

## # 36 Grassroots Politics

It was the fall of 1948, I was entering my senior year at City College, and the country was in turmoil, politically. Harry Truman was running for a second term against a strong Republican candidate, Thomas E. Dewey. Strom Thurmond was threatening to split the solid South as a Dixiecrat candidate. And Henry Wallace, who had been FDR's Secretary of Agriculture and third term vice president, was running for president as the candidate of the Progressive Party, speaking out against the growing cold war with the Soviet Union. In New York, there were several local political contests that reflected the Truman-Wallace split.

My politics from my earliest years was on the left. My mother considered herself a socialist. She had expressed support for Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas when they ran for President, and for the Socialist candidates for congress, Victor Berger and Meyer London. Her loyalty to her union, the ILGWU, included supporting its politics which also was Socialist. That is, up to 1932. When Roosevelt ran for President that year, Norman Thomas accused him of stealing his platform. Many of the labor unions that would have supported Thomas switched to Roosevelt and the Democratic Party, including the ILGWU. This upset many union members who objected to supporting a capitalist party. Their concerns were addressed in 1936 when the ILGWU, together with several other New York unions, formed the American Labor Party, giving them a political party that did not espouse capitalism, that endorsed Roosevelt, and that they could more comfortably support.

Throughout the 30s and 40s, long before McCarthy, communism seemed to color many political fights in New York. It split the labor movement, and by the early 40s, the American Labor Party, which had been formed by socialists, was taken over by a pro-communist faction. They succeeded in electing candidates for the New York City Council and the State Legislature. In 1944, the ousted socialists formed the Liberal Party. When FDR ran for a fourth term, he was endorsed by three political parties in New York: the Democratic, American Labor and Liberal Parties.

I considered myself part of the non-Communist left. If I had been approached by someone from the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL) I believe I would have joined. The fact is some friends who were members of American Youth for Democracy (AYD) did ask me to join their group, but I

suspected that it was too closely linked to the CP, and declined. Years later, I learned that AYD was formed by the CP the day after they disbanded the YCL (Young Communist League) as part of their popular front strategy. But I found myself taking part in marches and demonstrations where communist-front organizations kept showing up. It was annoying, but I refused to let their presence drive me away.

Which brings us to where I started: the fall of 1948. We were in the midst of the cold war. Stalin was no longer our ally. Hitler had been defeated and the world was being divided between US and Soviet spheres of influence. It was becoming clearer that the American Communist Party was being directed by the Soviet Union. However, there was a great big gray area: just because you supported many of the domestic causes that Communists advocated, this didn't make you a Communist. A growing number of Americans began questioning the loyalty of their fellow Americans who were for civil rights, social justice and an end to the cold war. I still maintained that I could be for peace and justice without being linked to the communists. And I certainly didn't consider myself a dupe when I chose to support Henry Wallace. I read PM, I listened to Johannes Steel and J. Raymond Walsh, the liberal radio commentators, and was a member of Young Progressives of America at CCNY. I guess I could have been called an anti-anti-Communist.

As the fall term started, my friend Bob Epstein and I decided that we should get involved in the Congressional campaign in our district. However, we were not 21, and could not vote, but we felt we could do something that would stimulate interest in the contest. We came up with the idea of sponsoring a debate between the two candidates. Our hidden agenda was to get more exposure and hopefully, support, for the American Labor Party candidate Leo Isacson. In the 24<sup>th</sup> Congressional District (the East Bronx), Congressman Leo Isacson had won a surprise victory in a special election earlier that year as the ALP candidate. (The only other ALP Congressman was Harlem's Vito Marcantonio.) Isacson was now running for reelection against the Democratic Party candidate, Isidore Dollinger, who had the backing of Tammany Hall and the full range of politicals from the center-left to the right. The Republican Party did not put up a candidate. Both Dollinger and Isacson had served in the State Legislature. In fact, when Isacson ran as an ALP candidate against a Democrat, he had Republican backing.

So how do two 20 year olds pull this off? We needed a place to hold the debate. Around the corner from where we lived was a community center called Juvenile House. The perfect location. We went to the director and explained what we wanted to do, and persuaded him that it was his civic duty to allow us to use his facility. We then called each of the candidates' offices and persuaded them that it was their civic duty to have their candidates meet in face-to-face debate so that the voters in the 24<sup>th</sup> Congressional district can see and hear them. How we were able to do this, and find a mutually agreeable date, I have no idea, but we did. Then we prepared a leaflet, got access to a mimeograph machine, bought a ream of paper, ran off the leaflets, went door-to-door in the neighborhood and distributed the leaflet announcing the candidates forum, and put up the leaflet in stores in the area. Bob and I had never done anything like this before. We nervously awaited the evening of the forum. Slowly, the people came out. The room filled up. The candidates debated. We pulled it off. We were thrilled.

The truth is, we were not the League of Women Voters or the Non-Partisan League. We were quite partisan. We wanted to help get Isacson reelected by posing as two civic-minded college students sponsoring a debate, with ties to neither candidate. We have no idea whether the debate changed anyone's mind. Dollinger won overwhelmingly. In the Presidential race, Bob and I and all of our friends supported Wallace and tried to convince our parents to vote for him. They, older and wiser, voted for Truman. None of us was heart-broken. We knew that Wallace couldn't win, but we wanted to speak out against the cold war. However, if there had been a larger turnout for Wallace, it could have resulted in a Dewey victory. Shades of Ralph Nader.

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