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Vote for Me And I'll set you free!

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin

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The Left (including the Black nationalist movement) really is in a backward stage. Rather than building on the legacy of the 1960's protests, we are instead losing ground and taking reactionary positions. We have a so-called Black-faced President in office, and it is clear that he is an agent of the rich and their corporations. Millions of poor and working people voted for him, including records numbers of Black voters, and yet he has done nothing for the poor or working people of this country, and has especially ignored the Black community. There are still massive numbers of Black/POC poor in the prison system from the federal war on drugs, yet he has ignored these prisoners, their families and communities. In addition, Black people are being slaughtered in the streets under color of law, yet the Civil Rights Division of his Justice Department have brought a tiny number of cases against racist killer cops. We have depression levels of poverty and unemployment in the Black community, and he cannot be bothered to take any targeted action to ensure economic equality. He is waging war by armed CIA drones in Africa and other parts of the world as part

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of a “war against terrorism”, started by his predecessor, George W. Bush, and has increased the number of such killings from the Arabian Peninsula to the Continent of Africa. Thousands of civilians have been killed by these drone and missile strikes, and they are clearly nation-state terrorism.

Yet, neither the left nor civil rights/Black nationalist movements have held any mass street campaigns against his pro-corporate policies, which are destroying our communities and literally starving us to death. Even groups that just a little while ago were saying that they were working for a “Five state nation in the Blackbelt” have apparently given that up for an even worse pipe dream: electoral politics. Chokwe Lumumba, the long time leader of the New African movement, is running for Mayor of Jackson, MS., with a realistic prospect to win, and the movement has started a New African Political Party, with ambition of running for office all over the country. But what does this mean, when revolutionaries decide to “work through the system”? They just say; if you can beat ‘em, join ‘em. As Bro. Malcolm X once said, they: “...They ain’t trying to build no nation, they’re trying to climb back on the plantation.” Capitalist Political Plantation, that is.

But how did this get started? There have been various Socialist, Communists, Black nationalists and other groups run for office since the 1950’s, with most being perennial candidates with no chance of being elected. But one must go back to passage of the 1964 Voting Rights Act to understand what this is about, in the years of 1964–1972 there were a thousand or so Black and POC politicians elected to office, some of whom were civil rights, Black power, and other activists. Yet the Democrats were still weak, and needed the Black vote in larger numbers to win national elections. So the federal government supported the Southern civil rights protests to make more Blacks eligible to vote.

During the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, Black activists were talking seriously about creating an independent Black politi-

sources to the Black community (instead of white tourist sites or white businessmen), to end police brutality and murder by the MPD, and create a mass movement against poverty and unemployment in our community.

cal party in opposition to the Democrats. In 1972, at a Black Power political convention, thousands of these Black nationalist activists and many Democratic Party politicians came together at the Black Power Political Convention in Gary, Indiana. The event was hosted by Gary Mayor Richard Hatcher, a prominent Black Democrat, and featured Jessie Jackson, who postured at the time as a Black civil right/Black power militant, and Leroy Jones/Amiri Baraka from Newark, N.J, who had national reputation as an artist, writer, and poet. The high point of this event was that the Black nationalists sold out to Richard Hatcher and the Democrats, who demanded their loyalty in creating an organization to groom and run Black Democrats, instead of the Black nationalists building an independent Black political group. That literally sealed the fate of the Black Power movement being a radical protest movement, in favor of electoralism and conformity. It was a defeat of massive proportions that still continues to resound to this day.

However, they did not fool everyone, and in the late 1970's a significant number of Black activists came together and created the National Black Independent Political Party, a radical black political party, which was a grassroots activist movement more than an electoral party, but did not totally reject political campaigning. Main thing was it was an authentic expression of the masses for independent Black politics. It spread to cities all over the country, and had become a national movement in a very short period of time. But then along came Jessie Jackson and his Rainbow Coalition, and his runs for the Presidency in the 1980's. The allure of his campaigns (1984 and 1988) caused many to quit the NBIPP, and come back to the Democrats, and shortly thereafter the NBIPP collapsed entirely. It is interesting that along with many calls for "Run, Jessie, Run!", were some by Black nationalists screaming "Nation Time", which is what Jackson himself was screaming in the 1972 at the Gary Black Power convention."

Chokwe Lumumba is not the first and only radical who has run for political office, most have failed. But that is not the case here with Lumumba, just as it was not the case with Obama. They apparently have strong backers in the business and banking community, and he is being supported by them for the race in Mississippi. He is the front runner there. The question is what happens when he wins. He wants you to believe that he will be a “revolutionary in office working for the people”. However, if we look at the elections of other radicals like the late Mickey Leland of Texas and Bobby Rush of Chicago, both of whom were in the Black Panther Party, they became conventional liberal politicians, and more importantly nothing improved for the urban Black communities they represented. This has been the case for many other activists who became politicians. The system has the ability to mute protest by revolutionaries to at most liberalism, and then constitute no threat whatsoever to capitalist property relations or hope of Black liberation. We can expect no more from Lumumba, despite all the rhetoric to the contrary by he and his supporters in the New African movement.

All the Left and the Black Nationalist tendencies can offer us is *nothing but running Black/POC/white progressives for Mayor, Governor, or President to “take Obama’s or some other politician’s place”, it is an utter failure. It makes no difference whatsoever if Socialists, Communist, Black nationalists and others are elected to high political because that is not how the rich run this country, that is just a democratic fig-leaf to cover for police state rule. If any candidate runs for office, they need significant financial backing from the business and political establishment if they are to win. Radio and TV ads require large numbers of contributions to any campaign, meaning that they must promise their affluent donors access and obedience. This is why so many are later caught accepting kickbacks and other payoffs from wealthy businessmen. These politicians are not independent actors; they are on the payroll of the rich. So,

by adopting electoral politics, these radicals are selling out and admitting that they do not think revolution is possible except by joining the Democrats (because that is where this leads) against the Republicans, and misleading the people with false promises and direction. “Vote for me, and I’ll set you free!”

Form Obama on down (*he claims that he was a grassroots community organizer) to Lumumba, these politicians are misleading the masses of people, who invest so much faith in them, to the degree that they do not criticize them or organize in the streets for their own interests. The activist-politicians are misleading the masses of people, just for their personal political gain or to push their pet politics.

They also are under the control of the rich with a hidden agenda. It is clear that we need to recognize that it is the people who make real revolutionary change, not radical or liberal politicians. We need to build an independent movement from the grassroots that has absolutely nothing to do with the establishment of political parties and are not under the control of any politician. Virtually nothing that politicians do is in our best interests anyway, rather than of their own, their donors or political party.

They want to be elected, and will do anything to get elected and stay in office. Politics is about money and power for them, not social justice. We have to go beyond conventional politics, and build a new society. We will not vote out the capitalist class or transform this racist society by electoral action, it is purely a myth. We have to struggle in the streets and communities to dismantle this entire system.

In contrast to this kind of political treachery and sellout, we call upon the people to join with us in building “Let’s Organize the Hood”, the mass program of Memphis Black Autonomy Federation. We are right now fighting in Memphis, TN. to drive out the Mayor and the current entrenched group of political scoundrels working for the white business elite, to force the government to provide more community development re-