

In Democratic debate, Clinton presses Sanders on race, gender and support for Obama

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In the Democratic Party presidential debate Thursday night, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, seeking to rebound from her devastating defeat in Tuesday's New Hampshire primary election, repeatedly raised racial and gender identity issues in an attempt to undercut Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders' appeals on the issue of economic inequality. Sanders, for his part, sought to counter Clinton with his own nods to racial politics.

Clinton's effort to shift the focus of the debate to issues of race and gender reflected, in the first instance, immediate electoral concerns. The next two contests in the campaign for the Democratic nomination take place in states with large numbers of minority voters: Nevada Democratic voters are 20 percent Hispanic and 10 percent African-American, while 55 percent of all South Carolina Democrats are black.

But more fundamentally, the increased appeal to identity issues by Clinton, echoed by the corporate-controlled media, reflects concerns in the ruling elite over signs that basic social and class issues are dominating the political thinking of broad layers of the population, fueled by deep-seated anger over the 2008 financial crash and the further growth of social inequality in its aftermath. At the same time, the Democratic primary campaign to date has shown that there is relatively little popular interest in the narrow politics of race, gender and sexual orientation that have been used for decades to divide the working class and suppress the growth of class consciousness.

In the New Hampshire primary, Sanders won the votes of women, and especially younger women, by a large margin over Clinton, despite the latter's emphasis in the days leading up to the vote on the prospect of her becoming the first woman president.

The powerful and unanticipated popular response to the denunciations of economic inequality and the crimes of

Wall Street by the self-described "democratic socialist" Sanders is an initial expression of a broad political radicalization. The basic function of the campaign of the long-time "independent" congressman and senator, who has always backed the Democratic Party, is to divert social and political opposition to the entire political establishment and, increasingly, to the profit system itself, back behind the Democratic Party.

Clinton has been battered by attacks on her close connections to Wall Street, which paid her millions in speaking fees and has kicked in tens of millions in contributions to her campaign and her super-PAC. Since Bill Clinton left the White House, he and his wife have raked in \$153 million in income, making it difficult for Hillary Clinton to maintain a credible pretense of sympathizing with the plight of low-paid workers, the long-term unemployed, debt-ridden students, and retirees living on fixed incomes. She is turning to identity politics as a way of concealing the vast class gulf separating not only her, but the US ruling elite as a whole, from the mass of the population.

The Democratic Party establishment is rallying to Clinton's side. The political action committee of the Congressional Black Caucus endorsed her this week, and Congressman James Clyburn of South Carolina, the third-ranking Democrat in the House of Representatives, has said he will make an announcement before the February 27 Democratic primary in his state. Clyburn, who is African-American, is widely expected to endorse Clinton.

The White House is also on board. In a significant remark in a speech to the Illinois state legislature in Springfield Wednesday, the day before the Democratic debate, Obama declared his opposition to anyone presuming to decide whether he or any other Democratic politician is a "real progressive." This was a clear rebuke

to the Sanders campaign, which used that language in criticizing Clinton's ties to Wall Street.

In Thursday's debate in Milwaukee, which was hosted by the Public Broadcasting System, Clinton set the tone with her opening remarks. She claimed to agree with Sanders on campaign finance and Wall Street reform, then added, "But I want to go further. I want to tackle those barriers that stand in the way of too many Americans right now. African-Americans who face discrimination in the job market, education, housing and the criminal justice system. Hardworking immigrant families living in fear, who should be brought out of the shadows so they and their children can have a better future. Guaranteeing that women's work finally gets the pay, the equal pay that we deserve."

This became a recurring theme throughout the evening, as Clinton suggested that Sanders was focused too narrowly on economic issues like jobs, income inequality and health care, while she was concerned with broader issues of concern to African-American and Hispanic voters, like racial discrimination, police violence and immigration reform.

Sanders made little effort to expose Clinton's pretense to being a champion of the oppressed. Like Clinton, he discussed such issues as job and wage discrimination, police violence and attacks on immigrants as though they were solely issues concerning racial minorities, and not the working class as a whole. Despite his occasional lip service to socialism—the word actually went unmentioned throughout the debate—Sanders separates racism, gender bias, and attacks on democratic rights from the capitalist system that gives rise to them.

He repeated his familiar criticisms of Wall Street and economic inequality, at a distinctly lower pitch than in previous debates and speeches. Significantly, he made no reference to the attacks on workers' rights in Wisconsin in 2011, which sparked a statewide movement against the administration of Republican Governor Scott Walker. That movement was ultimately diverted and derailed by the unions and the Democratic Party. Clinton referred twice to Walker, disparagingly, but Sanders never mentioned his name.

The reactionary character of both the Clinton and Sanders campaigns was most clearly expressed in their competition for the mantle of Barack Obama. The sharpest exchange between the two candidates came when Clinton suggested that Sanders had made unwarranted criticisms of Obama, claiming he sounded "like a Republican." Sanders angrily denounced this as "a low

blow."

After the debate, chief Sanders strategist Tad Devine complained, "They're trying to place a wedge, a wall, a division between Senator Sanders and President Obama. There's only one problem: It doesn't exist." No more devastating critique of the Sanders campaign could be devised. The Obama administration has been the principal instrument of the American financial aristocracy over the past seven years in waging war against the working class at home and upholding the global interests of American imperialism.

Clinton dropped the president's name 21 times in the course of the two-hour debate, according to media tallies, and Sanders vainly sought to outdo her in aligning himself with the policies of this right-wing big-business government.

It was notable that during the foreign policy section of the debate, which was relatively brief, Sanders identified himself completely with Obama and pointed to Clinton's differences with the White House on issues such as imposing a no-fly zone in Syria. Sanders made his most expansive comments of the campaign on the question of Ukraine and Russia, fully endorsing the policy of the Obama White House, which threatens an escalation to a direct military clash with Russia, the world's second-largest nuclear power.

Sanders declared, "Russia's aggressive actions in the Crimea and in Ukraine have brought about a situation where President Obama and NATO—correctly, I believe—are saying, you know what, we're going to have to beef up our troop level in that part of the world to tell Putin that his aggressiveness is not going to go unmatched... We have to work with NATO to protect Eastern Europe against any kind of Russian aggression."



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