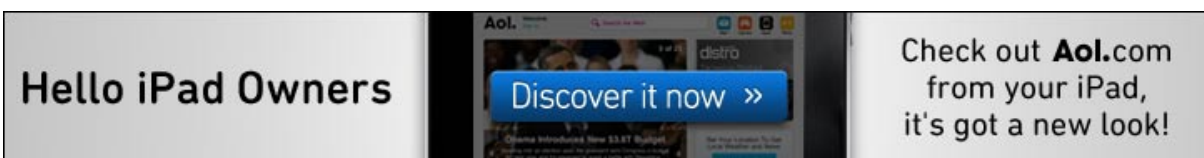


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Journalism student, San Francisco State University and cofounder of Bay News Movement, an independent multimedia news site.

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With POTUS In Town, San Franciscans Debate Relevance of Democratic Party

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Single payer health care and the National Defense Authorization Act. Police militarization and voter disenfranchisement. People power and organized labor. And of course -- 'Occupy.' These and other social issues sparked passionate debate amongst a crowd of 380 gathered in San Francisco's First Unitarian Universalist Church on Wednesday, Feb. 15 for a panel discussion on 'which way forward' for progressive activists in the U.S.

Presented by San Francisco's fledgling 99% Coalition, an Occupy offshoot committed to exclusively nonviolent action, the forum featured four local progressive activists and was moderated by local radio show host Rose Aguilar. On the night preceding a campaign fundraising visit to San Francisco by President Obama, they addressed a range of topics concerning U.S. foreign and domestic policy and strategies for altering the current climate of American politics.

But the most cogent and controversial debate erupted around the validity of the Democratic party as a choice for voters disenchanted with policies of the Obama administration.

"While neither of the parties are anything close to what people in this room would like, it is not the same as saying there is no difference," panelist Tom Gallagher said over boos from the crowd.

After a scathing critique of President Obama's foreign policy, Gallagher, a former Massachusetts state representative and current chair of the Progressive Democrats of America's San Francisco chapter, asked what happens in the U.S. if a third party presidential candidate gets 5 percent of the vote.

"You bring in the Republican party, which makes matters even worse," he said. "It's like we're pretending the 2000 election never happened."

Gallagher encouraged "occupying the Democratic party" and said a Ron Paul-like candidate should be challenging Obama in a Democratic primary.

Justice Party presidential candidate Rocky Anderson responded to Gallagher by asking where voters in a democratic society should draw the line when choosing to vote for the lesser of two evils: at violation of the War Powers Act with the Obama administration's involvement in Libya without congressional approval? at a health care reform act that strengthens private insurance companies' control over the health of the nation? or at the passage of the National Defense Authorization Act, which allows for indefinite detention of U.S. citizens without due process protections?

"What we have in this country is a government of the wealthy, not one that acts in the public interest, and it's happened with the collusion and cooperation of both the Democratic and Republican parties," Anderson said over uproarious applause. "It will continue if we don't let them know that we're going to take it in a different direction, and we're going to insist on not just changing around the players within this perverse game that they play. We're changing the game."

Panelist Margaret Flowers, Maryland chair of Physicians for a National Health Program and an Occupy Washington D.C. organizer, agreed that meaningful change of a corporate-controlled political system was impossible within either of the two major U.S. political parties. But instead of advocating for a third party vote, Flowers focused on activism outside electoral politics.

"We're creating a democratized economy in this country," Flowers said. "A hundred twenty million people in the U.S. are already members of cooperatives. This is how we undermine corporate power."

Flowers talked about building grassroots institutions like food co-ops and decentralized municipal energy production to serve as alternatives to the "nine pillars of corporate power" in the U.S., among which she named mass media companies and public sector workers.

Organized labor proponent Dave Welsh drew attention to the relationship between the Occupy movement and unions, especially the International Longshore and Warehouse Union. ILWU collaborated with Occupy Oakland on Nov. 2, 2011, in an attempt to shut down the Port of Oakland, and with multiple occupy encampments in other cities to shut down ports along the West Coast on Dec. 12.

Welsh said the "symbiotic relationship" between unions and the Occupy movement had already netted concrete results, including an ILWU victory over international food importing and exporting company EGT. He admitted that some people traditionally aligned with organized labor are afraid of Occupy's sometimes militant actions, while occupiers fear co-option from labor, but that both were misguided.

"People see a hammer coming down on working people, being swung by the one percent," Welsh said. "Occupy changed the national conversation. It changed the framework in which people think. It brought a new energy and fire to the people's movement."

San Francisco resident and retired civil servant Mo Shore said the discussion was interesting but too generalized, and that activists should settle on a rallying issue, like health care, to coalesce the diverse Occupy movement. He also weighed in on the debate between electoral politics and change from outside the system.

"Any kind of social movement or change in this country has come from outside," he said, noting that he registered with Anderson's Justice party at the event.

Moderator Rose Aguilar, host of the radio show "Your Call" on KALW-FM in the City, brought up the concept of police department militarization, and although the panelists did not discuss Occupy's sometimes radical tactics or police handling of the protests during the forum, the worry that clashes between protesters and police could soon become much more violent was voiced in the conversations that followed.

Outside the forum, Margaret Flowers talked about joint military-police training in Los Angeles.

"We're challenging a very powerful structure in this country, and to think it's going to go down peaceably is just naïve," she said. "This is a war. They're going to be violent, and it's up to us to maintain our strength and remain non-violent."

Alex Emslie is a journalism student at San Francisco State University and cofounder of Bay News Movement, an independent multimedia news site. This is his first piece for Off The Bus. If you would like to contribute as a citizen journalist to The Huffington Post's coverage of American politics, please contact us at www.offthebus.org.



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|-------------|--------|----------|----------|
| DELEGATES | 123 | 72 | 32 |
| FUNDRAISING | \$57 M | \$2.2 M | \$13 M |
| INTRADE | \$7.18 | \$1.54 | \$0.35 |
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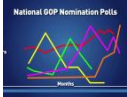
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