The economic nationalism of Bernie Sanders

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Bernie Sanders, the independent senator from Vermont who is running for the Democratic presidential nomination, is gaining a hearing among the public, due in large part to his focus on economic inequality. The support for the campaign of a politician who calls himself a socialist and regularly denounces the "billionaire class" is a reflection of widespread alienation from the political establishment and growing interest in a socialist alternative.

Sanders' campaign, however, is designed to channel this growing discontent back within the safe channels of the Democratic Party. None of his proposals challenge the basis of capitalist rule such as private ownership of industry and finance. Instead, he promotes the illusion that serious social reforms can be achieved within the existing political and economic system.

Sanders combines his populist appeals with economic nationalism. Far from pursuing genuinely socialist politics, which is based on revolutionary internationalism, he opposes the international unity of the working class, calling instead for American workers to rally in defense of "their" national state against foreign capital.

The general thrust of Sanders' argument can be summed up as the following: global trade undermines the sovereignty of the United States and results in the off-shoring of American jobs overseas to authoritarian regimes, resulting in declining living standards for American workers. As an alternative, Sanders proposes various protectionist measures.

This is the content of his stance on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which he has joined congressional Democrats and trade union officials in opposing. A statement released by Sanders declared that the TPP would "undermine US sovereignty," eliminate protectionist "Buy American" laws, and "reward authoritarian regimes like Vietnam."

"We need to regroup and come up with a trade policy which demands that corporate America start investing in this country rather than in countries all over the world," Sanders said on CBS News' "Face the Nation" program.

Virtually unmentioned in Sanders' numerous statements against the TPP is the basic geopolitical agenda that underlies the proposed trade bloc. The TPP is the economic component of the Obama administration's anti-Chinese "pivot to Asia." Sanders does not want to raise this issue because he, along with his congressional colleagues in both parties, supports such an aggressive policy towards China.

His interest in opposing the trade deal is to divert popular anger over unemployment, wage cuts and austerity along reactionary nationalist lines.

Since his election to Congress in 1991, Sanders has repeatedly attacked the extension to China of "most favored" trade status, called Normal Trade Relations in the parlance of the federal government. His very first piece of legislation as a congressman was a 1992 bill he co-sponsored with the current Democratic House minority leader, Nancy Pelosi, attacking the extension of most favored status to China, which was later vetoed by George H. W. Bush.

Since then, Sanders has sought repeatedly to repeal Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) with China on protectionist and nationalist grounds. During one such initiative in 2005, he declared that "Corporate America—with the active support of the president of the United States and the congressional leadership-is selling out the American people and making China the economic superpower of the 21st century."

On the basis of this political line, Sanders has aligned himself with openly right-wing figures. One Republican congressman, in supporting Sanders' 2005 effort, denounced the production of American flags in China. Echoing this sentiment, Sanders in 2011 attacked the Smithsonian Institute, on the occasion of Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Hu Jintao's visit to Washington, for selling Chinese-made busts of American presidents in its gift shop, calling on the museum to sell only American-made products.

Sanders, alongside Ron Paul, the right-wing libertarian Republican, sponsored another bill in 2005 calling for the

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US to withdraw from the World Trade Organization (WTO). A spokesman for Paul claimed that thanks to the WTO, which China joined in 2001, "Our trade competitors now have a bureaucratic means to gang up on us."

Following the favored propaganda line of American imperialism, Sanders' attacks on Chinese trade are often couched in "human rights" rhetoric. In 1998, he co-sponsored a resolution, which passed unanimously, criticizing China's human rights record and calling on the president to make Chinese diplomatic missions in the US contingent on the inflammatory demand that the US be allowed to establish a diplomatic office in Lhasa, Tibet.

Sanders has, under the guise of "human rights," supported numerous imperialist interventions, including the NATO war in former Yugoslavia and the current war against ISIS. Sanders' use of this line with respect to China has an unmistakable political significance.

While he attacks China for its mistreatment of minorities, Sanders has for many years distinguished himself by a nativist stance on immigration. He has sought to scapegoat immigrants in the US for the declining living standards of the American working class. This has won Sanders plaudits from right-wing layers, such as the TV host and anti-immigrant racist Lou Dobbs, who called Sanders "one of the few straight talkers in Congress."

For years, Sanders has attacked the federal visa program, blaming guest workers for high unemployment and low wages. "You have massively high unemployment for young people, yet we're talking about expanding visas so that young people from abroad can serve as life guards, become ski instructors, become front desk people, when young people in this country desperately need jobs to pay for a college education," Sanders told the *Washington Post* in 2013.

In 2007, Sanders and Republican Senator Chuck Grassley pushed for the suspension of visas for any company announcing layoffs. Sanders has focused particularly on the H-1B visa program, through which American corporations are able to hire highly skilled workers from abroad. Though the program is relatively small, with a cap of 65,000 visas per year, Sanders claims that it has caused a flood of foreign workers pushing Americans out of their jobs.

In 2009, he co-sponsored an amendment, also with Grassley, suspending the use of H-1B visas for banks that accepted federal bailout money. The American Immigration Lawyers Association denounced the amendment as "[creating] a climate of jingoistic divisiveness."

Sanders has publicly backed Obama's reactionary immigration policy. The administration's miserly immigration "reforms," such as the DREAM Act, provide temporary relief from deportation in exchange for paying back taxes and providing the government with detailed personal information, which could be used in future proceedings. Meanwhile, Obama has deported more immigrants than any other president in history and has bragged that under his presidency there are more "boots on the ground" along the US-Mexico border than ever before.

Sanders' brand of nationalist populism is a phenomenon with deep historical roots in the US. In the 1980s, jingoistic "Buy America" campaigns were utilized by the trade union bureaucracy to disorient and demobilize workers in the face of a plant-closing and wage-cutting offensive by American capitalism. This found its most noxious expression in the racist anti-Japanese campaigns of the United Auto Workers, in which Japanese-made cars were smashed with sledgehammers, and which culminated in the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American worker, in Highland Park, Michigan.

It is no accident that sections of the trade union bureaucracy have come out in support of Sanders' campaign. They share not only Sanders' nationalist outlook, but his political goal of disorienting the working class.

While populists such as Sanders claim to be on the side of the American worker, they are in reality working to enforce the continued domination of bourgeois politics over the working class. They promote the line that American workers should seek the protection of "their" national state from the world economy and foreign governments and corporations (as well as "treasonous" American corporations doing business overseas).

Sanders' overriding political concern is to head off a challenge to American capitalism from the working class by propping up the Democratic Party. This is what accounts for his nationalist politics and his decision to run in the Democratic primaries.

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