

Face Reality

By Joel Bleifuss

Supporters of third parties have filed a suit against the Federal Election Commission, charging that it has permitted a partisan group to ban third-party candidates from this fall's presidential debates. The Commission on Presidential Debates has decided only candidates who garner 15 percent support in five national polls can participate.

The suit asks a New York federal court to issue an injunction to stop the three debates from taking place. The plaintiffs charge that the debate commission, a group composed entirely of Democrats and Republicans, has written presidential debate regulations to suit their own interests. Ralph Nader has promised to make inclusion in the debates one of his key campaign issues.

Hello? It's called a two-party system for a reason. Somehow that fact never sinks in. Remember 1980? That year Barry Commoner formed the Citizens Party, galvanizing those disenchanted with Carter's conservatism in a noble run for the presidency. But the only time the national press noticed his campaign was when the word "bullshit" was used in a radio commercial.

In *These Times* editorialized back in 1980: "Both in theory and as a practical matter, the primary emphasis on presidential politics is a dead end. ... As a matter of practical politics, the only hope the left has of electing progressives to office is on the scale of a legislative election, either to state legislatures, city councils or Congress. ... The road to power—and, in the short run, to popular agitation around progressive principles—lies first through the legislature."

In 1980 it was Commoner, in 2000 it is Nader, a man who has devoted his life to exposing the perfidious influence of corporate power. But if Nader were serious about running for president, he would have begun laying the groundwork for a 2000 presidential bid in 1996. And a first step would have been helping the Green Party get its act together. (Except for in a handful of states like New Mexico and California, the party doesn't exist as such.)

If Nader were serious about influencing the national discourse, he would have run in the Democratic primary, where progressive candidates have an opportunity to present ideas that normally don't get a public hearing. By debating Al Gore and Bill Bradley, Nader could have reached an audience of millions. This year, more than any other, we needed a challenge to the somnambulant corporate centrism of Gore and Bradley. Absent a third party that is well organized from the grassroots

up, progressives must stay focused on putting pressure on those Democrats who claim to represent

them, something a Nader run for the Democratic nomination would have done admirably.

Since Nader and the progressives who support him have neither built a third party nor challenged the Democratic establishment, one must conclude that candidate Nader fulfills another role—that of civil confessor. Citizens disgusted with the status quo can leave a voting

booth with their integrity reaffirmed.

Their message is clear: We are not serious about political change. For too many on the left, electoral politics has devolved from civic participation into a lifestyle choice. One eats organic food to stay healthy, exercises to stay fit, and votes for Nader to avoid tainting principles with the give-and-take of real politics.

But let's not blame the victim. Like the poor, those progressives disengaged from party politics are understandably alienated. The current campaign finance system functions as a form of legalized bribery that allows the rich and powerful to pick and choose who gets elected. The Democratic Party, increasingly in thrall to corporate interests, has seen its popular base whither.

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There are exceptions: In states like Minnesota and Vermont and in congressional districts like those around the Bay Area, the progressive movement is part and parcel of the political establishment. Those are the models to emulate if we want to move beyond the current quadrennial exercise of hitching our wagon to the latest progressive star. ■

Terry LaBan



THE END OF CIVILIZATION AS WE KNOW IT

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Marching On

Unity 2000 plans to disrupt this summer's GOP convention

By Dave Lindorff

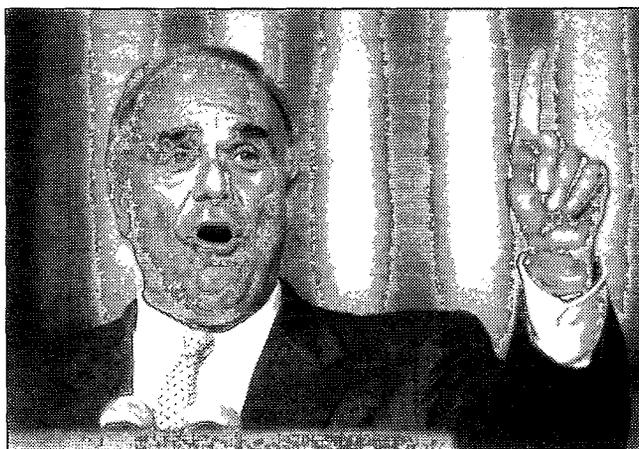
PHILADELPHIA—The City of Brotherly Love has backed down in its attempt to crush dissent during this summer's Republican National Convention. But the potential remains for a confrontation between demonstrators and Philadelphia police during the week-long event.

Faced with a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union, the city agreed on April 28 to issue permits to two organizations planning to march on July 30, during the run-up to the convention. In March, the city had denied permits for the groups—Unity 2000 and The Ad-Hoc Committee to Defend Health Care—and had required them to confine their activities to a remote area only 40-by-190 feet. Meanwhile, Republicans will have access to all 10 blocks around the First Union Convention Center. The groups got permission to demonstrate on their originally planned route, along Benjamin Franklin Boulevard.

A third organization, the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, still has not received a permit for its planned convention protest.

"I'm not satisfied," says Michael Morrill, spokesman for Unity 2000, a coalition of some 100 progressive organizations anticipating more than 100,000 marchers. "It annoys me that we had to bring the city to court to get this, and I'm concerned that there are only two legal demonstrations. The police have said they will quarantine a five-block radius around the convention center, so any groups that try to bring their protests to the convention site will be arrested."

If that situation sounds reminiscent of recent events in Washington and Seattle, it's no coincidence. To back up Philadelphia's severe restrictions on protest activity during the Republican convention, the city sent a dozen of its top officers to observe the way Washington police handled the demonstrations against the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in April. Philadelphia's finest returned from



Former Mayor Ed Rendell masterminded the restrictions.

ROBERT GIROUX/NEWSMAKERS

Washington full of praise for the D.C. cops' "restraint," but vowed to be even more liberal in their use of tear gas if protesters this summer step out of their permitted demonstration area.

Unity 2000 is a broad coalition of organizations including everything from ACT UP to the NAACP and various trade unions. Its focus is economic globalization, universal health care and workers rights. The death penalty and the fate of Mumia Abu-Jamal, currently on Pennsylvania's Death Row for the 1981 killing of a white Philadelphia policeman, while not a part of the coalition's agenda, are also likely to be major protest issues.

Philadelphia went all out last year to land the Republican convention. Ed Rendell, then mayor and now chairman of the Democratic National Committee allowed the Republican Party to deny protesters any access around the convention site. All convention organizers had to do was claim they have plans for those locations. The only place left was the so-called "protest pit."

Protest organizations, so far, have taken a hard line against the city's plans. "We won't be applying for a slot in the censorship pit," says Pete Davis, an activist with Philadelphia's ACT UP. "As far as I know, no other groups are signing up for it either. We feel that the city's efforts to contain protest is likely to backfire, and lead to a greater degree of civil disorder than if they'd just be more open."

So far, the only organization that has agreed to the city's terms and applied for a permit to demonstrate at the designated site is the Greyhound Adoption Group, which says it just wants to show off some dogs. ■

Philly Strikes Out

Philadelphia wasn't alone in selling its soul to land the GOP convention. It was joined by the Philadelphia AFL-CIO Central Labor Council, which convinced local building trades and other unions to sign a labor peace accord with the Republican National Committee, promising no job actions during the convention by unions involved in any aspect of the event—including hotel and restaurant workers.

But this agreement has been condemned by the public employees unions, like AFSCME District Council 47, which represents 3,500 of the city's white-collar employees, and the Fraternal Order of Police. A number of public-employee contracts are due to expire, and those unions want to be able to count on public and private union support if they have to strike this summer.

Tom Cronin, president of District Council 47, charges that the Central Labor

Council has signed a scab agreement with a party that has been responsible for anti-labor legislation. "Strikes are the working person's only weapon," he says.

The dispute has hurt labor participation in the Unity 2000 protests, but it hasn't stopped it altogether. John Rauscher, president of the Central Labor Council, claims that unions that weren't party to the legally binding labor peace pledge are free to strike. "If any unions like the municipal workers have to go on strike during the convention," he vows. "Heck, I'll be out there on the line with them."

This could leave the Republicans in an awkward position. Since the Fraternal Order of Police is one of the public employees' unions that refused to sign on to a labor peace pledge, Republican delegates could conceivably find themselves faced with an army of protesters and a police force out with a mass case of the "blue flu." **D.L.**