



Vermont independent Bernie Sanders (left) and California Democrat Ron Dellums open U.S. House to social-democratic ideas.

Congress takes a progressive step

By Kevin J. Kelley

In Congress, a tiny band of left-wing lawmakers recently took a bold step. They started organizing.

Reps. Ron Dellums (D-CA) and Bernie Sanders (I-VT), two of the hottest firebrands on Capitol Hill, are leading an effort to unite a score or so of social democrats. Many of the House members they're trying to recruit don't think of themselves in those terms, however, even though their brand of politics does embody certain social-democratic principles. They prefer to use all-American political parlance. And so it was in November that a Progressive Caucus came into being in the U.S. Congress.

The nascent group has fairly modest initial aims but a very large vision. It will function, for now, as an informa-

tion clearinghouse and a forum for policy development. The caucus has no staff or office of its own, relying instead on whatever resources can be supplied by individual members. It does plan to hold a mid-January conference in Washington, in which sympathetic groups around the country will help prepare a caucus agenda for the next session of Congress.

Finding a niche: Lonely leftists in the House have long yearned for such an organization. The Democratic Study Group (DSG), one of the most successful caucuses, has acted as a liberal think tank and advocacy outfit for 30 years. But the DSG has come to be viewed in some quarters as too tied to the mainstream Democratic establishment. A Populist Caucus exists as well, but its program and makeup are somewhat amorphous, in Sanders' estimation. The longer-established populist club is also said to lack the energy that animates the progressive upstarts.

Sanders sees the new group as a non-racial counterpart to the Congressional Black Caucus, which is open only to African-American lawmakers. The progressives share many of the goals of the Black Caucus, as well as a few of its members. "In a sense, we're trying to bring together whites and Hispanics who have a similar view of what needs to be done in the Congress and in the country," Sanders explains.

Despite his generally sour assessment of the House's performance, Vermont's independent socialist congressman is optimistic about the Progressive Caucus' prospects. "There are dozens of Democrats in Congress who are prepared to do the right thing," Sanders says. "By articulating ideas in a unified way, we will try to force the Democratic leadership to come to terms with those ideas. And at some point, the leadership does have to respond to the rank and file."

But a look at the caucus' start-up roster shows that its clout will be less than formidable at first. The 10 members who signed a November letter announcing the group's launch are hardly representative of the House's overall makeup. Three of the 10 are black. Three others are Jewish; one is a theist and another lists his religion as "unspecified." The caucus includes an openly gay man, Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA); a woman who lived in Nepal for five years, Rep. Jolene Unsoeld (D-WA); and a former college professor who wears a Grateful Dead T-shirt while rock-climbing, Rep. John Olver (D-MA). Most of the 10

come from districts that have voted heavily for Democratic candidates in the last three Republican presidential landslides. The group's members are based in such culturally atypical areas as Manhattan's West Side, the Bay Area, Massachusetts and the Pacific Northwest.

About half of the caucus' members are relative newcomers to Congress. Olver was elected earlier this year to fill the western Massachusetts seat left vacant by the death of the state's lone Republican congressman. Unsoeld is serving her second term as a representative from Washington state. Maxine Waters, a Jesse Jackson supporter from Watts, was elected in 1990 along with Sanders.

But the group also includes a few veterans painfully familiar with how Congress works. Among them are Dellums and his Black Caucus colleague Charles Hayes, a 73-year-old former union leader who represents Chicago's South Side. New York City's Ted Weiss and Massachusetts' Frank have likewise both been re-elected to Congress on several occasions. Oregon's Peter DeFazio, 44, and Lane Evans, a 40-year-old representative from rural Illinois, are the youngest caucus members, though each has been in the House for more than a couple of terms.

According to this collection of outsiders, Democratic insiders on the Hill are far too cozy with the White House.

INSIDE STORY

To a large degree, some of the members charge, it's the House establishment that has caused Congress to be held in contempt by so many voters. And since Speaker Tom Foley and his lieutenants have not presented a set of alternatives to Reagan-Bush policies, the progressives are developing their own list of reforms.

Attacking the wall: At the top is a battle cry on behalf of "Operation Budget Jericho." Last year's White House-Congress budget deal erected a wall between the military and human service spending categories. The pact prohibits the transfer of funds from the Pentagon account to, say, housing for the homeless. The progressives' first order of business is, therefore, to demolish this budget wall. And once the way is clear, the caucus will try to funnel substantial amounts of money to domestic programs. Sanders and Dellums are proposing a 50 percent cut in military outlays during the next few years, with the more than \$100 billion in savings to be allocated to social needs and to tax relief for middle-class and working people.

The group also wants to shield moderate income earners from the fallout of the savings-and-loan meltdown. More than a third of the failed S&Ls engaged in dishonest or illegal activity, the caucus notes. The \$1 trillion bill for cleaning up the mess should, "at the very least, be based on a progressive pay-as-you-go" formula, according to the group.

Many members of the group were pushing for national health insurance long before Harris Wofford made it a central issue in his successful Pennsylvania Senate race (see *In These Times*, Nov. 13). A call for a single-payer, universal system is prominently featured on the caucus' legislative agenda.

Wofford's campaign demonstrates, Sanders says, that "ideas which seemed terribly radical only six months ago are now filtering into the mainstream." He cites as another such example the tax-the-rich scheme recently put forth by House Ways and Means Chairman Dan Rostenkowski.

The politics of this old-style Democratic boss are generally "no different from George Bush's," Sanders says. "But the fact that Rostenkowski feels it necessary to come up with this sort of proposal is an indication of the pressure that's building on the leadership from below. The caucus intends to increase the pressure, to put the Democratic leadership on the defensive, and to make it respond to what poll after poll shows to be the will of the American people."

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