

US Reform Party convention: political confusion and right-wing nostrums

By Martin McLaughlin
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The Reform Party, which arose as a byproduct of billionaire H. Ross Perot's 1992 presidential campaign, held its fifth national convention at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Dearborn, Michigan, July 23-25. Attended by more than 350 delegates and at least an equal number of alternates and guests, the convention provided further evidence that this organization is no alternative for working people to the big business-controlled two-party system in the United States.

Reform has some of the outward trappings of a third-party movement. It has ballot status in 19 states, and will likely gain ballot status in most of the remaining 31 states and the District of Columbia in time for the 2000 elections, as it did in 1996. It has activists and local organizations in many parts of the country, and it won statewide office for the first time last November, when Jesse Ventura, a former professional wrestler, was elected governor of Minnesota. Whoever the Reform Party nominates for president will be entitled to \$13 million in federal matching funds, enough to wage a significant media campaign. Nonetheless the Reform Party does not have a mass political base and remains largely a political shell.

On the decisive issue of political program, the Reform Party offers no challenge to the right-wing consensus of the Democrats and Republicans. It embraces the profit system just as fervently as the two major capitalist parties, criticizing corporate America from the standpoint, not of the working class, but of sections of small business who feel squeezed by domestic and foreign competition.

The principal business of the Dearborn convention was to elect the party's officers for the coming year, who will be in a key position to influence both the selection of a presidential candidate and the attitude of Reform to the struggle between the Democrats and Republicans for control of Congress. The two main contests revealed both the tensions within the party and its vulnerability to manipulation.

Jack Gargan, a retired Florida financial consultant, was elected chairman in a three-way contest, defeating Pat Benjamin, a New Jersey businesswoman, and Thomas McLaughlin, chairman of the Pennsylvania state party. Gargan had the backing of Jesse Ventura, who addressed the convention by telephone Friday night and ended his remarks with an endorsement. Benjamin, the incumbent vice-chairman,

had the backing of the Perot loyalists who have controlled the party machinery up until now. Gargan's victory, which came in a runoff against Benjamin, demonstrated the weakening of Perot's influence.

In the contest for vice-chairman, the leading candidate through the first two ballots was Lenora Fulani, former presidential candidate of the New Alliance Party, a cult group founded by psychotherapist Fred Newman, himself a former adherent of right-wing cult group leader Lyndon Larouche. Fulani and her supporters merged with the Reform Party before the 1996 elections and have worked within the organization since then.

Fulani once claimed to be a socialist and still claims that her roots are "in the left," but she advocates policies which are extremely right-wing. Last month she presented a draft platform for Reform which denounces public education as "social engineering" by wealthy elites and calls for government funding of charter and parochial schools.

Fulani was finally defeated on the third ballot by Gerry Moan, a Long Island party leader, after all other candidates were eliminated. Moan's eventual victory—he received 180 votes, just over the 176 required for an absolute majority, to Fulani's 145—was a demonstration of both the political confusion and the narrow base of Reform, which makes it susceptible to takeover by such a bizarre and marginal group as the New Alliance Party.

Jesse Ventura was introduced to the convention as a candidate who had been elected because he ran from the center, against a conservative Republican and a liberal Democrat. Speaking over a telephone line, the Minnesota governor sounded the same theme, suggesting that the Democrats and Republicans were too extreme and that Reform should seek the support of elements in the middle.

The notion that the Democrats and Republicans represent opposite poles of the political spectrum is simply absurd. By any objective political assessment both parties are conservative, with a substantial number of Republicans, and some Democrats, in the camp of the extreme right.

The claim that the Democrats and Republicans are extreme opposites was combined in the speeches of Reform Party leaders with the assertion—in this case true—that the two parties

are virtually identical and that both are in the pockets of corporate interests. In the course of the three-day convention no speaker attempted to untangle this muddle.

Ventura's remarks to the convention were a compendium of the political nostrums on which Perot and the Reform Party have based their appeal. He confined his comments to the *process* of politics—campaign finance reform, term limits, encouraging voter participation, maintaining democratic procedures within the Reform Party—saying nothing at all about the *substance* of the policies which he advocates, at the state or federal level.

He even sought to make a virtue out of the lack of program, saying that members of the Reform Party were “individuals, not forced to march to the party line,” and that the Reform Party does not tell new members how to vote, but “lets them be themselves”.

Without apparent irony, Ventura praised Perot as the founder of the Reform Party, while claiming that “people built this party, not special interests”. Ventura is opposed to a third Perot candidacy and backs Lowell Weicker, the former Connecticut senator and governor and a confirmed right-wing budget-cutter, for the party's presidential nomination. He categorically ruled out running himself, on the grounds that he had pledged to serve out his four-year term in Minnesota, ending in 2002.

Convention delegates were undecided over a presidential nomination, according to a poll published Monday. While Perot still was the presidential choice of the largest number, his support was down sharply, to only 22 percent, with the balance divided among multimillionaire realtor Donald Trump, retired General Colin Powell, Ventura, Weicker and a half-dozen others. This list of “hopefuls” alone demonstrates the basically right-wing orientation of the Reform Party delegates.

The social composition of the Reform Party is largely petty bourgeois. While the majority of the delegates were small businessmen, professionals or middle managers, there were trade unionists, some identifiable by union jackets or T-shirts, as well as skilled workers. The delegates tended to be middle-aged or even older, and there were virtually no blacks or other minorities, except those affiliated with the Fulani group.

Among the candidates for national party office were a pollution control engineer from Mississippi, semi-retired; a welding inspector for a New Jersey power company; a Minnesota travel agent; an international business consultant and former DuPont expert; the executive director and fundraiser for a free clinic in Los Angeles; a Wall Street management consultant; a respiratory therapist at an Iowa hospital.

This writer spoke with a number of delegates, encountering, in succession, an Oregon lawyer disbarred for filing harassing lawsuits against state judges, who is an adherent of right-wing conspiracy theories about the United Nations; a young nuclear power plant worker from Wisconsin who belongs to the IBEW,

and is critical of the union for continuing to support the Democrats even after the Clinton administration backed NAFTA and the World Trade Organization; a long-haired young man from Ft. Worth, Texas who operates a paint-ball (war game) concession, who voiced hostility towards government regulation and taxation of small business; and a young Ventura campaigner from Minnesota, a professional political operative and veteran Democratic Party campaigner, and already, in his mid-20s, a hardened political opportunist.

These delegates and many others at the convention voiced intense hostility to the two established parties and the entire political structure of big business politics. “Politician” was the worst epithet that any speaker could employ. But the Reform Party is a product of the deepening political crisis in America, not a solution to it.

The vacuum that exists in American politics is the absence of any mass political formation that represents in a serious way the interests of working people. The Reform Party expresses the present political bewilderment of a layer of working class and middle class people, without articulating any road forward.

Filling the vacuum, as in bourgeois politics as a whole, are tendencies of an openly right-wing character. Patriotic flagwaving predominated in the convention speeches, along with a nostalgia for the (largely mythical) time when the US economy was insulated from the outside world, when politicians were honest, and when people had faith in government.

Operating behind the scenes in Reform are groups far more right-wing than the political views expressed by Ventura or Perot. Speakers at the convention included representatives of US Term Limits, a lobbying group financed by cosmetics billionaire Ronald Lauder, and the Initiative & Referendum Institute, which campaigns for right-wing anti-tax ballot propositions, and includes on its National Advisory Board the Republican governors of Mississippi, Louisiana, Michigan and South Dakota, as well as former Reagan Attorney General Edwin Meese.

Among the politicians who are scouting the Reform Party as a potential vehicle for their presidential campaigns are such extreme-right figures as Patrick Buchanan and Senator Robert Smith, who recently quit the Republican Party, claiming it was far too moderate.

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