 20 percent and Black youth unemployment rose above 80 percent in most urban areas of the North and Midwest.[[16]](#endnote-17) High unemployment, combined with a right wing ideological offensive, fuelled a resurgent racism. Representing the vigilante wing of Reaganism, the Ku Klux Klan initiated white voter registration drives and ran openly for office in the South. Bombings, shotgun killings and cross burnings were revived to terrorise African American communities.

Ratcheting up Cold War tensions, Reagan declared war against Third World liberation movements, claiming they were proxies for the “Evil Empire” (the Soviet Union). A force of anti-communist mercenaries, known as the “Contras”, was assembled to wage war against Nicaragua’s popular Sandinista government. Reagan also backed South Africa’s apartheid regime and its proxy forces in Angola, allegedly to defeat Soviet and Cuban-backed “terrorists”. In an effort to bankrupt the Soviet Union, Reagan launched a new arms race, with military spending reaching a record $365 billion in 1986.[[17]](#endnote-18)

In the face of Reagan’s right wing offensive, the Democrats offered little opposition. Mondale, the front runner in the 1984 primary, adopted a corporatist policy, advocating for tripartite coordination between industrial capitalists, the federal government and the AFL-CIO to rescue the declining industrial base of the Northeast. His main opponent, Gary Hart, pursued a more openly neoliberal policy, arguing for market-based mechanisms to promote new tech industry in the Sun Belt (the South East and South West). Both accepted Reagan’s rationale that social spending had to be sacrificed to fund a massive arms build-up. On foreign policy, there was little to distinguish them. While Hart advocated a more circumspect policy, opposing Reagan’s “dirty war” in Central America, both Mondale and Hart supported Reagan’s 1983 invasion of Grenada and the deployment of nuclear missiles in Europe. Both attempted to outbid Reagan in their enthusiastic support for Israel.[[18]](#endnote-19)

## The New Left and the Democratic Party

Following the youth radicalisation of the 1960s, much of the US New Left had adopted a hostile attitude to working within the Democrats, and with good reason. In 1964, the Mississippi Freedom Party demanded its delegates be seated at the Democrat Convention in place of the openly segregationist official Mississippi Democratic Party, which excluded Blacks (40 percent of Mississippi’s population) from membership. The party’s refusal to seat the MFP starkly illustrated that it was an instrument of Southern reaction that would not give up Jim Crow segregation without a fight. No longer were Democratic Party liberals seen as allies (even faint-hearted ones) in the struggle for racial justice. Malcom X’s break with the Nation of Islam, and his trajectory towards a revolutionary internationalist politics before his assassination in January 1965, also catalysed a leftward turn by youth within the civil rights movement. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee leader Stokely Carmichael famously coined the term “Black Power” to capture the mood of rebellion that gripped inner-city ghettoes.

The events of 1968 further radicalised the emerging New Left. The Viet Cong-led Tet offensive ended Washington’s hopes of victory in Vietnam and with it President Lyndon Johnson’s hopes of re-election. Martin Luther King’s assassination spurred Black rebellions in more than one hundred cities that were put down by 70,000 troops. In May and June, the eruption of mass student protests and a general strike in Paris, demonstrated that revolution was possible in the West. And in August, the crushing of the Prague Spring by Moscow’s tanks destroyed the standing of Moscow-aligned Stalinist parties, such as the US Communist Party.

For a wing of the anti-war and civil rights movements that had backed Democrat “dove” Eugene McCarthy in the primaries, the August 1968 Democrat Convention proved a bitter, but salutary lesson. Despite anti-war candidates winning the vote in the primaries, the Convention nominated Johnson’s pro-war vice president Hubert Humphrey. Outside the Convention, in the streets of Chicago, police viciously beat anti-war demonstrators. In the subsequent presidential election, Humphrey narrowly lost to Republican Richard Nixon, who attempted to temper anti-war sentiment by withdrawing US troops under a policy of “Vietnamisation” of the war. At the same time, Nixon intensified the bombing of North Vietnam and widened the war by invading Cambodia. The result was an explosion of protest across US campuses. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which spearheaded many of the protests, expanded from 30,000 to more than 80,000, organised in more than 350 chapters in November 1968.[[19]](#endnote-20)

Out of this period of intense anti-war organising emerged a New Left that began to shake off the shackles of McCarthyism and embrace radical and revolutionary politics. Various ideological currents emerged, some reviving the fortunes of the existing US left and others, inspired by international developments, constructed new revolutionary organisations. The Communist Party gained some youth, especially following the campaign to free African American activist Angela Davis (a CPUSA member framed on murder charges). The Socialist Workers Party – the standard bearer of US Trotskyism for decades – also attracted significant youth from its work on the campuses and in the anti-war movement. However, the fastest growing current within the New Left between 1968 and 1973, known as the New Communist Movement (NCM), embraced “Third World Marxism”, taking their lead from the Vietnamese and Chinese Communist Parties, Amilcar Cabral and the liberation movements of Southern Africa, and Che, Fidel and the Cuban Revolution. While the NCM’s influence lasted little more than a decade, its significance for our analysis here lies in its evolution from a rejection of Democratic Party electoralism in the early 1970s to enthusiastic engagement with Jackson’s campaigns a decade later.

## The New Communist Movement

In the late 1960s, Che Guevara’s call for “two, three, many Vietnams” appealed to young radicals looking for a revolutionary internationalist and combative resistance to the violence of US imperialism. In contrast, the “Old Left” – descended from the radicalisation of the 1930s – was viewed as stale and impotent. The international flagship of “world communism”, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), under Khrushchev’s leadership, advocated a policy of “peaceful co-existence” between the Eastern bloc and the West. Since the late 1930s, the CPUSA – the CPSU’s US acolyte – had pursued a “popular front” strategy, tail-ending the trade union bureaucracy that had long since made peace with the Democrats. The NCM rejected the “revisionist” trend of Stalinism, allegedly pioneered by Khrushchev (but in reality dating back to Stalin’s “popular front” turn), instead orienting to Beijing and embracing Mao Zedong Thought. Claiming to be the inheritors of the “Marxist-Leninist” tradition in the US, NCM groups adopted a sectarian attitude to working with others on the left. While a plethora of NCM groups existed in the early 1970s, the largest and most influential were the Revolutionary Union (RU), the October League and the Communist League.

In 1973-74, at the height of its influence, the NCM “held the allegiance of roughly 10,000 core activists and influenced many thousands more”, according to Max Elbaum, a New Left activist who went on to play an influential role within the movement.[[20]](#endnote-21) Inside SDS, Maoists argued for a disciplined, revolutionary cadre organisation in contrast to the loose structures that predominated in the New Left. The Black Panther Party (BPP), founded in 1966, provided a model, explains Elbaum: “the BPP’s character as a disciplined, centrally led, cadre party…was a watershed in legitimizing the notion of a tight revolutionary party among young radicals”.[[21]](#endnote-22) By 1973, the BPP was sharply divided: a faction led by Eldridge Cleaver – then in exile in Algeria – accused the Huey Newton-dominated leadership of reformism for its focus on community and education programs, and legal defence work. Cleaver argued instead for building an underground cadre organisation that could carry out armed actions. After a bitter dispute that saw shootouts between the warring factions, Cleaver’s minority faction left or were expelled. The BPP’s implosion marked the demise of radical Black Nationalism just as Maoism was reaching the peak of its influence within the New Left.

Throughout the 1970s, NCM groups played important roles in trade union, international solidarity and anti-racist campaigns. Despite their often hostile interrelationships, they shared a common focus on building grassroots struggles. While theoretically weak compared to the Trotskyist left, the NCM maintained a much larger audience. This was due in part to the efforts of the *Guardian* newspaper, which at its height in 1973 claimed 20,000 readers a week and drew thousands to public meetings.[[22]](#endnote-23)

By the late 1970s, all of the NCM groups were in decline. Elbaum identifies their demise as resulting from a “misassessment of how ripe capitalism was for defeat” and a self-proclaimed vanguardism, whereby each group asserted that they were the guardians of “one and only one correct, revolutionary doctrine”.[[23]](#endnote-24) Zig-zags in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) economic and foreign policy spurred a series of crises within the NCM groups. Following Nixon’s 1972 visit to China, relations between the US and China began to thaw. After Mao’s death in 1976, Beijing moved more closely into Washington’s orbit, siding with the US amid escalating Cold War tensions. China also became the main supporter of the genocidal Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. After Vietnamese troops ousted Pol Pot in 1978, China attempted an ill-fated military incursion into Vietnam. The CCP had now disowned the Cultural Revolution, and under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership set China on a path towards capitalist restoration. These moves tarnished the CCP in the eyes of even the most fervent US Maoists.

While several NCM groups had already distanced themselves from Beijing and abandoned Mao Zedong Thought, all NCM groups entered a period of crisis between 1979 and 1981. Most directly affected was the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), which had been the CCP’s most loyal US supporter. When Daniel Burstein, the CP(ML)’s key leader and editor of its publication *The Call*, began to question the tenets of Marxism-Leninism, the organisation went into terminal decline. A series of realignments, splits and fusions resulted in the launch of the League of Revolutionary Struggle (LRS) in 1978 and the Communist Workers Party (CWP) in 1979. The latter (the larger of the two groups with 400-500 members) was catapulted to nationwide prominence in November 1979, when five of its members were murdered at a rally opposing the Ku Klux Klan. While the massacre evoked widespread public sympathy, the CWP was also roundly criticised for its ultra-left posturing and failure to build a broad front against the Klan.

When Ronald Reagan entered the Oval Office in 1981 his right wing agenda provoked a wave of protest. In May 1981, 100,000 protested US intervention in El Salvador, launching a mass campaign against US intervention in Central America. The following September, the AFL-CIO initiated a rare display of defiance against Reagan’s anti-union assault, mobilising 400,000. In June 1982, a million marched for nuclear disarmament. Reagan’s ascendency underscored the need for a revolutionary left that could offer a way forward. Yet the NCM lacked both the cadre and political clarity to do so.

Other far left groups also entered the 1980s in crisis. The US SWP faced a series of splits and convulsions, having pinned its hopes on an expectation of rising class struggle that failed to materialise. As a consequence, its membership halved from a peak of 1,690 in 1977 to 885 in 1984.[[24]](#endnote-25) The International Socialists, representing “Third Camp” Trotskyism, abandoned their newspaper and suffered a split. Former members of both groups formed Solidarity in 1986. A Solidarity pamphlet published two years later reflects on why the New Left was unable to consolidate the 1960s rebellion outside the clutches of the Democrats:

[T]he movements of the 1960s in and of themselves did not have the social power and coherence to institutionalise this rebellion and translate it into a permanent, organized and unified feature of the political landscape. The U.S. labor movement, with its 20 million members, was the force that *should* have been capable of providing a social anchor for such a development. But the AFL-CIO had been tamed by the decades of post-war prosperity. Its firmly entrenched bureaucracy was steeped in business unionism, conservatism and reliance on electing Democratic friends of labor.[[25]](#endnote-26)

Into this void stepped the forces of social democracy, which had been temporarily pushed aside during the 1960s rebellion. At the forefront of this revival was the DSA, which formed in 1982 through a merger between the Democratic Socialist Organising Committee (DSOC) and the New American Movement (NAM).

## The Democratic Socialists of America

Today the DSA is by far the largest organisation on the US left. However, in the 1970s, this was not the case. In 1973, when the combined forces of the NCM could claim thousands of members and a readership of tens of thousands for their publications, the DSOC was just getting established with 300 members. The DSOC emerged as a split from the youth wing of the Socialist Party. A minority within the SP, led by Michael Harrington and Irving Howe, backed the McGovern campaign and favoured a “realignment” strategy within the Democrats. Harrington argued that the task of US socialists was “to build a new American majority for social change” by bringing together US labour and a “new politics” centred on the liberal, anti-war sentiments of students and middle class voters who had backed McGovern.[[26]](#endnote-27)

By the late 1970s, the conditions had ripened for the resurgence of social democracy. The 1974-75 recession resulted in a significant slump in industrial militancy and the decline of both union membership and rank and file organising. Black Power had renounced the early militancy of the Black Panthers in favour of seeking electoral office, following the brutal repression of the Nixon years. And, as Mike Davis observes, “The bizarre implosion of the ‘new communist movement’, as the Maoist left moved from the factory floor to frenzied party building and street confrontations, reinforced, if only by harrowing negative example, the growing claim of the electoralists to represent the sole rational hope for a mass American left.”[[27]](#endnote-28)

Harrington and the DSOC attempted to forge a Democratic agenda committed to Keynesian reformism, the so-called “left wing of realism”. Yet the “realism” that was gaining ascendency within the Democrats was neoliberalism. From 1978, the Carter administration adopted a right wing turn, abandoning health reform, job creation programs and labour law reform in favour of savage budget cuts. Significant sections of the ex-New Left now gravitated towards the DSOC’s electoralist politics. Publications such as *Socialist Review* and *In These Times* abandoned their former calls for a new American Socialist Party in favour of pragmatic endorsements of liberal Democrats.

The merger between DSOC and NAM, a successor organisation of SDS, brought hundreds of former New Left activists into the DSA. However, as Mike Davis observes, during the unity talks any serious analysis of the rightward transformation of the Democrats was shunted to the sidelines. “‘Unity against Reagan’ and unqualified support for the AFL–CIO Executive became the twin motivating slogans for DSA’s headlong rush, first to Edward Kennedy, and then to Walter Mondale.”[[28]](#endnote-29) At the time of DSA’s 1982 launch it claimed 6,000 members.[[29]](#endnote-30) While this was a largely passive, paper membership, the formation of DSA established social democracy as the dominant trend on the socialist left. Efforts by New Left currents to build a base in the working class through organising on the shop floor were now well and truly eclipsed by a perspective of trying to build influence among union officials and liberal Democrats.

In 1984, the DSA shunned Jackson in favour of Walter Mondale’s campaign, blindly hoping to drag Mondale to the left. In 1988, with no Mondale-like centrist contesting the nomination, the DSA backed Jackson. For the DSA, the Rainbow Coalition was not a vehicle to build a new party, but rather a means to consolidate support for its coalition-building efforts within the Democrats. The combined impact of the retreat of the revolutionary left and the revival of social democracy under the DSA’s banner contributed to pulling much of the far left into the Rainbow Coalition. As Davis observes:

The principal object-lesson of the militant 1960s, reliance on independent mass politics outside of and against the national Democratic Party, was stood on its head. Participation in bourgeois electoral politics was redefined as the admission ticket to serious popular politics *tout court*.[[30]](#endnote-31)

Not since the 1930s, when the Communist Party rushed headlong into the arms of Roosevelt’s New Deal, had the US left been so wedded to working within the Democrats.

## The Left and the Rainbow Coalition

In 1983, the allure of Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition proved too tantalising for the beleaguered remnant organisations of the NCM to resist. They now made their way down a well-worn path: entering the *cul-de-sac* of the Democrats to campaign for a liberal candidate. The NCM organisations that entered the Rainbow Coalition included the LRS, the CWP, Line of March (formerly the Rectification Network), the North Star Network and the Freedom Road Socialist Organization. The latter two organisations were attempts to unify several ex-Maoist splinters. Only a handful of revolutionary socialist groups, including Solidarity and the International Socialist Organization, resisted the pressure to join Jackson’s campaign.

Many sincere activists and anti-racists were drawn to Jackson’s 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns, perceiving them as a vehicle for pushing back Reagan’s right wing agenda. Sheila Collins, author of *The Rainbow Challenge*, argued that the Rainbow Coalition offered a solution to the failure of the 1960s civil rights and Black Power movements to consolidate their gains because of “the separation of the social movements from electoral politics”.[[31]](#endnote-32) Others argued that the Rainbow Coalition could give voice to the disenfranchised in the electoral arena and push US politics to the left. Still others claimed that the Rainbow Coalition offered a way to reinvigorate the anti-war and anti-racist movements.

For the left within the Rainbow, Jackson and other Rainbow politicians’ electoral ambitions were viewed as secondary to building “mass movements”. They argued that activists could use Jackson’s star media profile and left wing rhetoric to build grassroots campaigns. Shelly Ross, a leader of LRS, argued that the Jackson campaign demonstrated “the importance of electoral politics as a platform for progressive ideas”. Ross claimed, “The Jackson campaign thrust to the forefront of U.S. politics the demands of the Black Liberation Movement and in the process showed how the electoral arena could be transformed into a vehicle for revolutionary, mass struggle”.[[32]](#endnote-33)

Similarly, Elbaum, then a leader of Line of March, argues:

[T]he political program of the Jackson/Rainbow movement, while not revolutionary, went well beyond the parameters of mainstream politics. Yet by bringing this program into the Democratic primary contests, the Jackson campaign found a mechanism to present its message to tens of millions and mobilize a nationwide apparatus. This meant a direct confrontation with white supremacy – in the form of a white electoral backlash – as well as conflict with accommodationist Black leaders who were crucial to maintaining the hegemony of bourgeois politics in the African American community.[[33]](#endnote-34)

In 1984, with the Black establishment rejecting the Rainbow, leaders and activists from NCM groups were able to step into a vacuum in Jackson’s apparatus to assume leadership and organising roles within the Rainbow Coalition. Yet this only served to reinforce their illusions that the Rainbow Coalition could be turned into a vehicle for building struggles outside the electoral arena. As Misnik observed:

In reality, there are *two* Rainbow Coalitions, each with its own idea of the Rainbow’s purpose. The “pragmatic” Jackson supporters are primarily interested in strengthening their faction inside the Democratic Party. The “radical” Rainbow forces are attempting to advance progressive social movements through the Jackson campaign, with many hoping to provoke a fundamental realignment in U.S. politics.[[34]](#endnote-35)

Illusions expressed by leftists such as Ross and Elbaum that the Rainbow Coalition could take on a more permanent character stemmed from the objective need of Jackson to build a beachhead within the Democrats between the 1984 and 1988 elections. At the 1984 party Convention, 465 Jackson delegates, with the support of more than three million Democrat voters, experienced the indignation of having platform demands steamrolled by the party machine. Jackson himself readily endorsed Mondale’s campaign without winning any serious concessions. However, as soon as the 1984 election was over, Jackson launched his 1988 campaign by keeping himself in the national spotlight with public attendances at peace and anti-apartheid protests. The Rainbow Coalition conventions, held in April 1986 and October 1987, provided a means to maintain the momentum of his campaign by building the Rainbow independently alongside Democratic Party structures. The 1987 convention was attended by more than one thousand delegates, living up to Jackson’s claim that he was assembling a “rainbow” of Black, Latino, Native American and Asian American activists, alongside progressive trade unionists and social movements. Yet, despite claims otherwise, this “unity” ultimately only served one purpose: to get Jackson elected in 1988.

## Inside-outside strategy

For a sizeable section of the left, the Rainbow Coalition was seen as a means to precipitate a break from the Democrats in favour of establishing a new, anti-capitalist party. The National Committee for Independent Political Action (NCIPA) typified this “inside-outside” strategy. Like the left within the DSA today, the NCIPA held the position that the way to break from the Democratic Party is to join it. This perspective is fundamentally defeatist. It is premised on the assumption that electoral politics is the primary sphere in which a contest of ideas can be waged to shape mass consciousness. Collins’ assertion that “the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 shocked many left activists into discovering the dialectical relationship between social movements and electoral institutions”[[35]](#endnote-36) is a concession to the idea that the way to reach a mass audience is not through direct confrontation with the capitalist class by building mass movements outside the two-party system, but rather by working within the structures of a capitalist party.

Elbaum explains how NCM organisations each worked to bring different constituencies into the Rainbow. LRS and Line of March supplied key activists for labour organising efforts and LRS in particular gained positions of influence within the Rainbow. According to Elbaum, LRS cadre “worked to forge strong ties with Jackson’s inner circle, local elected officials and labor and community leaders” and were “often more willing than most others on the left to subordinate building the Rainbow to the immediate needs of Jackson’s campaign apparatus”. In contrast, Line of March was more “willing to engage in open fights over policy with what it saw as more accommodationist forces” to ensure that the Rainbow “was not completely dependent on the appeal of its charismatic standard-bearer or susceptible to pressures from the Democratic Party high command”.[[36]](#endnote-37)

For Jackson to maintain his allure on the campaign trail, he needed to project the image of a fighter outside of traditional party politics. The left inside the Rainbow served Jackson’s needs by providing foot soldiers for electioneering and a bridge to constituencies otherwise outside of his reach. Yet the internal machinations within the Rainbow had little impact on the political direction of the campaign. Despite the assertion of the Rainbow Left that is was building a vehicle for “independent politics”, the Democrat machine weighed heavily on Jackson’s public profile.

## Jackson’s 1988 campaign

In electoral terms, Jackson’s 1988 campaign was a stunning success. On March 8, 1988 – “Super Tuesday” – Jackson achieved a second-place finish in 16 out of 21 primaries in southern states, where a large Black voter turnout made Jackson the front runner in the delegate count. Jackson followed with a victory in Michigan, securing 55 percent of the vote, and ended the race with seven million votes (around 30 percent of the total). This time around, Jackson was aided by much stronger support from Black Democrat officials who saw the campaign as a means to strengthen their own clout within the party.

However, Jackson’s 1988 campaign was much more moderate than his 1984 run. Machine politicians such as Charles Rangel worked to undermine the influence the left had exercised in 1984. And Jackson himself tailored his speeches to be more palatable to the concerns of leading Democrats. For example, Jackson criticised Reagan’s deployment of troops in the Gulf during the Iran-Iraq war for endangering “our boys” and backtracked on his previous support for Palestinian self-determination. At the 1987 Rainbow Convention Jackson told stunned delegates that racial violence was an issue of the past and had now been resolved.[[37]](#endnote-38)

Jackson also pursued a much more conciliatory approach to working with Democrat powerbrokers. Whereas in 1984 Jackson had vehemently protested rules governing delegate selection for the party convention, in 1988 he made no such protest despite a 15 percent increase in the number of super-delegates (party leaders and elected officials getting an automatic convention vote). Once the convention was over, Jackson moved to bring the Rainbow under his control, dashing hopes that it could be retained as a vehicle independent of the party machine. Activist participation in the Rainbow evaporated. The coalition itself was transformed into Jackson’s personal political vehicle, rather than a membership organisation.

Elbaum’s assertion that “the Rainbow offered the prospect of a durable, mass-based and independent vehicle” that “revolutionaries could loyally help build, while retaining the freedom to advocate their own point of view”[[38]](#endnote-39) proved sorely misguided. His hope that “Jackson was willing to build a Rainbow Coalition that would undertake non-electoral as well as electoral activism and remain independent of official Democratic structures, and even distinct from his own campaign structures” proved a mirage.

The outcome reflected the balance of forces, both within the Rainbow and the Democrats. It also reflected the confusion within the Rainbow Left as to the purpose of their intervention. For Jackson and aspiring Black politicians, the Rainbow offered a bargaining chip to negotiate with Democratic Party power brokers. Once the party leadership had resolved to cut a deal with Jackson rather than lock him out, the Rainbow’s independence could only be a hindrance to his ambitions. Some viewed the Rainbow as a caucus intended to realign Democratic Party politics, while others on the left believed it could build a base for a new anti-capitalist party: a means of achieving a “dirty break”.

Whatever their motivation, the NCM groups that had entered the Rainbow in 1983 came out of the experience weaker and more disillusioned. The Communist Workers Party abandoned Marxism-Leninism, transforming itself into the New Democratic Movement and then dissolving before the Rainbow was wound up. The Line of March disbanded in 1989 and LRS followed suit a year later. The *Guardian* ceased publication in 1992. Freedom Road still exists and continues to orient to electoral work within the Democrats.

Peter Camejo, a former leader of the Socialist Workers Party, joined with ex-Maoists in the Bay Area Socialist Organising Committee to form the North Star Network in 1984. Reflecting on his time building the Rainbow Coalition, Camejo says:

At the time the North Star Network was formed I made a major political mistake. A new sense of possibility had emerged when Jesse Jackson started the Rainbow Coalition and ran (as a Democrat) for president in 1984. Within the North Star there was a desire to get involved in supporting Jackson’s organisation. While there were various points of view, mine being clearly opposed to the Democratic Party, I let myself be influenced into seeing the Jackson movement as a possible beginning of a real reform movement…or an actual split with the Democrats.

This error on my part lasted until I came to my senses and realised that, with few exceptions, the Rainbow Coalition was just another name for keeping progressives in the Democratic Party. Jesse Jackson was a hard-core Democrat and remains so today.[[39]](#endnote-40)

## Conclusion

Jackson’s 1984 presidential campaign was more radical than Sanders’ 2016 campaign, despite Jackson himself being a more conservative figure who had long represented a Black entrepreneurial elite. Amidst a deep social crisis that afflicted US society and African Americans in particular, Jackson was catapulted to prominence by a powerful revolt against Reagan’s pro-war, austerity policies. Jackson’s radical rhetoric was augmented by a loyal band of followers. A large section of the left, principally Maoists and ex-Maoists with origins in the New Left, provided not only foot soldiers but skilled organisers with roots in Asian and Chicano communities, and in anti-racist, anti-war, and women’s, lesbian and gay liberation movements. The Rainbow Coalition was a pole of attraction to a fragmented left that hoped to build a beachhead *inside* the Democrats and a base from which to organise *outside* the Democrats.

By 1989, this project was in disarray. The mass anti-war and anti-intervention rallies of the early 1980s were no more. Working class resistance to the Reagan offensive and employers’ assault on living standards had dissipated. Groups such as the League of Revolutionary Socialists made peace with the Democrat machine and wound up any public profile. Others withdrew from the Rainbow, but, demoralised, lacked any capacity to rebuild a left on the outside.

The Jackson/Rainbow campaigns provide valuable lessons for those looking to Bernie Sanders today. Firstly, the claim that it was possible to build “independent politics” through the structures of the Rainbow proved to be a myth. The Democratic Party will tolerate such efforts so long as they can enlist new voters in Democrat caucuses and expand the party’s voter base. However, the rationale for the Rainbow was to secure Jackson’s electoral victory in the primaries. So long as the Rainbow Left worked towards that end they were tolerated – even welcomed – within the Rainbow. Once the Rainbow Left had served its purpose, it was cast aside. Having been locked into the Democrats for five years, the Rainbow Left found itself locked out.

Secondly, the idea that the Rainbow could serve as a means to bring about a realignment in US politics, either inside or outside the Democrats, was mistaken. US politics was moving sharply to the right. Reagan was the front man for neoliberalism, but Democrats such as Walter Mondale and Gary Hart were willing accomplices. The Democrats’ rightward lurch, which began before Reagan’s ascendency and continued in the 1990s under Clinton, was driven by the declining profitability of US capitalism. Whereas Roosevelt’s New Deal and Kennedy’s Great Society programs implemented a reform package in response to the demands of the union and civil rights movements, the Democrats could no longer accede to such demands while simultaneously meeting the demands of big business. Moreover, the US ruling class had forged a consensus that to maintain its imperial hegemony, it needed to embark on a massive armaments program that could ensure its victory in the Cold War.

Thirdly, the strategy pursued by the Rainbow Left, despite protestations to the contrary, was fundamentally electoralist. While NCM groups shared an analysis that the Democratic Party was a capitalist party that couldn’t be reformed, a consensus also emerged that their decade-long engagement with struggles of workers and the oppressed needed to be complemented by electoral work that could win a larger audience for socialist ideas. For some, electoral work came to be redefined as a form of “mass” work. However, for the vast majority of Democrats, whether politicians or volunteers, they are in it to win. They are not in it for mass organising or left propaganda. Nor are they in it to disseminate arguments for building a new party *outside* the Democrats.

A successful strategy for winning elections differs fundamentally from one that can win strikes or build militant mass actions. Whereas strikes and protest actions are directed at an opposing party and are manifestations of class struggle and conflict, elections are a means to winning a vote from the largest possible audience. The former involves taking risks, making sacrifices and challenging the economic and political establishment; the latter involves getting as many supporters as possible out to vote. Within the time frame of an election and the rules of the game, an election campaign by itself cannot transform mass consciousness. It can only relate to existing consciousness. Inevitably, this requires adapting your electoral platform to the prevailing mood of the electorate.

Roosevelt’s New Deal and Kennedy’s Great Society programs were not won by canvassing for votes. They were the product of an upsurge in mass struggle. In 1934, general strikes rocked Toledo, Minneapolis and San Francisco. In 1935 and 1936, the CIO defeated General Motors in mass sit-down strikes, building the United Auto Workers union in the process. These mass struggles forced Roosevelt to push through the Wagner and Social Security Acts. Once the shop floor fell quiet and the CIO leadership turned to a strategy of dependence upon the Democrats, the reform period was over. Similarly, it was the militant direct actions of the civil rights era and the mass rebellions in inner-city ghettoes that forced Kennedy to enact the Civil Rights Act and the War on Poverty program. Once the rebellion ended so did the period of reform.

In a period of working class retreat, an electoral strategy can appear attractive, especially when the contenders for election are adapting their rhetoric to champion “socialist” ideas. Jackson’s 1980s campaigns, unlike Sanders’ more recent campaigns, were not infused with talk of “democratic socialism”. Jackson was campaigning in the last decade of the Cold War, when socialism was associated in the minds of most workers with the gulags of Stalinist Russia. Yet his championing of “economic justice” did strike a popular tone. For socialists on the election campaign trail working alongside other socialists and progressives from differing political traditions, it can seem that connections are being made with a much wider audience. Yet such connections are inevitably temporary (for the duration of an election campaign) and do not demand the argumentation and polemics that are required to win over an audience to a course of action that requires direct confrontation with the political establishment.

Today, as in the 1980s, US society is racked by sharp social and class divisions. Over the last decade, since the Global Financial Crisis, movements such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter have challenged corporate greed and exposed the barbarity of contemporary global capitalism. The emergence of a more confident and combative far right, and the complete intransigence of Trump and his allies in the face of the climate crisis, demonstrate now more than ever the need to build a revolutionary left that can lead a struggle for socialism. The pathway to building that left does not lead through the DSA nor along the path of campaigning for a Sanders’ presidency. Instead we must build a new, revolutionary left in our workplaces, in our schools and campuses, and on the streets.

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### Notes

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2. Interview in *Vermont Affairs*, Summer 1986. Cited in Michael Kruse and Manu Raju, “Can Bernie Sanders Win the Love of a Party He Scorns?”, *Politico*, August 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Sunkara 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Meyer and B. 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. See Owen Hill, “What Kind of Break from the Democrats?”, *Socialist Worker*, 17 July 2018; Eric Blanc, “Socialists, Democrats and the Dirty Break”, *Socialist Worker*, 6 August 2018; Eric Blanc, “On History and the Dirty Break”, *Socialist Worker*, 15 August 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
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10. Misnik 1988. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Jesse Jackson, “Hey, You Democrats: We’ll All Benefit if a Black Runs for President”, *The Washington Post*, 10 April 1983. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Marable 1985, p43. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Misnik 1988. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Cohen 1992, p2. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Davis 1986, p19. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Marable 1985, p8. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Carl Conetta and Charles Knight, “Post-Cold War US Military Expenditure in the Context of World Spending Trends”, Project on Defense Alternatives *Briefing Memo*, No. 10, January 1997. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. Davis 1986, pp18-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Elbaum 2002, p65. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. ibid p4. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. ibid p67. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. ibid p111. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. ibid pp88-90. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. ibid., p262. For a discussion of the causes of the SWP’s collapse, see Lorimer 1997. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. Misnik 1988. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. Harrington 1973, p5. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Davis 1986, p7. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. ibid., p8. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. Joseph M. Schwartz, *A History of Democratic Socialists of America 1971-2017: Bringing Socialism from the Margins to the Mainstream*, July 2017. <https://www.dsausa.org/about-us/history/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. Davis 1986, p8. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. Collins 1986, p105. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. Ross 1985, p41. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. Elbaum 2002, p276. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. Misnik 1988*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. Collins 1986, p105. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. Elbaum 2002, p280. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. Misnik 1988*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. Elbaum 2002, p276. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. Camejo 2010, pp180-181. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)