

JUNE 3

Nader and Greens head for presidential crash

This year, Ralph Nader's presidential campaign has two trains running that will collide at an unfortunate intersection – the Green Party's national convention in Milwaukee. The collision course is bad news for all concerned.

Nader, one of the great progressive reformers of the 20th century, has been clear and consistent for months in saying that he will not seek or accept the national Green Party presidential nomination for 2004. Yet he has made it known that he would welcome the party's "endorsement" – and there's a move afoot to give it to him at the national convention that begins June 23. Under such a plan, Nader might then try to get his name on the ballot courtesy of the Green Party in some of the two-dozen states where the party has achieved ballot status.

After a high-profile run as the Green Party's presidential candidate four years ago, Nader has emphasized that this time around he is an "independent" candidate. That's one train running that is acceptable (though not preferable) for quite a few Greens. But there's another train running that Green Party activists are just starting to find out about – and it indicates that Nader is heading in another direction.

Documents obtained from the Federal Election Commission show that Nader has signed and filed a legal statement declaring: "I certify that I am seeking the nomination of the Populist and/or other third Parties for election to the Office of President in more than one State." On May 27 the FEC issued a memorandum saying the agency's office of general counsel has verified that declaration, which is required by FEC law to qualify for presidential primary matching funds.

The situation faced by delegates to the Green Party national convention is not as it has appeared. Nader has been saying that while he will not seek or accept their nomination, he would welcome their endorsement of his "independent" presidential candidacy. Yet Green Party national delegates will be asked to swallow a pill that's even more bitter than they first imagined. In fact, the Green Party isn't being asked to endorse an "independent" candidate for president this year – the Green Party is being asked to endorse a candidate who is seeking to be the nominee of another party.

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Barring the unlikely event that the Green Party decides to opt out of the 2004 presidential race entirely, the national convention will almost certainly go one of two ways: Either it will adopt the Nader "endorsement" scenario, an option that apparently would create upheaval if not chaos for the Green Party at state levels. Or the convention will nominate David Cobb, a tireless Green Party activist with an impressive record of talking the talk and walking the walk of grassroots activism.

Meanwhile, what the heck is the "Populist Party" that Nader mentioned in his FEC filing? The Nader campaign seems less than eager to talk about it. When I asked Nader spokesperson Kevin Zeese, he commented that "the Nader campaign is taking an ecumenical approach to third parties" and did not respond to my specific inquiry about the Populist Party. Zeese did mention that this year Nader has received the endorsement of the Reform Party (which ran right-winger Patrick Buchanan as its 2000 presidential nominee). Time magazine reported in its May 31 edition that Nader is "forming his own Populist Party, which presumably could endorse him."

Nader's Populist Party is clearly designed to get him federal primary matching funds and ballot access in some states. It may as well be known informally as the Ralph Nader Party. An interesting concept of party building.

Nancy Allen, a media coordinator for the national Green Party, told me in an interview days ago that Nader "doesn't really understand the nitty-gritty grassroots work of organizing." She described Nader's approach to the presidential race this year as potentially very damaging to the Green Party.

The collision course of the 2004 Nader campaign's emerging contradictions could hit progressives hard at the Green Party convention. And Ralph Nader is likely to walk away without acknowledging the harm left in the wake of the smash-up.

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