

The Sanders vote in Iowa

Patrick Martin
3 February 2016

Iowa Democratic Party officials declared Hillary Clinton the winner of the Iowa Democratic caucuses Tuesday afternoon by the narrowest of margins. The former secretary of state edged Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders by 699 to 695 in delegates to the state convention, with two state delegate equivalents still to be determined.

More significant was the announcement of the total turnout of 171,109, divided nearly equally between the two candidates. Approximately 85,000 people—a third of them young people under 30—cast votes for Sanders, a candidate who identifies himself as a “democratic socialist.” This is 30,000 more than the number of people who voted for Senator Ted Cruz, the ultra-right winner of the Republican caucuses, and nearly double the vote for the massively hyped campaign of billionaire Donald Trump.

Sanders rolled up a huge margin among younger voters: those 17-29 supported him over Clinton by 86 percent to 11 percent; Democratic voters in the 30-44 age bracket also gave him a majority. Lower-income voters, those making under \$30,000 a year, backed Sanders heavily, as did those in the \$30,000-\$50,000 a year range. Clinton’s support was concentrated among upper-income and older voters, particularly those over the age of 65, who turned out in large numbers.

Entrance/exit polls found that the Vermont senator’s claim to be a socialist was one of the main attractions of his candidacy, as far as his supporters were concerned. Sixty-eight percent of Democratic caucus-goers regarded having a socialist president as a good idea, with 31 percent strongly in favor.

The mass support for Sanders explodes the myth, peddled endlessly by the American media, that the American people are unalterably wedded to capitalism. In his speech to campaign aides and volunteers Monday night in Des Moines, Sanders reiterated the condemnations of economic inequality, the criminality of Wall Street and the corruption of the US political system by big money that have been the basis of his campaign.

Hillary Clinton sought, however awkwardly, to strike a populist pose as well, telling her supporters Monday night that she too was a “progressive” who shared her opponent’s goals of universal healthcare, good jobs and rising wages, only differing on the best methods to achieve them.

The broad support for Sanders’ campaign has taken the corporate-controlled media by complete surprise, an expression of the vast chasm that separates the entire establishment and the mass of the American people. Now the commentators and pundits express bemusement over the hatred of Wall Street and the corporate elite—expressed in a left-wing form in the Sanders campaign and in a right-wing form in the campaign of billionaire real estate mogul Donald Trump—when, according to the media, American society is doing well, particularly compared to its European and Asian rivals.

This bewilderment is combined with fear. Longtime political adviser to presidents of both parties and virtually omnipresent media pundit David Gergen told the *New York Times* after the Iowa vote: “It’s striking that the winner of the Republican side represents the far right and the moral winner for the Democrats comes from the far left. It’s a clear vote of no confidence in the economic order.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* has made clear its political differences with Sanders in many commentaries published since the presidential campaign began last year. His “democratic socialism” is far less radical than the New Deal liberalism of Franklin Roosevelt, and it is combined with open support for the militarist foreign policy of American imperialism.

Nonetheless, the large vote for a self-proclaimed socialist candidate has enormous historical significance, particularly in the United States, where socialist ideas have been virtually criminalized for more than 60 years. Socialists were driven out of the unions and victimized in Hollywood in the course of the witch-hunts of the 1950s McCarthy era, and public discussion of any alternative to the capitalist system has been effectively banned in

official politics and the corporate-controlled media ever since.

For nearly half a century, basic class issues have been suppressed in America through a combination of virulent political reaction and militarism and an obsessive focus on issues of race, gender and sexual orientation on the official “left.” This has coincided with an ever-greater shift to the right by both major parties, a relentless assault on the social conditions and living standards of the working class, and the suppression of strikes and workers’ struggles by trade unions that have been transformed into corporatist adjuncts of the corporations and the government.

This period is coming to an end. The indignation of the working class has steadily mounted, especially since Wall Street threw the US and world economy into the abyss in 2008 and then used the crisis to further enrich itself at the expense of the working population. The bitter experience of the Obama administration, which came to power by promising progressive “change” and instead has overseen a further and unprecedented transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top, along with an expansion of militarism and war, has only intensified the anger and combativeness of working people and youth.

Sanders has evoked a powerful response because he has raised social issues that transcend race, ethnicity, gender, etc. The Iowa vote has highlighted the fact that it is class issues of economic security and equality that animate the broad masses, not the narrow and exclusivist concerns of identity politics, which reflect the preoccupations of privileged layers of the middle class.

There are growing signs of a revival of the class struggle, including the mass opposition of autoworkers to the sellout contracts imposed by the United Auto Workers union last year, the eruption of mass protests and sickouts by Detroit teachers carried out independently of the unions, and ongoing protests against the poisoning of the water supply in nearby Flint, Michigan.

At the same time, the two-party system through which the American ruling class has monopolized political power for more than a century-and-a-half is facing an unprecedented crisis of political legitimacy. It is losing its grip on a population that is profoundly alienated from the entire political system.

The mass vote in Iowa for the Sanders campaign is an expression of deep social discontent that is bringing the working class into political conflict with the capitalist system. The candidate himself may conceive of “political revolution” as merely a larger turnout at the polls and an

effort to increase support for the Democratic Party, one of the two parties of big business. However, there is little doubt that many in his audience have something more ambitious in mind.

The reality is that world capitalism is plunging deeper into economic slump and there are harbingers of a new round of financial shocks on a scale that could well surpass those of 2007-2008. The Sanders phenomenon must be placed in this global context. There are increasing signs of the working class all over the world seeking to break with its old, outlived organizations—trade unions, labor parties, social-democratic parties—that have become nothing more than instruments of the capitalist ruling elite to suppress and sabotage workers’ struggles.

The initial stages of this process involve the emergence of pseudo-left elements like Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain and Jeremy Corbyn in the British Labour Party, which appeal to this leftward movement of the working class in order to divert it back into new forms of accommodation with the crisis-ridden capitalist system. Sanders is an American counterpart to such tendencies, deliberately working to corral growing working-class opposition within the confines of the Democratic Party, one of the oldest capitalist parties in the world.

The movement of the working class to the left will inevitably go well beyond the bounds envisioned by Sanders. The objective logic of its struggles will propel it into a conflict with both parties of big business and the capitalist system that they defend. This must, however, be prepared politically and transformed into a conscious political and revolutionary movement against capitalism and for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact