

Why Sanders won in West Virginia

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Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders' landslide victory in West Virginia on Tuesday, following his victory last week in Indiana, has highlighted the widespread hostility toward the Democratic Party's front-runner, Hillary Clinton, some ten weeks before the party's nominating convention in July.

Sanders defeated Clinton, whom the Democratic Party has declared the all-but-certain victor of the primary process, in every single county in the state, winning 51.4 percent of the vote compared to Clinton's 35.8 percent. He secured particularly high vote margins in working class areas where the coal industry once dominated. As a consequence of decades of deindustrialization, largely overseen by the Democratic Party, West Virginia is now one of the poorest states in the country, with the lowest labor force participation rate.

In Logan County—the location of the 1921 Battle of Blair Mountain, in which 10,000 armed coal miners confronted strikebreakers and police—Sanders defeated Clinton by a 25 percentage point margin. The Vermont senator continues to secure overwhelming majorities among young voters, winning 73 percent of West Virginia Democratic voters under the age of 44.

The trouncing of Clinton by Sanders, who describes himself as a “democratic socialist,” in a state like West Virginia is of immense political significance. In trying to explain this and the other victories for Sanders, the media and the Democratic Party backers of Clinton are promoting a false racial narrative in which everything is to be understood in terms of the “white vote,” the “black vote,” etc. An example of this is the column (“As West Virginia Goes”) published yesterday by *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow, a committed Clinton supporter.

Clinton's problem, according to Blow, is that her strategy “has been to so closely align herself with President Obama that there is very little light between them.” This has “helped her secure and retain some minority voters, but most likely distanced her from white ones.” West Virginia, Blow continues, is “one of the whitest states in the country, and the absolute whitest in

the South,” as well as the “least educated state and one of the poorest.”

Blow attempts to conceal the obvious—that the support for Sanders is driven by enormous alienation and the desire among broad sections of workers and youth for a dramatic change in economic policy. Clinton's association with the Obama administration is generating hostility among workers and youth because the seven years of the Obama White House have seen a historic growth of social inequality and a continued deterioration of working class living standards.

Blow's comment, and many others like it, assumes as a matter of course that workers are acting not on the basis of economic interests, but on the basis of racial identity. These commentators reject any notion that the concerns motivating broad sections of workers who happen to be white are the same as those animating workers who happen to be black. They deny that workers are capable of rational judgment as to where their interests lie. They provide no evidence for these claims. Rather, they assume that repeating them incessantly will make them true.

The attempt to turn race into the fundamental social and political category has been at the center of the political strategy of the Democratic Party and its political periphery for decades. Particularly since the late 1960s, the Democratic Party has combined the repudiation of any commitment to social reform with the promotion of affirmative action and various forms of lifestyle and identity politics connected to the interests of privileged sections of the population.

To the extent that racial issues have been a significant factor in the 2016 elections, it is mainly in their crass utilization by the Clinton campaign and its supporters among sections of the African American upper-middle class. That Clinton, the personification of the status quo, has done well among more economically oppressed section of the African American population is a reflection of the reactionary impact of this type of politics.

It should be noted that another political narrative has been blown apart in the Republican primaries—namely, the

claim that religion is the central question motivating Republican voters. In the media there is no attempt to explain why it is that the “evangelical vote” has gone for the notorious fornicator Donald Trump, or why the campaign of the religious fundamentalist Ted Cruz went down in flames despite the backing of the Republican Party establishment. Here one sees in another, very distorted form the consequences of economic and social distress, which Trump is seeking to direct along extreme right-wing and nationalist channels.

More and more, the fundamental class questions are coming to the fore. Now that it has been shown that broad sections of workers are prepared to accept a socialist alternative, the response of the so-called “left” is to attempt to reinforce racial divisions.

Sanders himself offers no way forward. From the outset, the central purpose of his campaign has been to contain the deep and growing social anger within the framework of the capitalist system and the Democratic Party. Expressed in the popular support for his campaign, however, are powerful objective tendencies that must and will find more radical forms of political expression.

It is high time that workers and youth reject the entire reactionary effort to define politics on the basis of racial, ethnic or other artificial divisions. Class is real, rooted objectively in the process of production. Race is a fiction, employed by the ruling class and the political forces of the middle class, both on the right and the pseudo-left, to divide workers and subordinate them to capitalism. Class politics—uniting all workers on the basis of their common economic interests and social identity—can and will find a renaissance in the United States.



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