Dialogue with Nick Brana on ‘Our Revolution’ and the Fight for Independent Working Class Politics

[Note: Following is an abridged version of a discussion with Nick Brana, national director of the Movement for a People’s Party and past national outreach coordinator of the Bernie Sanders For President campaign in 2016. He is also a founding member of Our Revolution and was its first Electoral Manager. Leading the discussion is Alan Benjamin, member of the Editorial Board of The Organizer newspaper. The full interview can be accessed at www.socialistorganizer.com.]

Alan Benjamin: When you launched the Movement for a People’s Party in November 2017, you stated that “there is no path to power in the Democratic Party.” Since then the Unity Reform Commission of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) has met and tried to work things out so that the progressives can feel there is a reason for them to stick with the Democratic Party. What are your thoughts on the changes that the DNC’s commission has proposed?

Nick Brana: The changes don’t even begin to scratch the surface. They don’t get at the nature of the Democratic Party, which, as one of the two establishment parties, is outside the influence of working people. Like the Republican Party, it is run and controlled by corporations, lobbyists, and big donors.

The DNC’s Unity Reform Commission doesn’t address the issue of money in politics, of buying politicians. The idea that you can change a corporate party without challenging the levers of power held by the oligarchs is ludicrous. Take the DNC itself. It is supposed to keep the party accountable to its own rules. But it violated them in the party’s primaries in 2016. The whole process was entirely rigged.

Bernie Sanders’ Our Revolution recently admitted this is an email sent out to their support base. They wrote that if the DNC did not make any significant changes — such as a substantial reduction of super-delegates, an ombudsman, financial transparency, and more — then there is nothing preventing the party from rigging the process again. And that is exactly what we’re heading to. The progressive movement should not be upholding this illegitimate “reform” process.

A.B.: Regarding the Democratic Party’s political platform and the policies it has implemented over the years: The Democrats voted overwhelmingly to support Donald Trump’s record-breaking war budget in 2017; in fact they allocated more funds to the war buildup than Trump was requesting. In Colorado and other states the Democrats are promoting laws to deregulate the banks and financial institutions. In state after state, the Democrats have been complicit in the drive to privatize public education, through their support of for-profit and private charter schools. The list goes on and on. The Democrats are one of the twin parties of the bosses, and that won’t change. Your comments?

N.B.: Something that was better understood in 2016 after the election — something that the Democratic Party and the corporate media are trying furiously to erase — is that Trump is the symptom; Trump is not the root cause of our society’s problems. It was the very conditions created by the Democrats that put Trump in power.

The Democrats’ failure to represent working people over many decades is the root cause of why we have Trump and the swing to the right.

It’s a paradoxical situation. At the same time that you see Trump coming to power, with the resurgence of the far right, you’re also seeing polls that show that the American people are overwhelmingly and increasingly progressive on the issues: two-thirds support Medicare For All, two-thirds support free public college; nine-tenths support getting money out of politics — and you can go down the line.

But the point is that the donors who fund both establishment parties are only threatened by the progressive wing, and so they are going to block any progressive who tries to come to power inside the Democratic Party. They’re going to do it again in 2020.

A realization that I came to after working on the Bernie campaign and Our Revolution is that the Democratic Party internally is too undemocratic to be taken over. That is why we in the Movement for a People’s Party are building a movement across the country for a major new party that is genuinely progressive, that is internally democratic — with elected leaders who are accountable and can be recalled — and with a platform that is democratically formulated. This is impossible in either party of the billionaires.

A.B.: In the early 1990s, an important section of the labor movement (representing more than 2 million union members) formed Labor Party Advocates. Its mission was to open a discussion in the labor movement about the need for labor to break with the Democratic Party. Many of us in LPA noted that without labor’s funds, phone-banking,
which denotes a cross-class political formation. Such parties throughout our history have not been rooted in the working class and its organizations. They have seen themselves as representatives of all the people, whatever their social class, in opposition to the top oligarchs — but not in opposition to the capitalist class as a whole.

What are your thoughts on these points; what should be the class nature of a major new party? And how do we get there from here; how do we move forward to the creation of a major new political party?

N.B.: First, as you have said, labor’s relationship to the Democratic Party has devastated the unions, which are down from 35% to 11% of unionization in the country. The folks who began the Labor Party in the 1990s had reached the conclusion that the Democrats were not sufficiently different from the Republicans, and it was time to build independent working-class political power.

But when you launched the Labor Party in 1996, you were ahead of the curve. The difference between then and now is that in the mid-’90s you were going against the grain and against the momentum of society. Today, however, public opinion has caught up with that conclusion. Over the past 10 years, in particular, millions of people have left the Democratic and Republican parties.

The number of independents is now up to 45% — while only 27% of Americans affiliate with the Democratic and Republican parties.

The other thing you are seeing is that the number of people who are calling for a major third party has increased dramatically. It is now at 61%, according to a recent Gallup poll. There’s a real disaffection with the two establishment parties. Conditions exist today to create what so many unions tried to create in 1996 with the Labor Party.

In terms of what is our transition plan, I think that labor-community coalitions and candidates are a very powerful way of getting there, and they are necessary. It will take a collaboration between labor unions and social movements to achieve a major working class party at this point. And we in the Movement for a People’s Party are the social component of that effort.

I agree that working on a local level to elect candidates as part of local labor-community coalitions is a good way to begin because, yes, it doesn’t require as many resources at first — and victories on a local scale can help build the momentum for a major working-class party.

Also, by the way, the name People’s Party is not the final name that we’ve decided upon. It’s a description. It says that the new party must belong to the people, as opposed to the Democrats or Republicans, which belong to the corporations.

To move toward the formation of a mass working-class party, moreover, will require replacing one of the two establishment parties. When you get to the point where so few people belong to those two parties, the system becomes unstable and there’s an opening for a political realignment. And that’s what we have today.

A.B.: One last question concerning the very concept of “independent.” We in The Organizer believe that “independent” must mean a clean break with the Democrats and Republicans. It must mean rejecting the “inside-outside” strategy promoted by all too many forces on the U.S. left. In our view, this approach has always derailed efforts to build independent working-class political parties in our country.

Some today, such as Jacobin magazine, which is linked to the Democratic Socialists of America, are promoting what they call a “dirty break” — which, in our opinion, is no break at all. So how do we ensure that the candidates we are supporting are consistently independent?

N.B.: Our mission as Movement for a People’s Party is a clean break. We have no interest in trying to rehabilitate the Democratic Party. The sooner we can get away from the Democratic Party, the sooner we can create a realignment in the country and create a new and different party for working people.

A.B.: Before we conclude, is there anything else you would like to add?

N.B.: I would like to say that we’re in the midst of a sea-shift in consciousness toward independent politics. Polls have shown that two-thirds of the people are not planning to vote in the mid-term elections. The reason they cite is that the Democrats and Republicans are hopelessly corrupt.

The Political Revolution is where we declare our independence from the corporate parties, not just their candidates, but the parties as such. I encourage people to join us in the Movement for a People’s Party. We have organizers in almost every state, with chapters in many states. Our website is: www.forapeoplesparty.org.