

Bernie Sanders, the Democratic Party and socialism

Joseph Kishore
15 October 2015

The Democratic Party debate on Tuesday night reflected the growing nervousness of the political establishment and the ruling class as a whole over the explosive class tensions building up within the United States.

In one form or another, all five of the candidates participating in the event made use of left-sounding rhetoric in regard to economic issues. Martin O'Malley, the former governor of Maryland, spoke of "an economic injustice that threatens to tear our country apart." Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the current front-runner, proclaimed that her campaign would center on raising wages. At one point she said it was necessary to "save capitalism from itself."

Bernie Sanders, the self-described "democratic socialist" senator from Vermont, repeated his calls for a "political revolution" to "take back our government from a handful of billionaires and create the vibrant democracy we know we can and should have." There is an obvious incongruity in criticism of inequality coming from the field of Democratic presidential candidates. The country has been headed by the Democratic Obama administration for the past seven years, a period of record growth of social inequality. Since 2009, Obama's first year in office, 95 percent of income gains have gone to the top one percent.

As Tuesday's debate underscored, the Democrats are endlessly repackaging themselves in a non-stop marketing effort, hoping to rekindle support from a disillusioned and alienated public by adopting a new brand, slogan, etc. Virtually no effort is made to align today's positions with yesterday's or reconcile their words with their deeds.

Now, this party of Wall Street and American imperialism is scrambling to adapt itself rhetorically to the reality of a working class that is being radicalized, the better to carry out the ruling class' policies of austerity and war.

At the center of these efforts is Sanders, who has over

the past several months risen rapidly in the polls, attracting crowds of thousands and even tens of thousands to his rallies. Between April and October, Sanders' national poll numbers have increased from about four percent (compared to Clinton's 60 percent) to about 25 percent (compared to Clinton's 40 percent). He has taken the lead in New Hampshire and is tied with Clinton in Iowa.

The popularity of the Sanders campaign has surprised media commentators, who take it for granted that a "socialist" label dooms any political figure in the United States. In fact, Sanders has garnered support precisely because of his appeal to a deep and growing hatred of the capitalist system.

In terms of his actual politics, however, Sanders proposes nothing that is genuinely socialist, or even radical, for that matter. On Tuesday, he repeated his calls for a series of modest reforms, including raising the minimum wage, investing in infrastructure, establishing equal pay for women, and making public college and universities free through a tax on financial transactions.

Aside from a vague call to "break up" the largest banks, Sanders did not propose any measures that address the relations of production or the economic dominance of the capitalist class. There was no suggestion that industries or banks should be nationalized, a basic component of socialist politics. Nor did he explicitly call for a redistribution of wealth.

Even within the tradition of American politics of an earlier period, Sanders' proposals are thoroughly conventional.

Compare his statements to the platform of the Socialist Party in 1936, then headed by the reformist Norman Thomas. It proposed the "social ownership and democratic control of the banks, mines, railroads, the power industry and all key industries." The party's platform in 1912—when Eugene Debs won 6 percent of the

national vote—called for the nationalization of major industries, the requisitioning of food and storage warehouses to reduce the cost of living, and the collective ownership of the banking and currency system.

Sanders proposes to do the impossible: ameliorate social inequality without touching the foundation of the power of the capitalist class.

As he rises in the polls, Sanders very deliberately seeks to reassure the other main center of power in the United States—the military-intelligence apparatus. On Tuesday, he declared that he is “prepared to take this country into war if that is necessary.” Insisting that he is “not a pacifist,” Sanders pointed to his support for the war in Kosovo under Clinton, the war in Afghanistan launched by the Bush administration, and the Obama administration’s present war policy in Syria and Iraq.

These statements followed on previous comments that he would make use of drones, Special Forces “and more,” and that the United States “should have the strongest military in the world.” On Tuesday, he added a call for the prosecution of NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden.

Sanders’ support for imperialist war abroad says far more about his politics than his proposals for social reforms at home. All of the wars he backs are being waged in the interest of the ruling class and its program of global domination. It is impossible to oppose the economic policy of the corporate and financial elite at home and support its policy abroad.

The pro-war positions of Sanders are of a piece with his economic nationalism. His criticisms of social inequality are invariably tied to denunciations of “our disastrous trade policies.” Sanders lines up squarely with the trade union bureaucracy and sections of the Democratic Party in seeking to divert working class anger over layoffs and unemployment along nationalist channels, which serve to pit American workers against their class brothers and sisters around the world. At the same time, this “America-first” appeal deflects attention from the real source of workers’ oppression, the capitalist system, and lines up US workers behind their American bosses.

As for Sanders’ “political revolution,” it boils down to nothing more than expanding voter turnout behind the Democratic presidential candidate, whomever that is. Thus, he spoke Tuesday of the necessity “to have one of the larger voter turnouts in the world, not the lowest.” He added that “Democrats at the White House on down will win when there is excitement and a large voter turnout, and that is what this campaign is doing.”

It could not be clearer. Sanders’ primary function is to

prevent mounting social opposition from taking an independent political form.

Those organizations that have promoted the Sanders campaign—from sections of the trade union apparatus to groups such as Socialist Alternative and the International Socialist Organization—do so with this same conscious aim: Not to advance the cause of socialism, but to demoralize opposition by smothering and derailing the striving of the working class to break free from the capitalist two-party system.

The experience in Greece over the past year has shown the consequences of this type of politics. The Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza), which came to power pledging to end austerity, is now administering a new round of austerity measures, more brutal than those that went before, dictated by the banks and the European Union. Sanders and his backers play a parallel role in the United States.

To advance its interests, the working class requires an entirely different perspective. Millions of workers and youth are coming into conflict with the capitalist system, and socialism is once again a specter haunting the ruling class.

The fight for socialism, however, means the international unification of the working class in a struggle against the ruling class and all its representatives. It means the expropriation of the banks, financial institutions and major corporations and a radical redistribution of wealth. All the basic social rights of the working class—including the right to a job, a livable income, health care, education, a secure retirement—are in direct conflict with a social system that subordinates everything to the dictates of the corporate and financial aristocracy.

A genuine socialist program can be realized only when the working class is organized and mobilized as an independent political force, in the United States and internationally, to take political power and reorganize economic life on the basis of social need, not private profit.



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