

What happened to the US left?

Rick Fantasia

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Inside and outside the two-party system, two distinct lefts are alive if not well – the one polite and established, the other made up of grassroots activists

Is there any leftwing opposition in the United States? An ideologically hardened Republican Party is purging its moderate elements, prodded and encouraged by the rise of the Tea Party movement. Meanwhile an ideologically submissive Democratic Party has a centrist faction that is indistinguishable from the Republicans, and a progressive wing that is bound to a campaign finance system that demands careful attention is paid to the money people. Where is the left?

The left does exist, and operates both inside and outside of the two-party arrangement. There are in fact two lefts, and each has been in action recently, visibly so, in separate and distinct venues. One left was present at the US Social Forum in Detroit (Michigan) in June, where a gathering of over 15,000 activists from around the country and from a range of organisations met to “continue the spirit of the World Social Forums” by holding strategic discussions, “building relationships and collaborations across movements” and “deepening commitments to international solidarity and common struggle”.

Some of this was accomplished over five days; there was a spirited march of more than 10,000 people through downtown Detroit full of militancy, anger, movement and colour. Factions and groups wore variously coloured T-shirts, and people of many colours marched together. Forums and workshops and panels reflected the same spirit: the Excluded Worker’s Congress was one of some two dozen People’s Movement Assemblies at the Forum. Several hundred people gathered from organisations like the Domestic Worker Alliance, the Taxi Alliance, the Alliance for Guest Workers, the National Day Labourers Organising Network, along with groups of restaurant and farm workers, and from local workers’ centres that support immigrant workers. Up on the stage people spoke about the brutal conditions they experience at work and in their lives, and the vitality of their resistance, which drew them towards organisations and unions that brought them to Detroit.

The left represented in Detroit can be seen anywhere in the world, but in the US context it is marginal to the political debate and invisible to society. There was almost no media coverage of the Detroit Social Forum in the US press, before or after, though the media had been saturated through the summer with reports of rightwing Tea Party rallies (some of which drew just a few hundred people).

Although the Forum took place in the heart of the auto industry, where were the auto workers? While their numbers have declined, in Michigan there are still some 50,000 working and 128,000 retirees. But they had no visible presence in Detroit, nor did there seem to be UAW (United Auto Workers) T-shirts or banners. There weren't many signs of the traditional labour movement at all, although many individual union activists were surely present.

Detroit was youthful and counter-cultural, with ecological concerns and global issues represented, and a hall of literature tables occupied by socialist groupings, New Age practitioners and advocacy groups. The forum drew strong representation from non-union low-waged service industries, many of them women, as well as Latin and Asian and black. They were the excluded workers, a status celebrated by the organisers and politicians and put forward to represent the "grass roots" left.

But where were the "included" workers? And what does it mean to be "included" when the conditions of inclusion (stable jobs, unions able to secure higher wages, a range of social benefits, etc) have been under sustained assault? And if the included are being excluded, what interest is served by upholding that distinction at all?

Auto workers gather on the Mall

Another US left was also recently in action, at a large demonstration in October in Washington DC called by a coalition of "progressive" groups, including the AFL-CIO (the country's biggest trade union confederation), the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), the National Council of La Raza, and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. This was the established, institutionalised left, led by the main labour federation, the official labour movement that was able to bring well over 100,000 workers and others to Washington to show strength and draw public attention away from the Tea Party.

Here were those auto workers absent at the Forum in Detroit. In Washington their union seemed to be everywhere with UAW T-shirts and banners. Many thousands of workers gathered on the Washington Mall on that beautiful Saturday in October – white and black, men and women, from the UAW, SEIU, the Transport Workers Union, AFSCME, unions of government workers, teachers and service workers. The comportment of this gathering, and of this left, was different from Detroit. At this event the crowd sat almost politely, socialising and listening to speeches. Speaking from the Lincoln Memorial were media personalities, Democratic politicians and leaders of the established "progressive" organisations. While one could hear anger from the podium, it was sporadic and mainly directed at the Republicans, not capitalism.

There was little attempt to stir up the crowd, no march organised and no real sense of political urgency. The organisations that sponsored the event are the unions and

advocacy groups whose political action consists of lobbying for social legislation and contributing funds and campaign workers to liberal political candidates. Though their membership has been shrunk from plant closings, the transfer of jobs offshore, and the fierce anti-unionism of employers, they have had no inclination to mobilise their members for militant action in recent decades. They have been too close to power too often to want to jeopardise the position of their institutions (1). If black and white workers were present in almost equal numbers in Washington, most were members of the unions and civil rights groups that brought them there. They looked as though they would easily fit into any of the mainstream cultural institutions, with a certain pride in being American. It seemed more like a picnic on the lawn than a workers' demonstration.

Identity politics

If this institutional left has a bigger voice, it doesn't mean the left of the Detroit Forum has none. Though invisible in the media and with no role or influence in national politics, the groups of the grassroots left are active in hundreds of communities, working to build power at the local level along democratic lines, trying to expand by creating networks and coalitions between groups and across social space.

They often accomplish tangible things. Domestic Workers United has made significant progress toward establishing a law in New York State to give 200,000 of them the most basic labour standards (mandatory overtime pay, protection from discrimination, notice of termination). The strength of the groups is their autonomy and a pragmatic militancy that mobilises aggressively toward concrete goals, while bringing groups together to create broader networks.

Their weakness is that their aims are often limited to an identity politics whose highest social ambition is to "include the excluded" within arrangements that are less and less tenable for anyone. It reflects a tendency to misunderstand or misconstrue the full reality of class in the US and this, along with an avoidance of a common or even coherent worldview, is an intellectual legacy of the cold war that tends to leave only a surface-level social analysis. While Marxism may not have been enough to be able to grasp all the dynamics and complexities of society, it was a reasonable place to start.

Yes, the grassroots organisations were able to bring many working-class "people of colour" to Detroit, a fact celebrated throughout the week, but there were few white working-class people. The whites were mostly educated members of the middle class, organisers, activists, representatives of philanthropic organisations and academics. White working class people were not well represented in Detroit, nor had they been at the previous Social Forum in Atlanta in 2007 (2).

The head of one key organisation on the grassroots left, normally a sharp analyst of movement building, offers a solution to the problem of the relative absence of white

workers in a movement attempting to build social power. He says “white folks need to organise some poor white folks”. This elevates to a political principle the very racial separation that must be overcome to create the solidarity which is the foundation for any just society. Both these American lefts are weak because they must survive in a political culture dominated by the largest corporations on the planet. But they are also weakened by the self-imposed limits of their own social horizons. One has replaced exploitation with exclusion as the basis for worker mobilisation. The other sees mobilisation as not much more than a picnic in the park.

Rick Fantasia is professor of sociology at Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts