

On-the-spot report from NH primary

# New Hampshire students discuss Sanders and socialism

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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to voters in Durham, New Hampshire during the Democratic presidential primary election on February 9. Many of those voting were students from the University of New Hampshire (UNH), which, with more than 12,000 undergraduate students, makes up a large proportion of the town's population.

A continuous stream of UNH students arrived by shuttle bus from the university to vote at Oyster River High School. The vast majority of students told me they were casting their ballots for Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders. Primary results showed that Durham voted 71 percent for Sanders and 29 percent for Hillary Clinton, an even more lopsided result than in New Hampshire as a whole.

For many students it was their first time voting in an election, and many were able to register to vote on the spot. They were anxious to speak to the WSWWS, as a socialist news source, and in some cases lined up to get a chance to have their opinions recorded and their photographs taken. The comments reported here are only a small fraction of the interviews I was able to gather.

Zoe Parsons voted for Sanders. "For me it was between Hillary and Bernie, and I find Bernie more trustworthy," she said. She explained that she was most concerned about health care. She was also convinced that Sanders had accounted for every dollar of the cost for his plans. "He tells us exactly where he plans to get that money," she said, "and how much it's going to cost."

She was excited to be voting for the first time and was in strong disagreement with the statements of Gloria Steinem, supporting the Clinton campaign, who said that young women really didn't have any political ideas and were voting for Sanders because they wanted to meet young men.

Many students expressed their opposition to income inequality, poverty, and the disregard of the wealthy for the conditions facing the vast majority of the population in America today. There was a distinct anti-capitalist sentiment in the air. While many were opposed to war, most were unaware of Sanders' foreign policy positions.

They spent their teenage years in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis—and the ensuing entrenched joblessness and assault on social programs under the Obama administration—and their comments showed that they are seeking a way to express their opposition to the current state of political and social affairs.

Emily Bielfelt said, "I voted for Bernie. I'll straight-up say it. I like his views on women's rights and I like the socialism aspect of it. I think that everybody should have access to everything. So I like that about it."

She said that in her opinion socialism means that "everybody gets the same opportunities because the government's providing it and the 1 percent doesn't get all the opportunities."

While she didn't know much about Sanders's foreign policy, she

thought cutting the military budget would be a good place to start. "That's how you would pay for things," she said, "by not taking part in wars. Sanders was talking last night how it would take \$70 billion to pay for free college and he was going to take it from Wall Street. But if we just weren't overseas with all of our troops, then that could easily pay for free college."

Support among students for Sanders was motivated by his "Medicare for all" proposal, his pledge to make public colleges and universities tuition-free, his stance on the environment, and his call for getting money out of politics and fighting the "1 percent." Many students described themselves as socialists.

Nearly every student I interviewed, however, expressed the opinion that these policies could be implemented by Sanders, despite the fact that he has a long record of caucusing with the Democratic Party, one of the two big-business parties in America.

"I am happy to say that I voted for Bernie Sanders," Cameron, said. "I feel like he is our chance to get the country on the right road. I think that first and foremost we need to tackle getting big money out of politics."

He added: "It's rather pathetic that people with millions of dollars, billions of dollars, like the Koch brothers, can pretty much hand-select what candidate they would like just by putting boatloads of money into that candidate, and then you have somebody like Bernie Sanders who gets all this money from regular Americans."

Asked what it meant to be a "democratic socialist," Cameron said: "In my opinion, a democratic socialist means making the system work for all and not just the 1 percent up top. I think that socialism in itself has a very bad stigma in this country, when in reality if you look at what it actually means, it just means being a compassionate, good individual making the system work for all of us."

I pointed out that real socialism means actually changing the ownership of the means of production, and that the working class, the people who produce all the wealth, actually control society. Cameron was still convinced that Sanders' campaign was a step in this direction.

"I think that what a lot of people mistake about Sanders is that it doesn't just stop at this vote here," he said. "It will continue. It's a revolution; it's a big change. We need to get Democrats in the majority and that's really what I believe is the start in order to move the system more so it works for everyone."

He also believed, as did several other students, that Sanders' foreign policy stance differed substantially from Hillary Clinton's. "Sanders' main competitor, Hillary Clinton, did of course vote for the Iraq War," he said, "something a lot of her supporters just want to disregard. But voting 'yes' for the Iraq War was a catastrophe, it was horrible."

Cameron was unaware that Sanders says he supports targeted drone assassinations and the "war on terror" and has pledged to "destroy ISIS."

“Those are not socialist positions,” I argued, “He supports the interests of US imperialism.”

Although many of the UNH students described themselves as socialists, there was a lot of confusion about what socialism actually is. Many see socialism as making capitalism more humane and compassionate and more in tune with the needs of the population.

Specifically, there was little understanding of the fight for socialism as a class question, and the necessity of building an independent party of the working class in opposition to the Democrats and Republicans.

Rachel Moss said she identified with Sanders’ background: “He’s also a Jewish socialist from Brooklyn, like myself. I think that he would do a really, really great job as president, and I think that he has high hopes for the country, which is a lot more than some of the other candidates have.”

“For me,” Rachel said, “socialism means expanding on a lot of the programs that already exist in the country and updating them for the modern world that we live in instead of being stuck in 1900s America, which had different needs for the average citizen.”

Commenting on Sanders’ foreign policy, she said, “I think that he has the right idea of not being too involved. I think the fact that he voted against the Iraq War shows that he’s not willing to spend human lives—or American lives—on something that we don’t really have that big of a role in.”

I pointed out that Sanders was more than willing to sacrifice human lives in imperialist wars, preferring to start with soldiers from US-allied states. “He’s called on Saudi Arabia to put boots on the ground,” I said. “Saudi Arabia is a dictatorship and executed 47 people earlier this year. So from a *class* standpoint, he doesn’t differ from any of the other big-business politicians in terms of his foreign policy.”

We discussed the difference between the “political revolution” that Sanders’ promotes, and a socialist revolution, which would bring the working class to power and establish a workers’ government.

“That we’ve been able to focus on an idea of a political revolution in this election campaign this long, I think that’s incredible,” Rachel said. She expressed the general conception among students that Sanders’ “political revolution” could somehow push the Democratic Party, and the entire political system, to the left.

Taylor Lindsay, an environmental science student, said, “I voted for Bernie. I really value his view on how he wants to deal with environmental change, like working with global powers on climate change. So that had a lot to do with my choice.”

“I think global health care is very, very important,” she continued. “I was raised in a Canadian family, so they’re used to the health care system in Canada, and I think it’s a very effective way of making sure everyone’s healthy and making sure everyone’s taken care of.”

Taylor said she thought Sanders’ claim to be a democratic socialist “means he’s very liberal, very far on that side.” She added, “In some ways, I think it’s a little too far. The free college tuition for all students I think is somewhat unrealistic, because it is such a huge thing. To get it completely free for everyone is a very, very daunting task.”

I said implementing such proposals would require a radical change in the way society is organized. “But that’s not what Sanders is saying,” I said. “He’s saying he’s going to work with the insurance companies and the pharmaceutical companies and try to convince Wall Street to give people a better deal.”

The UNH students’ enthusiasm for the electoral process and support for Sanders express in a beginning and somewhat limited way a radicalization underway among this segment of student youth, who are fed up with years of reaction, corporate greed and rising social inequality.

Peter Bowers said, “I’m supporting Bernie Sanders because of how the system is rigged currently with Wall Street and how the rich get richer and how we have a disappearing middle class, and how we have rising health care costs, stagnating wages.

“I think we do need to reallocate wealth to really take care of everyone in this country and not just people that have succeeded in the system we have set up.”

He said Sanders would do this by raising capital gains taxes. “You raise taxes on stock portfolios, because right now it’s really easy to hide your money and make money off of it without paying a lot of taxes on it, or with speculation. That money can be reallocated into a college fund, into a nationalized health care system so that people can actually get a leg up and survive.”

I asked him how he thought the wealthy and big business would respond to such proposals. “They’re going to fight back hard,” Peter said. “But they’ve seen the handwriting on the wall, for a while, so they’ve had a chance. They’re going to fight. They’re going to kick. But Bernie’s a bit more magnanimous in how he talks to people, so I feel that things are going to work out a lot smoother.”

Despite the pro-war policies of both Sanders and Hillary Clinton, Peter was of the opinion that the Democrats were less pro-war than the Republicans. “I think the Democrats across the board are a lot on board about having conversations with other nations and trying to come to more peaceful arrangements,” he said.

Asked about socialism, Peter said: “Socialism is not full communism. You still have the capitalist system, but you have a situation where people really do help each other out, and you are considered to be at least partially responsible for the well-being of your fellow man.”

He considered my argument that socialism required a new independent revolutionary movement of the working class and that Sanders’ “political revolution” had nothing in common with this. He was convinced, however, that Sanders’ campaign was a step in the right direction.

“You know, I think it can happen,” he said. “We saw it with the labor movement 150 years ago. Hopefully, it’s not as violent as the labor movement. But it is going to take a lot of work. It’s going to take a lot of time. There are a lot of companies that have a stranglehold on how things run in this country. I don’t think it can happen overnight, but it’s a start and we need to see where we go from there.”

The US ruling elite is well aware that sentiments like those of this group of students in New Hampshire are but a faint representation of growing anger building up among broad layers of workers and youth to the conditions they face. The Sanders campaign expressly seeks to channel this anger back behind the Democratic Party, and away from an independent movement of the working class based on genuine socialist policies.



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