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No, Voting Won't Work

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Millions of Americans welcomed the Ralph Nader 2000 electoral campaign as a breath of fresh air in the stale atmosphere of corporate-controlled parties and politicians. The more Nader lambasted the corporations and their "Republican" party, the more popular he became, attracting larger crowds than Gore and Bush. Many people who didn't vote for Nader would have if they thought he could have won. The Nader campaign demonstrated, to those of us who blame corporate power for the problems in our society, that we are not alone.

But before deciding that an electoral strategy is a solution, we need to identify what exactly is the problem.

People increasingly realize that our seemingly unconnected problems -- the stress and difficulty that working people face in trying to support a family, the insecurity of people with serious health care needs, the destructive education reforms faced by students and teachers, the pollution of our water and air -- are all symptoms of the same problem. The majority of people, who want a more equal and cooperative and democratic world, are under attack by corporate and government leaders who dominate our society. The problem is that real democracy, in the sense of ordinary people shaping society by their values, doesn't exist -- not on the job, not in our government, not in our major institutions.

Real democracy must mean that ordinary people exercise effective power at every level of society to shape it with their shared values and shared vision. It can't be reduced to pulling a lever every four years. Winning real democracy therefore can only be done by ordinary people, in every place of work and neighborhood, acting directly and collectively to take possession of the world from the elite who claim to own it. It means creating a new kind of society from the ground up, one based on equality and commitment to each other. It means people joining together to defeat all the efforts of the elite to impose capitalist relations of competition and inequality.

For people to gain the confidence to take matters into their own hands requires building a mass movement with exactly this goal -- a revolutionary movement. Such a movement can succeed only by becoming a vast democratic force consciously determined to create a new society in its image. The movement must grow so large and popular that it can deprive the corporate rulers of the armed might of the state, by convincingly presenting itself, not the corporate-controlled government, as the legitimate authority. This is the solution to the problem of corporate power.

An electoral strategy actually undercuts this real solution. Urging people to vote is the opposite of urging them to join a revolutionary movement. The idea of voting is to elect other people to make changes *for* us. But the kind of changes we need can only be made *by* us. An electoral strategy keeps a movement passive, focused on what its candidates might do if elected, when it should be focused on what ordinary people themselves can do where they work and live. This is why the elite have historically used elections to contain anti-corporate movements.

An electoral strategy also prevents a movement from expressing the radical goals that most people want. Radical goals cannot be taken seriously in the absence of widespread confidence that there is a realistic way of achieving them. Only a mass revolutionary movement, in which ordinary people are the active force, can make radical changes in society. By making people place their hopes on some elected officials rather than on themselves, an electoral strategy eliminates any realistic basis for radical goals, and forces movements to trim and adapt their vision and message to what they believe is possible within the limitations of the established structures of power.

Nader's goal, for example, has never been to do away with corporate power but to regulate it so that it can operate in a more sustainable fashion. As he said in a recent *Harper's* interview, a free democracy is a precondition for a free market. Nader is not opposed to capitalism but only to its excesses.

We believe that most Americans want not just a reduction in corporate power but a profoundly different kind of society based on different values. The top priority for the anti-corporate movement should be to make people see that they are not alone in this aspiration, so that they will have the confidence to take over control of society from the ground up, without waiting for politicians to do for them what politicians cannot and will not do.

See World of Revolution

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