

Bernie Sanders promotes illusions in the Democrats at Detroit town hall meeting

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Senator Bernie Sanders spoke Tuesday before a crowd of more than 1,000 people at a town hall meeting in Detroit. The event, where Sanders appeared alongside long-time Democratic Representative John Conyers, focused on Sanders' "Medicare for All" campaign, which proposes to expand the federal health care program for the elderly into a universal, single-payer health care program.

Since the Democratic Party debacle in the 2016 elections, Sanders has become the de facto leader of an effort to prop up the party—to which he does not formally belong—and overcome the (correct) popular sentiment that the Democrats are completely indifferent to poverty and social distress, which was greatly exacerbated under eight years of pro-Wall Street policies of the Obama administration.

Sanders and his supporters have seized upon the issue of health care in order to bolster the Democrats' flagging credentials as a "people's" party committed to a program of social reform. In part this is to salvage the electoral fortunes of the Democrats in 2018 and 2020, but the more important goal is to impede any break by working people from the whole structure of the two-party system.

While polls have shown that Sanders remains the most popular politician in the country, the composition of the crowd suggested that his post-election efforts have had a limited impact among broader layers of the population. While reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* encountered some students and young people, the capacity crowd was dominated for the most part by those with a direct interest in efforts to salvage the Democratic Party as an institution: trade union functionaries, aging 1960s-era radicals, and pseudo-left groups oriented towards the Democrats, who promoted Sanders during the primary elections last year. Despite the fact that the meeting itself was held in a predominantly working-class area, workers were largely absent.

Sanders and Conyers presented a universal, single-payer health care system as a logical extension of the "advances" supposedly made in access to health care under the Affordable Care Act, commonly known as Obamacare. "Thank god we were able to beat back these ugly and horrific Republican attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act," Sanders declared. "But what we have to recognize is that even with the gains of

the Affordable Care Act ... today 28 million people still have no health insurance."

In reality, the Affordable Care Act was a reactionary piece of legislation aimed at bolstering the profits of the health care and insurance industries and corporate America more generally. It included more than \$700 billion in cuts to Medicare over 10 years, and sought to shift the cost of health care coverage from the employers and the government to working people.

Sanders and company were unable to totally paper over the devastating impact of the policies of the Obama administration, which oversaw the largest transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich in American history, has had on broad layers of workers, particularly youth. The meeting began with testimonials purporting to show how the Affordable Care Act has made a positive impact in people's lives. One of the hand-picked speakers, Candice Adams, told the meeting how she is tens of thousands of dollars in debt from student loans, is unable to find work in her field, and was recently laid off from an auto parts supplier. She thanked Obamacare for allowing her to pay for at least some sort of health insurance, to the enthusiastic applause of the audience.

Sanders' remarks were noteworthy as much for what they glossed over or omitted entirely as for what they focused on. Listening to the self-described "socialist's" remarks, one would have no idea that the ruling class is embroiled in the most intense factional political warfare since the Civil War, that a US nuclear attack on North Korea is being considered as a real possibility, or that the specter of military dictatorship has arisen, primarily with the support of the Democrats, in the aftermath of Trump's support for the fascist demonstration in Charlottesville.

After making only two tersely-worded press releases in the week after the Nazi rampage in Charlottesville, Sanders delivered somewhat lengthier remarks at the Detroit meeting denouncing Trump's failure to distance himself from the fascist demonstrators, which were widely reported in the national press. "What was even worse than seeing Nazis march, what we have never seen before, whether the president was a Democrat or Republican, was a president who could not condemn in the strongest possible terms Nazis and white supremacists," Sanders exclaimed, adding that "four hundred

thousand Americans died fighting against Hitler and Nazism and fascism.”

These remarks reflect anxieties within the ruling class that Trump’s open solidarizing with neo-Nazi layers has damaged the political authority and legitimacy of the American imperialist state, inviting mass unrest at home and undermining American prestige abroad. For all the nationalist mythologizing of America’s entry into World War II as a war against fascism, leading US industrialists like Henry Ford had been supporters and even business partners with the Nazi regime before the outbreak of war. The comments by Sanders, like those of Republican senators and the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, reflect concerns that the promotion of American imperialist interventions as wars for “democracy” against new incarnations of Adolf Hitler has been dealt a serious blow.

In the days following the events in Charlottesville, the cabal of military figures in Trump’s cabinet, openly cheered on and supported by the Democrats and the “liberal” media, has been to consolidate their control over the executive branch, undermining civilian control over the military. This raises even more serious and immediate dangers to democratic rights than Trump’s promotion of fascism, which is not yet a mass movement in the United States. Yet Sanders did not even acknowledge this in his remarks.

In fact, Sanders bears a particular political responsibility for allowing Trump a free hand to attempt to cultivate a new far-right movement. His winding down of his primary campaign, which appealed to the growing popular opposition to poverty and social inequality, and his embrace of Hillary Clinton in the general election, the choice of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus, guaranteed that the immense social discontent in the US could only find expression, within the confines of the American two-party system, in Trump’s right-wing populist campaign.

Sanders has long been associated with economic nationalist appeals, blaming workers in China and Mexico for the impoverishment of workers in the United States, and identifying the interests of American workers with those of American corporations. He has frequently co-sponsored bills with right-wing Republicans attacking legal immigration and “free trade.” In the aftermath of Trump’s election victory, Sanders declared in a televised town hall that he was prepared to work with him and “with anybody who wants to work together to develop a trade policy which tells corporate America they have to look beyond their greed.”

As usual, Sanders said nothing about foreign policy, despite the fact that Trump announced a major new troop buildup in Afghanistan the night before. His claim to be a “socialist” is belied most directly by his longstanding support for America’s imperialist wars, beginning with the NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, which he seeks to cover up by avoiding public discussion of foreign policy as much as possible. Sanders’s support for wars fought in the interests of

American capitalism is closely tied to his economic nationalism.

It is also noteworthy that Sanders, speaking in the center of the American auto industry in front of a crowd that included many trade union functionaries, said nothing about the massive and growing bribery scandal surrounding the United Auto Workers union, or the UAW’s debacle in a failed union certification vote at a Nissan plant in Mississippi, which Sanders himself campaigned heavily for. These two events, the bribery by Fiat-Chrysler of top UAW negotiators, and the decisive rejection of the UAW by Mississippi workers, who felt no reason to join an organization responsible for wages at the major Detroit automakers that are even lower than at the non-union Nissan plant, demonstrate that the UAW is a corporatist organization dedicated to enforcing management’s dictates against its own members.

The town hall meeting showed that Sanders is attempting to prop up the Democratic Party under conditions of mounting popular disaffection with the entire official political system. He reiterated his calls to improve voter turnout in order to ensure higher returns for Democratic candidates, and called upon younger people attracted to his campaign to run as Democrats in local elections. In response to an audience question calling on him to found a new “people’s party,” Sanders responded, “I don’t want Trump around for another four years. I don’t want Republicans in control of the House and Senate. I want Democrats to open the door; I want Democrats to be the party not of corporate interests, but of the working class.”

Sanders ran for office as an independent (at least in name) for decades, while caucusing with the Democrats. Now he abandons even the fig leaf of independence out of concern that any breach in the political monopoly of the Democrats and Republicans would lead to the emergence of a mass political movement of the working class that escapes the control of bourgeoisie.



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