

PA Progressives Plan for New Battles

Written by Carl Davidson
Monday, 31 January 2011 00:00



Nearly 500 progressive and liberal organizers gathered at Pittsburgh's Sheraton Station Square over the sunny but bitterly cold weekend of Jan. 22-23 to drawn out the lessons of their setbacks in the 2010 elections and shape a new course for the future.

Under the theme of 'Taking Pennsylvania Forward,' the two-day meeting was mainly pulled together by four 'Organizing Sponsors'—Keystone Progress, a popular online communications hub for the state; SEIU, representing some 100,000 PA workers; the Alliance for American Manufacturing, a coalition between the United Steelworkers and advocates for new manufacturing enterprises; and Democracy for America, the outgrowth of the Howard Dean campaign in the Democratic Party.

A large number of unions other than the USW and SEIU also took part, as well as many local political, civil rights, women's rights, youth and environmental groups from around the state. Beaver County was represented by a delegation from the 4th CD Progressive Democrats of America.

Eileen Connelly of SEIU chaired the opening session, and started off making an assessment of progressive gains and losses. When she got to 'we have to continue pressing for and end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, she got a spontaneous round of loud applause. Her main task, however, was to introduce PA's Senator Bob Casey.

"I want to focus on the future," Casey began. "We need to put hope in the lead, and fear behind us. But hope comes from hard work and tough debates."

Casey has been a liberal voice in the Senate on most issues, most recently around the exploitation of the Marcellus Shale, a geological formation beneath Pennsylvania and

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surrounding states. The shale contains immense quantities of natural gas, but it can only be released by a process of 'hydraulic fracturing' or 'fracking'. Gas drillers go 4000 feet or more and then outward horizontally in a spoke-like array for up to a mile. Then a toxic brine is exploded underground, releasing the gas and bringing much of the brine back to the surface with it. There is great danger of polluting water supplies and toxic spills, among other hazards, and an insurgent movement critical of the process has been erupting through the region.

Casey noted that oil drilling and strip mining in the past had 'left scars on the land, our communities, and our workers.' He pledged to work for gas extraction that was 'done in a way protective to the environment, and the health and safety of workers and communities, too.' He ended by saying that, although he had to be a Senator for everyone, he always posed the question, 'For whom do you fight, who do you put first? It's the workers and their families that come first, especially the people without a voice in high places. They come first.'

That comment served as a perfect transition to the next speaker, Leo Gerard, International President of the United Steel Workers. He started off by noting the presence of a number of young people in the room, noting that the bleak future and high unemployment of many young workers was posing "basic questions about what kind of society do we want to become."

"In the Bush years," Gerard continued, "some 50,000 U.S. factories were shut down and moved abroad. We don't have a deficit crisis; we have a jobs crisis. And we better face up to the fact that we have to hit the streets, kick some ass, and mobilize to do something about it. We know we can't do it alone. The labor movement can't work in isolation from the environmental movement, in isolation from the women's movement, the civil rights movement, and so on."

Gerard indicated that the road ahead would be tough. "In my own naiveté," he explained, "I was dumb enough to assume that a Democratic Congress and a Democrat in the White House would put us on a different path." But in order to rebuild a new clean energy and green technology manufacturing base, the only thing that will turn the jobs crisis around, he went on, it was going to take a lot more organizing and developing our strength at the base and in the streets.

"I'm sick and tired of us whining about what the Democrats didn't do," he explained. "The tougher question is what are we doing, and do we have what it takes. Don't worry about attacking Obama; attack the money! It's Wall Street and the banks blocking a recovery and shipping our manufacturing abroad."

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Fired up by Gerard, the participants headed out for the first round of eight workshops sessions, with a total of some 72 workshops over the two days. The topics were wide ranging—the Marcellus Shale, gun violence, medical marijuana, hip-hop politics, social media, coalition building, green manufacturing and the economy, immigration reform, dealing with racism, marriage equality, women’s rights in society and the workplace, ending torture, running for office, winning elections and many more.

DFA ran a series of workshops over the two days focusing on grass roots organizing, campaign organizing, precinct organizing, and ‘get out the vote’ organizing. Attendees of the DFA workshops received a certificate and a handbook for organizing to run for office.

‘Building a 21st Century Economy’ was chaired and presented by two young women from the Blue-Green Alliance, Hillary Bright and Lauren Horne. “If we got the \$100 billion Obama wants for Green jobs,” said Horne, introducing their PowerPoint presentation, “that would mean \$4 billion for Pennsylvania, and that could turn into 86,845 jobs around the state. In addition to advocating new green energy manufacturing startups, the presenters also stressed the important of setting and enforcing regulatory standards, especially the Renewable Energy Standards and Clean Energy Standards.

“We also want to invite all of you to attend the upcoming annual ‘Good Jobs, Green Jobs conference in DC Feb 8-10 in DC,” said Bright, wrapping it up. “We had over 3000 people come over the past three years, where we go into all of this in much more detail.”

Five different workshops over the weekend focused on pollution dangers from the Marcellus Shale drilling and coal-fired energy plants. Particularly outrageous was the dumping of fly ash and other waste in ‘Little Blue’ lake near Hookstown, PA, next to the West Virginia border and above the nearby Ohio River. It has become a giant toxic waster cesspool, and the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reported on the impact Dec, 16, 2010:

“The Post-Gazette’s ecological study of mortality rates for heart and respiratory disease and lung cancer shows elevated rates for the combined area of Greene Township, Hookstown and Georgetown. Heart disease deaths there were 46 percent higher than the national rate. The total of 88 deaths from all three diseases is 42 percent higher than the predicted number of 62 deaths, based on national rates.”

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"This is my hometown and these are my people," said Tina Shannon, president of PDA in the 4th

CD, and a workshop participant. "There's only so much people can take. First they had to worry about their water. Now their kids are getting sick from playing outside when the wind's blowing. We've got to draw the line and people are starting to get organized about it."

Two back-to-back workshops, 'Social Media 201' and 'Social Media Metrics,' were especially interesting to those making use of internet technology in political campaigns. The main focus was on the use of Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, both as ways of getting your message out and challenging the messages of your opponents and adversaries. In the lively back-and-forth between the presenters and attendees, dozens of tips and links were passed around on how to measure the impact of various efforts, and much more.

But economic problems remained as a center of gravity pulling on all discussions. One major workshop was pulled together by the Steelworkers: 'Growing a Manufacturing Economy in the 21st Century.' It featured Mickey Bolt, a USW member and a staff member of the Alliance for American Manufacturing (AAM) and Ike Gittlen, USW's AAM liaison chief.

Gittlen led off by posing the question: 'Why should progressives care about manufacturing?' He then projected a number of PowerPoint bullets: 1) necessary to create real wealth, 2) good jobs = strong communities, 3) good tax base = a more just society, and 4) social mobility = part of the American Dream.

"The hollowing out of our economy, the deindustrialization we see everywhere around here, the closing of factories and shipping them overseas," Gittlen explained, "if we can't fix these, you can forget about fixing everything else. And to fix this, we need to change and reshape industrial policy—and you can't change policy with getting political power. That's what it all boils down to."

Gittlen's points were reinforced by Bolt, who comes from Mercer County, about 60 miles north of Pittsburgh. "We have small towns like Greenville and Sharon that were centers on manufacturing. Today it's mostly gone, and when the guts are taken out of these small communities, everything else begins to fail—the schools are under funded, the parks aren't kept up, people stop going out to clubs and socializing—all sense of community begins to fade away

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as people become isolated and fearful.”

Both Gittlen and Bolt talked a good deal about China’s monetary and trade policies as a cause of the problem, and the need for U.S. officials to fight against them. One questioner from the floor challenged the emphasis: “Naturally, we want everyone to keep their trade agreements, ourselves as well as the Chinese, and we are doing unfair things that need correction, too. But isn’t the main source of the problem with finance capital right here at home? Shouldn’t we be mainly fighting for, say, a tax of the export of capital or a financial transaction tax to fund new startups. That might be a tougher bullet to bite, but it gets to the heart of the matter.” Gittlen responded by agreeing that the problems weren’t just on one side, but insisted that ‘all of the above’, including a focus on China, had to be carried out.

The main feature of the evening was a keynote address over by Rev. Jesse Jackson of Rainbow/PUSH, who was an early fighter against plant closings as well as civil rights, and thus warmly welcomed by this crowd.

Jackson began by recasting today’s political categories of progressive, liberal and conservative in terms of the fight against slavery.

“The conservatives of that day wanted to maintain and expand slavery,” he stated, “while the liberals wanted to make it less harsh and nicer. But the progressives of that time, those that claimed the moral center, were the abolitionists who wanted to do away with slavery altogether.

“The engine of change in our country,” he continued, “rides on two rails. One rail is the Democratic Party, the other is the Republican. But the train draws its power of movement from the third rail. That’s what we progressives are, the third rail, carrying the energy of change. We can’t just join the Democratic Party; we must change the direction of the party. We are not liberals. We are liberators.”

Jackson went on to stress the importance of new alliances. “We must really penetrate Appalachia. The region’s rural poor have a huge moral authority. No one can challenge their work ethic. No one can challenge their military commitment. No one can challenge their commitment to America.”

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Republicans won their majorities, Jackson explained, by pledging to close budget deficits through spending cuts. “Their answer to a fire is a gas distribution plan.” This would lead to public sector layoffs while unemployment remains above 9 percent. New Deal-like projects were needed and the spending required should be offset by tax increases on the wealthy and by ending the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

After Jackson speech, which drew a long ovation, the conference organizers gave out a number of awards. The most moving was to Anne Feeney, a widely loved Pittsburgh-based labor and folk singer. Feeney has been waging a personal battle with cancer, and is now recovering. Her poised ability to take the stage and thank everyone was itself an inspiration.

A popular workshop on the final day was ‘Hip-Hop, Social Media and the Future of Organizing.’ The presenters, who worked as a team, practically completing each other’s sentences, were Pittsburgh’s famous rapper, Jasiri X, and his elder co-worker, Paradise Gray. Jasiri got everyone energized by playing his rap video, ‘What If the Tea Party Was Black?’, which has gone viral, made the major news and irritated the Tea Party to no end. It must be seen to be fully appreciated; just Google the title.

“I must mention,” said Jasiri, “that I was inspired to do this by an essay by a white dude, Tim Wise, who wrote a heavy piece with the same title.” Then Jasiri and Paradise went on to discuss the evolution of hip-hop as spoken word poetry into the music video genre as well as live performances. ‘With a simple digital camera and a computer, you can put your piece on YouTube, then Tweet announcements around. If it’s good, it’ll take off, and on YouTube, they track the number of viewers and allow them to write feedback comments.’ Jasiri went to explain how John Stewart and Stephen Colbert gave him the idea of writing and filming a weekly video rap about everything that went on in the news that week. He sustained the project for three years, and made a name for himself as a progressive and independent multimedia artist and rapper. But exhausted from the energy required, he decided to do more periodic pieces—that’s when ‘What if the Tea Party was Black?’ was born.

Some of these lessons continued into one of the final workshops. It was a small one, titled ‘Blogging as a Tool for Communicating Progressive Ideas.’ Chaired by blogger Tom Waters, the panel included John Morgan of the PA Progressive blog, Maria Lupinacci of 2 Political Junkies, Lisa Kanefff of An Average Jane, and Barbara White Stack, blog editor for the Steelworkers.

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What was interesting was the variety of approaches and tasks involved. “I pick a subject I’m interested in, like gay teen suicide,” said Waters, then I do Tweet searches to see what everyone else has to say, then I pick an angle that hasn’t been said, and write on it.” Morgan explained that he started his day with a disciplined reading of national and Pennsylvania newspapers to see what the hot topics and especially the new trend were, then to write, repost and link pieces from there. Lupinacci said she start simply by writing letters to the editor, the watching the Pittsburgh City Council on TV: “Some thing would just get me mad, some I set up a blog, and just started writing and posting every day on what got me annoyed or angry.

Stack had a different discipline. “I have to make sure everything on the site reflects the views of the Steelworkers. That means I have to keep up to date on all of our positions, what our leaders are thinking, and what issues need discussion. It’s not easy, but I really enjoy it, especially when I see our stuff getting bounced around the internet or mentioned in Congress or the major media.”

The conference wrapped up just in time. The hotel lobby was filling with crowds, mostly wearing black and gold, the colors of the Steelers football team. A few brave souls were in the green and white of the New York Jets. All were warming up for the big game that would decide whether the Steelers went to the super bowl. Most of the conference attendees were in no mood for the bitter cold of the stadium, making a beeline for home, and the pre-game TV specials and the high spirits of victory that followed later that evening.

[Carl Davidson is a writer for BeaverCountyBlue.org , a member of Steelworker Associates in Beaver County, a national board member of the Solidarity Economy Network, and a national co-chair of CCDS, the Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism. If you like this article, make use of the PayPal button in the upper right corner of this blog.]