

Clinton primary contest losses intensify Democratic Party crisis

Joseph Kishore
28 March 2016

Bernie Sanders scored landslide victories over Hillary Clinton in Democratic Party caucuses held Saturday in Washington state, Hawaii and Alaska.

The scale of the defeats for Clinton, the presumptive front-runner in the contest for the presidential nomination, was overwhelming in all three states. In Washington's caucuses, Sanders beat Clinton by 73 percent to 27 percent. In Alaska, the margin was 82 percent to 18 percent. Sanders won the Hawaii caucuses by 70 percent to 30 percent.

The Vermont senator has won six of the last seven Democratic Party contests, including last Tuesday's victories in Utah and Idaho. Clinton won in Arizona the same day.

Turnout for the weekend caucuses, which generally involve far fewer participants than elections, approached or exceeded records set in 2008, including at least 225,000 in Washington. A report in the *Atlantic* noted that Sanders "won from wall to wall," adding, "He took every county in Washington, and in Alaska, he posted double-digit margins in all 40 districts."

These votes have deepened the political crisis in the Democratic Party. Even a Clinton victory over a candidate who describes himself as "socialist," if the margin of victory were small, would be of great significance. During the 1968 Democratic Party primary campaign, which unfolded amidst growing opposition to the Vietnam War, Senator Eugene McCarthy's performance in the New Hampshire primary, in which he won 42 percent to Lyndon B. Johnson's 49 percent, was considered a near-fatal blow to the sitting president. It helped precipitate Johnson's decision to withdraw from the presidential race three weeks later.

It is extraordinary that Clinton, who has emerged as the political personification of the status quo, is not only losing, but being trounced in so many states. She is being routed in many contests under conditions where she is presented as the all-but-inevitable winner of the nomination process. Her defeats are a repudiation of calls from leading Democratic Party officials, including President Obama, for Sanders to end his campaign. In a political system that was in any way responsive to popular discontent, Clinton's candidacy would be considered doomed.

The general media line notwithstanding, the issue is not so much who has the most delegates, but the political dynamic at work. Even if Sanders is not able to surpass Clinton's still

sizable lead, due to a significant degree to the pledges of so-called "super delegates"—party operatives, officeholders and politicians who are not elected in primaries and caucuses—it will be impossible to conceal the fact that the Democratic Party's standard-bearer is deeply unpopular.

The eventual outcome of the nomination process—for both the Democrats and Republicans—remains highly volatile and unpredictable. What is clear, however, is that the two-party system, through which the American capitalist class has exercised its rule nearly 150 years, is breaking apart.

The social anger that has built up over decades, vastly intensified since the crash of 2008, is beginning to find political expression. The United States is riven by extreme levels of social inequality, with a handful of billionaires controlling more wealth than the bottom half of the population. To this must be added the destabilizing consequences of a quarter-century of unending war, particularly in the decade-and-a-half of the "war on terror."

More and more, this underlying reality is breaking through the ossified structure of American politics. Expressing the shock this has produced within the political establishment, the *New York Times'* Nicholas Kristof recently made the remarkable admission that he—along with the rest of the media—"were largely oblivious to the pain among working class Americans."

While Kristof was referring to the support for Trump among sections of workers, the basic trajectory of the American working class is not to the right, but to the left.

Support for Sanders is the initial expression of a broadly felt anticapitalist sentiment among workers, and particularly among younger voters who have seen nothing but economic crisis and war for their entire politically conscious lives. Sanders, who has had far less media coverage than the other major candidates, has received 1.5 million votes from those under 30 in the primary process prior to Saturday, 300,000 more than Clinton and Trump combined.

These numbers express deeper social trends and corresponding changes in political consciousness. A survey by YouGov released earlier this year found that Americans under the age of 30 rated socialism as better than capitalism (43 percent had a favorable opinion of socialism versus 32 percent

who had a favorable opinion of capitalism). Sixteen percent of those under the age of 30 described themselves as socialist, while only 11 percent said they were capitalist.

Another recent poll found that among those age 18 to 35, 56.5 percent described themselves as “working class”—a term that is virtually proscribed in American politics and banned from the media. The percentage of those describing themselves as “middle class” has fallen steadily, from 45.6 percent in 2002 to a record low 34.8 percent in 2014.

While the evident willingness of millions of American workers and young people to consider socialism as an alternative to the existing capitalist system has come as a shock to the political establishment, this development is a striking confirmation of the political program and perspective published by the Socialist Equality Party in 2010. The SEP anticipated a profound shift in the political consciousness of the working class:

In the final analysis, the vast wealth and power of American capitalism was the most significant objective cause of the subordination of the working class to the corporate-controlled two-party system. As long as the United States was an ascending economic power, perceived by its citizens as “the land of unlimited opportunity,” in which a sufficient share of the national wealth was available to finance rising living standards, American workers were not convinced of the necessity of socialist revolution.

The change in the objective conditions, however, will lead American workers to change their minds. The reality of capitalism will provide workers with many reasons to fight for a fundamental and revolutionary change in the economic organization of society. The younger generation of working people – those born in the 1980s, 1990s, and the first decade of the twenty-first century – do not know, and will never know, capitalist “prosperity.” They are the first generation of Americans in modern times who cannot reasonably expect to achieve a living standard equal to, let alone better than, their parents’ generation.” [*The Breakdown of Capitalism and the Fight for Socialism in the United States*]

The scale of his support has taken the Sanders campaign itself by surprise. It reflects an emerging revolutionary potential that is entirely unacceptable to the candidate and the mildly reformist sections of the Democratic Party establishment for which he speaks. It has never been Sanders’ intention or desire to lead a popular movement against capitalism. From the beginning, his campaign was intended to serve as a safety valve for the political establishment.

As the campaign progresses, the contradiction between Sanders’ own objectives and the aims of those who have supported him will inevitably emerge. Aware of the dangers involved, Sanders spoke out of both sides of his mouth in interviews over the weekend. Asked whether he had any conditions for endorsing Clinton if she won the nomination—including that she support his campaign planks of Medicare for all, a \$15 minimum wage and free tuition at public colleges—Sanders evaded the question. He said it was a “misinterpretation of what I said” to suggest that there were any conditions, while refraining from saying directly that he would back Clinton.

But when he announced his bid for the Democratic nomination last year, Sanders pledged to support the eventual nominee, whoever he or she was. And in the course of the primary contests, he repeatedly promoted his campaign as the most effective means of increasing the turnout for the Democratic Party in the November general election.

Sanders’ campaign slogans—denouncing the “billionaire class” and a political system dominated by corporate money—address only certain surface aspects of American society, but by no means go to the source of mass discontent—the capitalist system itself.

The issues that are driving the working class into political struggle—the fight against war, inequality and the destruction of democratic rights—cannot be resolved without a decisive break with the Democratic Party and the building of an independent political movement of the working class on the basis of a genuinely socialist program. This means a fight to unite workers throughout the world in a common struggle to overturn the capitalist system, replacing it with a rationally planned and democratically controlled economy based on social need, not private profit.

The crisis of the two-party system revealed in the elections underscores the urgency of the building of the Socialist Equality Party to intervene in the struggles of the working class and provide the necessary revolutionary leadership.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact