

NEW REPUBLIC

Bill de Blasio Should Embrace Democratic Socialism in New York City

by Paul Berman | September 26, 2013

Dear Bill de Blasio:

This past Monday *The New York Times* ran a front-page story by Javier C. Hernández called "[Possible Mayor Now, But Then a Young Leftist](#)," about your activist years in the 1980s and early '90s. The story does seem to have caused a stir, and this is partly because of the dread word "socialist," and partly because of some auld but ne'er forgotten controversies of the Reagan era. On Tuesday the *Times* ran a piece about the stir. It was by Thomas Kaplan and it bore the title, "[Mayoral Rivals Attack de Blasio on Past Support of Sandinistas](#)." The attacks were less than gentle, and they have continued since then and they are not likely to stop. Those attacks add up to the single most vexing moment in your election campaign, so far.

Joseph J. Lhota, the Republican candidate, observed that, according to the *Times*, you used to call yourself a "democratic socialist." Lhota said: "It's really unfortunate that that's the level that we've come to in this city."

Your other rival is Adolfo Carrión Jr., who used to be the Democratic borough president of the Bronx and then went on to become President Barack Obama's director of the Office of Urban Affairs. Carrión has chosen for some reason to run for mayor on the Independent Party ticket, which means that he hasn't a prayer. He does have a say, though, and according to the *Times*, his say was "more pointed."

Carrión accused you of "propping up a brutal dictatorship in Central America," in the words of the *Times*. He accused you of upholding a political philosophy inspired by Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. "New Yorkers are getting a fuller picture of the Democratic Party's nominee," Mr. Carrión said, according to the *Times*, "and it's a scene right out of 'Animal Farm.'" This *was* a little sharper.

Mr. de Blasio, may I offer advice? You should brush off Lhota's attack, at least the one he made on Tuesday—the accusation about being a "democratic socialist." But you should worry about Carrión.

You should brush off Lhota's attack because New York City has a political history, and "democratic socialism" has always occupied an honored place within that history, and too many New Yorkers know this to be the case—even if, in benighted other parts of the country, "democratic socialism" sounds like a criminal offense. The Socialist Party of America used to attract a lot of support in some of the old New York ethnic neighborhoods. And the Socialists and their allies in those neighborhoods were possessed of a canny ability to put their popularity to good use. They were institution-builders, and their institutions have lasted, even after their political movement has mostly disappeared.

The Socialists built New York City's largest and most civic-minded trade unions, which, to anyone who is anti-union, may sound like a terrible thing to do. But New Yorkers are not anti-union, regardless of the occasional contractual goof. The Jews, the Italians, the African-Americans of New York—all of these people and other groups, too, have every ground to look back with gratitude on the old-time Socialists. The Socialists built cooperative apartment houses for working people, some 100,000 apartments or more, which

amounts to a small city, and the projects offered and in many cases still offer some of the best housing in New York City for people with modest incomes.

There is a shopping plaza in the Bronx named for Eugene V. Debs, the early twentieth-century Socialist leader. There is a high school in midtown Manhattan named for Norman Thomas, the Socialist leader who succeeded Debs. Any number of buildings around the city are named for one or another lesser Socialist. And this is for good reason. The Republican Party can pound its fist and go red in the face from now until Election Day, but nothing is going to change these New York realities. And you, Mr. de Blasio, have no reason to blush or apologize for having adopted the word "democratic socialist" in your youth. On the contrary! A touch of socialism, in a democratic version, is precisely what New Yorkers want, after too many years of Michael Bloomberg, the billionaire, even if Bloomberg has been a pretty decent billionaire.

Still, you should remember, Mr. de Blasio—you should even remind people—that, in New York, the old-time Socialist Party and its allies used to be adamant about their democratic convictions. And they had a foreign policy. The New York Socialists were America's most reliable militants against European fascism. And, at the same time, the old Socialists were some of America's earliest and staunchest and most knowledgeable opponents of the Soviet Union—one more indelible point in their favor.

Adolfo Carrión does bring up a troubling matter in this connection, though. When Carrión accuses you of having propped up a dictatorship in Central America, he is thinking of the Nicaraguan revolution and its Sandinista government, which, back in the 1980s, also called itself socialist: an awkward fact. Mr. de Blasio, you and I both remember that, during the Reagan years, a controversy over the Sandinistas and America's foreign policy halfway dominated American politics. Thousands of people on the American left, some of them old-fashioned Marxists, some of them Christian activists, became part-time and even full-time champions of the Sandinistas. Whole legions of those people went tramping through Nicaragua to volunteer their labor to the Sandinistas, or, at least, to bear witness to the Sandinista achievements and to denounce the Reagan Administration. You were among them. You were dedicated, which speaks well of you. You visited the Nicaraguan city of Masaya. You, too, admired. You have even orated lately about the admirable things you saw.

And I worry. This is because I, too, travelled to Nicaragua—in my case, as a reporter, originally for *Mother Jones*, later and more ambitiously for *The Village Voice*, still later for *The New Yorker*. The town of Masaya was, by happy coincidence, the center of my reporting. I returned to that town over and again, year after year. You and I may well have passed each other on the sidewalks, which are not too numerous, or on the open-gutter, unpaved non-sidewalks in the wooden-shack neighborhoods. I came to love that town. Maybe you did, too. Only, it occurs to me that, in regard to Masaya and the Sandinista movement as a whole, there is a lot you may not know. There is a lot that, as the future mayor of New York, you would do well to learn. There are even a few things that, as a candidate, you had better learn, or else Adolfo Carrión will have your scalp, and Joseph Lhota will be the beneficiary.

So I will write you another letter tomorrow, and I will spell out what I think you do not know, and I hope you will read it.

Sincerely,

Paul Berman

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