

Where's the socialism in the Sanders campaign?

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In the campaign for the 1984 Democratic presidential nomination, Walter Mondale, citing a then-popular advertising tagline, reproached his chief rival Gary Hart for empty platitudes and lack of substance, asking him repeatedly, “Where’s the beef?” In the 2016 campaign, a similarly blunt question could be posed to Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders: “Where’s the socialism?”

Sanders rocketed to prominence last summer as a self-proclaimed “democratic socialist,” striking a pose of intransigent opposition to Wall Street and the domination of American politics by the “millionaires and billionaires.” He has capitalized on the growing popularity of socialism among millions of students and younger workers, winning more than 7.5 million votes and posing a substantial challenge to the Democratic frontrunner, former secretary of state Hillary Clinton.

His identification with socialism has been critical to Sanders winning support among the younger generation of working people, who have seen capitalism produce nothing but economic decay, financial crisis and never-ending war. One recent poll showed that voters under 30 preferred socialism to capitalism by a sizeable margin, 43 percent to 32 percent, despite the nonstop media demonization of socialism.

But aside from the label, which Sanders now rarely uses, his “socialism” is invisible. He has not called for a single industry to be placed under public ownership and democratic control—not the oil companies, not the arms manufacturers, not the utilities, not the Wall Street banks that plunged the US and world economy into the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression.

The completely vacuous character of Sanders’ “socialism” was on display in his debate Thursday night in Brooklyn with Hillary Clinton, when Sanders was questioned about his call to break up the biggest

US banks, bailed out by the federal government in the 2008-2009 Wall Street crisis. CNN journalist Dana Bash asked why he proposed to let the banks themselves decide how the breakup would proceed:

Sanders: The point is we have got to break them up so that they do not pose a systemic risk and so that we have a vibrant economy with a competitive financial system.

Bash: But Senator, you didn’t answer the specific question, which is not just about breaking up the banks, but why allow the banks to do it themselves?

Sanders: Because I’m not sure—what the government should say is you are too big to fail. You’ve got to be a certain size. And then the banks themselves can figure out what they want to sell off. I don’t know that it’s appropriate that the Department of Treasury be making those decisions.

There is nothing at all radical here. Sanders argues like a free-market conservative, declaring it isn’t “appropriate” for the government to make decisions about the sell-off of bank assets. And this after repeatedly declaring that “the business model of Wall Street is fraud.” Apparently, the fraudsters can continue their operations unhindered, just on a somewhat smaller scale.

Sanders’s proposal to break up the major Wall Street banks, is not, as the WSWWS has explained, a socialist measure. He does not propose placing the banking system under public ownership and democratic control, so that the resources of society can be used for human

need and not the accumulation of personal wealth by a financial aristocracy. Instead, he advocates maintaining the private ownership of the banks, only dividing them into smaller units to create what he called in the debate “a competitive financial system.”

His call to downsize the biggest banks is, in fact, the position of a faction within the ruling class and the financial bureaucracy itself. The Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank and its president, Neel Kashkari, are holding public symposiums promoting the proposal. Kashkari, a former Goldman Sachs banker and Treasury official in the Bush administration, was the administrator of the \$700 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program bank bailout.

In his only public address devoted to the question of socialism, last November 19 at Georgetown University, Sanders presented his policies as an extension of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, both efforts at liberal reform to save capitalism, not put an end to it. He declared categorically, “I don’t believe government should own the means of production... I believe in private companies that thrive and invest and grow in America.”

The policies Sanders advocates on jobs, health care, education and the like would not have been out of place in the Democratic Party of the 1960s, and are far less radical than those proposed by the Populists of the 1890s and the Progressive and Farmer-Labor parties of the early 20th century, which called for public ownership of the railroads and utilities, and the breaking up of corporate monopolies.

What Sanders is proposing now for Wall Street—a self-directed breakup—has a noxious historical precedent: the breakup of the telecommunications industry in 1984. Under government prodding, the telephone monopoly AT&T broke itself up into seven component parts, initiating a process of deregulation, asset-stripping and mergers that has produced an unmitigated disaster for the workers of that industry, as demonstrated by the current strike by telecommunications workers at Verizon.

Sanders made an appearance on the Verizon picket line and has been endorsed by the leadership of the Communication Workers of America, the union that has sold out strike after strike and is preparing a similar fate for the current struggle. A socialist would raise the demand that Verizon and the other telecommunications

companies be nationalized under the democratic control of the workers. But Sanders is not a socialist.

Toward the end of the Brooklyn debate, Sanders boasted that he had brought millions of new voters, both independents and young people, into the Democratic Party. “I am proud that millions of young people who previously were not involved in the political process are now coming into it,” he said, “and I do believe that we have got to open the door of the Democratic Party to those people.”

Sanders is like the rooster who thinks his crowing causes the sun to rise. Millions of workers and youth are moving to the left, not because of the senator from Vermont, who is a temporary and undeserving beneficiary of this process, but because of the crisis and breakdown of American and world capitalism.

While Sanders seeks to keep this movement trapped within the straitjacket of the Democratic Party and offers his “socialist” persona and anti-Wall Street rhetoric as a means of doing so, it would be wrong to confuse the aspirations of those supporting him with the calculations of the senator himself. There is an objective logic to politics. The support for Sanders is only a transitional stage in a political radicalization that is placing mass struggles against the capitalist system on the agenda in the United States.

What is needed is the building of a new political leadership among workers and youth that can explain what socialism is, why it is necessary, and how it is to be achieved. That is the task the Socialist Equality Party will undertake in the course of the 2016 elections and beyond.



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