

Youth discuss war, inequality at Michigan rally for Sanders

Our reporting team
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Like many rallies across the country, Bernie Sanders' appearance at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) on Monday drew thousands of young people, many who are participating in the first political activity of their lives.

For a generation that has known nothing but political reaction, endless wars and a vast growth of social inequality, Sanders' denunciations of the "corrupt political system" and an economy "rigged" to only benefit the richest 1 percent was greeted with enthusiasm.

However, the candidate for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party, who describes himself as a "democratic socialist," has been the temporary beneficiary of the initial stages of a political radicalization among young people and workers, which will go far beyond Sanders' efforts to contain opposition within the Democratic Party and appeals for mild reforms of the capitalist system.

In comments to reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* students and others at the rally expressed a growing desire to create a fairer economic and political system, which they vaguely associate with their understanding of "socialism." At this point several expressed the belief that this can be accomplished through the Democratic Party and his "political revolution," which amounts to campaign finance reform and proposals to "make the rich pay their fair share," while keeping capitalist property relations intact.

Stacie Johnston, an EMU student, said, "I always vote but I haven't been this excited in a while. The fact that Sanders is for the people is very refreshing, as opposed to those for big money interests or corporations. I really like that he's authentic and that he's for women's rights. He's always voted for women's health, to keep Planned Parenthood funded and also to reform the criminal justice system. I really like that he wants to look at the defense budget and our strategies there. I like that he's for a more diplomatic approach to solving our international issues instead of just going to war, having senseless wars like the war in Iraq.

"I believe Bernie Sanders is more honest than Clinton and that he's for me. I don't believe that Hillary Clinton is for me, she flip-flops her policies all the time. She was against gay marriage and then she's for it. She was for the war in Iraq and then she was against the war in Iraq. She was for Keystone [the gas pipeline] and then she was against Keystone. She does what suits her because I think her sole goal is simply to get elected. It's not about the people."

The WSWWS reporter pointed out that Sanders has repeatedly expressed his support for Obama's wars, from Afghanistan to Syria, and the supposed "war on terror" and drone assassinations.

"There were a few times that I think he probably could have shown better judgment," she said. "But so far he has maintained consistency in what he has supported. Yes, that would be one instance in which you could not call him a socialist, but he is looking at the more diplomatic ways... that America should not always go in first into other countries and their conflicts. I think that's a better plan."

As for socialism, Stacie said, "I don't know enough about socialism, but I'm not against it. What I do know of it, I think it's a good idea. I'm for people having equal rights and for things being fair."

Jaime, a young teacher, said she thought the major issues in the elections were "Health care and war. It seems like war is a waste of lives and resources. It's ridiculous. Let's put that money toward more peaceful things."

A number of young people expressed outrage over the situation in Flint, with one young professional in the health and safety field saying, "I think there was a lot of negligence shown by the officials in the state and local government, going all the way to the top. I was shocked that when they reported lead in the water it didn't immediately get a wide response."

Andrew, a student, said he hadn't made up his mind yet about the election. "I am here to listen, I haven't made a decision." He said for him the biggest single issue was war. "I am very much against American imperialism. The drone issue is very big for me."

During his remarks Sanders said nothing about US militarism. While he made a passing reference to the government having no money for Flint, while spending billions on the Iraq War, he made no criticisms of Obama or the Democratic Party. When the WSWWS reporter explained Sanders' support for US military interventions to Andrew, and this support for US aggression against Russia and China, he replied that he thought the Democratic Party could be pressured, "The older Democrats are much more right-wing in my thinking."

Pritpaul, a software engineer, said, "I think Sanders is the only hope we have for someone to fix the problems. Unfortunately we have a two-party system; third parties don't stand a chance

"I realize Bernie is not going to dismantle capitalism, but I am sort of an FDR kind of guy."

Members of the Bock family also spoke with the WSWS. Asked what they thought were the main issues in the 2016 elections, Bill Bock Sr., a public school principal said, “It is the environment.”

His son, Bill Jr., replied, “income disparity. I am a Detroit teacher with a Masters degree making \$43,000 a year. I owe more now on my college loans than when I finished school seven years ago.”

Asked what they thought of when they heard the word “socialism,” Lidi Armenta, Bill Jr.’s wife, said, “I think a lot of people confuse socialism and communism. The majority of people are seeing beyond labels. When you see that capitalism is failing you are open to new things. The system is doing well for the people on top.”

Bill Jr. said, “I think the government, all of us, should make sure people are taken care of.” His father added, “the social conservatives want big government to tell women what to do with their lives. Bernie Sanders wants smart government, not big government.”

Lidi continued, “For some reason we are led to believe that everything that is not capitalist, not driven by profit, is anti-American. But if you look at what is happening with privatization, we are having problems with the mortality rate rising.”

Ryan, who tutors students and develops educational curriculum, said, “I favor Sanders’ approach on spending less money on the military and spending more expressly on the needs of citizens. The special economic interests that control the political system have disenfranchised the people. I voted for Obama in ’08 but not in 2012. I was disappointed with him, especially with his policy towards education and continuing the wars.”

Joshua is a bell attendant at a hotel. He was at the event with Jenne, a Taco Bell worker and a student at Wayne State University, and Courtney, another WSU student. Courtney said, “Sanders is for equality. A lot of young people can’t afford to go to college and are dropping out.”

Jenne said she liked Sanders’ foreign policy and that he would not be for more wars in the Middle East and “meddling in their affairs.”

Josh said Sanders had stood firm for his principles for many years and hadn’t waived like Clinton. “If someone is going to be president they need to have integrity.”

Courtney said Obama had tried to change the country but the “billionaire class controls both parties structurally.”

The WSWS reporter pointed to the contradiction between Sanders’ criticism of the “billionaire class” and the fact that he was promoting the Democrats, which were controlled by the “billionaire class,” just as much as the Republicans. Far from genuinely expressing the political radicalization of workers and youth in the US, Sanders was trying to capture it and contain it within the Democratic Party, the second party of American capitalism.

In response to these points, the students expressed interest in attending the public meetings sponsored by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality on “What is Socialism?”

Alex and Bill are Eastern Michigan University students. Bill said, “Obama could have done more progressive things. Inequality has such a strong hold in America and the wealthy have all the

power. It will be kind of difficult to break their hold unless there is a movement from below.”

A charter schoolteacher said, “Sanders is the only one that does not have a super PAC. The Democrats and Republicans are two sides of the same coin. But Sanders is different. He is a man of the people, the only one that wants to take away the tax breaks from the rich.”

Another EMU student said, “I, my generation, a lot of people like Sanders so I came here to see what he stands for. The ‘American Dream’ is outdated. It’s from the 1950s and the dream of a suburban life. It can’t inspire people any more because it is really hard to achieve. It can’t be ‘pull yourself up from your bootstraps anymore. We have to solve things in a communal, not an individual, sense now.”

Sandra, another EMU student, said, “Sanders is the only candidate who has clear and achievable goals. After eight years things have only gotten a little better under Obama, like the cost of gas going down. What I don’t like is that some people think they are entitled to the best of education, the best quality of life, but they say that a fast food worker doesn’t deserve \$15 an hour. They don’t think the people of Flint, Detroit or Highland Park should have access to education. People were poisoned in Flint just to save money.

“It’s all about them keeping the power and passing the best education down to their own. It’s not just the wealthy but those are in a position of power and want to help their friends.”

The remarks of students highlighted the initial stages of the shift to the left among youth and workers. This is only a precursor, however, of a far broader radicalization and a greater social differentiation as the working class begins to assert its own class interests. The development of the political independence of the working class requires the most determined struggle to expose the efforts by Sanders to promote the Democratic Party and subordinate the interests of workers and youth to the war aims of US imperialism.



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