

After the Democratic presidential debate

Pseudo-left groups step up promotion of Sanders and the Democrats

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The response of the pseudo-left organizations Socialist Alternative and the International Socialist Organization (ISO) to the October 13 Democratic presidential candidates' debate demonstrates their common orientation to the Democratic Party, despite quibbling between them over how best to adapt to the Bernie Sanders campaign. Both organizations have hailed the debate as a sign that the Democratic Party is moving to the left and evidence that pressure from below can compel it to carry out progressive social reform policies.

On the part of Socialist Alternative, this takes the form of open and unabashed support for the campaign of self-described "democratic socialist" Bernie Sanders for the Democratic presidential nomination. The organization becomes hopelessly entangled in the contradictions of its own unprincipled politics by simultaneously campaigning for the Democratic candidate Sanders and claiming to oppose the Democratic Party and support the building of an anti-capitalist party independent of the Democrats.

The ISO adopts a slightly different tack, no less self-contradictory. It praises Sanders for helping to push the Democrats to the left, while nominally opposing his campaign because it is being carried out within the framework of the Democratic Party.

Behind the squabble over how to adapt to and promote the Sanders campaign, both organizations, in common with the entire fraternity of middle class pseudo-left organizations, work to obscure the class divisions in American society and block the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class.

The debate itself, nationally televised and watched by some 15 million viewers, was a cynical and thoroughly dishonest affair. All five participants, front-runner Hillary Clinton, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and three marginal candidates, postured as opponents of social inequality and critics of the corporate-financial oligarchy. It was but the latest attempt of this party of Wall Street, the Pentagon and the CIA to rekindle support among a disillusioned and alienated public by rebranding itself, without any accounting for its record of austerity for workers and bailouts for the banks, or any attempt to reconcile its words with its deeds.

The debate performance was driven by concerns within the ruling class over the growth of social and political opposition, reflected in the unexpected level of popular support for the "socialist" candidate Sanders, who has made social inequality the center of his political appeal. None of the debate participants, of course, noted that they were running to succeed the former candidate of "hope and change," who had presided over the biggest transfer of wealth in history from the working class to the rich.

The most glaring contrast between rhetoric and reality is the Sanders campaign. In the course of the debate, Sanders made clear that the content of his so-called "political revolution" against the "billionaire class" is nothing more than a campaign to corral more votes for the Democratic

Party.

Challenged by the moderator, CNN's Anderson Cooper, on the electability of someone who describes himself as a socialist, Sanders explicitly defended his intervention in the presidential race on the grounds that it would increase the vote for the Democratic Party and its eventual presidential candidate (whom Sanders has unconditionally pledged to support).

"Republicans win when there is a low voter turnout," Sanders said, "and that is what happened last November ... We are bringing out huge turnouts and creating excitement all over this country. 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."

He rushed to reassure the ruling elite and the military-intelligence establishment that he was a reliable supporter of US imperialist interests around the world and the state agencies that promote them by means of military violence and subversion. He declared his support for President Bill Clinton's 1999 war against Serbia, George W. Bush's war against Afghanistan launched in 2001 and Obama's current war in Syria and Iraq. He affirmed his readiness, if elected, to take the US into new wars. And he reiterated his position that NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden should be prosecuted for exposing the government's police-state spying on the American people.

He said nothing about the US bombing of the hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan that killed at least 22 unarmed people, or any of the other war crimes committed by the US government. In the days following the debate, Sanders went further, stating his support for Obama's decision to reverse his previous promises and keep thousands of US troops in Afghanistan indefinitely.

It is impossible to oppose the policies of the ruling class within the US while supporting them overseas. In fact, there has never been anything genuinely socialist about Sanders' domestic program, which accepts private ownership of the corporations and banks and evades any challenge to the core interests of the ruling class. His list of reform proposals—a \$15 an hour minimum wage, free tuition at public colleges, selective tax increases on the wealthy—are far more modest than the "Second Bill of Rights" proposed by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1944 (and promptly forgotten), which called on the government to guarantee to all Americans a job, education, medical care and a decent home.

Since the debate, Sanders has been tacking further to the right, defining down his "socialism" to efface any distinction between it and capitalism with a few cosmetic reforms. On the campaign trail, he has cited as examples of "socialism" police and fire departments and public libraries.

In an October 19 article ("Bernie Sanders Uses Smaller Crowds to Push Back Against 'Radical' Label"), the *New York Times* noted that Sanders had taken to holding smaller meetings in Iowa to "make the case that he

would be electable as the 2016 Democratic nominee.” It quoted Tad Devine, a “senior adviser” to Sanders, as saying, “The idea of electability is important to Iowa and New Hampshire Democrats—it’s not something we can blow off.”

The response of Socialist Alternative to the Democratic debate (“Democrats’ First Debate: Sanders Socialist Message Reaches Millions”), is to hail Sanders for “having created heightened interest in his anti-establishment, pro-working class campaign.” Not only that. According to Socialist Alternative, Sanders “has shifted the primary debate inside the Democrats to the left.”

This supposedly “socialist” organization notes a few “weaknesses” in Sanders’ performance, mentioning his explicit support for US imperialist wars in Afghanistan, Serbia and elsewhere and his assurance that as “commander in chief” he would be prepared to take the US into war.

“But these weaknesses,” it writes, “do not alter the enormously positive effect the Sanders campaign is having in politicizing and radicalizing hundreds of thousands and, potentially, millions of people.”

Like all of the pseudo-left groups, including the ISO, Socialist Alternative turns reality on its head. The Sanders campaign is not the catalyst for a radicalization of the working class. It is a response by a section of the capitalist class to the reality of a profound shift in popular consciousness to the left and a growing disgust with the profit system. The purpose of the Sanders campaign, which has generally received positive coverage in the corporate media, is to block the development of socialist consciousness and the emergence of a revolutionary movement of the working class.

Most tellingly, Socialist Alternative writes: “The debate marks another step forward in the re-emergence of socialist ideas as a legitimate force in US politics.” In other words, Socialist Alternative sees jumping on the Sanders bandwagon as a means of further integrating itself into the Democratic Party and the trade union apparatus. It anticipates further openings for supposedly “independent socialist” candidates such as Seattle City Councilwoman Kshama Sawant to gain entry into the political establishment.

If anything, the ISO is even more ecstatic over the Democratic debate. In “What to take from the debate” (October 19), Wael Elasady begins by gushing: “I’ve listened to most of the various presidential debates since 2004, and this one was, far and away, the most exciting and the furthest to the left. To have a candidate who, asked about the greatest threat to national security, responds that it’s climate change, or who defends being a democratic socialist—while the likely next president, Hillary Clinton, admits on the record that she wants to ‘save capitalism from itself’—was satisfying to watch, to say the least.”

He continues: “Okay, I have to admit that I got pretty excited at some points ... the debate participants at one point tried to outdo each other about how eager they were to throw some bankers in jail for their role in causing the financial crisis.”

What can one say about such middle class liberal rubbish? What predominates here, stupidity or swinishness? Either way, the pro-Democratic Party politics are clear.

The article criticizes Sanders for running within the Democratic Party and doing the bidding of the Democratic National Committee, but at the same time it praises him for his “radical economic positions and his willingness to put the system on trial.” The precise content of Sanders’ “radical” economic positions or his alleged indictment of the “system” is never explained, either by the ISO, Socialist Alternative or any of the other fake-left groups that are promoting the Vermont senator.

But there is an additional virtue in Sanders’ campaign that, according to the ISO, must not be overlooked: “It’s also important to point out that at the same time Sanders is opening up space for a discussion of socialism and legitimizing left-wing positions on things like education and taxation...” Like Socialist Alternative, the ISO sees an opening to get even

closer to the power brokers and secure lucrative positions within the political establishment.

To a very great extent, the tactical differences between the two organizations over how best to promote and exploit the Sanders campaign are bound up with their competing efforts to win the patronage of forces within the state and its appendages, such as the trade union bureaucracy.

At another point in the article, Elasady writes of the Sanders campaign: “At the end of the day, the base of the Democratic Party was reignited after eight demoralizing years waiting for the hope and change that Barack Obama promised, but never delivered.” Elasady is, obviously, part of that base. He is talking about himself.

What he does not mention is the role of the ISO in promoting Obama and his phony “hope and change” act. Immediately following the November 2008 election, for example, the ISO called Obama’s victory “a transformative event in US politics.”

Elasady criticizes Sanders on the grounds that “socialism is being identified with someone who has an imperialist outlook on the role of the US in the world, which helps provide a left-wing cover for the crimes of empire.” These words are, in fact, an apt characterization of the role of the ISO itself in supporting the US-backed and financed “revolution” in Syria and the war for regime-change in Libya that preceded it.

Following Russia’s military intervention, the ISO has publicly lined up with the most hard-line militarist factions within the American state to demand a more aggressive policy against both Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Moscow.

It is notable that an article published by *SocialistWorker* on October 22, headlined, “Five Clinton crimes that won’t be investigated,” criticizes the Democratic presidential frontrunner for her support for the war in Afghanistan, drone missile assassinations and the coup in Honduras, but says nothing about her most salient foreign policy stand: calling for a no-fly zone in Syria together with stepped up US military aid to the CIA-backed “rebels,” a policy which the ISO endorses.

The *SocialistWorker* article concludes: “So let’s continue to build independent socialist organization—and with it, the social power and the movements needed to win the best of what was discussed in the debates, and much more besides.”

Let’s build, that is, an “independent socialist organization” to promote illusions in the Democratic Party and render working class opposition impotent by keeping it bottled up within the capitalist two-party system.



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