

Sanders and the left feint in capitalist politics

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Four days before the first presidential primary election, self-styled “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders holds a double-digit lead in New Hampshire over the presumed frontrunner for the Democratic nomination, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

The first national poll taken in the wake of Sanders’s virtual tie with Clinton in the Iowa caucuses showed that the senator from Vermont had surged nationally, trailing Clinton by only a narrow margin, 44 percent to 42 percent. If confirmed in subsequent polling, this would signal a remarkable shift in political sentiment compared to three months ago, when Clinton led Sanders by 61 percent to 30 percent.

The growing support for Sanders signals a dramatic change in the political environment in the United States, and hence, the world. It is all the more remarkable in a country where socialist ideas have been suppressed and excluded from official political discourse for three-quarters of a century.

The past three decades, in particular, have seen an extraordinary lowering of political culture, even by the standards of American politics. The political environment has been utterly stagnant, dominated by a relentless glorification of wealth and the exclusion of anything that smacks of genuine opposition. Every State of the Union address, including President Obama’s last month, has carried the obligatory assurance of how good things are in America.

The corporate media have perfected the art of creating a synthetic public opinion that bears no relation to the real sentiments of the vast bulk of the population, and then using that supposed public consensus to justify the reactionary policies of the ruling class. The broad support for Sanders and the crisis of the supposedly unbeatable Clinton campaign, which have taken the entire political and media establishment by surprise, have exposed the fraudulent character of what has passed for public opinion.

Particularly noteworthy is the radicalization among young people, who sided with Sanders over Clinton in the Iowa caucuses by 84 percent to 14 percent. Sanders leads Clinton by similar margins among likely Democratic primary voters 30 and under in New Hampshire, according to the most recent polls.

As *Washington Post* columnist Catherine Rampell grudgingly admitted in the Friday edition of the newspaper, the current generation of youth, to which she belongs, “love Sanders not *despite* his socialism, but *because* of it... Many of us also entered the job market just as unbridled capitalism appeared to blow up the world economy. Perhaps for this reason, millennials actually seem to prefer socialism to capitalism.”

The support for Sanders is inextricably linked to his professions of intransigent hostility to the financial aristocracy that dominates

American society. In Thursday night’s debate in New Hampshire, Sanders declared again that “the business model of Wall Street is fraud,” while reiterating his criticisms of Clinton for accepting millions in campaign contributions and speaker’s fees from Goldman Sachs and other major financial institutions. The entire first hour of the debate was devoted to a discussion of the pernicious role of big business and whether the major banks should be broken up to prevent a recurrence of the 2008 Wall Street crash.

The rise of Sanders is a response to decades of war and reaction, culminating in the financial collapse of 2008, with its devastating impact on social conditions in the United States. As the consequences of the global crisis of capitalism have unfolded—the destruction of decent-paying jobs, the austerity policies of capitalist governments throughout the world, the buildup of the forces of a police state to suppress working class opposition, and the unending series of wars by American imperialism—tens of millions of workers and youth have begun to draw increasingly radical conclusions.

There are signs of panic setting in within the Clinton campaign and the Democratic Party establishment as a whole. This is not because they view Sanders himself as a threat to capitalism or the political domination of the corporate-financial elite. The ruling class has a long experience with the “independent socialist” from Vermont. For decades, first in the House of Representatives and then in the Senate, he has caucused with the Democratic Party and supported every Democratic presidential candidate and every Democratic administration.

Always treated respectfully, he has been seen as a valuable political asset, providing a left cover for the Democratic Party and promoting the illusion that this right-wing capitalist party is somehow a progressive party of the people.

However, the popular credibility of the Democrats has been massively undermined by seven years of the Obama administration. In this situation, the grave danger confronting the American capitalist class is the emergence of a political movement outside the two-party system that challenges the domination of the super-rich over every aspect of US society. Bernie Sanders is not the herald of such a movement, but a false prophet who is neither genuinely socialist nor genuinely independent.

The Socialist Equality Party evaluates the significance of the Sanders campaign not by its campaign promises, or the illusions of those who now support him, but on the basis of a Marxist analysis of objective class relations and a historically grounded international perspective.

The rise of the Vermont “socialist” is not purely an American

phenomenon, but the American expression of an international process. In country after country, under the impact of the global economic crisis of capitalism, the ruling class has brought forward “left” bourgeois parties to divert mass opposition into harmless channels. This is the role of figures like Jeremy Corbyn, the newly elected leader of the Labour Party in Britain, and Podemos in Spain, now maneuvering to form a coalition government with the discredited social democrats. In the most extreme cases, as in Greece, the “left” has been brought directly into power, in the form of the Syriza government, and charged with the responsibility of imposing capitalist austerity policies on the masses.

Leon Trotsky, the co-leader of the 1917 October Revolution in Russia, explained how the ruling class manipulates the political system within the framework of bourgeois democracy. “The capitalist bourgeois calculates,” he wrote, “At the right moment I will bring into existence opposition parties, which will disappear tomorrow, but which today accomplish their mission by affording the possibility of the lower middle class expressing their indignation without hurt therefrom for capitalism” (*Terrorism and Communism*, p. 58).

If the American financial aristocracy thought Sanders represented a genuine threat to its interests, it would not be putting him on national television to deliver his jeremiads before a mass audience. The ruling elite has more than a century of experience in the use of such figures to manipulate mass sentiment and safeguard the profit system from challenges from below. These include third-party efforts like the Populist Party of the 1890s, the Progressive movement of the early 20th century, the Farmer-Labor Party of Robert La Follette in Wisconsin in the 1920s (and related groups in Minnesota and the Dakotas) and the Progressive Party of Henry Wallace in 1948. All these campaigns dissolved, sooner or later, back into the Democratic Party.

In the past half-century, the ruling elite has sought to avoid any significant “left” third-party efforts, using the Democratic Party itself as the principal vehicle for containing and dissipating mass popular opposition to the US ruling elite, whether over the Vietnam War, the violent attacks on labor struggles in the 1980s, or the endless wars in the Middle East and the staggering growth of social inequality. Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy in 1968 and George McGovern in 1972 were followed by Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988, Howard Dean in 2004, and now Bernie Sanders.

Considered in this historical framework, what is remarkable about Sanders is how vacuous his supposed radicalism really is. He is far less radical in his domestic policy than the Populists, the anti-Wall Street presidential campaigns of William Jennings Bryan, and the Farmer-Laborites. In the crucial area of foreign policy, he is virtually indistinguishable from Obama and Hillary Clinton, even attacking them from the right on issues like trade with China. When asked directly last year about his attitude to US military intervention abroad, he declared he was for “drones, all that and more.”

If Sanders goes on to win the Democratic nomination and the presidency, he will betray the aspirations of his supporters flagrantly and with extraordinary speed. A thousand excuses will be brought forward to explain why the wars must continue abroad

and nothing can be done to rein in Wall Street at home.

Sanders is not the representative of a working class movement. He is rather the temporary beneficiary of a rising tide of popular opposition that is passing through only its initial stages of social and class differentiation.

The Socialist Equality Party welcomes every sign of a leftward movement and radicalization among workers and youth. The objective conditions of capitalist crisis and imperialist war are the driving forces of a profound leftward shift in the consciousness of tens of millions. But there is nothing more contemptible than to patronize and adapt to the illusions that characterize the present, initial stage in the development of class consciousness and popular opposition. That is the specialty of the various pseudo-left appendages of the ruling class and the Democratic Party.

It is legitimate for genuine socialists to adopt a sympathetic and patient attitude to the growth of popular opposition, but it is politically impermissible to politically adapt to the movement’s prevailing level of understanding. It is necessary to expose the contradiction between Sanders’ social demagoguery and his bourgeois program, without suggesting that he can be pushed to the left by popular pressure from below.

The task taken up by the Socialist Equality Party is to open up a new path for the movement of the working class and lay the foundations for a broadening and deepening of the radicalization, breaking irrevocably from the Democratic Party and all forms of bourgeois politics and establishing the political independence of the working class. This is the essential basis for transforming the growing opposition into a conscious political and revolutionary movement for international socialism. The prerequisite for this task is to tell the working class the truth.



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