

Sanders' upset win in the Michigan primary

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The victory of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders in the March 8 Democratic primary in Michigan is a clear indicator of growing radicalization in the American working class. More than half a million people cast their votes for a candidate claiming to be socialist. This gave Sanders an unanticipated victory over former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the consensus presidential nominee of the Democratic Party establishment. Sanders won despite the support for Clinton by the corporate-controlled media, whose polls invariably predicted a Clinton victory by double-digit margins.

The vote did not come in a small rural state or in caucuses attended by a few thousand Democratic Party activists. Michigan was the first major industrial state to vote in the presidential nomination campaign, and the turnout was relatively high.

Historically, Michigan was a center of the American labor movement—the site of sit-down strikes that paved the way for the formation of the industrial unions in the 1930s. It has become ground zero for the crushing impact of plant closures, wage cuts and the growth of poverty and social misery, carried out with the full collaboration of unions, including the United Auto Workers, which have been transformed into industrial policemen for the corporations.

The primary campaigns in both big business parties have been dominated by the growth of popular anger and disgust with the political establishment. Eight years after the Wall Street crash, the mass experience of economic insecurity and falling living standards is beginning to find a political expression, however distorted. Broad sections of working people and youth have gravitated to candidates who portray themselves as anti-establishment “outsiders.”

This has taken an overtly right-wing and ominous form in the support, including among highly impoverished and oppressed sections of the working

class, for the fascistic real estate billionaire and Republican front-runner Donald Trump. In the Michigan Republican primary, Trump won easily, taking nearly 50 percent of the vote in Macomb County, a center of the auto industry in the suburbs north of Detroit.

Opposition to the political establishment has found a more left-wing expression in the broad support of workers and young people for Sanders, whose claim to be a “democratic socialist” has connected with growing anti-capitalist sentiment. Sanders, to his own surprise, has found a strong response to a campaign that was launched largely to provide the Democratic Party with a “left” cover before the planned nomination of Clinton. Sanders pledged from the outset to support the eventual Democratic nominee, whomever that turned out to be.

The glaring failure of media polling to detect the shift in class sentiment, assuming that the polls in Michigan were not simply rigged to assist in a Clinton victory, is itself a demonstration of the chasm that separates the entire political establishment, including both major parties and the corporate interests they serve, from the vast majority of the population. This was summed up last Friday when President Obama, responding to the February jobs report, made the astounding boast that “America is pretty darn great right now.”

For decades, as the political system has moved ever further to the right, pursuing policies of social reaction at home and permanent war abroad, a manufactured “public opinion” has been used to suppress opposition and justify a reactionary agenda. This has been buttressed by the so-called “left” of American politics, concentrated in the Democratic Party, which, with the eager assistance of various middle-class pseudo-left organizations, has worked to conceal the basic class divide in American capitalist society and instead define all social and political issues on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation and life-style questions. The

aim of the fixation on such secondary questions is to divide the working class and block its emergence as an independent and united political force.

Sanders' victory in Michigan reflects the intrusion of class issues into the elections. The Clinton campaign, like the media, was taken unawares by Sanders' win. At a campaign rally Tuesday night in Cleveland, Clinton made no reference to the close contest in the neighboring state and instead described the campaign for the Democratic nomination as in its final stages. "The sooner I can become your nominee, the more I can begin to turn my attention to the Republicans," she told her audience.

Sanders was similarly oblivious to the real state of affairs. He held no election night rally for his supporters and campaign workers in Michigan, choosing instead to leave the state for events in Florida. He gave a perfunctory seven-minute news conference in Miami shortly before 11 p.m. without making any claim to victory.

Clinton won a majority among only two demographic groups: the highest income bracket, those making over \$100,000 a year; and the poorest sections of African-American workers in Detroit, Pontiac and Flint. Sanders won every region of the state outside the Detroit metropolitan area. Significantly, he won an even higher percentage of the vote in industrial cities like Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo than in college towns like Ann Arbor and East Lansing.

The class character of the vote for Sanders was further demonstrated in exit polls, which found that people under 30 voted for the senator from Vermont by a margin of 81 percent to 18 percent. Sanders won majorities of voters making less than \$50,000 a year, whites without a college degree (by 17 points), and even union voters (by two points) despite—or because of—union endorsements for Clinton. Sanders also won white women by a margin of five points, refuting suggestions that the former secretary of state would have a natural advantage with those of her own gender.

The exit polls indicated another significant political fact: most voters did not suddenly change their minds, under the impact of last Sunday's debate or other events. That means that the polls conducted in the weeks leading up to the primary consistently underestimated the support for Sanders.

It remains very difficult to predict what the outcome

of the 2016 election campaign will be. The two-party system, which the American ruling class has maintained for nearly two centuries to safeguard its political monopoly, is in increasing crisis. While the support for the Sanders campaign reveals a shift to the left among working people, Sanders' conscious aim is to contain this radicalization within the framework of the Democratic Party, whether as the party's nominee himself, or by delivering his supporters to the camp of Clinton.

Moreover, both Sanders and Trump, in different ways, base themselves on the reactionary program of economic nationalism. Sanders attacks NAFTA and other pro-corporate trade deals not from the standpoint of the unity of the working class internationally against the transnational corporations, but from the standpoint of playing off American workers against their class brothers and sisters in other countries. Trump combines this with openly racist and anti-immigrant demagoguery and bellicose denunciations of Mexico, Japan and China. Whether in "left" or openly right-wing garb, protectionism fuels the growth of militarism and war.

The 2016 election campaign has revealed a mounting crisis of the US political system. The ruling class uses all its political instruments to manage and exploit the crisis, from the left-talking Sanders to Trump or some other far-right figure. The growing popular indignation and search for a way out of the crisis must be developed into a conscious independent political movement of the working class along genuinely socialist—and therefore internationalist—lines.



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