

Sanders and socialism

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27 January 2016

In a presidential election campaign that has already defied conventional wisdom and revealed an immense crisis of the American political system, the most significant factor is the broad and growing support for Democratic presidential aspirant and self-described “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders.

The Vermont senator, who has openly characterized his campaign as an effort to reverse flagging support for the Democratic Party and boost its prospects in the 2016 elections, has made the issue of social inequality and the machinations of Wall Street the central theme of his challenge to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination. This has evoked a far greater popular response than anyone in the media or political establishment, beginning with Sanders, anticipated.

Just days away from the February 1 Iowa Caucuses, Sanders has, according to opinion polls, either erased or overtaken Clinton’s lead in a state where the presumed front-runner had spent millions of dollars and supposedly locked in a victory. In New Hampshire, which hosts a primary a week later, Sanders has a double-digit lead over Clinton that seems to be expanding.

The surge in support for Sanders is all the more significant in that it has continued during two months of nonstop media scaremongering over the threat of terrorist attacks following the events in Paris and San Bernardino. Not so long ago, media pundits were gloating that Sanders’ campaign had become a dead letter because the American people had shifted their attention from economic inequality to the “war on terror.”

The support for Sanders has exploded a whole series of fictions about the American people and American politics. In a country where anti-socialism has been a virtual secular religion for the better part of a century, where socialist ideas have been excluded from political discourse and banned by the media, and where socialist opponents of the two parties of big business have been kept off the ballot by antidemocratic election laws—it turns out that socialist ideas are immensely popular.

A recent poll showed that a majority of Democratic voters in Iowa identified themselves as socialists as compared to those identifying themselves as capitalists. Particularly among young people, Sanders’ denunciations of social inequality and Wall Street evoke a powerful response. A YouGov poll of Iowa Democrats showed Sanders leading Clinton among voters aged 18 to 29 by an astonishing 74 percent to 14 percent.

In a country where the entire political, media and academic establishment is obsessed with questions of race, gender and sexual orientation and basic class issues are suppressed, it turns out that what really concern the vast majority of people are fundamental social and economic issues that transcend the preoccupations of identity politics and are common to all working people.

Broad layers of workers and youth are being radicalized by decades of social and economic reaction, which have only intensified under the supposed tribune of “hope” and “change,” Obama. They are appalled at the reality of perpetual war and the squandering of vast resources on killing and plunder overseas, together with the looting of the economy at home by a criminal corporate and financial aristocracy.

Having been fed nothing but lies by the politicians and the media, beginning with the claim that America is enjoying an economic recovery, they react with a mixture of surprise and hope that a prominent presidential candidate is talking about the things that concern them.

The rising popular support for Sanders is engendering increasing concern and fear within the ruling elite, not so much because of Sanders himself, but because of the profound shift to the left and growth of social opposition that underlies his rise in the polls.

The past week has seen a mounting campaign by the media and the Democratic Party establishment to counter Sanders’ rise. Prominent Clinton supporters have attacked Sanders for being insufficiently supportive of African-Americans and others have engaged in redbaiting. On Monday, Obama came close to endorsing Clinton, telling a Politico podcast that he rejected comparisons between

his 2008 victory over Clinton in the Iowa Caucuses and Sanders' surge in the polls in that state. He went on to praise Clinton for "making a real-life difference to people in their day-to-day lives."

The *Wall Street Journal's* lead editorial of January 20, "Taking Sanders Seriously," was a warning to the corporate-financial elite about the dangerous implications of Sanders' campaign. While it greatly exaggerated the radicalism of Sanders' reform proposals, claiming, for example, that Sanders would "use government to control the means of production," the statement made clear that the financial elite would not tolerate any of the measures, modest by historical standards, advanced by Sanders to rein in the banks and reduce social inequality.

Citing a *Wall Street Journal/NBC* poll showing Sanders defeating Republican front-runner Donald Trump by 15 percentage points in a hypothetical match-up, the newspaper worried about the possibility of a split in the Republican Party and "an extreme election outcome."

But workers and youth who are attracted to Sanders because they identify with the socialist ideals of economic equality and human solidarity are obliged to consider a whole series of questions that arise from the Vermont senator's campaign—most fundamentally, what is socialism, and who are the real socialists?

While Sanders inveighs against Wall Street's greed and criminality, he supports the imperialist wars being waged by the Obama administration in the interests of the very same financial elite. How is it possible to oppose what the "billionaire class" (in Sanders' words) does at home and support what it does around the world? Domestic and foreign policy are two sides of the same coin—the global strategy of the American ruling class, and the cost of the trillions squandered in military hardware and war, are inevitably imposed on the working class. There is no struggle for socialism apart from a struggle against imperialist war.

Sanders claims to represent the interests of working people in America, but he promotes economic nationalism and chauvinism, lining up with the trade unions in seeking to divert workers' anger over layoffs and wage cuts away from the US corporate elite and instead directing it against the workers in China, Mexico and elsewhere. From its inception, socialism has been based on internationalism—the international unity of the working class—in opposition to nationalism.

Sanders is seeking to become the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party, the oldest capitalist party in the United States. He never explains how his "socialism" can

be achieved within the framework of a political party that is controlled by Wall Street. Socialism is possible only on the basis of the political independence of the working class from all capitalist parties and politicians. It requires not a policy of protest to the powers-that-be, but a revolutionary struggle by the working class for political power and a workers' government.

The measures proposed by Sanders—the breakup of the biggest banks, free college tuition, universal health care, a \$15 per hour minimum wage—are incompatible with the existing economic and political set-up, which Sanders accepts and defends. The editorial by the *Wall Street Journal* makes clear that the ruling class will never accept the enactment of such measures and will resort to the most ruthless methods to block them. The response of the ruling elite, and both of its parties, to the growth of social opposition is the militarization of the police and the establishment of a police state-in-waiting to violently crush any serious challenge to its profits and power.

To provide jobs, education, housing, health care, a decent retirement and all the other necessities of life, the working class will be compelled to break the power of the financial oligarchy, seize control of its wealth and end its private control over industry, finance and transportation. Socialism is inseparable from public ownership of the means of production under the democratic control of working people—something Sanders has explicitly rejected.

As it enters into great class battles, the working class will, with the help of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the true socialist party, the Socialist Equality Party, come to recognize in Sanders and his political allies an obstacle to the development of a mass revolutionary movement that must be consciously rejected and cast aside.



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