

Sanders outlines pro-capitalist, pro-war positions in speech on “democratic socialism”

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In a speech Thursday afternoon at Georgetown University, Senator Bernie Sanders made it clear that what he calls “democratic socialism” has nothing to do with either socialism or the defense of democratic rights.

The candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination explicitly rejected any connection with socialism as a movement of the international working class to put an end to capitalism and establish a society based on collective ownership of the means of production.

He declared, “The next time you hear me attacked as a socialist, remember this: I don’t believe government should own the means of production... I believe in private companies that thrive and invest and grow in America instead of shipping jobs and profits overseas.”

This is a statement that, whatever his reformist rhetoric, Sanders is committed to a policy of driving down the wages and benefits of US workers to boost the profits of companies operating within the country.

Nor did Sanders voice any defense of democratic rights against the enormous and expanding attacks by the military-intelligence apparatus of the US government. He said nothing about CIA torture, NSA spying, the revelations of Edward Snowden or the escalating violence of the US police against working people of all races.

On the contrary, Sanders entirely embraced the framework of the “war on terror” as pursued by the Bush and Obama administrations, devoting the last major section of his remarks to advocating all-out war against ISIS.

The main line of the speech was to portray socialism, not as a political program directed against capitalism, but as an misleading epithet thrown out by right-wing opponents of liberal reforms undertaken to save the

profit system, such as those carried out by Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal during the Great Depression, and by the Johnson administration in the 1960s.

Social Security and the federal minimum wage were denounced as socialist, Sanders said, adding: “Unemployment insurance, abolishing child labor, the 40-hour work week, collective bargaining, strong banking regulations, deposit insurance, and job programs that put millions of people to work were all described, in one way or another, as ‘socialist.’ Yet, these programs have become the fabric of our nation and the foundation of the middle class.”

Similarly, in the 1960s, when Medicare and Medicaid were created, “these vitally important programs were derided by the right wing as socialist programs that were a threat to our American way of life.”

Fifty years later, Sanders declared, the same label was being applied to efforts to improve the conditions of life for working people in the midst of the protracted economic crisis brought on by the 2008 Wall Street crash.

The first thing that must be said about Sanders’s claims is that what the Democratic candidate proposes today bears no resemblance to the policies enacted under the New Deal or in the 1960s. His program is far to the right of these programs, which were conceded by the ruling class in response to bitter social struggles.

That is why Sanders insists on the label “democratic socialism,” as well as sprinkling his speeches with calls for a “political revolution”: the rhetoric gives his policies a superficial radicalism which they entirely lack in substance. He proposes nothing more than somewhat higher taxes on the wealthy, to finance higher spending on health care and college education, and a modest increase in the minimum wage.

His “political revolution” boils down to bolstering the electoral prospects and political credibility of the Democratic Party, one of the two parties of the ruling class.

The second observation is that even this extremely modest program of reform is a fraud. If elected president, a Sanders administration would not fight for the interests of workers any more than Obama, who has presided over the greatest transfer of wealth in American history.

Sanders’s pretense to “socialism” is a fraud at an even more fundamental level. He combines his verbal paeans to “democratic socialism” with complete silence on the most important threat to the democratic rights of the American people: the enormous growth of the police-state apparatus in the United States, above all the power of the Pentagon and the associated intelligence agencies, including the CIA and NSA.

It was notable that in the foreign policy section of his speech, Sanders claimed to oppose regime-change operations like the 1953 overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran, the 1964 overthrow of Joao Goulart in Brazil, and the 1973 overthrow of Salvador Allende in Chile, but he never named the instruments of those counterrevolutionary coups, the Central Intelligence Agency and the US military brass.

To do so, of course, would both risk alerting the American people to the threat posed by CIA and Pentagon to democratic rights at home, and cut across his aspirations to become the commander-in-chief of those forces in January 2017. Instead, Sanders cited the CIA approvingly, in connection with its analysis of the crisis in Middle East, to support his own foreign policy prescriptions.

Sanders went out of his way to pander to backward conceptions of socialism as a nefarious import, alien to the United States. In the section of his speech disavowing any intention to advocate public ownership of the means of production, he went on to say, “I don’t believe in some foreign ‘ism’, but I believe deeply in American idealism.”

The actual content of this “idealism,” however, is nothing more than garden-variety support to American imperialism. Sanders declared, “The United States must pursue policies to destroy the brutal and barbaric ISIS regime, and to create conditions that prevent fanatical extremist ideologies from flourishing.”

He hailed the creation of NATO, the principal instrument of Cold War foreign policy (responsible for one of the most brutal right-wing coups of that period, the seizure of power by the colonels in Greece), and called for the creation of a new NATO-type organization to prosecute the struggle against what he called “the global threat of terror.”

With that language, Sanders embraces the same foreign policy framework as George W. Bush (the “global war on terror”) and Barack Obama. In the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination, Sanders has positioned himself as the continuator of Obama’s foreign policy, as opposed to Hillary Clinton, who has sought to distinguish herself by advocating more aggressive measures in the Middle East.

The real content of Sanders’s foreign policy views was summed up in his hailing of Jordan’s King Abdullah as the model for Muslim countries carrying their share of the load in the war against ISIS. He saluted the King, “not only for his wise remarks, but also for the role that his small country is playing in attempting to address the horrific refugee crisis in the region.”

Abdullah is a brutal autocrat who represses all domestic opposition and is allied with Saudi Arabia and other despotic Persian Gulf regimes. That matters none to Sanders, who is anxious to encourage the Arab regimes to send their own ground troops into the Syrian slaughterhouse to do the dirty work of American imperialism.



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