

# The Arc of the Rainbow

By Kurt Stand

## I.

Like the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow that vanishes when closest to hand, left unity has proved time and again to be an elusive goal. Yet the search continues to inspire, as well it should; how else can a weak, divided left play a meaningful role organizing resistance to the dangerous direction our society is headed? -- a question which takes on added importance in light of this year's election, as Bush can now claim a "democratic" imprimatur to his undemocratic selection to office in 2000. His victory, being taken as a mandate for the continuation of his might-makes-right policies here and abroad, makes our future even more dangerous.

Unfortunately, election season tends to be the time when all possible differences within the left over how to build a movement for social change are accentuated, differences which all too often drown out shared commitments to peace and justice. Though this year saw more of a general sentiment than usual on the need to prioritize a Democratic victory because of fear of what a Bush election in 2004 might mean, it proved insufficient in part because the usual divisions nonetheless remain in evidence. This was apparent during the primaries and later in the uncertainty of how to simultaneously critique and support Kerry. The support for Nader reflected this uncertainty, and while drawing on a much narrower base of support than his previous run, still speaks to an outlook with sufficient support that it can't simply be discounted. More significant, many on the left won't want to dirty their hands in electoral politics at all, preferring to focus instead on whatever kind of practical organizing they had been doing. It is not irrelevant to note that this divide of left sentiment roughly parallels the divisions which enable an unrepresentative minority to rule in Washington-- millions of working people vote Democratic without real influence in the Party; millions, for lack of an alternative, vote Republican where their voice remains unheard; while, critically, millions who could, don't vote at all.

The inability to overcome this state of affairs within the left, within society, has been the source of debates inside movement circles during virtually every national election in living memory, arguments endlessly repeated without resolution. Emblematic of this was the Committee of Correspondence's pre-primary discussion last year on Portside-- initiated by Carl Davidson's and Marilyn Katz' paper, "Moving from Protest to Politics: Dumping Bush's Regime in 2004," which argued that defeating Bush should be the left's immediate priority and that this necessitates a cross-class alliance as well as continued mobilization against the war and on other critical issues. While their position was, and remains, valuable, and though the critical responses were for the most part put forward with comparatively little of the name-calling which too often disfigures such debate, a fundamental flaw existed in the failure to address how any of the stated disagreements can be bridged. Being able to implement any proposed strategy means looking at the underlying assumptions on either side of the line drawn over how to approach electoral politics.

This is a line which finds on one side those who stress the need to focus on the institutional framework of government, making the point that it *does* matter which Democrats hold office, that the answer to the question of who sits in the White House and Congress has an enormous impact on the environment in which we live, in which social conflicts are fought. From that outlook flows a strategy geared toward playing a role, a direct role, in the election process rather than one on the margins. Concretely, this led to prioritizing the defeat of Bush and ending Republican control of the House and Senate while pushing forward the most progressive ideas possible within the Democratic Party. This position did not necessarily mean supporting the most progressive primary candidate-- and definitely meant deciding who to support in November based on criteria other than a comparison of program alone. The decision to support Kerry rather than Nader, just like the decision to make Bush's defeat the goal of activity in 2004, was based on an understanding of what the actual impact on society, on working people, would be if we must face another four years of what we have been facing.

It is, however, in large part because of the ambiguity of where to draw the line between ideology and electability that the other side of the argument draws force. Those who see more in common between Bush and Kerry than disagreement rejected putting scarce energy and resources into a fundamentally undemocratic election in which the left is marginal. From this point of view it makes more sense to prioritize strengthening social movements in their independent capacity to fight for a progressive agenda-- independent, it is stressed, of whoever sits in office. Flowing from this can be the logic of supporting Nader-like candidates; in most cases it means de-emphasizing national elections altogether. This translates into working to lay the foundations for a continued defense of the interests of working people (and, increasingly, of human decency) even in the event of continual right-wing electoral success-- an ability clearly insufficiently developed at the time Bush first took office. Of equal importance, it means working to ensure the strength to effectively press issues from below so as to make use of whatever possibilities might exist when Democrats are in office -- an ability clearly insufficiently developed during Clinton's years in office.

This same dichotomy can be looked at from another angle; those activists who opt for a non-electoral orientation or for third-party initiatives tend to base their politics on the recognition that U.S. society has been marked by fundamental continuities in governing policy since the late 1970's, tendencies apparent even where real differences between presidential administrations exist. It is a trend that has aimed at lifting previously imposed restrictions on capital (the logic of free trade pacts and social welfare cuts) as well as restrictions on the use of police and military power (the logic behind increased incarceration rates, increased proclivity to use force abroad).

Yet this outlook, valid as far as it goes, misses much in its generalizations, beginning with the fact that what people tend to feel and respond to are the specific dynamics at play at any given time. Presently that means heightened awareness of the consequences of Bush's policies; this in particular is true of people already active in labor, civil rights, women's and other organizations who, by that activity, tend to be sensitive to even small

changes in the political climate. Anger at Bush ran even deeper than in previous election cycles because it was built on top of the lingering anger surrounding his illegitimate assumption of office. Those who prioritized his defeat therefore did so not only in response to what the Bush Administration had done; it was also a response to that sentiment, a mood already evident during the 2004 primaries.

Opposition to Bush was fueled, too, by an awareness that his victory in the general election would be taken as an expression of support for the three centerpieces of his presidency to date: the invasion of Iraq, the passage of the PATRIOT and Homeland Security Acts and the tax cuts for the wealthy at a time of high unemployment. The importance of opposing Bush on those grounds can not be underestimated as these, taken together with the other socially regressive actions and legislation of the past four years, mark not only the continuation of trends begun in the late 1970s; in their combination they represent a potential qualitative shift in the system that could have a deleterious impact on us (us being the people of the United States and people around the world) for years to come. Despite awareness of the dangers in our present situation, the energy of those who oppose this administration did not in and of itself ensure Bush's defeat-- no more can militant opposition alone reverse the direction corporate capital with its intrinsic militarism is taking our country.

Only by finding a way to synthesize the varied political choices flowing from each of the perspectives mentioned will we make headway on needed immediate changes and the equally necessary fundamental structural changes. Thus it may be useful to take a look at a point in recent history when such a synthesis was seriously attempted: the National Rainbow Coalition, which -- even absent delivering a pot of gold -- did leave the outline of a road that we might well uncover and rebuild-- a road to take us someplace other than the land of renewed frustration.

## II.

The current national regime is best understood as an attempt to continue the policies of Reagan, to complete the social dismantling and unalloyed militarism of those years (a direction slowed though not turned back during the years of Bush I and Clinton). A key reason for this attempt is that the dominant sections of the corporate world see themselves as having unfinished business, because the Reagan Administration was not able to undo as much as its sponsors hoped. Popular resistance was far more successful than usually acknowledged in holding the line against attacks on what had been won in struggles of the 1930s-40s, 1960s-70s; retaining far more in the way of social rights and social welfare than capital, in its main drift, is now prepared to live with. It is this analogy that makes the example of the Rainbow so relevant today-- for central to popular resistance from around 1984 to about 1991 were the Rainbow and Jesse Jackson's two presidential campaigns. Whatever victories were won then were due to a meaningful unity built around progressive politics which balanced mainstream electoral participation with militant issue-oriented popular mobilization.

To recall what has been too quickly forgotten, the Rainbow was a black-led, genuinely multiracial organization from its leadership through to its base. Key to its importance was that it became rooted in different communities across the country while at the same time winning support from significant numbers of union members-- markers of overcoming the usual divisions within U.S. (and, too frequently, left) politics. The depth of the Rainbow lay in its clear commitment to the struggle for social justice; its breadth built on its open advocacy of progressive positions on social issues that many liberal, many class-based organizations have preferred not to address. Testament to that was the direct confrontation with the racism exploited so well by Reagan; in fact, its being openly addressed proved essential to the unity that was developed.

By encouraging a diversity of people to raise their specific concerns within a broader framework-- be they family farmers or urban welfare recipients, striking unionists or abortion rights advocates, environmentalists or various international solidarity activists (and of these, those who usually followed separate tracks in opposing South African apartheid or U.S. intervention in Central America or Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza)-- the Rainbow provided a context that gave greater strength to each of its stripes-- something often proclaimed, something rarely accomplished.

This flowed from a commitment to people bred of respect for their ability to see beyond themselves, bypassing the road that leads groups to fight each other over the crumbs on the table, refusing to take the path of false unity built on lowest common denominator politics. The result: a genuine solidarity, genuine not because the prejudices or conflicting views of those addressed magically disappeared, but rather because those involved began to see what was common in spite of the differences.

This sensibility was also generated by Jackson's presidential campaigns from which, for better or worse (perhaps better and worse) the Rainbow could not be separated. Jackson used his Democratic primary challenges as an open platform to articulate and give public credibility to the agenda around which the Rainbow was organizing. The reason Jackson reached as broad a constituency as he did, however, cannot be attributed to his program alone; there are all too many examples of socially conscious platforms put forward that have failed to reach, inspire or organize people.

The critical difference: Jackson's campaigns were conceived and perceived as serious attempts to win the Democratic Party nomination and the general election. Third party and reform Democratic campaigns that are run as protests, to raise "consciousness," tend to lack meaningful roots-- especially in poor and working-class communities where people are looking not for good ideas alone, but rather for the connection between such ideas and their implementation. Winning office was understood in the communities mobilized by the Jackson campaign as providing the means (the possible power) to effectuate needed changes in society. This gave those involved a strong sense of purpose in turn, making commitments stronger.

Which is not to say most people had illusions about the likelihood of a Jackson presidency, for they didn't; the serious intent of the campaign, however, was

unmistakable as was a hope that no longer seemed outlandish. This is one of the reasons that support continued and grew even after the 1984, 1988 elections ended in the disappointments of Mondale, Dukakis nominations, of Reagan and the elder Bush election victories. This marks a significant difference from the disillusionment that has tended to follow defeats of progressive or radical candidates; one need only think of Mo Udall or Barry Commoner, of Fred Harris or Benjamin Spock.

This sense that real progress was being made was intimately linked to the Rainbow for it meant that political organizing was ongoing, that it wasn't campaign-dependent. The Rainbow's ability to link pre-existing networks of activists provided the means to reach groups of people ordinarily not reached; created a framework by which specific agendas could be added to and strengthen a common one. Thus the Rainbow took on the character of a movement, breaking out of rigid categorizations, opening participants to a more comprehensive, challenging outlook, giving the whole a meaning greater than that of a coalition simply bringing together groups representing various constituencies -- a quality surpassing the sum of the Rainbow's parts. Individuals from many walks of life who usually confine their political participation to something local and tangible found that a place was created where one could step beyond what is usually considered possible.

Dependent as the Rainbow in some ways proved to be on Jackson's presence, it therefore also proved indispensable to his success: as a political vehicle in its own right, it added strength to his runs for office; as an independent force it helped keep the whole from being completely absorbed within mainstream politics until its collapse. This experience goes some way to demonstrating the mutual dependence of work inside and outside established political structures, contrary to arguments that they are necessarily antagonistic strategies.

### III.

The mutual dependence was not without tension. There was a constant pulling in different directions. One need only contrast the consummate insider, Ron Brown, key Jackson advisor later to be Clinton's Secretary of Commerce because of the close ties he had built with business interests, with Jack O'Dell, a key Jackson advisor from Operation Push through the Rainbow, whose many years as editor of *Freedomways* underlined the critical, radical perspective he brought to his lifetime commitment to the struggle against racism, war and social injustice in all its forms.

Initially this was a creative, productive tension with measurable achievements in terms of changing immediate political conditions and a more intangible but no less real impact in changing the underlying political environment. Notable were the numerous liberal/progressive statewide election victories, especially ones in the South and West; one need only think of Doug Wilder in Virginia, Anne Richards, Jim Hightower in Texas, several Senate seats in both regions enabling the Democratic Party to recapture that body after having lost it at the time of Reagan's first presidency. Legislative successes can also be recorded, such as the Senate's rejection of Bork for a seat on the Supreme Court, the defeat of contra aid, the approval of sanctions against South Africa over a presidential

veto. All quite a change from 1980-82 when a seemingly unbroken chain of right-wing Republican election triumphs led many Democrats in the House to vote with Reagan, giving him something close to a working majority during his initial years in office.

Noting these developments is not to pretend that the right lost power or initiative at that time; what is shown though is that challenges to its dominance were growing, blunting the sharpest edges of the attack. From the relative quiet characteristic of the period of the mid-70s through the early 80s, public protest and street actions again became more visible-- as witnessed in the upsurge of anti-apartheid solidarity, of demonstrations and civil disobedience in defiance of U. S. Central American intervention, as seen in mobilizations on behalf of abortion clinic defense, in the huge growth of strike support campaigns on behalf of Pittston coal miners, Eastern Airline workers, Hormel meat packers.

All these developments did not flow from the Rainbow alone, far from it. What the Rainbow did do, however, was provide a political context that legitimated this increased activism, a public presence that legitimated left-wing voices in the midst of the activism, and a sense of direction which helped break down the isolation of disparate protest (characteristic of the movement before and after its collapse). City-wide political insurgencies, cross-issue organizing, local movements reaching out for national support were all facilitated by its presence.

Other changes, including some of those intangible ones, were helped in decisive ways by the Rainbow/Jackson campaigns-- to cite one, the issue of ending U.S. support for apartheid South Africa was through their actions, along with those of Randall Robinson and TransAfrica, made into a national political issue in a way that it had never been before (the Carter Administration, by way of comparison, had been under relatively little pressure to break U.S. ties). This meant challenging and overcoming the racist benign neglect and the anti-Communist rationalizations that had led liberals and many progressives to keep the ANC and its supporters at arm's length. By putting equal emphasis on South African and Central American solidarity, the Rainbow also helped nudge the peace movement a little further along the lines of overcoming its racial divide.

Another example of the ground breaking nature of the Rainbow (and of its still unfulfilled transformative potential) lay in the Jackson campaign's direct appeal to Arab-American voters, its open willingness to work with the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee; thereby taking on what had been an "acceptable" form of discrimination in mainstream politics, appealing to a community that had been (and, too often, remains today) shunned. Alongside of this was the willingness to challenge U.S. support for Israeli expansionism; to challenge the silence of too many peace activists when it came to taking a stand in solidarity with the Palestinians. This contributed to the building of opposition to the first Gulf War, one of the last visible national initiatives of the Rainbow prior to its demise.

One-third of the AFL-CIO Executive Board voted to oppose that war, a then-unprecedented act of defiance, as was the challenge to Kirkland at a Federation

Convention over his support for U.S. counter-insurgency in Central America. Challenges to labor's foreign policy were paralleled by militant strike activity and the coordination of locally-based strike support committees on a scale probably not seen since the expulsion of the left unions from the CIO in 1949. Most of these strikes were defeated; capital held the upper hand throughout this time. These developments, however, indicated a growing restiveness within organized labor from the rank-and-file to sections of the leadership that foretold changes that have since taken place (and, one hopes, changes yet to take place).

To all this the Rainbow contributed far more than is usually remembered or acknowledged, in no small part because it relegitimated political debate and discussion within union circles-- because it meaningfully connected labor's issues with other issues of social injustice. The Rainbow reached members to an extent that Kirkland could not ignore, a process marked by the change from 1984 when Federation staff worked actively to oppose Jackson in the Democratic primaries (especially targeting black unionists) to 1988 when it was no longer able to do so. The change lay not in Lane Kirkland's view of Jackson, but rather in a recognition that Jackson had more support from union locals, from union members than any other candidate. Their politicalization further reflects the transformative potential of the Rainbow.

The extent of the transformation that did take place then was relevant to 2004 and remains relevant to ongoing debates as it shows that it was possible to do what too many insist is impossible. Reform electoral activity within the Democratic Party did not swallow up the work to mobilize people to take direct action on the issues of the day. Building an autonomous national organization rooted in popular self-organization did not detract from building alliances geared to influencing politics on Capitol Hill in D.C. Instead of posing an either-or choice today we need to look at how this was accomplished, how its success can be replicated-- albeit replicated in a form with more staying power than the Rainbow's short-lived existence as a national force.

#### IV

For the Rainbow's stay was brief; its ending failure seen in 1992; having laid the groundwork for the elder Bush's defeat, the decade of struggle's chief beneficiary was Bill Clinton, the Democratic candidate who most distanced himself from Jackson and the substance of his campaigns. If a consideration of the Rainbow is to be meaningful, then an honest assessment of the reasons for its rapid collapse is as important as understanding the basis of its initial rapid rise.

To do so means rejecting the too-simple explanation of placing primary blame on Jackson personally, on the organizational measures he took to break the Rainbow's independence. That he did take such measures beginning in 1988 when local radicalism seemed to threaten Jackson's political and personal credibility in the system, began to challenge some of his ties to traditional local establishment figures in the black community, began to question national leadership in labor and other groups with whom it was hoped a stronger alliance could be forged, is clear enough. Yet this by itself explains little, for it ignores the fundamental problem: the Rainbow's inability to develop sufficient strength to survive on its own lacking Jackson's presence. This was similar to

the inability of the coalition formed around Harold Washington's mayoralty in Chicago to survive his untimely death, an indication that the roots of the obstacles to be overcome lie deeper than the vagaries of any one individual's personal politics.

For too often overlooked when analyzing what took place after 1988 is that the Rainbow, broad and dynamic though it was, was never able to organize on a scale that matched Jackson's electoral base. Closely related to this, and a key structural problem never fully overcome, was that its local formations were unable to replicate on the ground the unity embodied within the organization/movement as a whole.

Looking across the country at the height of the Rainbow's strength, one could find Rainbows based in the black church, others drawn mainly from old civil rights activists or anchored by explicit left groupings, while some were run by local elected officials. Although there was some interconnection among these, it was rare for all to work fully together, rare to have the same constituencies participating equally in one decision-making process. At the same time, labor Rainbows tended to organize on their own, apart from city- or county-wide based groups, themselves varying between those run by progressive officers, those rooted in rank and file opposition forces, and those of various shades in between.

Although perhaps a bit extreme and thus not completely typical, Washington, D.C., does provide an example of what this meant in practice. Before any "official" organizing took place, a Latino Rainbow formed, composed of activists from different Hispanic communities throughout the Washington area; in subsequent years this group maintained its autonomy and its radical perspective. The city-wide Rainbow had a decidedly different character, dominated as it was from the times of its founding by individuals in and around Marion Barry's mayoral administration. Reflecting all the ambiguities of Barry's relationship with Jackson, it often did little -- yet, when motivated, was able to reach deeply throughout the District's black community, engaging people whom national progressive movements have rarely engaged in Washington.

Nearby Montgomery County's Rainbow (in suburban Maryland) took a different path, quickly becoming a multi-racial grouping of left activists; as a group it survives to this day having been able to sustain itself for longer than any other part of the Rainbow in the metropolitan area. And the Montgomery Rainbow has never abandoned its activism or its politics; but it also never developed the mass character of the less active, less radical one in D.C. The Prince George's County Rainbow in the other Maryland suburb of Washington brought local elected black officials together with social justice activists in an uneasy, yet productive union that was unable to survive the strain of unresolved issues of purpose.

A labor Rainbow was formed, too; true to form, it was largely unconnected to Rainbow groups outside trade union circles. Unfortunately, despite a promising beginning with a reach that embraced unionists from Virginia and Maryland along with those in D.C., the group was unable to develop to its full potential. Confusion was added to the mix as all

these existed in an ever-shifting set of relationships with Rainbow national headquarters and Jackson's campaign organization.

Although this picture varied from location to location, this pattern of distinct Rainbows with little contact with one another was a persistent problem. At first positive, the multiplicity of organizational forms reflecting the diversity of engaged communities, the openness and experimentation possible in this seemingly formless structure provided scope for people of differing views or degrees of commitment to find an appropriate level of involvement for themselves. That the Rainbow's development was left at that point, however, meant that no cross-community local infrastructure was created able to maintain activity or membership when the pace of events slowed down. Once the framework of a national movement disappeared, most surviving organizations were unable to keep their multi-racial character and/or hold onto a working-class base, and therefore unable to develop into decisive political formations even in limited arenas. The reality was that when the connection to Jackson and his presidential campaigns was severed, the Rainbow's ability to mobilize and serve as an engine of organized social protest proved insufficient to the purpose of maintaining an organization of those whom the Jackson campaigns had brought into action.

This outcome, this inability, goes to the heart of the tension the Rainbow could never resolve, the tension between the Rainbow as a coalition and the Rainbow as a movement. Those who measure progress in terms of the growth, the political maturation, the practical ability to influence legislation of established social justice organizations -- the NAACP, the AFL-CIO, large churches, NOW, the Sierra Club -- value the ties to political figures open to reform and to political activism consistent with agreed-upon program as the means to establish a needed national political presence. These had one set of expectations. Those who identify more with direct action -- as in the strike support committees for the Decatur (Ill.) "war zones," the street protests against particularly outrageous examples of police brutality, the direct action of groups like Act Up or Earth First -- tend to support political insurgencies, to look for ways to push issues beyond pre-set agendas, to reject the incremental approach of more institutionalized forms of struggle. Here the measure of success lies in the ability to mobilize and to change the prevailing notion of what is possible. So long as these two lines of thinking, of doing were integrated there was progress (and, with equal justice, one can say that as long as there was a perception of continuing progress they remained integrated). Once an overarching framework was gone, the bonds formed over the previous years failed to hold, the loose threads which tied together the various parts of the Rainbow quickly became unraveled. In D.C., outside of very small circles, the support for the Rainbow died when the Rainbow died, an absence especially noticeable as municipal politics soon took a decided step to the right.

This divide in the Rainbow roughly corresponds to today's divide over electoral participation, over whether or not to work within the Democratic Party, and whether to support its candidates, and over how to build an independent political alternative. The easy answer to this dilemma is to assert the impossibility of a solution, setting the one side against the other in an assumed necessary antagonism. The Rainbow's eventual

failure does seem to give credence to such an outlook -- that is, as long as its initial rise and its very real achievements lie forgotten. Rather than accepting this self-defeating assumption of an essential incompatibility between action and organization, the challenge is to face up to the difficult, essential task of building stable, participatory organizations that represent working people, while also supporting the spontaneous, self-organized movements of popular discontent as they arise.

## V

Discovering how to build a bridge to link these alternative approaches begins with understanding the depth of a problem too often underestimated. What is under consideration is a conflict that has bedeviled radical movements at crucial times and places throughout history; evident around the world, it has been particularly problematic over the course of our country's past. Many examples can be given of organizations unable to sustain themselves after a period of rapid expansion and dramatic impact; one need but think of the Knights of Labor, the IWW, the Garvey movement, SNCC, SDS to name but a few. To avoid such a fate, others have attempted to buy survival at the price of a bureaucratic compromise that inhibited popular initiative; instances of a list easily extended include the Populist Party's support of William Jennings Bryan, the Cold War CIO and NAACP's anti-communist witch hunting, and the swallowing of New Politics into McGovern's 1972 presidential campaign.

This was a phenomenon analyzed about 30 years ago in Frances Fox Piven's and Richard Cloward's *Poor People's Movements: How They Succeed; Why They Fail*, a work that examined how the urge to consolidate gains made in open forms of struggle that participants control themselves leads to formations based on exclusion and the suppression of popular initiative. Their study ends with an analysis of the dissolution of the National Welfare Rights Organization in the wake of the demoralizing, splintering effect of its attempted transformation into a centralized group limiting local autonomy. Bearing in mind all the many differences, it seems a fate that foreshadowed the Rainbow's.

One particular reason in the U.S. for the intractability of the tension Piven and Cloward discuss has to do with the structure of our political system which tends to fragment (and thus limit) democratic governance. Thus the multiplicity of local elected offices, the autonomy this gives many officials from even city-wide, let alone state or federal offices (true today even given an ever more intrusive, centralized federal government) also means that local mobilizations against unjust authority can take place without direct reference to national organizations which can appear to be more encumbrance than help. If a group is challenging discrimination at Denny's, attempting to block the opening of a Wal-Mart, trying to keep a public school, a hospital, a fire station open-- all these are generally fought out in very narrow confines, confines in which national progressive social justice organizations seem irrelevant or tangential (as do Democratic / Republican labels, for that matter). When confronted with a behemoth like Wal-Mart the battle is often lost, but enough victories are won this way to make such localism appear viable, especially in the absence of an alternative. Even union bargaining follows an analogous path, the globalized economy notwithstanding; negotiations on issues from work rules to

shift schedules, issues intimately connected to everyday concerns, tend to take place at the local level. All this is positive as far as it goes, an aspect of our democratic heritage essential to use if our democracy is to become real-- people should have power to exercise control over those matters that lie closest to home. Therein lies the rub; power doesn't lie at the local level, which is why such action in and of itself can only take people so far. Local self-activity is almost always defensive, victories won often soon lost; the uneven nature of what is achieved contributes to the disparate social conditions under which we live that inhibit solidarity. In order to get at root causes and fundamental solutions, national forms of organization with real coherence are needed. Since the same decentralized political structure also weakens national party formation (one reason corporate involvement in Democratic and Republican Party decision-making, in government itself, is so direct), national social justice organizations become even more important than they might otherwise be, for social struggles to go beyond holding the line.

Unfortunately such organizations (the same as those mentioned above, the AFL-CIO, NAACP, NOW *et al.*) tend to try and create such coherence by the adoption of comprehensive programs that almost of necessity gloss over particular flashpoints that don't fit into the big picture they see, often making them unresponsive to waves of protest generated locally based on dynamics unplanned in any headquarters. Furthermore, the kind of unity they create is at times more limited than that developed in those local battles that turn expansive; as membership-based groups with defined constituencies they in practice (though never acknowledged in press releases) prioritize issue-based unity-- fair trade, affirmative action, choice-- that is more limiting.

This conflict over centralization / decentralization has another negative consequence when it leads to unproductive internal conflicts. At its most extreme this can mean a parochialism on a local level that ignores the wider impact of a given set of actions as against an attempt by undemocratic means to impose a set of policies by a national leadership that ignores or discounts reality on the ground (the mid-80s strike at the Hormel meatpacking plant in Minnesota gave a vivid, costly example of both ends of this equation).

There is another kind of divide, closer to that which Piven and Cloward examined, one which presents an even more basic difficulty-- and that lies in the efforts of those already organized to preserve what they have, as distinct from those without organization (or those organized with the weakest representation) who seek to attain what others have won. A case in point: health care -- union members with good negotiated benefits, while supporting national health as an ideal, while understanding the implications of rising health care costs on all bargaining issues, nonetheless tend to put more energy into preserving the benefits they have against attack than they do for a universal plan which, no matter how good it might be, is less tangible. The immediate needs of the uninsured are, obviously, understood differently. Despite the fact that practical politics, to be effective, requires addressing the needs of the insured and uninsured, despite the genuine desire for a common approach; the difficulty in overcoming disunity has kept the goal of doing so meaningfully elusive. A similar picture can be drawn of numerous other issues,

all exacerbated in a time of reaction. Yet the Rainbow's success did come in a period of reaction in the face of a divide within the social justice movement that was initially more explicit than usual. Mondale's 1984 campaign, begun with an unprecedented pre-primary endorsement by the AFL-CIO, soon joined by endorsements of most other major national social justice organizations, gave voice to those represented who found themselves under direct attack by the Reagan Administration. Alternatively, Jackson's campaign at that time was one which gave voice to the unorganized, the unrepresented, the excluded, those whom liberal and Democratic politics usually took for granted.

As Jackson's campaign presented a more comprehensive, a more direct, challenge to Reagan than did Mondale, as the Rainbow provided an organized forum to bring represented and unrepresented together, Jackson began to broaden his base. Mondale's subsequent defeat in the general elections further exposed the weakness of top-down coalition organizing; the contrast with the enthusiasm and hope inspired by Jackson, the incisiveness of the social critique he presented, and the Rainbow's continued presence after the elections was reflected in the growth of his support. By 1988 Jackson was able to call upon significant support from within those organizations that had supported Mondale, even from within those whose leadership would have preferred a less challenging candidate, in this way increasingly bridging this organizational divide.

The greater the success, however, the greater the pressure. A final level of division, one less visible but no less real for that, has to do with that pressure and its impact on reform throughout our history. Governing interests, business interests, have often proved that they can be malleable when it comes to making concessions around narrowly defined issues. This malleability, however, only goes so far and is surpassed by the intensity of reaction against reform movements when they begin to challenge fundamentals--especially when the fracturing, the divisions fostered in our society show signs of being healed. It is a history that, more than once, has led leaderships to pull back from what appeared destruction by repression into self-defeating compromises. It may be an imperfect parallel, but nonetheless one can see a consequence of this unpalatable choice in the violence of an assassin's bullet that killed Martin Luther King Jr. being followed soon thereafter by the 1968 dissolution of the Poor People's Movement, and the Rainbow's dissolution as Jackson moved toward an accommodation with the Democratic Party leadership he had been challenging.

## VI

Attempts have been made to learn from the Rainbow's collapse, differing paths taken by participants all with the aim of continuing the work of building an independent progressive / left political vehicle with deep roots and widespread support. These initiatives have made contributions and recorded successes; none has fully overcome the internal conflicts upon which the Rainbow foundered. Looking at the distinct solutions sought since 1991 can shed further light on considerations to take into account when charting our course beyond 2004.

Ron Daniels, one of the principal people (and one of the most principled) in the Rainbow's leadership, fought to maintain it as an independent political force and took

one road by running for President in 1992 as a third-party candidate on a platform that explicitly articulated the radical implications of the ideas contained within the Jackson campaigns. His stress on the need to create an organization that clearly broke with the Democratic Party, the reaffirmation of an unapologetic, open anti-racism, anti-imperialist outlook was shared by NCIPA (National Committee for Independent Political Action), many of whose members had been key to the life of local Rainbows, and drew on activists from the National Black Political Assembly which Daniels had previously chaired (and which had been instrumental in Jackson's initial run for office). Daniels was solidly committed to organizing rooted in the black community and to a vision of multiracial unity that began with unity amongst the most oppressed and impoverished in our society.

Despite the support of people who, like Daniels himself, had played important roles in enabling Jackson's campaigns to win the support of millions of people, he was able to retain only a fraction of the Rainbow's organizational and the campaign's electoral support. The cross-class alliances, the very ambiguities and contradictions Jackson embodied, however frustrating and self-defeating these often were, proved to be an important factor in his appeal at a time of confusion such as we were (and are) living through. More importantly, being cut off from the Democratic Party and allied national progressive organizations with large memberships limited the resources at his disposal; it also cut his campaign off from constituencies needed to give an independent party a foundation upon which to build. This took from Daniel's campaign a sense that it was winnable, a sense that it could become a permanent factor in community life, giving his effort a Quixotic tone that made it especially difficult to translate sympathy with his agenda into active support from those groups of people he was addressing. The Greens took a superficially similar direction; in existence prior to 1984 many Greens did take part in the Rainbow, attracted by its radicalism-- and drew from the experience a confirmation of the belief that alternative politics should of necessity take the form of a third party. Reflecting that orientation, they have put their energy into running candidates on their own ticket for local and national office, culminating in Nader's 2000 candidacy that gave the Greens national visibility. Catching the militancy of the anti-globalization movement, expressing the anger many felt at Clinton-Gore's retreat from liberalism, Nader won far more votes than any other independent presidential candidate in many years; the middle-class voters to whom he appealed proved far more likely to cast a symbolic protest vote than those (the ones to whom Daniels spoke) whose immediate needs were more pressing.

All this came at a cost; the Greens (in direct contrast with Daniels) have made, with but a few isolated exceptions, no serious attempt to develop as a multiracial organization. Nader's campaign platform reflected this; despite the freedom from compromise possible due to the Greens' independence from the Democratic Party, his focus on economic justice issues to the comparative neglect of social justice issues meant his program was narrower than Jackson's. Tellingly, election-time votes have not been turned into political strength; the Greens have been unable to impact legislation or popular organizing to the degree their numbers should allow. A focus on elections has kept them on the periphery of ongoing organizing reflected in the small role the Greens, as a

political party, have played in the antiwar movement. The strained ties they have with other organizations, local or national, stemming from their election strategy, have made them marginal even in areas, such as electoral reform or fair trade, so central to their appeal.

The Greens' dilemma was actually heightened by their relationship with Nader; running him for President was an attempt to gain national credibility so as to aid their local organizations, but the national campaign in 2000 was not rooted in such organizations and so proved of less value than hoped. Nader's 2004 run for President demonstrates a lack of accountability, a lack of respect for the Greens' democratic decision making that shows the flaws in this strategy-- leaving the Greens as a political party with no evident strategy as to how to use the undeniable support they have to become a fulcrum of progressive politics nationally. That was evident in David Cobb's campaign. Unlike Nader, his goal was to build the Green Party without breaking ties with progressives who continued to work within the Democratic Party. Yet this only magnified the Greens' weakness as a national party. Cobb's vote was negligible, the Greens' political impact marginal.

A third path has been taken by the Labor Party, one significantly different from the other two (although with a program similar in many respects to that of the Greens) as it is a political party that neither runs nor endorses candidates for office. This because, rather than building a party of those largely unorganized, it aims to build an organization of radical politics institutionally rooted-- that is, to be the class-conscious expression of union members and, through them, of the broader working class. Doing so is seen as a means of addressing weaknesses found in the Rainbow (and in most other alternative politics) by creating a vehicle for working people of their own, a structure not dependent on charismatic leaders or middle-class activists, not subject to the ups and downs of enthusiasm usually characteristic of third parties.

Concentrating its energy on organizing around social justice issues like universal health care, the Labor Party has attempted to move unionists beyond demands for piecemeal reforms, to overcome the divisions which have weakened labor at the bargaining table as it has politically. Doing so it has moved beyond its original base among skilled oil and chemical worker locals from the late founder Tony Mazzochi's OCAW, gaining support from the California Nurses Association, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, among a few central labor councils and pockets elsewhere in the labor movement.

But nowhere has the Labor Party become a decisive force, electoral abstentionism both reflecting and exacerbating its weakness. The policy of neither running nor supporting candidates is for that reason not meant to be permanent; rather it stems from a recognition that the Labor Party's base among unionists is not strong enough to make electoral participation meaningful. Behind this there lurks a fear that, lacking a critical mass of members, a labor ballot line could be used by horse-trading local officials, or by people on the left with no support beyond a small circle of friends, resulting in either case with a loss of credibility among the rank and file. Yet not participating reduces its relevance to the most active and aware unionists whose support is essential to its future.

Although active and an important voice within the trade union movement, the Labor Party remains too small to influence the AFL-CIO or to have a strong impact on the issues it is raising-- and without a clear strategy of how to grow to the point where its voice will be heard. Building a clear class-conscious presence in labor also requires a real connection to equivalent sentiment outside a union framework, a need that also remains to be met.

A final approach is that taken by the Working Families Party in New York (and paralleled to some extent by other survivors of the New Party such as Progressive Maryland), a party that has prioritized building coalitions between labor and community organizations via local electoral politics-- the goal being a strong, genuinely independent force that largely functions within the Democratic Party in order to empower progressive sentiment usually ignored or taken for granted. In this way, and unlike the other formations with some roots in the Rainbow, the WFP (reflecting the perspective of Dan Cantor, who was the 1988 Jackson campaign labor coordinator) has been attempting to build on the legacy of working inside as well as outside the two-party system.

To this end, the WFP both runs candidates on its own line against conservative Democrats and Republicans and also supports liberal / progressive Democrats in its own name (which in New York means on its own ballot line). The WFP has been geared to doing patient nuts-and-bolts local organizing, careful work meant to build the trust needed for lasting coalitions. This has already led to some meaningful victories and does hold the potential for a good deal more-- not, however, without overcoming certain fundamental difficulties, a key one being that an orientation toward the Democratic Party, necessary in many respects, can become too parochial if it becomes too narrow a focus.

More significantly, coalition politics can be limiting, especially when the organization that brings the coalition together is weaker than its partners, making the core dependent on (or powerless to object to) decisions and compromises by its partners without having an equal voice in the process. As, almost by definition, a union or community group will have a narrower, more specific agenda than a political party does, this can prove to be limiting. The lack of a kind of critical autonomy has also made it hard for the WFP to build an individual membership / activist base for which it is the primary organization, at least on the scale needed for long-term stability (let alone have a genuinely transformative impact on local politics).

Finally, the dependence on coalition partners so necessary for meaningful electoral participation can come at a price of a strong relationship with independent social movements-- a problem complicated by the WFP being forced by circumstances (the circumstances of the New Party's dissolution as a national organization) to organize on an almost wholly local plane. Experience has shown that such connections-- including taking an active role on national / international issues, on questions of war or peace are needed in the long run to keep progressive local politics progressive.

Noting weaknesses in the initiatives described above is not meant to disparage them or to deny their importance; each represents a part of what needs to be done in order to give

voice and strength to the discontent in our society; all four of these initiatives have been positive in advancing the overall struggle. What it does do, however, is serve as a reminder of the difficulties, of the contradictory choices, that confronted the Rainbow, a reminder of the objective obstacles that stood in its path. Given these contradictions, activists should not have been surprised at the Rainbow's collapse; rather, they should have all the more respect for its ability to survive as long as it did. The Rainbow's potential is underscored by its successors, for it had been able to give expression within itself to each of the political tendencies discussed above.

## VII

How to overcome the obstacles the Rainbow and other movements and organizations have stumbled over in the struggle to realize social justice in our society therefore remains a question to be answered. The question-- and answer-- is intimately related to the one with which we began, that asks how a weak, divided left can play a meaningful role organizing resistance to the dangerous direction our society is headed. For the left's political purpose lies in building just the sort of unity among different communities, among people with varying perspectives reflecting a range of social movements, the range of working people, as that which the Rainbow expressed-- a diverse unity that was able to act together for a common purpose, a unity grounded in participatory structures, one defined by a program and a vision that speak as much to hope as to need.

Measured by that standard, the organized left's participation in the Rainbow fell short -- defining, for this purpose, the left as that distinct part of the wider progressive community that is explicit in a commitment to socialism. Of course, another definition sees the Rainbow itself as part of the left; a failure to understand that both these definitions can be valid at the same time is itself a reason for some of the political mistakes that were then made.

This is not to say that groups and individuals on the left didn't play an important, positive role in the Rainbow, for they did; it simply is to note that what was done was insufficient. Important as it is to learn from the mistakes of Jackson and others involved, what is more important is to learn from one's own -- our own -- failures, as that is where change begins. Key when it comes to what was not done is the ambivalence shown by DSA and by the CPUSA. Neither organization made the commitment to the Rainbow or to the Jackson presidential campaigns that their longstanding programmatic priorities ought to have led them to make. The Communist Party's strategic orientation was geared to the formation of an anti-monopoly coalition; the Rainbow -- linking as it did the black community, significant (and growing) sectors of labor, and social movements embracing the poor and middle class, as well as reaching other Third World communities -- embodied all the elements called for, yet it was never approached as such. Equally, DSA's Democratic Agenda strategy (which still had life in it in the early and mid-1980s) of building the "left wing of the possible" by connecting grassroots movements to organized labor in coalition with other progressives as part of a struggle to make the Democratic Party an unambiguous vehicle of a renewed New Deal, was something consistent with (only possible through) the Rainbow -- yet it wasn't accepted as such.

Instead there was a tendency on the part of too many within each organization to focus on the Rainbow's all-too-evident mistakes, weaknesses and vacillations -- the ease of being able to do so serving for some as a substitute for the needed, critical involvement. Within DSA, there were specific reasons for this hesitation; differences over Israeli/Palestinian issues loomed large, becoming a major internal dispute, as did differences over assessing the nation's political mood. These, in turn, were tied to an underestimation of the need to address issues of race and U.S. foreign policy as central to building a broad-based working-class movement; the dominant attitude of the leadership at the time saw these as potentially divisive unless subsumed under a more narrowly constructed economic agenda (which is the liberal/labor approach today of America Coming Together opposition to Bush). As to the CPUSA, it was somewhat paralyzed by an internal crisis over how to respond to Gorbachev's reforming policies in the Soviet Union. The Communist Party also had overestimated the progressive potential of the coalition formed around Mondale in 1984, a mistake which led it to underestimate the Jackson campaign's importance not only then, but still four years later. This partly stemmed from a huge overestimate of its own strength, one which led it to deny in practice the importance of independent black leadership in the struggle against racism and for social justice within working-class struggle. Substituting itself for the movement, the CP turned away from what had been its position in previous years. Underlying this lack of response in each organization was this common tendency to counterpose coalition-building to movement organizing, fear of alienating potential allies leading to an inhibition to act. This provides a prime example of how an orientation toward building coalitions can contain the seed of the danger of allowing one's outlook to become static, to not notice the ground shifting as people act on their own initiative. In addition, both reacted with discomfort at the other elements of the left to be found in the Rainbow, reflecting a view of left unity that sees an acceptable version only when one's own organization is primary -- a parochialism indicative of how people trying to be broad can, if not careful, wind up being almost as narrow as those attempting to be pure.

DSA did eventually endorse the Rainbow, and many members were active in Jackson's presidential campaign in 1988; as a whole, however, what was done was too little too late. The failure to act more affirmatively, to take advantage of the possibilities then afforded, meant that an opportunity for DSA to develop a more multi-racial character was lost, and subsequent efforts to better root itself in local and national politics were thereby also made more difficult. The transformation of U.S. politics (the transformation of the Democratic Party if that is to be the means to that end) is dependent on autonomous organizations, initiatives of just the sort that the Rainbow embodied -- even when this creates unexpected challenges, exacerbates tensions otherwise buried. DSA's failure lay in trying to sidestep that challenge.

Furthermore, any socialist organization, if it is to move beyond isolated circles of like-minded individuals, needs to root itself in social protest that grows out of community struggles, to root in particular communities of people -- something that becomes possible when inchoate or fragmented social protest shows signs of broader organization, as was the case with the Rainbow in the 1980s. This is likely to create tension and confusion; it is easier to be "right" while on the sidelines dispensing the political wisdom of socialist

analysis to leaders of public organizations, though experience tends to show that the political value of doing such by itself is negligible. The purpose of socialist organization is to find a way to develop unity from within the confusion of varied voices that comprise any movement -- something impossible to accomplish when one stands outside.

This was understood in theory; practice, however, did not correspond-- as a part of the Rainbow it was possible to envision a meaningful political role for DSA; apart from it, harder to even imagine one. And since then, DSA has been without a political project in which it could make a significant national contribution. Failing to grasp the opportunity then presented meant that DSA's large membership increase that followed in the first half of the 1990s proved temporary.

That increase was due to the reawakening of political activism by many inspired by the Jackson campaigns; it was due also to the search for a new home by people of other sectors of the left experiencing their own loss of direction, a beginning of a crisis that has only deepened in the years since. A crisis due to loss of direction accurately describes the situation of the CP, the national leadership's passivity in relation to the Rainbow as significant a factor in its subsequent split as were global ideological issues. The inability of the Communist Party to reform itself was of a piece with its inability to act decisively (or even coherently) at a time of political ferment. It was an instance in which the cost of not acting proved higher than the cost of engagement. Those members most rooted in public activism, especially in the black community, but amongst many local union activists as well, were especially alienated by the CP's failure to make building the Rainbow a priority. Out of this came the split that formed the Committees of Correspondence, a split that left both parts in a weakened state-- and, similar to the problem facing the entire left, the Cof C, unable to locate itself within a broader context in the Rainbow's absence, has been unable to root itself anywhere. This has led to a situation in which most members' activity is not tied to the C of C's activity; this situation contributes to declining membership and levels of participation. As to what the Rainbow lost, one can only speculate. Had DSA and the CPUSA, two comparatively large organizations with significant peripheries (that is, networks of friends and sympathizers), contacts in large national social justice organizations and diverse activists in a range of areas across the country, committed themselves affirmatively to build the Rainbow, there would have been far greater likelihood to give greater permanence to what was being created. If not terribly helpful in thinking of a past which can't be rewritten, this observation is highly relevant to the future to be written.

In their absence, the principal socialist / Marxist organizations to play a substantial role in the Rainbow were smaller ones, notably the League of Revolutionary Struggle and Line of March, each of which threw itself into its life with a commitment DSA and the CP lacked. As Max Elbaum points out in a brief discussion of the Rainbow in his insightful book *Revolution in the Air*, these two groups, along with other survivors of the radicalized later New Left, such as Freedom Road, saw in it the opportunity to act on their anti-racist, anti-imperialist convictions on a mass scale. Seizing the possibility, they played an important, positive role in developing the Rainbow's program and organization. Unfortunately, they were too small, with too narrow a base outside their

ranks, to act with the comprehensive strength called for by the situation at the moment. Moreover, they had developed a style of work that relied on too few a number of active members (with too great an internal divide between members and non-members) sufficient to give shape and help keep alive over the long term a movement that developed so rapidly, was so broad, as that with which they were now faced.

There is a great difference between exercising leadership within a coalition in which one's own organization is a principal member, and exercising leadership when a small part of a much larger whole; an enormous strain was put on those attempting to do so. In fact, the extreme effort this entailed contributed to the demise of each shortly after the Rainbow's.

The collapse of LRS and Line of March after their having played so significant a national role was not due solely to structural, organizational problems; a basic political one was involved. This political problem was due to the two working at cross-purposes despite both groups having helped shape the distinctive progressive outlook of the Rainbow -- the one organization emphasized the relative importance of Jackson's presidential campaigns and national political coalitions formed around it while the other stressed the need to maintain the Rainbow's autonomy and locally-based radicalism. The rigidity of the line of difference between the two perspectives reflected a tendency on the part of each organization to adhere too rigidly to an already-determined programmatic direction even as the situation changed (the opposite problem of that committed by DSA and the CPUSA, both of which erred by failing to implement their respective programs due to a sensitivity to the smaller rather than the larger picture). Because the left was unable to find a way to overcome the fracturing that prevented either course from coming to fruition, it was recreating within itself the same divisions plaguing the wider movement.

## VIII

These are divisions that remain, as seen in the Portside discussion with which we began. A discouraging commentary on all that had taken place, if that was all to be said, but it isn't. After all, an informal left unity did develop within the Rainbow, a coming together based on a shared commitment to resist Reagan-era reaction, based on a shared commitment to peace and justice, to change that would go beyond mere palliatives -- and to do so on a genuinely national scale. For anyone who experienced that sense at Rainbow meetings or Jackson campaign triumphs, it cut through the sense of defeat many shared at the waning of hopes that had been so strong little more than a decade earlier.

This was a unity composed of groups that had wholeheartedly thrown themselves into the work of the Rainbow, of individual members of groups which vacillated in their commitment and of leftists without any affiliation. An unplanned and informal coming together, it was able to overcome historical divides because of being rooted in a movement/organization much larger than the left itself. To be sure, this was a partial, imperfect unity, in that respect paralleling the partial, imperfect unity the Rainbow embodied on a greater scale. With all its imperfections, the left unity then created had a catalyzing impact, one which can be seen -- as can the Rainbow -- as prefiguring what may still be possible. Politically meaningful left unity (especially in electoral terms)

didn't survive much past the early 1990s; attempts thereafter to build on what had been created failed -- failed not because the mutual understanding of activists was forgotten, but because political activity again shrank to issue-specific arenas. Any left unity not rooted in common work, not rooted in a movement wider, more comprehensive than itself, remains a chimera. The reason should not be hard to see, for the purpose of the left is to build linkages within and amongst working people, activity that grows out of the resistance/aspirations expressed in daily life, in the forms people create in their workplaces, neighborhoods or self-defined communities. Isolated from that, one gets abstract argument or superficial agreement -- the reason why the left unity so talked-about is so rare. Unity, which is as much as to say a socialist program, is purposeful only when it comes from, and not only speaks to, people.

Needless to say, we are a long way from being there; the Rainbow, which had created the last (as in most recent, not final) possibility, can't be recreated; a new, improved version can't be willed into existence. What will come will have to flow from our current reality, one defined by an administration more aggressively reactionary than any we have faced before at a time when democratic structures are weaker than before. Insecurity and fear dominate millions of lives on a scale greater than at any time since the Depression; fear and hatred dominate political discourse more than at any time since the McCarthy era at its worst.

It is to this reality that our attention ought to be focused, for it is this that leads millions of people to turn away from problems of society in order to deal with those more immediate issues of private life that are graspable, a retreat seen in many who face poverty as in many whose standard of living is comfortable. Out of this, too, many accept the conservative mantra that poses an authoritarian solution of hierarchy (the content of the Christian right) as an answer to insecurity and fear, something that gains credibility the less the Democrats provide an alternative. For millions of others, of course, the Democrats are the alternative even as Democratic leadership, so plainly visible in the Kerry campaign, does all it can to limit the alternative it presents. This was the 2004 election writ large -- with the intolerance of fear, fueled by corporate money, proving stronger than an energized opposition that lacked an organization in which that opposition could fully express itself. In all this the left, if noticed at all, is dismissed as too inconsequential to provide an answer. Where the left is relevant is in the area where resistance is more directly expressed; from the 1999 global justice actions in Seattle, to the anti-war actions on the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, to many more of a more local character, these are more widespread and reflect a more complete critique of where our society is headed than has been the case at least since the last years of the war in Vietnam. The left is also a part of the inner life of those large national organizations, the AFL-CIO, NAACP, NOW et al., that have assumed a more important role politically over the past twenty years, becoming as well more open to action outside the narrow streams in which they moved in, say, 1984. This may still be inadequate, yet the change below the surface this reflects nonetheless is a portent of further change.

To some extent this growing opposition reflects a different type of resistance, one that often eschews political forms seen as corrupted or irrelevant in favor of expressions of an

individual humanism that gives in to neither the greed of the market or the fear of the “other,” of a sense of giving that rejects the atomization upon which power rests. It is this spirit upon which the Rainbow was able to draw; still today, it represents a striving that speaks of the possibility of the world we live in being challenged as prelude to being changed to become the better world that is possible. Making sense of this politically, finding a way to broaden the scope and give direction to the various levels of challenge which exist is where the role of the organized left is to be found, though to say this means being acutely aware of the disproportion between what is needed and what can be done. As noted above the current Bush Administration can be seen as a more determined (more desperate) version of the Reagan Administration; opposition to it can also be seen as more determined (and more desperate) than that of the early 1980s; yet the left, while sharing in that latter sentiment, has only become weaker than it had been in its already weakened state.

This weakness can be overcome, though only if there is a greater degree of unity than we normally see. An example of what not to do was demonstrated earlier this year in the Democratic primaries; though differing in election strategy, left activists supporting Dean, Kucinich, Mosley-Braun, Sharpton shared opposition to the war and broad agreement on an alternative agenda for the country (that is, the activists politically had more in common than the candidates they supported). Had left organizations coordinated their individual efforts more with the anti-war (and other progressive) movements their political impact might have been much greater than it was, even if Kerry had nonetheless emerged as the nominee.

This brings us back to our original question of how a weak, divided left can play a role in organizing resistance to the dangerous direction our society is headed. It means that in debates such as those that took place in Portside, the question uppermost is how to build a bridge between seemingly opposed election strategies so that our limited strength is not further undermined by working at cross-purposes; that the goals of preventing Bush from further implementation of his program and laying the foundation of a stronger independent movement for social justice after the election are seen as complementary; likewise the parallel focus on both the most obvious immediate injustices of the system and their underlying causes.

If doubt exists that this can be done then the Rainbow’s achievement in building unity should be recalled -- a unity all the stronger as it was based on attacking the principal source of disunity, the disparate conditions under which people live in our society -- and on accomplishing this by rooting demands in the particular communities in which people live and move, so that by raising particular concerns, the general interests of working people are advanced. On the other hand, if we are to move forward it means being able to overcome the weakness of the Rainbow by rooting national coalitions in local formations, building unity from the bottom up. The more this is done, the more likely it will be to reduce the distance between movement and structure that Piven and Cloward noted, to build organization that is stable and democratic, able to debate and to act, inclusive within, focused on the wider world without.

Helping to build such formations locally while maintaining links nationally is where the left can play a role even if, as at present, in limited ways. The left won't grow until it is itself better rooted, until it becomes the vehicle people use to create an alternative. The steps taken today are ones which can help prepare the ground so that in any future broad-base political opposition, whatever form it takes, the left will be in a better position to play the role it might have played in the Rainbow, the connecting link to combine the various unities of popular participation that help people glimpse the future they can make.

## IX

That future will be realizable when the combined unities we seek are joined not only in what is being opposed, but joined as well to the vision of what can be to which we aspire. The Rainbow was more than a ramshackle coalition in part because Jackson's slogan "Keep Hope Alive" had tremendous resonance, challenging the hopelessness of those dispossessed, those marginalized by the system in which we live. Although, like any other phrase, "Keep Hope Alive" can be trivialized, the challenge it poses to despair when the words are attached to work, to commitment, to creative possibility, is not so easily denied. What new form will arise to revive that hope is, of course, something that can't be predicted. In acting now to prepare the ground for the next wave of challenge, the legacy of the Rainbow ought to be kept in mind. Its failure, when all is said and done, was not due to having attempted too much; rather it was because neither time nor strength existed to attempt more. We may yet find that in its failure were planted the seeds of future success. No pot of gold sits out there waiting to be discovered, no magical incantation can unveil the mists, open the ground in which it lies hidden. So too, past defeats can't be erased, desire alone is unable to end the injustices that have afflicted too many too long. Yet Rainbows do exist, the blended colors in the sky, distinct, inseparable, stand always as the harbinger of the good weather to come after the storm has passed.

An apt description of the beauty become visible when we find ways to make stronger each instance of solidarity that does exist, create a unity that looks outward to all the ways people strive to make of life something larger than what is given. With imagination, with understanding, with persistence, we can act on those hopes briefly given light by the Rainbow, act to build a world of peace and justice. Hopes too often denied, hopes never extinguished, remain as hopes that one day will be transformed into life.

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Kurt Stand  
#42289-083  
Virginia Hall  
FCC Petersburg Low  
P.O. Box 1000  
Petersburg, VA 23804