

On eve of presidential primaries

## Growing support for Sanders highlights US political crisis

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26 January 2016

New opinion polls show that Bernie Sanders, the Vermont senator who calls himself a democratic socialist, has moved ahead of Hillary Clinton in Iowa, the first primary state to vote in the 2016 Democratic presidential nominating process, and has widened his lead in the second, New Hampshire.

In Iowa, which holds its caucuses on February 1, a series of polls released over the past week have placed Sanders either in the lead or narrowly trailing Clinton, with his numbers improving and hers declining from previous surveys. In a New Hampshire poll by CBS News released Sunday, Sanders had opened a 19 percentage point lead among likely Democratic voters.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, Sanders is no socialist. As a nominal “independent,” he has worked closely with the Democratic Party, the oldest capitalist party in the United States, for his entire political career. His intervention into the presidential race, running as a Democrat while claiming to oppose social inequality and Wall Street, is calculated to channel growing social opposition and burgeoning anti-capitalist sentiment back behind the Democratic Party, in order to render the opposition politically harmless.

Sanders himself has sought to reassure the ruling elite with the argument that his campaign will revive flagging support for the Democratic Party. He has pledged to support the Democratic presidential candidate, whoever that turns out to be.

He opposes public ownership of the corporations and banks and the unification of workers across national boundaries. He lines up with the trade unions in opposing trade deals on the basis of economic nationalism and anti-Chinese chauvinism. The touchstone of his politics is his full support for the Obama administration’s imperialist wars in the Middle East and Central Asia. If elected, his promises of universal health care, a higher minimum wage and free college tuition would be quickly jettisoned in line with his support for American imperialism and its wars, which are inextricably bound up with the class war against the living standards and rights of workers and youth in the US.

Nonetheless, there is an objective significance to the growth of popular support for a candidate who inveighs against social

inequality and calls himself a socialist in a country where anti-communism has for the better part of a century been a state religion in all but name. For decades, socialism has been politically quarantined in America. Socialist views have been excluded from political discourse in the corporate-controlled media. A battery of anti-democratic election laws make it virtually impossible for a socialist opponent of the two big business parties to obtain ballot status.

That under such conditions, Sanders has won a level of popular support that he, least of all, anticipated, reflects a broad shift to the left and political radicalization among working people and youth. Tens of millions in America are disgusted with the existing economic and political set-up and are looking for a radical alternative.

It is not an accident that the support for Sanders, which was not anticipated by the media and political establishment, coincides with the growth of working class militancy and protest, as seen in the opposition of autoworkers last year to the sellout contracts rammed through by the United Auto Workers union and the eruption this month of protests by residents of Flint, Michigan against lead poisoning of the water supply and teachers in Detroit against intolerable conditions in the schools.

Sanders’ continuing rise is all the more noteworthy given the near-blackout by the media of his campaign over the previous two months. After the Paris terror attacks of November 13 and the San Bernardino mass shooting on December 2, the US media was fixated on terrorism and national security, in addition to Donald Trump’s supposedly “anti-establishment” candidacy for the Republican nomination, to the virtual exclusion of any other concern. According to one survey of news programs aired on CNN, MSNBC, ABC, CBS and NBC from mid-November through mid-December, Trump was mentioned 690 times and Sanders only 20.

Media pundits wrote off the Sanders campaign on the grounds that the American people had lost interest in social inequality and the crimes of Wall Street and were focused only on the supposed threat of terrorist attack.

The growth of working class opposition that underlies the support for Sanders is the main factor in the crisis that has

emerged, in different forms, in both parties in the current election campaign. It is a crisis that goes beyond one election—assuming the November election takes place—and threatens to tear apart the two-party system through which the American ruling class has monopolized political power for more than 150 years.

The lead editorial in the January 20 *Wall Street Journal*, “Taking Sanders Seriously,” voiced the alarm that is growing within the ruling class. The article exaggerates the scope of the measures being advanced by Sanders to rein in the banks and counter the growth of social inequality, but it makes clear that even Sanders’ modest reform proposals are anathema to the ruling elite.

“[I]t’s no longer impossible to imagine the 74-year-old socialist as the Democratic nominee,” the article warns. “Many Republicans claim to welcome a Sanders nomination on the assumption he’d be easy to beat. But don’t be so sure, at least not this year... the possibility of an extreme election outcome is no longer unthinkable.”

The editorial cites a *Wall Street Journal*/NBC poll showing Sanders defeating Republican front-runner Donald Trump by 15 percentage points in a hypothetical match-up.

The *Journal* also expresses the concern that if Clinton’s campaign is scuttled—noting the possibility of an FBI indictment over her handling of official email while she was secretary of state—it “could be too late” for another Democrat to enter the race.

With the possibility of Sanders winning the Democratic nomination apparently growing, the media, beginning with a *New York Times* report on Saturday, has begun to fan speculation that former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg may run as a “third party” candidate. Bloomberg is reportedly conducting his own polling to determine the feasibility of a candidacy, which he would launch only in the event Sanders won the Democratic nomination, and is prepared to spend \$1 billion of his own \$37 billion dollar empire.

The *Journal* editorial raises the possibility of Bloomberg or a more conventional Republican entering the race as an independent, but warns that “Mr. Sanders might have an even better chance to win in a multicandidate race.” It raises as well the possibility of the Republican Party splitting in two.

The Clinton campaign is in deep crisis. The former First Lady, New York senator and secretary of state faces the prospect of losing both the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. Victories could propel Sanders to a strong showing in subsequent primaries in Nevada and South Carolina, and in 11 other states that hold primaries on “Super Tuesday,” March 2.

Until recently, Sanders did little to attack Clinton directly, but he has begun to point out that she received \$600,000 in speaking fees from just one Wall Street financial house, Goldman Sachs, in one year. Clinton has responded by wrapping herself ever more thoroughly in the mantle of the

Obama administration, touting its reactionary and discredited policies, including Obamacare.

In response to Sanders’ gains in Iowa, where the Clinton campaign had already spent millions of dollars and which had been considered a “lock,” her surrogates have in recent days both race-baited and red-baited Sanders.

In a column published in the *Atlantic* on January 19, author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates attacked Sanders for his opposition to reparations, a scheme that would pay some amount of money to all African-Americans for the historical crimes of slavery and segregation. Coates accused Sanders of failing to “fight against white supremacy,” and implied that he is indifferent to past injustices suffered by African-Americans. On NBC’s *Meet the Press* Sunday morning, host Chuck Todd followed the lead, spending the better half of a six minute interview with Sanders implicitly suggesting that, due to his opposition to reparations, he is racist.

Elsewhere, Clinton ally David Brock attacked a new commercial for Sanders called “America,” which is set to the Simon and Garfunkel pop song of the same name, for not featuring enough blacks. “From this ad it seems black lives don’t matter much to Bernie Sanders,” said Brock, who was formerly a right-wing journalist.

Other Clinton surrogates have in recent days invoked anti-communism. Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri said last week that Republicans “can’t wait to run an ad with a hammer and sickle” against Sanders in the general election campaign. Another Missouri Democrat, Governor Jay Nixon, who called out the National Guard to crush peaceful protests in Ferguson in the wake of the police killing of Michael Brown in 2014, joined in. “Here in the heartland, we like our politicians in the mainstream, and he is not—he’s a socialist,” he said.

Sanders’ surge and Clinton’s present struggles, whatever the ultimate outcome, are symptomatic of a political system in a deep state of crisis. The American two-party set-up is breaking down under the weight of the crisis of capitalism and the initial stirrings of the working class.

The Sanders campaign is not a vehicle for the working class to carry out a struggle against endless war, austerity and attacks on democratic rights. It is a political diversion and trap. It is necessary for the deep-felt anger and opposition reflected in a distorted way in the Sanders campaign to find a genuinely progressive expression through the development of an independent political and revolutionary movement of the working class.



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