

The message of Wisconsin

Patrick Martin
7 April 2016

In the wake of Senator Bernie Sanders' crushing victory over former secretary of state Hillary Clinton in Tuesday's Wisconsin primary, the corporate-controlled media and the political establishment have been at pains to dismiss the significance of half a million people voting for a candidate claiming to be a socialist.

Sanders outpolled Clinton in 79 of the state's 82 counties and dominated nearly every demographic and income group. He won more than 80 percent of the vote among those aged 18 to 29, more than 70 percent of the vote among independents, and defeated Clinton by 54 percent to 44 percent among nonwhite voters under 45 years of age. He has now won seven of the last eight contests for the Democratic presidential nomination.

In its election night coverage, the American media barely reported these figures, showing far greater interest in the fortunes of billionaire demagogue Donald Trump, the Republican frontrunner. The media portrayed the victory of Texas Senator Ted Cruz over Trump as a political earthquake while downplaying Sanders' more sweeping victory over Clinton.

The media consensus was that the Wisconsin result meant little in terms of the Democratic presidential contest. The *Washington Post* headlined its report, "Sanders wins in Wisconsin, keeping alive his improbable bid for the nomination," referring in the second paragraph to "Clinton's still-overwhelming lead in delegates."

The *New York Times* wrote off the across-the-board rout of the Democratic frontrunner, declaring, "Mrs. Clinton's defeat does not significantly dent her comfortable lead in the race for the 2,383 delegates needed to secure the Democratic nomination."

Neither the major newspapers nor the television networks have attempted to grapple with the political implications of a candidate claiming to be socialist locked in an increasingly tight race with the near-unanimous choice of the Democratic Party establishment. On Wednesday, a McClatchy-Marist poll found that Sanders has taken a two-point lead over Clinton among likely Democratic voters nationwide, 49 percent to 47 percent.

The Sanders campaign represents a historical milestone in American politics. Some seven million people have gone to the polls or attended caucuses to vote for a candidate identified as a socialist, who calls for a "political revolution" to end the domination of billionaires over American political life. Two million people have donated to the Sanders campaign, and his rallies routinely attract crowds of 15,000 to 25,000 people. Among young people, in particular, support for Sanders is immense. More people aged 18-29 have voted for Sanders than for Clinton and Trump combined.

The media silence on the subject of the Sanders surge is an

expression of political nervousness in the ruling elite. Its concern is not over the messenger, a Vermont senator who has long functioned as a reliable Democratic Party ally. Rather, it is deeply shaken by the message of social and political discontent delivered by millions of people in the United States who are voting for a self-proclaimed "democratic socialist."

The mass vote for a candidate claiming to be socialist discredits what has become a foundational narrative of American politics: that the United States is a country where the working class is unalterably hostile to any alternative to the "free enterprise" system. Not only socialism, but even liberalism has been virtually banned from official politics, referred to by cowering Democrats as the "L-word," from which they seek to distance themselves.

Marxists have always insisted that "American exceptionalism" was of a historically limited and relative character. The slow political development of the American working class was bound up with the privileged position of American capitalism, which made possible steadily rising living standards for the working class and thus encouraged illusions in the viability of the profit system.

The change in the objective situation is beginning to produce a corresponding change in consciousness. It is of enormous significance that Sanders has won his greatest support among working class voters under the age of 45. This generation is being politically radicalized by the protracted decay of American capitalism--its decline on the world market and the resulting devastating impact on the jobs and living standards of American workers.

It required social processes maturing over many years to create the conditions where a somewhat anomalous figure, a little-known senator from a tiny state, could disrupt the planned coronation of the Democratic presidential frontrunner.

The 2016 election campaign is unfolding against the backdrop of eight years of economic upheaval and slump in the wake of the Wall Street crash, and eight years of the Obama administration, which bailed out the banks at the expense of working people and presided over a further concentration of wealth at the top alongside a further deterioration of jobs and living standards for the vast majority. It comes as well after 25 years of nearly uninterrupted imperialist war, with vast resources squandered, human and material.

Sanders is riding a wave of economic anger and hostility over social inequality. Despite all efforts to cover it up, it has proven impossible to conceal the deeply rooted sickness of American society: the ever-widening economic gulf between the top one percent (or one-tenth of one percent) and the broad masses who work for a living and produce the wealth. By now, the economic

figures are familiar: the financial aristocracy has seized virtually the entire increase in national income over the past two decades; wages and living standards for working people have stagnated or declined; temporary and contract jobs account for all the increase in employment since the 2008 financial crash.

It is under these conditions that there is such a broad popular response to Sanders' critique of Wall Street and corporate greed. Millions of young people and workers are looking for a way to fight back against the attacks on jobs, living standards and democratic rights, and the mounting threat of war, and they have seized on the Sanders campaign as a means of doing so. As it moves to the left, the American working class is beginning to take up political questions.

Nowhere is this process clearer than in Wisconsin. This is the state where in 2011 a mass movement erupted in the working class and among young people, triggered by the reactionary anti-worker legislation pushed by Governor Scott Walker and enacted by the Republican-controlled state legislature. Demonstrators flooded the state capitol and there was a growing movement for a general strike. This was forestalled only by the intervention of the AFL-CIO unions, which blocked any direct action by the working class and diverted the mass opposition into a campaign to recall Walker and replace him with a Democrat committed to similar cuts in wages, benefits and jobs, only carried out in collaboration with the unions.

The Democratic Party cannot be an instrument for combating the social crisis. Like the Republicans, it is unalterably committed to the defense of the profit system and shares responsibility for the bipartisan assault on the working class. The Democrats have moved steadily to the right over the past four decades, abandoning whatever remained of the reformist policies of New Deal liberalism and the social-welfare programs of the 1960s.

The Clintons are the personification of this process. Bill Clinton won the presidency in 1992 as the candidate of the Democratic Leadership Council, the right-wing formation that embraced the reactionary policies of the Reagan-Bush era. He notoriously pledged to "end welfare as we know it," eliminating the federal program dating from the 1930s that provided financial support for the long-term unemployed, while unleashing a law-and-order campaign that ended with more black men in prison than attending college.

Hillary Clinton continues this tradition, running as the continuator of the policies of the Obama administration, which has escalated US military aggression in the Middle East while preparing for war with China and Russia, massively expanded the surveillance state, and single-mindedly promoted the interests of Wall Street and the super-rich.

Sanders is likewise a defender of American capitalism, and no one has been more surprised than the candidate himself at the mass response to his campaign. He initially intended to serve as a lightning rod, drawing discontented workers and young people back into the embrace of the Democratic Party, following in the footsteps of Dennis Kucinich, Al Sharpton, Howard Dean and Jesse Jackson.

His "socialism" goes no further than 1960s liberalism. While he criticizes Clinton for having supported the 2003 invasion of Iraq,

he explicitly backs the war policies of the Obama administration.

Throughout his political career as mayor of Burlington, congressman and US senator from Vermont, Sanders has never supported any wider challenge to the domination of the corporate-controlled two-party system. He has caucused and voted with the Democrats in both the House and Senate and has supported every Democratic presidential candidate since Walter Mondale in 1984. He is committed to backing Hillary Clinton if she staggers across the finish line ahead of him, telling the *New York Daily News* this week that Clinton was "far, far preferable to any of the Republican candidates."

Sanders has won the support of millions not *despite*, but *because* of his professions of "democratic socialism." These have been taken seriously by an electorate that sees socialism as an alternative to the conditions of life created by capitalism. But there is nothing genuinely anti-capitalist in Sanders' perspective. This was shown most recently in his interview with the *Daily News*. When asked about his repeated calls to break up the Wall Street banks, Sanders could not explain how it was to be done, in the end declaring that the banks would be allowed to decide how to break themselves up.

It is one thing to recognize the objective significance of the mass support for Sanders. It is quite another to adapt to Sanders politically. The Socialist Equality Party opposes his campaign for president and warns that if he were elected, a Sanders administration would be an instrument of the American ruling elite to confuse and disorient the working class and prepare new attacks, while defending the worldwide interests of American imperialism.

The task of the SEP is to prepare the working class by making clear what it means to fight for socialism, combating illusions in Sanders and all other efforts to divert working people away from a struggle against the capitalist system, and advancing a genuine revolutionary alternative.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact