

Sanders pushes trade war policies

“Left” demagoguery and nationalism dominate Democratic debate in Flint

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In Sunday night’s debate between Democratic presidential contenders Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, held in Flint, Michigan, the crisis resulting from the lead poisoning of the city’s water supply served as the occasion on the part of both candidates for “left” posturing devoid of any substantive proposals.

Sanders sought throughout to use the Flint crisis as a springboard for pushing economic nationalist, trade war policies, attacking Clinton for having backed trade deals such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the normalization of trade relations with China and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. In the run-up to Tuesday’s primary election in Michigan, Sanders has intensified his nationalist rhetoric, seeking to channel the anger and frustration of autoworkers over mass layoffs, plant closures and cuts in wages and benefits into hostility toward their coworkers abroad, particularly in Mexico and China.

Flint, a city of 100,000 people, has been devastated by General Motors’ closure of virtually all of its plants in what was for decades the center of its industrial empire. Over the past 20 years, the city has lost 75 percent of its manufacturing jobs. It has gone from 80,000 GM workers to fewer than 5,000 today.

The auto giant bankrupted the city, with the collaboration of both Democratic and Republican administrations and the United Auto Workers union. The decision of state and local officials to switch the water supply to the polluted Flint River in 2014, and the subsequent cover-up of toxic levels of lead and other chemicals by officials from the Obama administration on down, was but the latest social crime inflicted on Flint’s mostly working-class inhabitants.

In his promotion of protectionism, Sanders, who calls himself a “democratic socialist,” actually complements the overtly fascist demagoguery of Republican front-runner Donald Trump, who has campaigned in the Detroit area in advance of the Republican primary and sought to exploit the social crisis facing Michigan workers by means of racist

attacks on foreign workers and immigrants.

While nominally representing different extremes of the bourgeois political spectrum, both Sanders and Trump lay the blame for factory closures and unemployment not on capitalism, but rather on unfair trade deals. This nationalist opposition to pro-corporate trade deals reflects the interests of sections of the ruling class. It echoes the longstanding chauvinist policies of the United Auto Workers and the trade unions in general, which have served to block a united struggle by American and international workers against the transnational corporations. The unions’ economic nationalism has facilitated endless layoffs, wage cuts and speedup carried out in the name of upholding the “competitiveness” of US-based companies against their foreign rivals.

In Sunday’s debate, Clinton sought to counter Sanders’ charges on trade by accusing the Vermont senator of opposing the Obama administration’s bailout of Chrysler and General Motors by voting against the October 2008 bill sanctioning the \$700 billion taxpayer rescue of the banks. Some \$85 billion from the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) bank bailout fund was used to finance Obama’s forced bankruptcy and restructuring of the US auto industry.

Clinton presented the auto restructuring as an immense boon to autoworkers, remaining silent on the fact that it was carried out on the backs of the workers, who suffered a 50 percent wage cut for all new-hires as part of a two-tier wage system, along with drastic cuts in benefits for both retirees and current workers, and thousands of additional layoffs.

Referring to record profits recorded by the Big Three US automakers in 2015—based on a 30 percent reduction in labor costs—Clinton boasted, “We had the best year that the auto industry has had in a long time.”

While Sanders voted against the TARP bill, he actually supported the auto bailout, a fact he emphasized at a town hall event held Monday night in Detroit.

In the back-and-forth between the two candidates over

their respective records on auto, Sanders and Clinton were in part competing to win the endorsement of the UAW, which has yet to announce its choice for the November election.

At one point, in fending off Sanders' attacks on her trade policies, Clinton, perhaps unwittingly, revealed an essential function of the State Department, which she headed as secretary of state in the first years of the Obama administration. "I did go many places around the world to sell American products," she declared, "because the alternatives were usually European, Asian, primarily Chinese products." In other words, she hustled to secure markets and profits for the American corporate elite.

The first half-hour of the two-hour event was devoted to the Flint water crisis, with the candidates taking questions from both the CNN moderators and members of the audience. The two sought to outdo one another in expressing shock and anger over the poisoning of Flint residents, but neither offered any specific proposals or dollar amounts to be spent removing the lead pipes, making the water system safe and caring for the thousands of children physically harmed for life by exposure to the toxic substance.

Both Clinton and Sanders quickly called for the resignation of Governor Rick Snyder, a Republican. While this demand is entirely in order, for the Democratic candidates it serves as part of an attempt to lay all of the blame on the Republican Party and conceal the criminal role of Democratic officials at the local, state and federal level.

When asked by one of the moderators whether they thought officials responsible for the lead poisoning and cover-up should be jailed, both candidates dodged the question, saying that would be up to investigators and the courts.

Asked by a Flint resident for specific proposals to solve the crisis, Clinton said she supported the efforts of the city's Democratic mayor and Democratic representatives in Congress. They, however, are proposing token measures that will hardly begin to address the scale of the crisis.

Congressional Democrats have proposed allocating \$600 million for Flint, while the cost to remove and replace the lead pipes has been estimated at more than \$1 billion. Fitch, the credit rating agency, recently estimated that it would cost \$300 billion to replace lead water pipes nationally.

Sanders, for his part, quickly pivoted from the Flint crisis to his trade war agenda. In reply to a question from CNN moderator Anderson Cooper on whether Flint residents could trust "big government" solutions to the crisis, Sanders replied, "I suppose they can trust the corporations who have destroyed Flint by a disastrous trade policy which has allowed them to shut down plants in Flint and move to China or Mexico."

He returned several times to the same theme, complaining

at one point that "Secretary Clinton supported virtually every one of the disastrous trade agreements written by corporate America." He added, "Those trade policies have resulted in the shrinking of the American middle class."

The above quote points to one significant feature of Sanders' performance in the debate—the virtual elimination of any reference to the "working class" in favor of that most vacuous of political abstractions in the vocabulary of American bourgeois politics: the "American middle class." Sanders' increasing adherence to the unwritten law of official politics in the US banning the term "working class" is a sure sign of his accelerating turn to the right.

At one point he answered Clinton's disparagement of him as a "one-note" candidate by declaring, "My one issue is to rebuild a disappearing middle class. That's my one issue."

Most revealing of the fraud of Sanders' "socialism" was his omission of any call for the nationalization of basic utilities such as water and sewerage. If ever there has been a demonstration of the incompatibility of social needs with corporate control over the provision of basic necessities—whether through direct ownership or via the subordination of nominally public entities to the banks—it is in the Flint crisis.

Historically in the US, the demand for public ownership and democratic control of the utilities—electricity, water, sewerage, the railroads—was a standard plank in the platforms of socialist and progressive parties in the early part of the 20th century, and was even supported by more left sections of the Democratic Party. Sanders, a conventional bourgeois politician despite his talk of "political revolution," opposes nationalization, in line with his defense of capitalist private ownership of the banks and corporations.



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