

After the March 15 US primaries: The political role of the Sanders campaign

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The Democratic and Republican Party primary elections held in five states on Tuesday have further cemented the position of the two front-runners, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.

On the Republican side, it is increasingly likely that the party will have at the head of its ticket in November a candidate with a distinctly fascist and authoritarian program, including open appeals to violence against political opponents and racist agitation against immigrants and ethnic and religious minorities. On Tuesday, Trump threatened that there would be “riots” should he be denied the nomination at a contested Republican Convention.

On the Democratic side, the likelihood of Bernie Sanders overcoming Clinton’s lead in delegates is increasingly remote after the former secretary of state’s victory in all five states holding contests on Tuesday. Barring a crisis that drastically impacts her political prospects—such as a criminal indictment over her State Department emails—Clinton is heading toward securing the Democratic nomination at the party convention in July.

A likely nomination of Clinton—the personification of the status quo and one of the more despised politicians in the United States—places into sharper relief the political function of the Sanders campaign. The widespread support for Sanders has revealed the extent to which workers and youth are looking for an alternative to capitalism. They will not, however, find it in the self-described “democratic socialist” senator from Vermont.

From the beginning, Sanders’ role has been to serve as a lightning rod for social discontent, directing it into the dead end of the Democratic Party. In his more candid moments, he has stated that the actual content of his “political revolution” is to encourage millions of

young people and workers not to lose faith in the “political system” and to increase the Democratic vote in November. He will now begin the process of pressuring his supporters to back the eventual nominee, Clinton.

Drawing something of a balance sheet of the Sanders campaign from the standpoint of the Democratic Party, *New York Times* columnist Timothy Egan wrote on Wednesday that while the “math now makes it nearly impossible for him to get the bid,” Sanders should continue to run because he has “done a real service, for the party he only recently joined, and for the country.”

Thanks to Sanders, Egan declared, “millennial voters who flocked to Barack Obama but have a meh feeling about another Clinton are back in the arena... His ideas will shape every part of the party platform, which will give Clinton what she lacks: a clear message. Eventually, [Sanders] will endorse the woman he influenced, and Democrats will be the better for it.”

In fact, the Sanders campaign will have no impact on the program of the Democratic Party or the policies of any future Clinton administration. Already, Clinton is beginning to shift to the right in preparation for a contest with Trump, preparing to position herself as the alternative for the “moderate” wing of the Republican right and the reliable guardian of the interests of American capitalism. However, Egan’s comments point to an understanding within the political establishment that Sanders’ role—of which the candidate himself is highly conscious—is to counter the deep anger and disillusionment that have been the principal products of seven years of the Obama administration.

The form and framework of the Sanders campaign is not an incidental question. The fact that he chose to run within the Democratic Party in and of itself, whatever

his “left” rhetoric, determines the trajectory and political significance of his campaign. The claims of various pseudo-left organizations notwithstanding, the Democratic Party cannot be transformed into an instrument for social and political progress, let alone socialism. Even if Sanders were to accomplish the unlikely feat of winning the nomination, this would change only the particular form in which he repudiated his promises and upheld the interests of the corporations and banks.

As it has progressed, the content of the Sanders campaign has become more and more right-wing. He has combined his call for various social reforms, themselves unobtainable outside of a mass working class movement directed against the capitalist system, with pledges to maintain the “strongest military in the world.” In the past several weeks, he has focused his rhetoric (particularly in Ohio and Michigan) on denunciations of “unfair trade deals,” echoing Trump in promoting the reactionary notion that erecting national barriers is an answer to assaults on wages within the United States, rather than opposing the global capitalist system itself.

Sanders’ “socialism” is a fraud. It is devoid of any anti-capitalist content. He defends the system of private corporate ownership and profit. He defends the capitalist state. His campaign is not an expression of the growing militancy and political radicalization of the working class. Rather, it is a response by the ruling elite to that development and the danger it poses of the emergence of an independent political movement against capitalism.

The next step in this elaborate political maneuver to neutralize and demoralize social opposition is already being prepared in the form of a campaign that insists the only way to “stop Trump” is to unify everyone behind Clinton. In an open letter released on Tuesday, MoveOn.org, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and other Democratic Party-affiliated organizations—both pro-Sanders and pro-Clinton—called for a “voting renaissance” to “stop Trump” and “show that our country is better than this.” This “anybody but Trump” campaign will assume various forms and involve the entire pseudo-left fraternity.

Those who are developing the arguments for such an “anti-Trump” campaign are not only seeking to bolster the Democratic Party and prepare the groundwork for

Sanders’ support for Clinton, they are also perpetuating a false understanding of the political dynamic of American politics. The very real danger represented by Trump cannot be countered by support for the Democratic Party. On the contrary, Trump’s ability to exploit social anger and direct it into reactionary channels is due above all to the role of the Democratic Party and what passes for the “left” in the United States, including Sanders and the organizations that have backed him—a “left” characterized by contempt for the working class and dedicated to smothering the growth of workers’ militancy and demobilizing opposition to social inequality and war.

While the US election campaign still has eight more months to go, it has already revealed both the deep crisis of American politics and the enormous dangers facing the working class. The central and critical task is the building of a genuine socialist, internationalist and revolutionary leadership—the Socialist Equality Party.



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