

Bernie Sanders mobilizes African American celebrities to help “keep hope alive”

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In an effort to broaden his appeal, Democratic Party presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, the self-proclaimed “democratic socialist,” has shifted gears in recent weeks and begun making appeals to African American voters. The Sanders campaign is communicating its message with the help of well-known academics, celebrities and Democratic Party politicians.

In several recent public appearances, the US Senator from Vermont has played up his history as a former protester and civil rights activist. According to the *New York Times*, “With a blitz of appearances, ads on black-oriented radio stations, a tour of historically black colleges and the help of well-known and not-so-well-known African-Americans, Mr. Sanders is racing to get the word out: He is a lifelong civil rights advocate who marched with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.”

On the eve of Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, Sanders took part in a live-streamed, round-table discussion ostensibly to promote King’s historical legacy. Also participating were rap artist Killer Mike [Michael Render], academic and Democratic Socialists of America member Cornel West and former Ohio state senator and minority whip Nina Turner. Sanders took the opportunity during the discussion to liken his campaign to King’s struggle in the 1960s.

Killer Mike seconded this idea. “You have to see how his philosophy lines up with that [of leaders from the civil rights era],” he stated. In his music, Render has been a vocal critic of the Obama administration’s militaristic policies and of police brutality.

At another point in the conversation, Render implored working class African Americans to overlook race and to support Sanders. “It’s time to understand that people that got washed under in New Orleans were not just black, there were many poor white people that were not able to return ... that lost their lives.” He followed this entirely legitimate point by suggesting that the “beautiful relationship” of African Americans with the Democratic Party could only proceed inasmuch as Democrats align themselves with the ideas of “the greatest Democrats,” i.e., King.

Render is correct to emphasize the class issues at the center of the crisis in America and to insist on rejecting racial politics. The conditions in New Orleans and elsewhere are reaching the breaking point, and the social misery afflicts every section of the working population. However, Sanders—as a candidate for the presidential nomination of one of America’s two major big business parties—would and could do nothing about poverty,

unemployment, low wages, the ongoing attacks on democratic rights and the endless wars. As president, he would inevitably deepen those attacks.

Throughout the January 17 discussion, no participant dared point out the contradiction between the anti-Vietnam war position of King (who famously referred to the US government as “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world”) and Sanders’s own promotion of the “war on terror.” King’s opposition to the war in Vietnam led him to politically break with Lyndon Johnson, the Democratic president at the time, although not with the Democratic Party.

What has Sanders done? Rather than denounce US imperialism, he has fully embraced the current administration’s drive to war, arguing at the Democratic Party debate Sunday that Barack Obama was “doing the right thing” in regard to his criminal policies in the Middle East. The Vermont Senator called for an even larger portion of the US military budget to be plowed into “fighting ISIS and international terrorism.” Sanders debate performance occurred just hours after he had made his brief detour to promote himself as the inheritor of King’s legacy.

In terms of Sanders’s supposed opposition to social inequality and “the billionaire class,” one really has to use some degree of political realism. Why should his speeches denouncing the wealthy in very abstract terms be believed? This is hardly the first time in American history that a politician has used populist rhetoric in an effort to channel widespread anger back into the Democratic Party, the graveyard of popular opposition.

Sanders is seeking the nomination of the party whose leading figure in the White House has presided over an economic “recovery” since 2008-09 that has benefited only the wealthiest portion of society. Some 95 percent of all gains have gone to the top one percent. Meanwhile the median net worth of American families plunged by 39 percent from 2007 to 2010. Sanders cannot explain the contradiction between his vague, essentially toothless criticisms of Wall Street and the commitment of the Democrats to the preservation and enrichment of the elite. The Obama administration has neither prosecuted nor jailed a single financial executive for his or her role in collapsing the economy.

A recent *Bloomberg Politics* poll of likely voters in Iowa found that 43 percent of Democratic primary voters in that state described themselves as socialists. Sanders is the undeserved beneficiary of the radicalization of sections of the working population and young people.

But other factors and political considerations also play their role in buoying the Sanders campaign. He has the support of relatively affluent members of the middle class who are angry and resentful of the super-rich fraction at the very top of society. Some of the more farsighted among these petty bourgeois layers find Sanders attractive because of their concern that the obscene levels of social inequality will lead to social explosions. Likewise, he has increasingly come to be viewed as a safe pair of hands by representatives of finance capital, acutely sensitive to the danger of social unrest in America.

Sanders has been tapped to contain and render harmless the still-inchoate opposition of young people and workers to the present social and economic order. This was evident in one of Sanders's remarks at the roundtable discussion. "One of my great worries is that so many people of all different colors [are] giving up on the political process. ... They understand that the system is rigged, and they don't vote. ... And when they don't vote, a bad situation gets even worse."

Other participants in the discussion sought to impart their own special brand of political charlatanry and deceit. "What is magnificent about the Sanders campaign," declared academic and media commentator Cornel West, is that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s legacy is now "embodied within the context of electoral politics. We haven't had this since '84 and '88 with Jesse Jackson. ... And here we actually ... have Brother Bernie Sanders who ... is still willing to confront Wall Street after having spent time in Congress. ... It very well could be America's last chance for the legacy of King." West uses florid demagoguery to conceal the essential social fact: Sanders like Jackson is a political safety valve and an ardent defender of the system that exploits and oppresses the mass of the population.

Ohio State Senator Nina Turner presented an executive order issued by Republican Ohio Governor John Kasich, promoting a "community-based policing" model across the state, as an example of "[laying] down all those things that divide us" and coming "with what brings us together."

In fact, policies like those ordered by Kasich are reactionary and amount to an intensification of police brutality in poor and working class neighborhoods. According to a 2013 Department of Justice report, "community-oriented policing," or COPS, "may be a layer added on top of, rather than replacing ... traditional methods of intervention (e.g., street sweeps, crackdowns)."

Concluding her comments, Turner declared "Black folks respect the police ... justice and accountability can go hand in hand, because we can't have a civilized society without the police."

Thoroughly establishment figures such as Sanders, West and Turner can promote themselves as "heirs" to the legacy of Martin Luther King, in the first place, because King himself never broke with the effort to reform the existing system and pressure the Democratic Party. However, one has to add that the degeneration of the official civil rights leadership and liberalism has reached an advanced state. King took courageous stands on the war in Vietnam and poverty that would be inconceivable by those who seek to wrap themselves in his mantle today.

A considerable number of artists (primarily musicians and actors) have signed on to the Sanders campaign. The list includes

familiar names from the radical or left-liberal generation of the 1960s and 1970s, including Danny DeVito, John Densmore (The Doors), Elvin Bishop, Marshall Crenshaw, Steve Earle, Bill Frisell, Donovan Leitch, Jackson Browne, Charlie Musselwhite, Jello Biafra, Graham Nash, David Crosby, Bonnie Raitt, Susan Sarandon, Mike Watt, Loudon Wainwright III and Lucinda Williams. Sanders supporters also include figures who have come to prominence in more recent decades: Will Ferrell, Flea, Thurston Moore, Shepard Fairey, Zoë Kravitz, Juliette Lewis, Justin Long, Margaret Cho, rapper Lil B, Adam McKay, Ezra Miller, Patton Oswalt, Jeremy Piven, Killer Mike, Mark Ruffalo, Sarah Silverman and others.

A question almost automatically comes to mind: are these "celebrities" supporting Bernie Sanders because they mistakenly think he is a socialist and a danger to the status quo, or precisely because they know—or sense—that he is neither? For the most part, the latter is probably the case.

In any case, someone like Michael Renter may be articulating the confused feelings of broader layers of the population who are searching desperately for some alternative to the corrupt, wealthy and hated Democrats, including Obama, and the Republicans. But insofar as he and the other artists promote Sanders and the Democrats, they are helping to trap the population in a political set-up that is implacably hostile to them.

For the Socialist Equality Party, it is the interests of these broader layers that matter, not the doings of the "big names." Popular support for Sanders may be understandable given the miserable choices that are available in the 2016 election, but the harsh truth has to be stated now, not after future disasters—more war, more repression, even greater social inequality like those which followed the 2008 election of the "candidate of change," Barack Obama. The working class and young people need a revolutionary socialist alternative that represents a complete break with capitalism.



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