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> Progressive faction takes on status quo

> By Sophie Cocke

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> Fern Rosentiel has spent the past few years battling the multibillion-dollar biotech companies that have been growing seed corn on Kauai. As a leader in the fight to force the seed companies to disclose more information about their pesticide use and abide by strict setback rules for spraying chemicals, she's organized protest marches, been active in social media campaigns and galvanized support for local legislation.

> The fight over GMOs and pesticides has deeply divided Kauai, where she was born and raised, and spurred "unbelievable hatred," acknowledged Rosentiel.

> "I've been heckled and called names," she said. "People won't talk to me or meet for coffee."

> But through her advocacy work she's also gained significant experience in community organizing that she is now drawing on as she launches her first political campaign to fill the seat being vacated by state Rep. Derek Kawakami (D, Hanalei-Princeville-Kapaa).

> Rosentiel, 31, is among about a dozen candidates running for seats in the state Legislature this year who political observers say make up an emerging progressive faction within the Democratic Party.

> What constitutes a progressive agenda isn't easy to define, but for John Bickel, one of the movement's leaders, it means "standing up for the little guy against the corporate interests."

> Many of the candidates have been active in high-profile protests surrounding genetically modified foods and pesticide use, the Thirty Meter Telescope and, most recently, Alexander & Baldwin's diversions of streams on Maui. They also tend to be Bernie Sanders supporters, with a number of them having taken active roles in his presidential primary campaign.

> The protest movements, combined with the opportunity to campaign for Sanders, have allowed more people to gain the political skills and contacts needed to become credible candidates, said Colin Moore, director of the Public Policy Center at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

> At the same time, the power of the mainstream Democratic Party has been waning since the death of U.S. Sen. Daniel Inouye in 2012, he said, allowing more room for new voices within the party.

> The Democratic Party "was very well managed and highly coordinated, starting with Sen. Inouye and filtering down to recruited candidates," said Moore. "The way you succeeded was to wait your turn and be a good Democrat, and I think that crowded out more progressive figures."

> New school

> The Hawaii Alliance for Progressive Action, a nonprofit launched two years ago and led by Kauai County Councilman Gary Hooser, is also helping prop up emerging political leaders. HAPA emerged out of the political fights against the GMO companies, of which Hooser was a leader, but the organization also embraces broader issues such as economic inequality and the influence of corporations on politics.

> HAPA says its mission is to "catalyze community empowerment and systemic change towards valuing aina and people ahead of corporate profit."

> To this end HAPA has launched a leadership program, called the Kuleana Academy, that trains participants in running political campaigns.

> "The Kuleana Academy came out of a belief in the community and around the state that there is a shortage of progressive leaders who are stepping up and running for public office," said Hooser.

> The academy graduated 21 people this year, including Rosentiel and four others who have gone on to launch campaigns for seats in the Legislature this year.

> Tiare Lawrence is challenging Democratic Rep. Kyle Yamashita for his seat representing Upcountry Maui and Sprecklesville.

> Lawrence has been active in the protests against the Thirty Meter Telescope, Alexander & Baldwin's stream diversions and the GMO companies.

> She says she was prompted to run, in part, because of Yamashita's support for a bill that passed the Legislature this year allowing A&B to continue diverting water from streams in East Maui despite a court ruling invalidating the company's state permits.

> "It was blatant and wrong to use legislation to overturn a court ruling," she said.

> Yamashita was a co-sponsor of the bill, which spurred heated protests and hourslong public hearings as it moved its way through the Legislature. Native Hawaiian taro farmers and environmentalists had been fighting A&B for more than a decade over the stream diversions and argued that the bill was "special interest" legislation favoring the interests of a corporation over that of the public.

> Alex Haller also graduated from the Kuleana Academy this year and is challenging Democratic Rep. Lynn DeCoite for her House seat representing parts of East Maui, Lanai and Molokai.

> Haller, a Sanders backer, said he supports the counties' right to regulate the biotech companies. Maui County passed a ballot initiative in 2014 temporarily banning genetically engineered crops. The measure, like similar ones on Kauai and Hawaii island, is currently tied up in the courts.

> Patrick Shea, another graduate from the Kuleana Academy who describes himself as a progressive and a Sanders supporter, is challenging Rep. Ken Ito (D, Kaneohe-Maunawili-Kailua).

> He criticized the Legislature for passing a bill this year that protects Airbnb's vacation rental listings in Hawaii, many of which are unpermitted, as well as the bill protecting A&B's stream diversions.

> "I think those are two major examples of the Legislature favoring corporations over community," he said.

> Shea is particularly focused on issues of income inequality, which have been a large part of the Sanders campaign.

> "We are seeing people have to leave Hawaii because the jobs that they can afford, so to speak, are elsewhere," he said. "We are just seeing the middle class diminishing."

> Jonathan Wong is running against Rep. Clift Tsuji, whom he criticized for accepting money from the biotech companies.

> "The GMO issue, to me personally, is about big corporations using their influence and power and money to take advantage of people," he said.

> Two HAPA board members are also running for elected office this year. Ikaika Hussey is challenging Rep. John Mizuno (D, Kamehameha Heights-Kalihi Valley), and Kim Coco Iwamoto is running against Rep. Karl Rhoads (D, Chinatown-Iwilei-Kalihi).

> Challenges ahead

> Bickel said that the hope is that "a few incumbents will get knocked off and it will send a message." He called the protests over the TMT and GMOs "growth movements."

> "They bring in more people to the progressive movement," he said. "The progressives stand up for the little guy against corporate interests. That's true in the GMO issue and true in the TMT movement."

> But some see the GMO issue, in particular, as posing a challenge for the progressive movement, which seeks to include working-class people. The seed companies employ about 1,400 people in the islands, and workers have expressed fears that the protests and greater regulation could mean the loss of jobs.

> "The challenge for progressive movements is to draw in working people and their unions, to the extent possible, to support a unifying economic justice agenda, rather than be split on issues like food justice, which tends to divide rather than unify," said Bart Dame, a local representative for the Sanders campaign and a board member of the Progressive Democrats of Hawaii.

> He said that the progressive movement also needs to work to be more multicultural and multiethnic. "In recent years, clearly there is a Hawaiian sovereignty component, but increasingly the progressive label has been applied to more of a haole cultural lifestyle," he said.

> Perhaps the biggest challenge for many of the emerging candidates who grew out of the protest movements will be whether they can articulate a broader agenda beyond issues that they have been so intensely focused on so that they attract wide enough support to get elected.

> “The anti-GMO support is deep but it is not broad,” noted Moore. “They will really have to broaden their appeal beyond GMO and TMT and these niche issues.”

> It’s something that many of the candidates are already working to do. Rosentiel, for instance, says she wants to focus on Kauai’s drug abuse problem, attract more funding for schools, alleviate traffic congestion and make life more affordable for local families.

> “I was raised by a single mom who was a teacher,” she said, “so I know the issues with survival here and making a living and supporting a family.”

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