

## Editorial

# Retrieve the legislative branch

In last week's editorial we argued that the reassertion of congressional initiative against presidential power portended a critical realignment in American politics. We noted that Congress, like legislative bodies at the state, county, and municipal levels, was more susceptible to popular initiative and control than the executive branch. Through most of this century, the executive branch at all levels has been the focal point of corporate political power and influence and corporate concentration of wealth and power in society at large has operated to shift policy-making authority from the legislative branch to the more inaccessible recesses of various executive agencies, commissions, and other appointive bodies at all levels of government.

Carter's key cabinet appointments so far indicate that he will be no exception to the rule of talking "populism" to the voters, while performing as the executive of the corporate order once elected. His proposal that Congress grant him plenary powers over the next four years to reorganize the executive bureaucracy without substantial congressional participation is in the same vein.

In the last four years, Congress has begun to establish the mechanisms for challenging the President and the cabinet for initiative in policy-making. In particular, it has moved in the three basic areas of budget-making, information gathering and the war power.

The meaning for socialists in these developments lies first in the social and political changes that have given rise to the changes and second in the opportunities for action they open up.

Watergate and the anti-democratic designs of the Nixon administration may have been the immediate occasion for the resurgence of congressional activity, but underlying this is the exhaustion of liberal reform as a means to pacify class antagonisms.

The era of easy imperialist corporate growth, nurturing jobs and income expansion at home, is over. Such growth has always been the condition of reform at home. Today's reforms are increasingly conservative in nature, and more often than not set one group of working people against another. There is increasing skepticism of reforms offered by the major parties, and of policy alternatives that pose employment against inflation, or social compassion against inordinate taxes, or serviceable government against centralized bureaucratic monstrosities.

Support for corporate expansion abroad and old style reforms at home is declining. But the desire for change is not.

In general, people are not clear in their own minds about the kind of changes needed. But it is clear that their needs increasingly go beyond the system's capacities.

The central political issues of the past four decades have changed as well. Starting in the 1930s with the passage of the Wagner National Labor Relations Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act, and the Social Security Act, and with increasing pervasiveness since the 1950s, issues involving the struggle between the corporate need for profit and the needs of working people, between capital and labor, have come more and more to dominate American politics, while older issues involving intra-bourgeois conflicts have receded.

Prominent among these capital-labor issues has been the push for full employment planning, inadequately embodied in the Humphrey-Hawkins bill; various proposals for national health insurance; federal aid to cities to fund public services and employment; restrictions on overseas corporate investment; transfer

of funds from military spending to social programs; uniform federal welfare standards; industrial health and safety; consumer protection; reallocation of federal subsidies from automobile to public transportation and other measures that reflect the increasing assertiveness of working class interests against traditional profitability.

In short, the struggle between capital and labor for control over the nation's economy has moved into the center of the political arena, pitting the principle of economic and social democracy against corporate priorities. Institutionally, this struggle is polarizing along lines of Congress as the potential people's branch *versus* the executive as the corporate branch.

Congress is still conducting the skirmish timidly, even reluctantly, because corporate power still reaches broadly and deeply into the Congressional power structure. Most members of Congress still do not represent the popular cause nor do they fully understand corporate power as its enemy.

The Harris poll reported two weeks after the past election that over 80 percent of the people want Congress to listen more to the people, that close to 80 percent want the government to help the poor, the elderly, and others hard hit by inflation, that almost three-fifths want Congress to curb the power of the President, that the great majority want Congress to act as the people's branch against vested interests and oligarchic power. They want other things that are inconsistent with these, but that kind of confusion may be expected in the absence of a sustained and popular socialist movement helping to clarify and more sharply define the issues.

Socialists should enter electoral politics, *as socialists*, with their focus on the legislative branch at all levels of government, from the city councils to Congress. They should join with trade unionists, blacks and other national minorities, women's movements, teachers, consumer and ecology groups, anti-redlining groups, hospital and other service worker groups, etc., in drafting social goals programs for the people and against corporate power.

They should run candidates from among their ranks rather than simply supporting the lawyers and other operators put up by the regular major party or silk-

stocking reform organizations. They should campaign on a social goals program, and between elections maintain social goals assemblies for continuous week-in and week-out development, agitation and organization around their program.

In calling for this kind of electoral activity, we are breaking with what have been two prevalent approaches to electoral work by socialists: First, the concentration on presidential politics that has characterized the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) led by Michael Harrington; second, the quadrennial, largely ritual presidential campaigns by the various socialist parties.

The DSOC strategy of socialist participation in presidential elections, given the present state of party politics, enmeshes socialists in the process of filling an office that is currently beyond the hope of popular control. It can only lead to discrediting socialist leadership and judgment through an inevitable series of debilitating compromises and post-election disillusionments. There is no shortcut to socialism, but if there were one, it would not lie through the White House. There is no point to socialists lending themselves to electing "better" executives of the corporate order.

On the other hand, the running of socialist presidential slates is no less effective. The fact that its purpose is primarily to recruit new members to narrowly doctrinal groups largely divorces the slate-running activity from the major arenas of popular political activity and discredits socialists in the eyes of the people as not seriously out to win on their behalf and not seriously concerned for their democratic aspirations in the here and now.

If socialists want to be politically relevant, if they want to participate in and help shape the direction of popular working class movements, they will learn from what people want and from being with the people in their electoral activity. They will continue their work-place and community protest activity but also begin to focus on participation in contesting for control of the legislative process—both in elections and in the development of programs around major issues and the mobilization of support for them.

Our view of the emergence of socialism as a major political movement in American political life necessarily rules out a

concentration on doctrinal matters (not to be confused with theory and principles) that center upon organizational narrowness and verbal purity.

We see socialism emerging in the United States as a multi-faceted and multi-tendency movement, reinvigorating and fulfilling American democracy. A majority movement for socialism in the United States can never be built within the confines of the traditional doctrinal socialist parties as they now exist. The history of the past 50 years amply demonstrates that and it is time to draw the lesson.

Socialism will emerge as a major movement in American politics, and in incipient form already is beginning to emerge, as a broad diverse array of movements that will take party form when it has the prospect of becoming a major party, by transforming or replacing one of the existing major parties.

In the meantime, socialists should participate in all available electoral arenas—in major party primaries, in non-partisan elections for city councils or county boards of supervisors or boards of education, and in partisan elections as socialists where there is any chance of success.

At the close of this bicentennial year, it is fitting to recall that John Adams said that the happiness of society is both the purpose and the test of government, and that government in the United States today under the sway of corporate power neither fulfills that purpose nor meets that test. Adams warned that concentration of wealth would transform the republic into an oligarchy. People increasingly know these things and want a change. Socialists should be at the forefront of the struggle for that change.

Adams also held that the legislative branch "should be in miniature an exact portrait of the people at large. It should think, feel, reason, and act like them." Socialists should play a leading role, and have every interest, in helping to draw that portrait and bring it to life.

Corporate power is accustomed to virtual monopoly in the market and over government. It is time to break up the corporate monopoly, not by anti-trust suits, but by beginning to retrieve the legislative branch to the people and making it the champion of the sovereignty of the people and their happiness, against the usurpations of oligarchic corporate power.

