

# “Sanders in Trump Country”: Vermont senator peddles his own brand of economic nationalism

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Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders was the guest speaker at a town hall meeting in Kenosha, Wisconsin Monday, sponsored by the cable news network MSNBC. The event, dubbed “Bernie Sanders in Trump Country,” was hosted by Chris Hayes and included both Trump and Clinton voters in the hard-hit industrial town just south of Milwaukee.

The site was chosen, Hayes said, because the city of 99,000, long a stronghold of the unions and the Democratic Party, had cast a narrow majority of its ballots for Trump—the first time that city residents backed a Republican presidential candidate in 46 years. The state of Wisconsin voted Republican for the first time since Reagan in 1984.

Following Clinton’s crushing defeat, there has been a raging internal discussion within the Democratic Party over how her single-minded focus on racial and gender politics and disdain towards the concerns of working-class voters allowed Trump to win in Wisconsin, Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Iowa, which Obama had carried in 2008 and 2012.

Hayes, the former Washington, DC editor for the *Nation* magazine and senior editor of the union-backed publication *In These Times*, provided Sanders with a platform to rebrand the Democratic Party as the real champion of working people. To underscore Sanders’ close collaboration with the trade unions, the event was held in the hall of United Auto Workers Local 72, which once had 14,000 members before Chrysler shut its giant Kenosha plant in 1988.

Sanders said he did not believe the argument that Trump won because “many of his supporters are sexist, racist or homophobes.” Instead, he said, “There is a lot of pain in this country, people are scared and worried. Fifty percent of older workers have zero for retirement. This was [Trump’s] main success story: ‘I will stand up to the establishment, to business, government and the media.’”

As for workers, Sanders said, they thought, “We don’t want the same old, same old,” and Trump comes along, a multi-billionaire saying, ‘I don’t pay taxes, I got companies in Turkey, in Mexico and in China, but I am going to stand up to the economic establishment and the political establishment,’ and a lot of people responded, ‘Ok, we’ll give this guy a

shot.’”

The comments from workers participating in the forum who had supported Trump are revealing. Jamie Seban, a divorced mother of two who has worked several jobs, said going online to get health insurance was “a massive disaster,” adding that she had to pay premiums of \$300-400 a month and a \$10,000 deductible. “That’s ridiculous. How can someone afford that?”

Another worker, Richard Bizer, who had voted for Obama in 2008 and for Sanders in the Democratic primary last April, said he supported Trump because “he wasn’t Hillary.” He added that he would have voted for Sanders if he had been the Democratic nominee.

Sanders thanked Bizer but did not say a word about Clinton, the favored candidate of Wall Street and the Pentagon, who Sanders spent months palming off as a “progressive” who would enact sweeping reforms to protect working people.

Matt Augustine, a union worker at a Snap-On tool manufacturer who retired after 30 years, said, “The leadership of the unions is lacking. The unions have lost their way over the last 20 years and they don’t represent the people like they used to.”

Sanders responded by praising the unions for creating “middle class living standards,” ignoring the complicity of these pro-corporate organizations in the systematic slashing of jobs, wages and benefits in the name of making US corporations more competitive and profitable.

It is significant that throughout the televised event, Sanders avoided the term “working class” and instead spoke only of the “middle class,” adopting the standard terminology of the American political establishment. During his primary election campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, Sanders routinely invoked the term “working class,” in line with his attempt to present himself as a “socialist” running in opposition to social inequality and the “billionaire class.”

Increasingly since his endorsement of Hillary Clinton, and particularly since the election of Trump, Sanders has dropped any reference to the “working class.” This is not a small matter. Rather, it is part of his rightward move to accommodate himself to Trump’s election and further integrate himself into the

Democratic Party establishment.

As a result, references to the “working class” are reserved for the extreme right, which presents itself as the defender of the working class in opposition to the “establishment.” Trump regularly makes use of the term.

Sanders’ effort to draw workers back into the fold of the Democratic Party has nothing to do with reversing its decades-long effort to dismantle the social reforms of the New Deal and Great Society—which it will not do, regardless of Sanders’ claims to the contrary. To a great extent, it simply boils down to out-Trumping Trump on economic nationalism and demands for trade war against China, Mexico and other countries.

After Sanders complained that Trump did not paid taxes, a worker in the audience pointed out that Jefferey Immelt, the CEO of General Electric had not paid taxes either, but that did not stop Obama from appointing him as a leading economic advisor.

Visibly flustered, Sanders said, “You are damn right, that was a stupid thing to do.” He quickly changed the subject from Obama and the Democratic Party, however, saying, “Many years ago Immelt got up before a group of people and said ‘when I see the future of General Electric, I see China, China and China.’”

Throughout the event Sanders promoted the hoary myth, long peddled by the UAW and other unions, that job cuts and declining living standards were caused by “unfair trade”—not the capitalist system and the relentless pursuit of profit by the global corporations.

Echoing Trump, Sanders said, “For years and years, we have been told by Republicans and many Democrats that our trade policy was working, that it was a good idea for America. Well, the American people don’t believe it. They think something is wrong with permanent normal trade relations with China and the Mexican free trade agreement. We have lost four million decent paying jobs. The American people want candidates who will stand up to the billionaire class and start representing the middle-class and working families of this country.”

This only underscores that Sanders has nothing to do with socialism. Nationalism, whether peddled by Trump and his alt-right advisor Stephen Bannon, or the “left” variant promoted by Sanders and the trade union bureaucracy, serves the same reactionary purpose.

Its aim is to block the development of class consciousness in the working class and prevent US workers from uniting with their class brothers internationally. Whatever their differences, both Sanders and Trump seek to subordinate workers to the profit interests of corporate America and the war drive of American imperialism. During the entire event Sanders never mentioned the danger of war.

As he had done throughout the primaries and afterwards, Sanders carefully sought to conceal the class character of the Obama administration and the Democratic Party. Throughout the evening, he did not make the slightest criticism of Clinton,

Obama or the Democrats. On the contrary, Sanders said there was “overwhelming evidence that we are better off than when Obama came in—but despite that the middle class continues to decline and millions are hurting and scared their kids will have a lower standard of living than they did.”

Sanders made no effort to square this contradiction. Yet it is impossible to understand how Trump was elected without understanding the impact of the anti-working class policies of the Democrats, which were escalated under Obama.

Nor did Sanders care to discuss his own role in facilitating Trump’s victory. Sanders overwhelmingly defeated Clinton in the state’s Democratic Party primary last April, winning every county except Milwaukee County, and trounced her by 15 percentage points in Kenosha County.

Addressing Sanders, a retired toolmaker said, “For the people I know it was either Trump or you, that’s from a grassroots point of view. They liked Trump or Bernie because they talked to the people. Everybody else was talking hogwash, they were talking over us.”

Sanders’ support for Clinton, the favored candidate of Wall Street, the corporate-controlled media and the political and military establishment, gave Trump an open field to run as the sole anti-establishment candidate and monopolize social discontent.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned from the beginning, Sanders’ campaign was aimed at corraling anti-capitalist sentiment and containing it within the Democratic Party. Sanders now wants to prevent workers from drawing lessons from the 2016 elections and understanding how the Democrats paved the way for the most right-wing government in US history. Along with the rest of the Democrats, the Vermont Senator has already signaled his willingness to collaborate with Trump.



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