

Sanders campaigns for anti-abortion Democrat in Nebraska

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Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who won 13 million votes for his self-styled “democratic socialist” campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination last year, visited Omaha, Nebraska April 20 to appear with a right-wing Democratic candidate for mayor who opposes abortion rights.

While the mayoral election is nominally nonpartisan, the incumbent Jean Stothert is a Republican and her main challenger Heath Mello is a Democratic state senator. The two were the leading vote-getters in a primary held April 4, in which Stothert won 43.7 percent and Mello 41.4 percent. The runoff between them will be held May 9.

The 37-year-old Mello was formerly a senior aide to US Senator Ben Nelson, before being elected to the state senate in 2008, and reelected in 2012. He works as a professional fundraiser at Metropolitan Community College in Omaha.

While in the state senate, Mello supported legislation requiring clinics to inform women seeking abortions that they have the right to a fetal ultrasound. He also backed a bill to ban abortion after the first 20 weeks of pregnancy, a measure that would likely violate the Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision.

The Nebraska Democratic Party is led by Sanders supporters who took control during the presidential campaign, when Sanders won the Democratic caucus in the state, defeating Hillary Clinton. The head of Sanders’s statewide campaign, Jane Kleeb, became chairman of the state party.

At a rally in Omaha last Thursday, Sanders, Kleeb, Democratic National Committee vice-chair Keith Ellison and Mello appeared side-by-side before a crowd of 6,000 people, with Sanders hailing the mayoral candidate, saying his election would represent a “shot across the board, that in a state like Nebraska a

progressive Democrat can win.”

Abortion rights and women’s groups immediately denounced Sanders and Ellison for their appearance, claiming that he was relegating cultural issues like abortion and gay rights to the back seat, in favor of populist rhetoric on economic issues, where Mello adheres to standard Democratic Party demagoguery about supporting “working people” against big business.

Both Sanders and DNC Chair Thomas Perez initially dismissed the criticism, saying it was unrealistic to demand support for abortion rights by every Democratic candidate.

Perez said, “If you demand fealty on every single issue, then it’s a challenge. The Democratic Party platform acknowledges that we’re pro-choice, but there are communities, like some in Kansas, where people have a different position.”

Sanders echoed this thought. “If you are running in rural Mississippi, do you hold the same criteria as if you’re running in San Francisco?” he asked. “I think you’d be a fool to think that’s all the same.”

As the criticism mounted, however, Perez pulled back, reiterating his support for abortion rights. He declared, “I fundamentally disagree with Heath Mello’s personal beliefs about women’s reproductive health,” while pointing out that Mello had agreed to abide by the Democratic Party platform if elected mayor (a meaningless promise, since a city mayor has no power over such matters as access to abortion).

Sanders continued to defend his support to Mello in an appearance on the CBS Sunday interview program “Face the Nation.” Asked about the Omaha appearance, he said, “If we’re going to become a 50-state party, if you’re going to go to Omaha, Nebraska, which has a Republican governor, two Republican senators, all Republican congresspeople,

Republican legislature, you know what? And if in Omaha, 5,000 or 6,000 people come out to a rally led by Jane Kleeb, their new Democratic chairperson, who is doing a great job, and if you have a rally in which you have the labor movement and the environmentalists and Native Americans and the African-American community and the Latino community coming together, saying, we want this guy to become our next mayor, should I reject going there to Omaha? I don't think so. It was a great rally, and I hope very much he wins."

His alignment with an anti-abortion Democratic candidate for mayor is only the most grotesque of many acts of accommodation by Sanders with this right-wing capitalist party. Since Clinton's defeat in the presidential election and the inauguration of Donald Trump, Sanders, despite his nominal status as an "independent" in the US Senate, has become one of the most prominent national spokesmen for the Democratic Party.

The Omaha campaign stop was part of a week-long "Unity" campaign swing in which Perez and Sanders made a series of joint appearances in states carried by Trump in the presidential election.

In the same "Face the Nation" interview where he reiterated his support for Heath Mello, Sanders spelled out his role as a last-ditch defender of the Democratic Party, as a politician who regards saving and rebuilding the Democratic Party as his principal mission.

Pointing to the wreckage of the Democratic Party, which has lost the presidency, control of Congress, and two-thirds of state governments, Sanders declared, "The Democratic Party has got to take the lead, rally people, young people, working people, stand up to the billionaire class. And when we do that, you're going to see voter turnout swell. You're going to see people coming in and running for office. You're going to see Democrats regain control of the United States Congress."

"Face the Nation" host John Dickerson was not so impolite as to ask Sanders to square his rhetoric about fighting "the billionaire class" with the reality that many billionaires support the Democratic Party—and most backed the Democrats against Trump in the presidential election.

Instead, he invited Sanders to explain what he was doing to revive the Democrats, and the senator declared, referring to himself, "there's very few people

who have been running around the country quite as much as I have been trying to bring people into the party."

Sanders continued, warning that low voter turnout in the next congressional elections, in 2018, would mean "there is no future forward for the Democratic Party." He claimed that if the Democratic Party focused on issues like health care, raising the minimum wage and opposing climate change, "voter turnout goes up, Democrats win."

As the saying goes, Sanders has become more Catholic than the Pope. The erstwhile independent—whose "independence" was never more than an electoral device in his home state, since he consistently caucused with the Democrats on Capitol Hill—has set himself up as the main opponent of any break by working people, youth and students from this reactionary party of Wall Street and American imperialism.



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