

Democratic presidential debate: Nervousness and demagogy

Our reporter
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The first televised debate among the candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination, held Tuesday night in Las Vegas, Nevada and broadcast by CNN, demonstrated the increasing nervousness of the American ruling elite over mounting social anger among working people.

All of the candidates adopted a pose of sympathy for the plight of working people, invariably referring to them as the “middle class” rather than the working class in order to blur as much as possible the actual class contradictions in American society.

In the division of labor within the capitalist two-party system, the Republicans use right-wing populist demagogy, appealing to religious bigotry, racism and anti-immigrant prejudice, as a screen for policies that express the unvarnished profit lust of the financial elite: elimination of social welfare programs, deregulation of business, tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy.

The Democrats offer populist demagogy of a more “left” character, making a pretense of sympathy and concern over the economic plight of working people for the purpose of diverting mass anger into harmless channels. They serve Wall Street by defusing any threat from below. At the same time, the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, uphold the power of the military-intelligence apparatus and the worldwide interests of American imperialism.

So desperate is the crisis of American capitalism, so deep the class divisions and so widespread the growth of popular opposition that the Democratic Party has been compelled in 2016 to add a dash of “socialist” rhetoric to its empty populism, in the form of Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, now the leading challenger to the Democratic frontrunner, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Tuesday night’s debate was the first direct

confrontation between Sanders and Clinton. They were joined by three other candidates who have failed to register any significant support in the polls, former Maryland Governor Martin O’Malley, former Virginia Senator James Webb, and former Rhode Island Governor and Senator Lincoln Chafee.

The event received a massive media buildup and was presented by CNN with all the atmospherics and special effects of a boxing match, or perhaps a reality show competition, complete with the playing of the national anthem, followed by a lengthy commercial break, before any of the candidates had said a word.

From the beginning, the candidates presented themselves as opponents of war, poverty, injustice and the domination of politics by big money, without in any way suggesting that these were all connected to a common cause—i.e., the profit system.

Chafee pledged to “end these wars,” referring to the Middle East. Webb claimed to speak for “economic fairness and social justice.” O’Malley warned of “deep economic injustice that threatens to tear this country apart.” Sanders spoke of an “unprecedented crisis,” with the “middle class working longer hours, while most new income goes to the top 1 percent.”

Even Hillary Clinton, whose candidacy has more support from Wall Street than any other Democrat or Republican, spoke of the need to create opportunity “for every child,” to raise wages and create jobs, and to “change the tax system, where the wealthy pay too little and the middle class pays too much.” She promised to “heal the economic divide,” without explaining how this was possible in a society where the top 1 percent owns nearly half of all wealth and demands even more.

She even declared, in response to a direct question about whether she was a progressive or a moderate, that she was a “progressive who wants to get things done.”

This was, rhetorically at least, a different posture from the campaign of her husband in 1992, in which he ran as a “New Democrat” who rejected liberalism and promised to “end welfare as we know it.”

The first question to Bernie Sanders was whether a candidate calling himself a socialist could be elected president of the United States. He gave his standard reassurance that he was advocating modest social welfare schemes of the type implemented in Scandinavia, concluding with the claim that his campaign, by attracting a new layer of young people, would expand the number of voters and strengthen the Democratic Party.

Moderator Anderson Cooper pressed the issue, demanding to know whether Sanders was a capitalist. When Sanders said he was opposed to the type of “casino capitalism” practiced on Wall Street today—in effect, indicating his willingness to support “good” rather than “bad” capitalism—Cooper asked the other candidates, “Is there anyone else on the stage who’s not a capitalist.”

Clinton immediately spoke up, saying, “As we have to from time to time, we have to save capitalism from itself.” She went on to declare her support for small and middle-sized businesses, with Sanders responding, “We all agree that America is a great entrepreneurial country.” That was the end of any discussion on socialism vs. capitalism.

Much of the debate consisted of efforts by the moderator and other CNN questioners to provoke conflicts among the candidates on secondary or tertiary issues, and attempts by the three peripheral candidates to gain attention at the expense of Clinton and Sanders, who were treated as co-frontrunners throughout the two-hour program.

The most significant exchanges came during the discussion on foreign policy, which focused on the current crisis in the Middle East and the potential confrontation between US and Russian military forces in Syria, where the two countries have intervened on opposite sides of the civil war between the Assad government and Islamist opposition forces.

Both Clinton and Sanders backed the current policy of the Obama administration, which involves air strikes against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), military support for other Islamist “rebel” groups that have links to Al Qaeda, and efforts to overthrow the Assad

government.

Clinton reiterated her support for a US-imposed no-fly zone over parts of Syria, while Sanders opposed such an effort and criticized the 2003 US invasion of Iraq (for which Clinton voted in the Senate), calling it “the worst foreign policy decision in American history.”

Asked directly when a “President Sanders” would use force, the senator replied, “When our country is threatened and when our allies are threatened.” He was not a pacifist, he continued, and had supported Bill Clinton’s bombing of Serbia in 1999, the invasion of Afghanistan under George W. Bush in 2001, and the current Obama campaign of air strikes in Syria.

None of the candidates—including Sanders, the supposed scourge of the “millionaires and billionaires”—made any connection between the grotesque concentration of wealth and privilege at the top of American society and the increasing resort by the US government to military aggression abroad. On the contrary, their common goal was to conceal such connections and block working people from drawing any conclusions about the responsibility of the profit system for the increasing danger of a new world war.

Sanders demonstrated throughout the debate that his radical posturing is so much hot air. When asked directly about his call for a “political revolution,” Sanders huffed and puffed, but offered nothing more than the wish that more people go to the polls to vote.



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