

Vermont senator pushes restrictions against foreign workers

The reactionary politics of independent “socialist” Bernie Sanders

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Last week the US Senate passed an amendment to the economic stimulus package, which would restrict foreign workers from being hired by banks receiving federal bailout money. The measure was co-sponsored by Bernie Sanders, the senator from Vermont who describes himself as a “democratic socialist.”

Introducing the amendment on the Senate floor, Sanders made pseudo-populist denunciations of Wall Street while claiming that American workers were losing their jobs because of the import of tens of thousands of workers from China, India and other countries. Sanders said Wall Street banks had laid off 100,000 workers in the last three months of 2008 and “added insult to injury” by requesting 21,000 H-1B visas to hire foreign workers.

Sanders and the co-author of the amendment, Iowa Republican Chuck Grassley, originally sought a one-year suspension of the Labor Department’s visa program—which allows employers to recruit highly skilled workers from overseas—for banks receiving Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) money. The measure that was passed limits hiring for two-years and also makes it more difficult for foreign workers already in the US to extend their work permits.

The entire issue has been largely concocted and is being cynically used by the Senate Democrats and Republicans to divert public anger over mounting unemployment and their preparation to hand over trillions more to bail out the banks.

According to the Associated Press, in 2008 banks receiving TARP money only made 4,163 requests for H-1B visas, and the actual number of foreign workers recruited was “likely a fraction” of this figure because the government only grants 65,000 such visas to all US employers each year. One study showed that Bank of America, for example, hired only 66 such employees in 2007—or 0.03 percent of its 210,000-member workforce.

The American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) denounced the measure as a “disturbing step backwards,” which “creates a climate of jingoistic divisiveness.”

This is not the first time Sanders has played the nationalist card. In 2007 he and Grassley co-sponsored a similar bill calling for the suspension of the visa program for any American company announcing mass layoffs.

While posturing as a “socialist” and supporter of American workers, Sanders has cultivated close ties with fascistic types, including CNN talk show host Lou Dobbs, who calls Sanders “one of the few straight talkers in Congress.”

In June 2007 Sanders appeared on Dobbs’ show to denounce changes in the immigration law, which were opposed by the right wing because it allowed for the eventual legalization of undocumented workers and an expansion of the government’s “guest worker” program. Sanders responded to Dobbs, saying, “You’re right. The money interests are selling out American workers and our entire country.” He added, “If poverty is increasing and wages are going down, I don’t know why we need millions of people coming into this country as guest workers.”

During the debate over normalizing trade relations with China, Sanders joined union bureaucrats, including Teamsters President James P. Hoffa, and former Nixon speechwriter Patrick Buchanan to oppose the trade deal. In a December 2004 op-ed piece written for the *Washington Times*, Sanders denounced Microsoft and other “corporate turncoats and their enablers in government,” who were turning their backs on “the land of the free and the home of the brave” by outsourcing to China.

“As the greatest democracy on Earth,” he continued, “we must ask why American companies are turning communist China into the new superpower of the 21st century? While

Microsoft is 'saving a dollar,' it is helping undermine our economic and military security by gutting our manufacturing and technological infrastructure, and moving it lock, stock, and barrel to one of our major international rivals."

Explaining his alliance with such reactionary forces, Sanders told the *Nation* magazine that traditional politics has become obsolete. "In the sense that we are trying to develop left-right coalitions, we are also trying to redefine American politics." Alliances over trade, health care and other economic issues, he said, presented an opportunity to "redefine the 'normal' paradigm that a lot of the corporate media create when they talk about liberal and conservative."

Sanders' former communications director David Sirota elaborated on this reactionary outlook in an article called, "The Upside of Nationalism," in April 2008. Writing in the liberal magazine *In These Times*, the Democratic Party strategist argued that growing anger over job losses and trade issues had shifted American politics fundamentally, allowing "progressives to use nationalism for our economic agenda."

All of this is reactionary hokum. The promotion of nationalism, far from advancing the economic and political interests of the working class, only serves to block its struggles and, in the name of "national unity," subordinate working people to the demands of corporate America and the government for ever greater sacrifices.

The dangers of such pseudo-populist nationalism can be seen in England where the trade unions organized strikes, under the banner of "British jobs for British workers," against Italian and Portuguese contract workers at the Lincolnshire oil refinery—an action that won the support of the extreme right British National Front.

The logic of economic nationalism—which pits American workers against their brothers and sisters internationally—is war. Through the medium of the Obama administration, a layer of ex-radicals are making their peace with American imperialism and seeking to conceal its predatory aims with sugar coated phrases about "progressive patriotism," the headline of a recent lead editorial in the *Nation* magazine.

In the case of Sanders, the 68-year-old former anti-war protester made his peace with US capitalism long ago. First elected mayor of Burlington, Vermont in 1981, under the slogan, "Burlington not for sale," Sanders quickly established close ties with prominent Republicans and big business interests in the city. Tenants associations opposed his plans for the development of the waterfront district, arguing that he was acting on behalf of luxury housing and hotel developers who were trying to gentrify working class neighborhoods.

In 1990 he won the first of eight terms in the US House of Representatives. Over the next 16 years the so-called "independent" voted with the Democrats 98 percent of the time, including support for Bill Clinton's war against Serbia in 1999, the congressional resolution authorizing Bush to launch war against any country after the September 11, 2001 attacks and for every appropriation bill to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

For this reason, his 2005-06 race for US Senator received the backing and financial support of the Democratic Party establishment, including New York Senator Chuck Schumer and Barack Obama who traveled to Vermont to personally campaign for Sanders, who appeared on the Democratic Party's primary ballot.

With the economic situation worsening each day and the Obama administration quickly dispelling illusions that he will provide any relief, other than to Wall Street, the Democratic Party and its allies are seeking to whip up American-first nationalism to pre-empt the eruption of mass struggles, which will inevitably pit the working class against the profit system and the two parties that defend it.

Both houses of Congress have sought to insert "Buy American" clauses into the stimulus package, which mandates the use of American iron and steel and domestically manufactured goods. This was only toned down last week, after severe warnings from the European Union and Canada, as well as major US exporters, that the protectionist measure could provoke a trade war and a more rapid descent into a global depression.

There is deep and legitimate concern over the ongoing destruction of jobs. The only program that can defend the working class, however, is one that begins from the standpoint of the international unity of the working class and the need for a common struggle against the bankrupt capitalist system. In the US, this means organizing the working class in a political struggle against the Democratic Party, on the basis of a genuine socialist program that places the banks and the major branches of the economy under the public and democratic control of working people.



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