

After the Mid-Term Elections: Where Do We Go From Here?

(A Talk delivered at Community Church of Boston, November 11, 2018)

Mark Solomon

The record turnout for the 2018 midterm elections dramatically underscored the public's sense of their exceptional significance. As clear as many of the public's understanding of the stakes for the fading slivers of democracy, affecting the elections was the less apparent, but no less compelling global crisis. That crisis is playing out through savage assaults on working people the world over. Immensely powerful capital operating on a global stage continually seeks the most exploitable labor to be found under repressive anti-labor governments, dismantles or outsources domestic production while shifting capital to financial instruments – forcing painful austerity on heavily indebted countries and their working populations.

In this country, the fruit of “neoliberal globalization” is in rotting, abandoned industrial plants, in permanently depressed communities outside the high urban mainstream, in clusters of working class life feeling forsaken and forgotten. On a global scale, underdeveloped and developing countries of the Global South are experiencing the massive uprooting of populations, waves of immigrants desperately seeking to escape grinding poverty, environmental degradation and social collapse.

That crisis, spawned by capital operating globally, has in turn brought about a resurgence of the most reactionary and proto fascist sectors of the system to redirect the anger of uprooted and alienated masses away from the corporate capital sources of the crisis into racist, misogynist, homophobic, militarist, anti-Semitic and nationalist channels. (Proto fascism is the cultivation of a political and cultural climate that breeds full-blown fascism.)

Feeding on the fears and growing alienation of sectors of the working and middle classes, proto fascism cynically targets the post World War II global order (that it has no real intent to replace), reviling its protagonists and defenders as hated “globalists” who are allegedly loyal to a global order over the interests of the nation.

As capitalist globalization persists in crisis, authoritarian, nationalist and proto fascist currents, fanned by racist and anti-immigrant hysteria are

surging all over the world. That current has taken power in Hungary; it is the dominant force in Poland, and Ukraine. It is rising in Germany and Scandinavia; an outright fascist has ascended to power in Brazil, even globalist Great Britain has succumbed to nationalistic anti-EU currents.

The authoritarian and proto fascist current has temporarily at least ascended to the White House in the persona of Donald Trump who has now defiantly labeled himself a “nationalist,” while showing no discomfort in the fact that nationalism in this country has been tied inseparably to white supremacy. Trump has emerged as the quintessential proto fascist – attempting to destroy a multitude of social programs to aid working people, especially the young; shouting “America First,” while his sole legislative “first” has been a massive tax giveaway to the super-rich. In the global arena, he has defiantly opted out of the Paris Accords on climate control. He has abandoned the nuclear treaty with Iran; has walked away from the Reagan-Gorbachev Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty. He has shilled for massive increases in the already bloated military budget, has manifested unprecedented racist hostility towards immigrants of color seeking asylum from unbearable economic hardship – and ominously, with control over the US nuclear arsenal, he has shown no grasp of the existential threat of a nuclear Armageddon.

Not every major aspect of Trump’s threat may have been considered by the 2018 electorate. However, the general sense of the danger that he represents (topped by concern over the fate of health care) brought out unprecedented numbers of voters. Many youth, not accustomed to midterm voting, voted in record numbers. Women, partly repelled by Trump’s open misogyny both voted and helped elect to Congress record numbers of women as well as electing women governors and scores of state legislators. The long march to equality took a major step forward with the election from Minnesota and Michigan of the first Muslim women to Congress and election of increasing numbers of African American, Latino and other candidates of color. At last, two Native American women will enter Congress. At the state and local levels, seven governorships changed hands and over 300 right-wing members were ousted from state and local legislatures.

The shift to the left on the state and local levels has perhaps ended a too-long practice of downgrading those arenas by progressives. State legislatures will determine the character and contours of redrawn congressional districts (based on the 2020 census) that have historically distorted by outrageous

gerrymandering to favor affluent, largely white constituencies. The effective candidacies of Andrew Gillum in Florida and Stacey Abrams in Georgia perhaps foretell a major advance both in African American representation in the South and in tapping that crucial region's progressive potential (also foretold by the defeat of a right wing Republican congresswoman in South Carolina, by the visionary Lumumba administration in Jackson, MS., etc.) In sum, progressive forces registered major gains in formerly impenetrable states like Kansas and Iowa, moved an average of 7 to 10 points leftward all over the country, most likely lost only one seat in Senate races largely stacked against progressives, decisively captured the House and delivered a united blow to Trump and his ethnonationalist aspirations. As the votes continue to be tabulated, early claims of a weak, indecisive "blue wave" are contradicted by the accumulating power of the anti-Trump vote.

Where do we go from here?

Progressives, leftists and socialists, whatever the self-designated labels, need to recognize some fundamental propositions that have not always achieved a consensus. First, electoral politics is a mandatory battleground for change. It is where power over the purse and power over guns, power over human well-being and survival reside. At the same time, movement for political office bereft of non-electoral battles to advance progressive issues is a prescription for irrelevance.

Regarding the controversial issue of "working in the Democratic Party," there is a need to recognize that political independence is not based primarily on party labels, but on a commitment by candidates, pressed by constituents, to refuse to take corporate PAC money. One of the most promising aspects of the new, relatively young and diverse corps of new representatives is their pledge to refuse corporate funds – the core source of political corruption and a major cause of a centrist pressure within the Party.

Cooperation is needed between specific issue-oriented movements (like peace, human rights, environmental survival, reproductive choice, affordable education, etc.) and the effective, growing movement of individuals and groups with technological skills that were critical in mobilizing grass roots actions leading up to the elections. Groups like Indivisible, Brand New Congress, Progressive Change Campaign Committee can be enriched and politically deepened through permanent relations with peace, economic justice and human rights organizations. In turn, those

groups can hone increasingly important technical skills through working with Internet-based organizations with an overriding objective of building an organized progressive majority at the grass roots.

Progressives need to work towards a dynamic, holistic approach to issues – linking them in ways that build cooperation and unity across single-issue lines and provide a coherent programmatic message. With fresh energy and fresh ideas, the new largely left oriented congressional “freshman class” likely will reinvigorate the progressive caucus’s Peoples Budget. That should be a rallying point for linkages between a variety of pressing domestic issues from universal health care to jobs and infrastructure, to fighting racism, sexism and homophobia.

Peace and global justice deserve special consideration. Trump’s actions in tearing up agreements, savaging immigrants and fanning military threats underscore the urgency of work for peace. However, those issues were virtually absent from the 2018 elections. That is inexcusable; relative public silence can only result in escalating retreat from arms control treaties and from the path of peace. Ironically, the public overwhelmingly supports efforts to curb and ultimately end nuclear arsenals, to scale back overseas bases and to cut military spending. Lacking is attention and commitment among progressives to curb the war machine and return to the path of peace.

A fundamental requirement for sustaining a now-awakened coalition of progressive forces is to nurture and hold together an alliance of left and centrist movements. That is admittedly a difficult challenge. However, that alliance can be created and sustained by mutual recognition of the top priority – the defeat of Trump and the fascist danger. Cooperation between different currents does not require that progressives retreat on vital issues and questions of principle. Cooperation, though, is not advanced by castigating all centrists as “neo-liberals” connoting that they are irrevocably hostile to labor and to all progressive ideals. Reality is more complicated than that.

At the same time, unity between left and center currents does not require retreat by progressives on strategy and tactics. Progressives can respectfully advance an argument that clear, forceful progressive policies garnered more electoral support in difficult areas than candidates who ratcheted down their principles to accommodate conservative constituencies. That debate can and

should go on as all currents seek common ground in fighting the racist right wing threat.

One of the most vital challenges for progressives of all stripes is to prioritize and struggle against massive efforts to suppress the vote, especially the votes of African Americans, Latinos and other racial and ethnic groups. That assault on voting rights is predicated upon a frenzied recognition by the right that the country's ethnic and racial composition is changing rapidly with the old racist dream of a "white man's country" fading to oblivion while the largely progressive outlooks of people of color help lead the country to a just and democratic future. Thus, defense of the vote is rapidly becoming an issue of democratic progress towards full equality or the creation of an apartheid state (like pre-democratic South Africa) based on white supremacy. Little on the political agenda for progressives is more vital than a challenge to suppression of the vote.

A major outcome of the midterm elections is the extent to which progressives and liberals entered the political arena at all levels – starting with local councils, local school committees, and local administrative posts – flowing upward to state legislatures. Grass roots efforts constitute the fertile soil for the planting and growing of progress leading to qualitative change in the country's political life. A major lesson from a cluster of successful campaigns, especially by African Americans and Latinos is that principled politics combined with hard work can win for many among us who dare to enter the fray.

The midterm elections marked a high point in the rebuilding of the coalition of working people, youth, seniors, nationally oppressed communities, LGBTQ communities, etc. of the Obama era with the addition of vast numbers of women, many formerly Republican voters, many from the suburbs, into the movement to stop Trump.

One major grouping remains outside that growing progressive majority – working class white males largely in their middle years. It is not suggested that ALL in that group are willing fodder for Trump. Many are dedicated trade unionists and community activists. However, there are large numbers of white males that actively support Trump and are motivated by estrangement and fierce resentment of political forces – especially Democrats – that they believe do not care about them. De-industrialization sparked Democratic abandonment of industrial workers; and the Party, as far

back as the seventies, began to downgrade the declining industrial work force in favor of catering to professionals and money-laden hi-tech operatives.

Most progressives have little or no interaction with alienated white workers. We do not engage with them; we do not have language that assuages suspicion and resentment, and we have little or no grasp of how to find common ground.

It wasn't always that way. There was a time when workers, white and non-white, urban and rural, industrial and agricultural were important cogs in progressive struggles – building the labor movement, defending the Roosevelt New Deal, fighting fascism. They bonded through a simple idea often scoffed at today – class struggle. Through that lens, white workers had little confusion about what constituted their enemy. It was the “bosses;” it was the corporate barons that owned the factories and farms, relentlessly exploiting their labor. Multiracial cooperation was forged on that common ground of class struggle where the claims of the most oppressed were often addressed as special issues within the framework of shared class battles.

We need to re-study that experience though it cannot be easily replicated in a vastly new environment marked by a racially and socially heterogeneous working population. Today, we speak of “intersectionality,” of the multiple identities of individuals and groups. Within that generally valid concept, we sometimes miss the central role of class in shaping and clarifying the special demands of race and gender. Given the divisive and destructive nature of racism and sexism, the working class must inevitably confront those poisons in its own interest. The challenge is to root all those battles in the foundational field of class oppression and class struggle.

Some white workers, even fervent Trump supporters, acknowledge the negative impact of corporate iniquity upon their lives. A progressive community alerted to that reality can help reawaken joint multiracial battles for social and economic justice against corporate perfidy – battles that ultimately provide the fertile ground for combating all forms of bigotry while building unity of all victimized by an oppressive system. That requires the rebuilding of the labor movement in whatever forms are appropriate for present-day reality. The unions need to grow again, to play an indispensable role in the struggle against Trump and proto fascism and to be a major force in uniting all working people.

There is a big agenda. With confidence, clarity and resolve, progress will win; reaction will be defeated and a genuinely new and constructive political order will emerge.

Mark Solomon is past national co-chair of the Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism (CCDS) and past national co-chair of the United States Peace Council. His latest book, "Keeping on in Dark Times: Memories of Peace and Justice Battles in the Forties and Fifties" will be published next year.