

Conversations with Sanders supporters in Wisconsin, New York and Pennsylvania

Our reporters

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Democratic Party candidate Bernie Sanders has held rallies in recent days in states holding primaries this month, including Wisconsin (primary on April 5), New York (April 19) and Pennsylvania (April 26).

Sanders has won a string of contests in recent weeks, including landslide victories in Washington state, Hawaii and Alaska last weekend. Recent polls show that the Vermont senator is ahead of Clinton in Wisconsin. In New York, Clinton's home state, the former secretary of state is leading Sanders by only 54 to 42 percent according to a poll released on Thursday, a significant narrowing over earlier results.

The widespread support for Sanders, who describes himself as a "democratic socialist," has intensified the political crisis in the Democratic Party and the campaign of frontrunner Hillary Clinton. Clinton is deeply unpopular, despite receiving the backing of most of the Democratic Party leadership.

Those supporting Sanders are generally motivated by anger over social inequality and the domination of the political system by the banks and giant corporations. Sanders' role has been to try to channel this opposition behind the Democratic Party and the two-party capitalist system.

The WSWS spoke to workers and young people attending Sanders rallies. Their comments are representative, expressing both hostility to social conditions and political relations in the United States along with illusions in the role of Sanders and the viability of reforming the capitalist system.

Kenosha, Wisconsin

Several thousand attended a rally this past week in Kenosha, Wisconsin, a former industrial center in the Midwest that has been hit by plant closings and mass layoffs.

Andrew, a Carthage College graduate who works for SC Johnson, said, "Most of my paycheck goes to debt. I'm not able to buy a house, not able to buy a car, because of my student loans. My standard of living is lower than my parents.

"I went to Carthage, couldn't afford to live on campus so I made the 45 minute commute [from Kenosha] every day. My girlfriend and I graduated with \$100,000 in debt, so I mean, what can I say? We are barely making it by."

Asked how the Kenosha area has changed in the time he has lived there, Andrew said, "Both of my parents worked at American Brass at

a factory that closed, and Chrysler closed, where my dad worked in assembly. The whole downtown by the port used to be all big factories, they would have big freighters come in and fill up. They built condos afterwards.

"We did everything we were supposed to do, go to college, get a good job, and we are still barely getting by. There is no limit on student debt interest. I know people who have 7 or 8 percent and are just paying interest, not even paying the principal."

Bronx, New York

A rally in the Bronx borough of New York City on Thursday attracted 20,000 people, who lined up for many blocks around St. Mary's Park.

Alfredo, a construction worker, said, "It seems to me that [Sanders] is for the little guy and wants to help improve the economy and create more jobs for people, especially minorities. I believe from what I've read that he wants to stand up to Wall Street and the corporations. But I don't think it's fair for any of the politicians, Democrats or Republicans, to blame workers in other countries for taking our jobs. I mean a Mexican worker has to eat too.

"I think Sanders wants to find a balance between capitalism and socialism. I wouldn't call myself a socialist, but I am open to some of the ideas because something has to change."

Several expressed the view that Sanders as an individual would help change American politics because of his personal background.

Katherine, 27, was educated as an analyst and now writes science fiction. "I came here because I think [Sanders] can bring a future for the new generation. He cares about people because he is not of American royalty; his father had a small business. I bet most of the people here are students. If we have free education, we will not have to have loans. We would not have drugs, we would have jobs, we would have housing."

Auto, a 22 year old, said, "I think it's very important that Sanders is not being supported by corporate money. He comes from an everyday American family, not the super wealthy. And he has more of a connection to his audience than Hillary Clinton for that reason."

When WSWS reporters pointed to the role of the Democratic Party and the Obama administration in defending the interests of the wealthy, Matthew, who attended the rally with Auto, said, "I think the Democratic Party is a corporation more than anything else. It's not really a party for the people. They have an agenda. We live in a time

of corporate politics. A handful of people are running the country right now and doing whatever they want.

“I think socialism means that every one is given the same opportunities. In America we are not really equal opportunity as much as we portray ourselves to be. Socialism is about leveling the playing field and about bringing the so called underclass up so nobody’s in poverty.”

Gyon, a student from the College of Staten Island who lives in Brooklyn, said, “He says we are the wealthiest nation on the planet, so how come it is so hard to get minimum wage? We are not asking for an extravagant wage. I had friends who had to move out of the city to where the price of living is better.”

Tenecia, who does work in shipping and receiving, talked to the WSWS while sitting on a park’s grassy baseball fields where the spill-over crowd was directed. “I left the Democrats. They are two wings of the same bird. I don’t like either one, Democrats or Republicans, both doing the same crap. They have their own little special interests.

“The superdelegates were put in place to keep those grassroots delegates out of the equation. When Bernie won out west, he took Alaska, Utah—the most conservative state—he takes it by a landslide. There are so many landslides back to back. Yet superdelegates want to dig their heels in. These superdelegates will back Hillary regardless. They are giving the middle finger to the grassroots. It will cause a backlash.”

Michael, a real estate broker in Rochester, New York, said, “I came out here to show my endorsement to Sanders. He was right about the Iraq war, and now it has cost us hundreds of lives and millions of dollars.

“The Democrats have clearly showed favoritism towards Hillary even before Sanders started to challenge her. She completely represents the corporate interests. I think this is true with a lot of senators and Congress members, and these positions should have term limits. Now we see that the Democrats have moved to the center.”

After some discussion about Sanders’ support for the US war drive and his role directing opposition back into the Democratic Party, Michael said he still supported Sanders, but added, “We have a two party system that doesn’t work, but I’m not sure if Sanders could run as an independent. I don’t think it should be out of the question, and the [Democratic National Committee] would certainly have brought it on themselves.”

Che, a recent graduate from the SUNY Albany, said, “I support Sanders because he wants to revolutionize politics. I think Trump wants to change politics, but in a fascist way. Sanders instead is bringing out drastic change and making average people feel like they can get involved in politics.

“I’m also not sure if Sanders will get elected because a lot of older people think of socialism as a bad word, and they act like this is still the 1950s. On the other hand a lot of younger people support socialism. I do because I look at countries in Europe like Belgium and Norway, and I know they provide for people.”

WSWS reporters pointed to the growing inequality in Europe and the role of the social democratic parties in implementing the policies demanded by big business. He said he wanted to learn more.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

On Thursday morning, about 8,500 people attended a Bernie Sanders rally in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, another Midwestern city hit hard by deindustrialization and plant closings, particularly in the steel industry. The audience was largely composed of students and youth in their 20s and 30s, together with workers and professionals.

In visiting Pittsburgh, Sanders sought to further cement his ties with the trade union bureaucracy, particularly the United Steelworkers, which is based in Pittsburgh, on the basis of economic nationalism and the “fight for 15” campaign organized by the unions to bolster the Democratic Party. The union speakers introducing Sanders promoted economic nationalism, blaming free trade agreements rather than capitalism for industrial job losses in western Pennsylvania and across the country.

Addie, Squid and Josie drove from Morgantown, West Virginia to attend the rally. Addie, a mother of two with a degree in history from West Virginia University, now working at a grocery store florist shop, explained her view of Sanders’ self-proclaimed “democratic socialism” as a system of reforms to capitalism. “He calls himself a democratic socialist. I’m for democratic socialism. If everybody agrees that we should put our tax money toward helping everybody in society, what’s wrong with that?”

“I’m against laissez-faire economics, where you let capitalists run off and do whatever they want. I’m for regulation so that society as a whole is more happy, rather than just a few people.

Asked whether she would support an international party of the working class, Addie responded, “I think we need more than a two-party system. Another party would be good. An international movement of workers would be good, but is it realistic right now?”

Anna, a PhD student at the University of Pittsburgh, explained her reasons for coming. “I wanted very much to see Bernie because I was curious to see him from a close distance. I think he is the candidate who is closest to my views for now.”

Anna said of Clinton, “I think she’s too much related to some old structures. She was in politics for a long, long time, and I think she is related to the establishment in general.”

When WSWS reporters pointed to Sanders’ support for war, Anna responded, “I’m against all kinds of wars. In wars, so many people die, and there is so much destruction that it’s not the right solution. I don’t know what needs to be done, but there probably is a solution for a better world. I think it will be very hard to stop the wars, but we need to try, to do something. The profit is enormous from wars. It’s not about freedom, or something else, it’s about profit. That’s very sad.”

“I don’t know to what extent we can trust the candidates, because there is a lot of populism. There is a lot of populism in this campaign, and people want to be excited about something. There is a lot we don’t know. I’m very cautious to take part in something, but I am very curious to see the people who support Bernie, because it’s my closest position for now.”



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