

# Is Bernie Sanders a socialist?

Tom Hall, Barry Grey  
16 July 2015

The growth of support for the campaign of the “socialist” Bernie Sanders is an indication of the leftward shift of broad layers of the American population. The senator from Vermont, who calls himself an independent but caucuses with the Democrats, is seeking to tap into popular anger over ever-rising social inequality by placing the issue at the center of his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination.

In his campaign speeches, he declares that income inequality is “the great moral issue of our time” and attacks the greed of the “billionaire class,” while calling for the restoration of “the once-great American middle class.”

Sanders has been gaining on Hillary Clinton, the presumptive Democratic nominee, in key early primary states. In two months, Clinton’s lead in New Hampshire has shrunk from 38 points to 8. In Iowa, Sanders is currently polling at 33 percent, 19 points below Clinton. The Clinton campaign, which was expected to cruise to an easy nomination, now admits that she may lose to Sanders in Iowa.

The Vermont senator has generally drawn larger crowds than any other announced presidential candidate. A July 1 rally in Madison, Wisconsin drew 13,000 people. By contrast, Clinton’s largest rally thus far, held in New York City, attracted only 5,000 people.

Support for Sanders is all the more significant given that anti-communism has served as the bedrock of official politics in the United States for more than 70 years. From the McCarthyite witch-hunts and Hollywood blacklists of the 1950s, through the triumphalism that accompanied the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, socialism has been effectively banned from official political discourse in the United States.

Broad layers of the population, particularly young people, are alienated and disaffected from the political establishment and its two right-wing parties of big business. Voter turnout in the 2014 mid-term elections was a mere 36.3 percent, the lowest in over seven decades.

Recent polls give an indication of the depth of this sentiment. According to a Pew Survey, the portion of the voting-age population that identifies with neither of the two major parties has reached a record-high 39 percent. A Gallup poll last month found that fully 47 percent of respondents were willing to vote for a socialist for president.

Many people are looking for alternatives to the existing political and economic order, which offers nothing but inequality, war and escalating attacks on democratic rights. For this reason, Sanders’ “socialism,” far from being a liability, has actually contributed to his popularity. Young people, in particular, are intrigued by the prospect of a socialist presidential candidate.

But is Bernie Sanders really a socialist? This question raises a related one: What are the basic principles of socialism?

**Internationalism:** Since the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848, which proclaimed, “Workers of the world, unite!” the socialist movement has been an international movement. Engels described the International Workingmen’s Association as “the first international movement of the working class.”

The basic orientation of bourgeois politics is nationalism, according to which workers should identify their interests with those of the nation,

which, of course, is ruled by the capitalist class. To this, socialism counterposes the perspective and program of working class internationalism, stressing the identity of interests of workers of all countries, races, religions, etc., who are objectively united in a common struggle against the capitalists of all countries.

Socialism strives to unite the workers of all countries on the basis of a common revolutionary program and stresses that the struggle to put an end to capitalist exploitation and establish socialism is, by its very nature, an international struggle. Socialism opposes all attempts to scapegoat or discriminate against immigrants and rejects all forms of nationalist or racial politics, which serve to divide the working class.

Bernie Sanders is not an internationalist. He is an American nationalist. He is a consistent advocate of economic nationalism and protectionism, which seek to place the onus for layoffs and unemployment in the US on the workers of other countries. By virtue of his “America First” politics, he seeks to line up American workers behind “their” American exploiters and in opposition to their class brothers and sisters in other countries. He has long agitated, in particular, against China, opposing trade deals from a chauvinist standpoint.

Sanders opposes the Obama administration’s Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) from a right-wing, nationalist standpoint. The proposed economic bloc is a reactionary initiative, part of American imperialism’s drive to isolate, militarily encircle and ultimately attack China. But Sanders does not oppose it on an anti-imperialist basis. Rather, he accuses the TPP of “undermining American sovereignty.”

For years, Sanders has attacked immigrant workers, accusing them of taking the jobs of American workers. He has sponsored multiple bills opposing the federal visa program, while supporting the immigration policy of Obama, who has deported more immigrants than any other administration in history. For his efforts, right-wing anti-immigrant talk show host Lou Dobbs called Sanders “one of the few straight-talkers in Congress.”

**Social ownership of the means of production:** The rational development of a complex global economy to benefit the world’s population is blocked by the anarchy of the capitalist market, which subordinates all decisions to the profit interests of a few. The American and world economy is dominated by a handful of banks and hedge funds whose operations are entirely parasitic and essentially criminal. The resources of the world, first and foremost, human labor, are subordinated to the drive of a narrow financial aristocracy to accumulate ever greater wealth. A necessary first step in the development of a planned economy geared to social need and the promotion of social equality is the expropriation of the major banks and corporations and their transformation into publicly owned and democratically controlled institutions.

The question of social ownership of industry and finance is not even mentioned in Sanders’ speeches. He talks about the “billionaire class,” but is careful not to speak of the capitalist class. His use of phrases such as the “billionaire class” and the “great American middle class” are indicative of the intellectual vacuity of his politics, which serves to conceal rather than reveal the underlying roots of social inequality and

other social evils.

The term “billionaire class” has no scientific validity. Social class is determined not by the scale of wealth, but by the relationship of social layers to the basic economic structure of society. Sanders seeks to divert attention from the economic system on which obscene levels of personal wealth are based.

Similarly, talk of the “great American middle class,” a nebulous and essentially mythical construct, has long served to cover up and blur the basic division between the working class and capitalist class that dominates society.

None of Sanders’ programmatic demands touch on the private ownership and control of the main levers of economic life. His program is not only not socialist, it is not particularly left-wing. Democratic presidential platforms during the last great period of economic crisis, the 1930s, were far more radical. The 1936 platform, for example, pledged to make full use of the law “in stamping out monopolistic practices and the concentration of economic power.”

Sanders’ reform proposals—a \$15 minimum wage, a federal jobs program—modest as they are, cannot be realized outside of a broad mobilization of the working class in opposition to the ruling class and both of its political parties. The Vermont senator promotes the illusion that they can be achieved within the framework of the Democratic Party and the capitalist system.

His most radical proposal is the breakup of the biggest banks, a reform measure that was carried out in isolated cases during the Great Depression as part of Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal” program, which was enacted for the purpose of saving capitalism from the threat of socialist revolution. Sanders knows, of course, that the Democratic Party of today, whose nomination he is seeking, would never carry out such a measure and has instead used the financial crash of 2008 to transfer trillions of dollars in public funds to Wall Street and strengthen the grip of the biggest banks on the economy.

**Anti-imperialism:** We continue to live in the epoch of imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism. Imperialism emerged at the end of the 19th century. Its main features were defined by Lenin during World War I as the monopolistic concentration of production, the domination of finance capital and economic parasitism, the great power striving for global geo-political and economic dominance, the oppression of weaker nations, and the universal tendency toward political reaction.

Lenin called imperialism the epoch of wars and revolutions. The irreconcilable contradictions—between global economy and the division of the world into rival nation-states, the basic geo-political framework of capitalism, and between socialized production and private ownership of the means of production—inevitably give rise to wars of colonial conquest and wars between rival imperialist powers. They also give rise to the objective conditions for the overthrow of capitalism by the working class.

Socialists oppose all wars waged by imperialist powers such as the United States and oppose all of the efforts of imperialism, whether by economic, political or military means, to subjugate and exploit poorer and weaker countries. Socialists place at the very center of their activities the development of a mass international working class movement against war, insisting that the prevention of a third world war is possible only on the basis of a revolutionary struggle to put an end to capitalism.

Sanders is a supporter of American imperialism. Although he boasts that he voted against the Patriot Act and the Iraq War, he has voted for numerous defense spending bills and has supported imperialist interventions under the guise of human rights, including the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia and the current war against ISIS.

Sanders supported the US-led regime-change operation, spearheaded by neo-Nazis, that overthrew a pro-Russian government in Ukraine and installed a rabidly anti-Russian, right-wing government, which has carried out a bloody war against pro-Russian separatists in the east of the country.

The US has used its puppet government in Kiev to carry out a massive US-NATO militarization drive in Eastern Europe, threatening the outbreak of war with nuclear-armed Russia.

Sanders supports this reckless and reactionary policy, portraying it as a defensive response to “Russian aggression.” In a 2014 television interview he declared, “The entire world has got to stand up to Putin.”

Sanders is also a staunch Zionist. He defended Israel’s barbaric war in Gaza last year. Video has emerged of Sanders at one of his public meetings shouting down and threatening protesters challenging his support for the state of Israel.

He is a supporter of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, a next-generation warplane that has a unit price of \$350 million and whose development has already cost \$1 trillion. Sanders supports the basing of F-35s in Burlington, Vermont, where he served as mayor in the 1980s.

**Social equality:** Capitalism, which is predicated upon the exploitation of the working class, is incapable of providing economic security and a decent standard of living for working people. Even at its height during the post-World War II economic boom, American capitalism was characterized by massive discrepancies of wealth and income and widespread poverty.

The past 40 years have seen a vast decline in the global economic position of American capitalism. This has produced ever greater levels of social inequality, the result of a relentless attack on the living standards of the working class. This process is bound up with the dismantling of large parts of the country’s industrial infrastructure and the rise of a new financial aristocracy, which accumulates its wealth on the basis of non-productive, parasitic and semi-criminal activities.

Social inequality is not some aberration of capitalism, it is its essential feature.

Sanders, for all his populist rhetoric, defends capitalism and opposes the mass mobilization of the working class. On a host of issues, from public health care to mandated vacation time, Sanders holds up European countries as a model to be emulated—at a time when these countries are carrying out brutal austerity measures and dismantling the welfare state programs established after the Second World War. All that is necessary is that we “make better choices,” a recent statement on his web site declared.

Sanders avoids any concrete explanation of the social and political dynamics behind the growth of social inequality and the decades-long assault on the working class. He covers up the role played by the Democratic Party in this process.

On his web site, he declares that “the economy today is much better than when President George W. Bush left office.” In reality, the Obama administration has overseen the largest transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich in American history. One Harvard study found that 95 percent of all income gains went to the wealthiest 1 percent of the country between 2009 and 2012.

**The political independence of the working class:** Socialism insists that the struggles of working people for decent jobs, wages, health care, education, housing, etc. are in essence political. The capitalist ruling class, by virtue of its control of the means of production, controls the political system. For the working class to free itself from economic exploitation, it must conduct a political struggle consciously directed at the taking of power and establishment of a workers’ government.

The most critical question is the political independence of the working class from all parties and politicians of the capitalist class. The working class must advance its own solution to the crisis, and to do so, it must have its own mass socialist party.

That is why in the United States socialists have always opposed the political subordination of the labor movement to the Democratic Party. The tying of American labor to the Democrats by the trade unions has been the primary means for upholding the political dominance of the

ruling class. In a country that has seen violent, bitter and heroic workers' struggles, the political subordination of labor to the Democrats has been the Achilles' heel of the workers' movement.

The major political function of Sanders' campaign is to divert the growing social discontent and hostility toward the existing system behind the Democratic Party, in order to contain and dissipate it. His supposedly "socialist" campaign is an attempt to preempt and block the emergence of an independent movement of the working class. This is underscored by his decision to conduct his campaign within the framework of the Democratic Party. Indeed, Sanders announced at the start of his campaign that he would throw his support behind the eventual Democratic presidential nominee, whomever that might be.

As a comparison of Sanders' positions to these core conceptions of socialism makes clear, his "socialism" is a ruse to prevent the emergence of the real thing.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**