

Once again on Sanders and socialism

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At a town hall event Thursday night in Las Vegas, jointly hosted by the MSNBC cable channel and Telemundo, Democratic presidential candidate and self-described “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders was asked by one of the moderators to explain what he meant by socialism.

Sanders has attracted broad support from working people and youth by basing his bid for the White House on denunciations of social inequality and the political domination and criminality of Wall Street. His claim to be a socialist, far from alienating many workers and youth, has attracted them to his campaign, an indication of the growth of anti-capitalist sentiment. According to one prominent poll released on Friday, he trails former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton nationally among Democratic voters by only 3 percentage points.

In reply to the question about socialism, Sanders said: “When I talk about democratic socialist, you know what I’m talking about? Social Security, one of the most popular and important programs in this country, developed by FDR to give dignity and security to seniors... When I talk about democratic socialist, I am talking about Medicare, a single payer care system for the elderly. And in my view, we should expand that concept to all people...”

“When I talk about democratic socialist, I’m not looking at Venezuela. I’m not looking at Cuba. I’m looking at countries like Denmark and Sweden...”

This response bears careful scrutiny. It makes clear that, despite his talk of a “political revolution” against the “billionaire class,” Sanders is not an opponent of the capitalist system or the two-party political monopoly through which the American corporate-financial elite has ruled for more than 150 years.

There is nothing anti-capitalist in Sanders’ so-called “socialism.” Socialism is not a reform of capitalism, it is its opposite. It is based on the abolition of private ownership of the means of production—the major

industries, transport, telecommunications, banking—and their transformation into public utilities under the democratic control of the working people. It replaces production for private profit based on the surplus value extracted through the exploitation of workers under the wage system with production for the benefit of society as a whole. It supersedes the anarchy of the market by organizing economic life on the basis of rational planning.

It overcomes the contradiction between globalized production and the nation-state political framework of capitalism by uniting workers internationally in the struggle for a world socialist federation. It is a revolutionary change that can be achieved only through the independent political mobilization of the working class and the establishment of a workers’ government.

Sanders opposes all of this. He contends, in the name of “socialism,” that the existing economic and political set-up can be reformed along the lines of the programs that were instituted in the 1930s (Social Security) and the 1960s (Medicare). Neither of these programs, while representing significant gains for working people, challenged the basic class interests of the American ruling elite. Precisely because the economic and political power of the ruling class was left intact, these programs have been under constant attack. They have been increasingly whittled down and are now targeted for extinction.

Where, moreover, did these programs come from? They were not the result of the beneficence of the American capitalist class. They were wrenched from the ruling elite in the course of bitter and bloody struggles of not only the American, but also the international working class. The most important factor behind the enactment of the social reforms of the 1930s and 1960s in America was the socialist revolution of 1917 that established in Russia the first workers’ state in world history.

That world-transforming event provided a mighty impulse to the struggles of workers in the US and around the world, and it inspired in the ruling classes of every capitalist country fear of something similar happening to them. The outbreak of the Great Depression in 1929 discredited capitalism in the eyes of millions in the US and internationally and fueled a growth of class struggle that erupted in general strikes in three major American cities—Toledo, San Francisco and Minneapolis—in 1934.

This was the context in which Franklin D. Roosevelt, a resolute defender of the capitalist system and the interests of the American ruling class, felt compelled to implement a series of social reforms, including Social Security, whose basic purpose was to avert social revolution in the United States.

The next major social reforms, Medicare and Medicaid, the government health programs for the elderly and the poor, were enacted under conditions of rising social struggles and mounting political discontent. This was the period of the mass civil rights movement, which was, in essence, an extension of the class battles that gave rise to the industrial unions in the 1930s, and which was animated by an egalitarian ethos. It coincided with anti-colonial struggles that shook Asia and Africa. It was accompanied by urban rebellions that swept America's cities, militant strikes of industrial workers and the first stirrings of the anti-war movement.

But even at the height of its global economic dominance and political influence, American capitalism was unable to overcome endemic poverty, unemployment and oppression. In 1964, Lyndon Johnson proclaimed his “War on Poverty,” but that quickly collapsed as American capitalism was overtaken by its international and internal contradictions. Since then, the Democratic Party and the ruling class as a whole have shifted ever more violently to the right, abandoning any policy of liberal reform.

The past 30 years have been dominated by a relentless ruling class offensive against the working class, which has been escalated, under the Obama administration, in the aftermath of the capitalist breakdown of 2008. Sanders often notes that in America today, the richest 20 individuals own more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of the

population—more than 150 million people. Yet he embraces and praises the president who has overseen the greatest transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich in history.

As he said Thursday night, “Bottom line is, I happen to think that the president has done an extraordinarily good job. I have worked with him on issue after issue.”

In recent days, pro-Clinton economists such as Paul Krugman and Jared Bernstein have attacked Sanders' reform proposals, including free tuition at public colleges and universal government-provided health care, as wildly impractical and unrealizable. This is an attack on Sanders from the right, based on the standard lie that “there is no money” for social programs. However, Krugman and the others are correct in one critical regard. Sanders, no less than his pro-Clinton critics, accepts and defends the existing economic system. Proceeding from that starting point, his reform proposals are indeed utopian.

Outside of a mass struggle that directly challenges the bases of capitalist rule no genuinely progressive changes can be achieved.

As for Sanders' supposedly “socialist” models—Denmark and Sweden—both have for the past two decades been busy dismantling the welfare states established after World War II and imposing ever harsher austerity measures on the working class. Their turn to social and political reaction is exemplified by their savage attacks on refugees. Sweden last month announced it would expel some 80,000 people fleeing the imperialist wars in the Middle East, and Denmark announced plans to seize the assets of asylum seekers.

Sanders does not represent the growing opposition of the working class to inequality, war and repression. He does not articulate the growth of anti-capitalist sentiment among the masses. He represents a response by the ruling class to these developments. His central political function is to prevent the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class by channeling social discontent back behind the Democratic Party.



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