

**DECEMBER 11, 2003**

# Breakthrough and peril for the Green Party

**U**p against the campaign of a wealthy businessman who outspent him nearly 10-to-1, a strong progressive candidate nearly won the runoff election last Tuesday to become San Francisco's mayor. Some national news stories depicted the strong showing for Matt Gonzalez as a big surprise. But it shouldn't perplex anyone when vigorous grassroots organizing combines with a sound strategy to get breakthrough results.

Local elections in San Francisco are officially nonpartisan, and ballots don't indicate party affiliations. But the contenders spoke openly of their party labels. The Democrat in the race, Gavin Newsom became so worried that Bill Clinton and Al Gore flew in to campaign for him. In contrast, Green Party member Gonzalez relied on several thousand active volunteers.

Contrary to all the conventional media wisdom, the Gonzalez campaign surged to receive 47.4 percent of the votes.

Routinely discounted by pundits in the mainstream media, the Green Party has been making some inroads. The party now claims 205 elected officials in 26 states. This year, Greens won posts ranging from auditor of York, Pa., to alderman in New Haven, Conn., to city commissioner in Kalamazoo, Mich., to water district official in Maine.

These are low-ranking positions, but big political trees can grow from little acorns. That's exactly what happened with Gonzalez in San Francisco. His step-by-step approach, building coalitions along the way, brought him to the point where he is now president of the city's powerful Board of Supervisors.

Gonzalez represents the kind of pragmatic idealism that the Green Party needs. His recent achievements include spearheading a victorious ballot initiative raising the city's minimum wage to \$8.50. A strategic thinker, he recognizes the need to build the Green Party from the ground up while striving to prevent Republican consolidation of power.

Next year, in California, the right wing will seek to gain a seat in the U.S. Senate by defeating the liberal Democratic incumbent. Gonzalez, determined to help prevent that,

says he intends to back Sen. Barbara Boxer's re-election bid.

Likewise, as the San Jose Mercury News reported on Dec. 7, Gonzalez has a savvy view of next year's race for the White House. In the newspaper's words, Gonzalez spokesperson Ross Mirkarimi said that "if

Nader runs again for president in 2004, Gonzalez won't support him."

But many Green Party leaders are insisting on a presidential race next year. At an annual fall meeting, says a Green Party news release, "members of the Wisconsin Green Party unanimously endorsed a statement calling on the Green Party of the United States to run a strong presidential campaign in 2004, while also maintaining focus on races at the local, state, and federal levels." The release noted that similar resolutions had been approved at Green Party gatherings in Michigan, Iowa and New England.

Some Green activists have argued that the party's local campaigns need the sort of media attention and excitement that was generated by Ralph Nader's presidential run under the Green Party banner in 2000. But try telling that to the thousands of Matt Gonzalez supporters who just achieved the most impressive showing for a Green Party candidate in history.

If Nader runs for president again in 2004, his campaign seems doomed to be virtually opposite of the Gonzalez effort. Nader would be lucky to get half as many votes as his previous total of 2.7 percent nationwide. A Nader campaign would not offer voters a chance to wrest the White House away from the right wing. At a time when preventing a second presidential term for George W. Bush is a historic imperative, a Nader campaign would be — at best — beside the point. At worst, a gift to Karl Rove.

There has been a lot of talk among some Green Party leaders about a "safe states" strategy, with the party's presidential campaign efforts being mostly concentrated in states where either Bush or the Democrat has a lock. But that scenario seems to be a fallback illusion for Greens who don't want to fully re-examine the purported wisdom of a Green Party presidential campaign next year.

In the Nov. 24 edition of *The Nation* magazine, longtime Green Party analyst Micah Sifry quotes Nader as pooh-poohing a safe-states approach: "You either run or you don't. You don't say to people in some states that we're going to ignore you." And Nader added that "no candidate will want to be bound by" that kind of restriction.

For Green Party activists and their candidate, the apparent benefits of a presidential run may include the media coverage, which — however inadequate and slanted — still beats being ignored. But what's at stake far transcends such concerns. ■