THE CONSUMER PARTY—A REAL FORCE?

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One of the most significant aspects of the recent city election was totally missed in the post-election newspaper and tv analyses. While headlines and newscasts blathered about the margin of the Rendell-Klenk victory (hardly a surprise) no one bothered to take much notice of the 15,000 votes cast for the Consumer Party candidate for controller, Lee Frissell, and the 10,000 votes cast for running mate Art Liebsohn, the candidate for D.A.

When matched against the 200,000 plus votes cast for the victors, it's clear that the Consumer Party is not going to storm City Hall any time soon. But the long-range prospects for the development of a broad-based independent people's party are looking better all of the time.

TREND TOWARD INDEPENDENCE

This independent political trend first expressed itself in recent years in the Philadelphia Party formed by Charles Bowser and then again a short time later in the 'Recall Rizzo' movement. The Philadelphia Party professed an independence that attracted tens of thousands of votes, but history has shown that it never really did break away from the liberal wing of the Democratic Party.

When Bowser supporters endorsed the Democratic ticket in the past campaign they proved that the Philadelphia Party was not much more than a temporary flanking movement in the battle with Rizzo over the control of the Democratic Party machinery. Although it carried a smaller percentage of the vote than did the Bowser-led ticket, in many ways the accomplishments of the Consumer Party were much more impressive than those of the Philadelphia Party.

The Consumer Party had no 'superstar' candidates; instead it ran on the issues: police brutality, the school crisis, utility rate hikes, governmental corruption, transportation and housing. Where the Philadelphia Party was vague and compromising, the Consumer Party took clear and progressive positions — for example, popularly elected Civilian Review Board to curb police abuse, and social service relief through taxation levied upon the banks and corporations.

While the Philadelphia Party had relatively easy access to the anti-Rizzo press, the Consumer Party had to battle every inch of the way to be recognized as a 'legitimate' party in public debate forums and in newspaper and tv coverage. In this battle it was more successful than some other third parties of the past. Surprisingly, the *Daily News* endorsed Consumer Party candidate Frissell for city controller.

The Consumer Party has another plus in its favor — its history. Not a fly-by-night operation, the Consumer Party has been around for years as a minor presence in city elections. It draws its main support from the Consumer Education and Protection Association (CEPA), a consumer grievance organization that has become a familiar sight to Philadelphians due to its many rallies and petition campaigns.

SUPPORT PEOPLE'S STRUGGLES

In the past two years, the Consumer Party activists have shifted their emphasis to building the party as a real, broad-based, fully structured organization. And in an effort to build informal alliances, they have been consistently supportive of other progressive struggles in the city — the SEPTA strike, the fight for quality education and desegregation, and the struggle of the "walk-in homesteaders" are a few examples.

All of these features of the Consumer Party represent a real step forward in the movement towards a local independent people's party. But the Consumer Party also has some serious weaknesses that could hold back its political and organizational growth.

Many of these weaknesses stem from its characterization of itself as a "consumer's" organization. The party apparently believes that the major struggle in the society is between consumers and the monopoly corporations. It seems to believe that, since the term 'consumer' is so broad as to include everybody, a 'consumer party' is a good way to rally the masses of people behind progressive causes.

The trouble with this is that under capitalism the central fact of political life is the exploitation of the working class as *producers*. To ignore this and lump virtually everyone together as consumers blurs over the contradictions between the classes.

Take someone who owns a small factory employing 20 people and someone else who works in that same factory. Both of them may very well unite as consumers to oppose a utility rate increase. But what about a city law that would force employers to provide better health and safety conditions? Here the worker and the boss are naturally going to part company.

Another problem with the consumer approach is that it glosses over the special oppression of national minorities and women. It is no accident that the closing of PGH, the cuts in the school budget, and the intensification of police brutality have come down hardest on Black and Puerto Rican people. Or that the tenants fighting "urban redevelopment" in Fairmount and the walk-in homesteaders of North Philadelphia are Puerto Rican and Black. It's not some quirk of fate that the chief victims of cutbacks in daycare are oppressed nationality women.

The Consumer Party has rightfully supported these struggles, but it has failed to draw out the reliance of the city's rulers on racism. It has by and large failed to deepen the consciousness of the white working people as to the need for a struggle against all forms of racial inequality. These serious shortcomings must be overcome.

Furthermore, the Consumer Party must turn its attention to developing Black and Latino leadership from within its ranks throughout the organization. And it must begin to build more formal relationships with other progressive independent political movements — in the rank and file workers' movement and in the communities, especially the Black, Latino, and other national minority communities.

If the Consumer Party can shed these ideological and organizational weaknesses, it can build on the real gains it has already registered and, in conjunction with other forces, become a real vehicle for independent political action.