



The Working Families Party rewrites the script for pro-worker politics

We may have found a new answer to the question, "What's the matter with Kansas?"

Author Thomas Frank posed that question in the title of his much-cited book that explores "how conservatives won the heart of America." It's a question that resonates in every state where working people continue to vote for politicians who support trade deals that trash our jobs, bail out corporations that renege on their retirement promises and let employers like Wal-Mart encourage their workers to sign up for health insurance paid by us taxpayers.

The new answer to that question comes from New York, where the Working Families Party is using old-fashioned issues organizing and an electoral system that empowers minor parties to force both Democrats and Republicans to pay attention to its pro-worker agenda.

New York may be a blue state in presidential elections, but it has a Republican governor, and Republicans control one legislative chamber. So if the Working Families Party can force a minimum wage increase through New York's Legislature and override a gubernatorial veto, as it did last year, perhaps it offers something worth copying in red states like Kansas and blue states like Oregon and Washington.

What Frank dissects in his book about Kansas is the politics of diversion. Working people might wake up worrying about the cost of health care 50 weeks out of the year. But, somehow, during the two weeks before an election, they start obsessing about their right to keep their guns or someone else's right to marry a person of the same sex — and those issues suddenly overwhelm the debate about how we can make health care more affordable.

Then those hot-button social issues start to fade the day after the election, and working people start worrying all over again about rising health care costs and their shrinking family budgets.

The antidote to the politics of diversion is the politics of focus: Stick to the issues that matter and keep talking to voters, 52 weeks a year, about what their elected officials are doing to help or hurt their jobs and their families' well-being.

I noted in this column last year how the AFL-CIO's Working America program is doing exactly that. But the Working Families Party does that and more. Because it is a political party, it has the right to nominate candidates in federal, state and local elections. And, because New York's election laws encourage major party candidates to seek and run with the endorsement of minor parties, the Working Families Party has maximized the power of its ballot line to bring wayward Democrats home on pocketbook issues and attract Republicans who support a good jobs agenda.

New York's system of voting is called "fusion." It sounds arcane, but we used to have this system in Oregon and Washington, until big-money interests forced its repeal in the early 1900s. It allows minor parties to co-endorse candidates of the major parties and present those candidates separately to the voters on the minor party's ballot line; then it combines or "fuses" the votes that candidates receive when they appear more than once on the ballot. With this system, minor parties are no longer forced to play the role of spoilers in elections. When they organize well on issues that resonate with the voters, they can bring the major party candidates to their doorstep, begging for that extra

listing on the party's ballot line that can mean the difference between winning and losing a close election.

The experience in New York also shows that working people, who may be divided over the Democratic and Republican Party platforms on social issues, are often willing to set those concerns aside and cast their votes for candidates of either party who support pro-worker positions on economic issues. When they can vote for a candidate on the ballot line of a party that represents clear solutions to their everyday concerns, they're no longer faced with the dilemma of wasting their vote in order to send a message to the top candidates.

Fusion voting gives more power to the voters, who can both send a message to a candidate and put that candidate in office with votes attached to their message.

There's a song about New York that says if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere. The Working Families Party is taking its show on the road now with the promise of focus and fusion as the means to force politicians to deliver for working families again, state by state. That show will be playing at the International Longshore and Warehouse Union Hall in Portland Friday, Feb. 3, and it could be ready for a long run.

For more information, go to www.oregonwfp.org.

(Full disclosure: During the past month, I have been paid to provide consulting services to the Working Families Party in Oregon and Washington. But I was not asked to write this column, nor was I compensated for writing this column.)

Tim Nesbitt is a former president of the Oregon AFL-CIO.

Bush makes recess appointments to NLRB

WASHINGTON, D.C. — President George W. Bush last month made two recess appointments to the five-member National Labor Relations Board. On Jan. 4 he appointed Republican Peter Kirsanow, and on Jan. 17 he named Democrat Dennis Walsh to serve on the Board. Under recess appointments they can serve until the adjournment of Congress in 2007.

This marks the first time that the NLRB has been at full strength since December 2004. The current members are Republicans Robert Battista, chair, and Peter Schaumber, and Democrat

Wilma Liebman.

During the holiday recess Bush also appointed Ronald Meisburg to serve as general counsel of the NLRB. Meisburg served on the NLRB from Jan. 12, 2004 to Dec. 8, 2004, also under a recess appointment by Bush.

Walsh served as a Board member from Dec. 30, 2000 to Dec. 20, 2001 under a recess appointment by President Bill Clinton, and again from Dec. 17, 2002, to Dec. 16, 2004, after being nominated by Bush and confirmed by the Senate. During the past year Walsh has been on Liebman's legal staff.

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