

The Bernie Sanders campaign and the American pseudo-left

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6 June 2015

In the aftermath of the announcement by “independent” Senator Bernie Sanders that he is seeking the Democratic Party nomination for US president, the various groups that comprise the American pseudo-left have engaged in a debate over the best tactical approach to the Sanders campaign.

One of the central tasks of the Sanders campaign is to attempt to inflate illusions in the Democratic Party after more than six years of the Obama administration. While occasionally presenting himself as a “socialist” and making an appeal to deep anger over growing social inequality, Sanders has long functioned as a run-of-the-mill Democrat, caucusing with the party in Congress and backing the US military war machine. (See, “The right-wing political record of Bernie Sanders”)

Groups like the International Socialist Organization and Socialist Alternative, which operate in and around the periphery of the Democratic Party, see their own role as complementary to that of Sanders himself. Their aim is to promote the Democrats and do what they can to block an independent political movement of the working class.

Out of all the pseudo-left organizations, Socialist Alternative has arguably been the most open in its support for Sanders. They have adopted the position of integrating themselves directly into the Sanders campaign in order to exert “pressure” on him, arguing that he can be convinced through such means to run as an independent if and when he inevitably loses the nomination.

Such a campaign, they argue, would be a potentially epoch-making political event. In a May 9 article titled “Bernie Sanders calls for Political Revolution against Billionaires,” Socialist Alternative member Philip Locker writes that an independent campaign could “open up a completely new chapter in US politics, acting as a huge impetus towards the building of a new political force to represent the 99%.”

Locker openly admits that running as an independent “would go against Sanders’ stated intention and his general political approach,” but, he writes, “it cannot be excluded. It will be influenced by how events unfold and how much pressure Sanders comes under from his own supporters demanding that he continue running in the general election rather than endorse Clinton.”

There is a definite progression in Socialist Alternative’s writings on Sanders before and after the announcement of his candidacy. In a March 4 article, SA’s Tom Crean declared that, should Sanders decide to run as a Democrat rather than continue his decades-old “independent” charade, it would represent “a lost opportunity to build a left political alternative to the two-party system.”

Barely a month later, the same writer struck a more conciliatory pose as it became increasingly clear that Sanders had made up his

mind. “Socialist Alternative welcomes the fact that Sanders is seeking a dialogue with progressive and left activists *inside and outside* the Democratic Party about whether he should run, and, if so, *whether he should run in the Democratic primaries* or as an independent left candidate.” [emphasis added] He concluded, so as not to create the appearance of impropriety, by declaring that “our most pressing difference with Sanders is on the Democratic Party.”

Following Sanders’ formal announcement, SA rushed to present the campaign in the most glowing terms possible. The May 9 article cited above proclaimed that Sanders “has launched an insurgent campaign for President.” It adds that Sanders’ decision to run as a Democrat is “unfortunate,” but hastens to add that his campaign “stands in sharp contrast to the waffling and empty rhetoric of Hillary Clinton and other establishment politicians.”

Lest there be any ambiguity, the supposedly “socialist” organization declares that it “welcomes Sanders’ decision to run for President.” As for Sanders’ program, it is presented in glowing terms, with caveats along the following lines: “Regrettably, he did not oppose the war in Afghanistan and failed to oppose the recent Israeli massacre in Gaza.” These, however, are only minor issues!

Socialist Alternative’s criticism of Sanders for running openly as a Democrat is entirely tactical in character. They would prefer that he run as an independent, the better to channel opposition and contain it within a framework that is not at all threatening to the ruling class and the capitalist system. Phrase mongering about “pressuring” Sanders to the left, which was used seven years ago in reference to Barack Obama, is only window dressing to cover their prostration to the Democratic Party.

In fact, for all the talk of “independence,” Socialist Alternative has for some time consciously sought to develop intimate and direct ties with the Democratic Party. In February, Socialist Alternative’s Seattle city councilwoman Kshama Sawant was caught on video attending a fundraiser and birthday party for local Democratic Party leader, King County Councilmember Larry Gossett. When pressed by the protesters who recorded the video, Sawant retorted that Gossett “has been the ally of working people for a long time,” despite his recent vote to approve a \$200 million juvenile detention center.

The craven prostration of Socialist Alternative has provoked a debate, albeit of an entirely friendly character, with their co-thinkers at the International Socialist Organization. The ISO is concerned that aligning itself too closely with such an obvious political sham would be counterproductive. For its part, the ISO is signaling that it would prefer to back a presidential campaign by the Green Party.

At the same time, the ISO makes clear that they have no principled opposition to Bernie Sanders’ politics. Indeed, last month the ISO and

Socialist Alternative cosponsored a conference in Chicago, the “Left Electoral Action Conference,” in which representatives of the Sanders campaign participated. Nor do they have any genuine principled dispute with Socialist Alternative over the issue of the Democratic Party. Both organizations backed Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, a Cook County commissioner and longtime staple in the local Democratic Party, for Chicago mayor, hailing him as a “progressive” alternative to the eventual winner and former Obama chief of staff Rahm Emmanuel.

The ISO writes in an article appearing on their *Socialist Worker* website on May 27 entitled “A socialist FAQ on Bernie Sanders and the left,” that “[while] [w]e do support many of Sanders’ proposals for reform...[w]e also disagree with Sanders’ support for apartheid Israel and his failure to consistently challenge [!] U.S. imperialism, his weak position on the issue of racist police violence, and his support for restrictions on immigrant rights.” But, they hasten to add, “the question for us isn’t mostly about the ‘purity’ of Sanders’ political positions,” they write. “The crux of our objection is Sanders’ decision to run for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, and to promise in advance that he will endorse the mainstream Democrat who will all but certainly defeat him.”

All the political narrowness and disdain for principled politics that define the politics of the pseudo-left are encapsulated in this statement, which is apparently intended to mark them out as principled opponents of the Democratic Party. The “decisive” issue for the ISO is not that Sanders’ politics is completely hostile to the interests of the working class (and his right-wing record is here referred to only in passing, as an issue of purely secondary importance, of “purity”), but the formal avenue in which he is now peddling them.

For principled Marxists, the decisive question in appraising a political tendency is not formal membership in the Democratic Party but, as the Socialist Equality Party wrote in its Statement of Principles, “their *history, program, perspective, and class basis and orientation.*” By ridiculing such considerations as dogmatic “purity,” the ISO demonstrates that it is not socialist at all, but instead represents a narrow layer of the upper middle class interested only in making themselves more comfortable under capitalism.

At any rate, countless third parties and “independent” political movements have sprung up throughout the history of the United States that serve only to channel popular opposition back into the Democratic Party, including Sanders’ “independent” congressional campaigns, the Green Party, and, one might add, the ISO and Socialist Alternative themselves.

Instead of supporting the Sanders’ campaign, the ISO is apparently preparing to provide support to the eventual Green Party nominee. In their tactical criticisms of Socialist Alternative, they have consistently held up the ISO’s support for various Green Party campaigns, such as Ralph Nader’s presidential campaigns and the New York gubernatorial campaign last fall by Howie Hawkins, as models to be emulated. These campaigns themselves functioned largely as pressure valves for the Democratic Party.

Indeed, last week the ISO opened up Socialist Worker to Hawkins to denounce Sanders as being “no Eugene Debs.” In that article, Hawkins echoed the ISO’s tepid criticisms by declaring that “[Sanders’] positions on the issues is secondary to the question of whether his politics are helping the working class act for itself or subsume itself under the big business interests in charge of the Democratic Party.”

The essence of the ISO’s position was further revealed in the article, “Can the Democratic Party be Used for Good?” Like many of the ISO’s programmatic articles, it treats as an open question something that would not even be a legitimate subject of debate among genuine Marxists. The article makes clear that, while the ISO feels compelled to formally distance itself from the Sanders campaign, there is no line they will not cross if they find that it suits their purposes.

Author Danny Katch begins by writing that the Democratic Party is “one of the most criminal enterprises the modern world has ever known.” If that is the case, and it most certainly is, how can one seriously pose the question in the title?

“Can the Democratic Party be transformed from within?” Katch asks rhetorically. “The honest approach to answering this question,” Katch replies, “is deciding whether our energy is best spent trying to overcome the tremendous obstacles to building an independent left-wing party or trying to overcome the tremendous obstacles to transform the Democratic Party from the inside,” to which he humbly responds that “my money is on the former.” In other words, the question is reduced for him to one of tactics, not of principled political considerations based on an appraisal of the class character of the Democratic Party, much less the fight for an independent revolutionary program.

In any case, the ISO makes clear that it will continue its practice of working with the Democratic Party (and the trade unions and “civil rights” organizations that help buttress it) in the form of close collaboration with the Sanders campaign. “Of course, we should work alongside Sanders supporters in labor, political and social struggles,” Katch concludes. “We can applaud their opposition to a political system that is thoroughly rigged by big money donors and the corporate media. But socialists should talk to them not just about corporate domination of politics, but why imperialism, racism—and ultimately Democratic Party itself—are vital to that domination.”

Both the ISO and Socialist Alternative orient themselves completely around the middle-class supporters of the Democratic Party because this is the layer they speak for. Despite the minor variations in their tactical approach, both are resolutely opposed to a class analysis of the Sanders campaign, of the Democratic Party, of the world situation as a whole. Notwithstanding their current mild criticisms of Obama, both promoted Obama and declared his election to be a “historic” (ISO) transformation of American politics.

No small element in their obsession with Sanders is the prospect that his campaign in one way or another opens up the possibility of securing lucrative positions within and around the Democratic Party and the unions.

Nothing frightens these organizations more than the prospect of an independent revolutionary working-class movement. Instead, they aim to carve out “political space,” in order to serve as a roadblock for such a movement. That is the meaning behind the “debate” over the Sanders campaign.



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