

The “People’s Convergence”: The pseudo-left entreats Bernie Sanders to lead “People’s Party”

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16 September 2017

On September 8, a group of about 60 self-proclaimed “progressives” led a march to the office of Senator Bernie Sanders in Washington DC. Their mission was to deliver a petition of 50,000 signatures, along with a \$162,000 check from donations, to coax the former presidential candidate into forming a new political party. Sanders was made aware of the campaign and the plans to deliver the petition ahead of time, but was not present to receive the plea and ensured that no one in his office was present either. He has not made a comment on the entreaties.

Such was the inauspicious beginning of the “People’s Convergence,” organized over the weekend by the founder of the “Draft Bernie for a People’s Party!” campaign, Nick Brana.

The event attracted only about 140 registrants, with a few dozen “walk-ins” who joined throughout the weekend. While ostensibly called to discuss whether “progressives” should fight to reform the Democratic Party or start a new political party, all those participating shared an orientation to the Democrats, around whom they orbit and to which they look for leadership.

Socialist Alternative, the Green Party, the Progressive Independent Party and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) were all present. Some of the more well-known figures included Socialist Alternative leader Kshama Sawant, celebrity professor and DSA member Cornel West, Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein, and Code Pink founder Medea Benjamin.

The central political fraud—that the event and those who organized it have any real independence from the Democratic Party—was expressed in the first instance by their desire for the movement they are building to be led by Sanders, who ran for president as a Democrat and has repeatedly insisted on his desire to build support for the Democratic Party.

All the groups present backed Sanders in different ways in 2016, helping Sanders to channel social anger and opposition among millions of workers and youth behind Hillary Clinton, the candidate of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus. Sanders, while nominally an independent, is now in the leadership of the Democrats’ Senate caucus.

The political orientation to the Democratic Party was expressed in different forms in the break-out groups.

In “Back from the Brink: Stopping the War Machine,” not a single speaker mentioned the capitalist system, nor did any speaker provide an explanation for what drives US imperialism. Panelist Medea Benjamin, founder of “Code Pink,” spoke mainly about the conflict in Korea and put forward her thesis that “it is going to be women that pull us out of this disaster.”

The discussion revolved around “unifying” various so-called “antiwar” coalitions, all of which are organized around the Democratic Party and have supported the CIA-backed war for regime-change in Syria. When an audience member asked how a movement shamelessly begging for a leader who enthusiastically supported the Obama administration’s foreign policy, including the Iraq-Syria war, who has supported countless US interventions and ultimately endorsed war criminal Hillary Clinton for president, plans to be anti-imperialist, the panelists had no answer.

In the session “Independent Politics & Left Coalition Parties,” all seven panelists agreed that the real fight was to get the “right people” into office “who will do work on our behalf,” as Green Party representative Darryl Moch put it. The unseriousness of this panel was best expressed by the speaker representing the “People’s Party of South Carolina,” who stated that a new political party “can’t be a political party about policies. It has to be fun... and

about what is realistic on the ground.”

Racialist politics predominated. The events surrounding the Dakota Access Pipeline and the poisoning of the water in Flint, Michigan were lumped together and blamed on “institutional racism,” rather than the capitalist system. Several panelists lamented their own “white privilege,” with Araquel Bloss of the Progressive Independent Party noting that “it is a painful process to acknowledge the shame.”

In “Rebuilding the Labor Movement,” panelists discussed “revitalizing” the anti-working class trade unions. Dan La Botz, co-founder of Teamsters for a Democratic Union, longtime member of Solidarity and newly declared member of the DSA, complained about how Trump had “divided the labor movement.” He essentially blamed workers for the fact that a section of the unions supported Trump because he “spoke to their industry,” while only a small number of unions supported Sanders.

The unions, La Botz claimed, will be driven forward by a “big upsurge” of workers. In fact, the unions have been doing everything they can for decades to suppress opposition and, when it breaks out, to isolate, contain and crush it.

The culmination of the “Convergence” was a “Draft Bernie Town hall” event on Saturday night, featuring Cornel West, Kshama Sawant, comedian Jimmy Dore and Draft Bernie founder Nick Brana.

West asserted that “dear brother Bernie” should be held accountable and complained that he did not have anyone at his office to receive the signatures from the “draft Bernie” movement. He said that whether or not Sanders chose to lead the movement, it was necessary to form a “solidarity” of different groups based on “integrity, honesty and decency” to form a “Third Party,” though he said nothing about the program upon which the party should be based.

The panelists offered, at best, perfunctory criticisms of the “corporate wing” of the Democratic Party, while in the same breath concluding that they would continue to pressure the Democrats, if not work directly with them. Sawant, who is herself enmeshed in Democratic Party politics in Seattle, Washington, complained that the election would have produced a different outcome “if Bernie had run all the way to the general election as Socialist Alternative had called for.”

During the 2016 elections, Socialist Alternative was the most enthusiastic supporter of Sanders’ Democratic Party primary campaign, forming #Movement4Bernie. In the

panel discussion, Sawant called for a party that is free from dependence on corporate money, claiming that “Sanders showed on a very grand scale... that you can run successful campaigns, fight for working people” without taking corporate cash.

Millions of people “are not ready yet in a very clear manner to build a new party,” Sawant warned. They still want to test out the Democratic Party. “We cannot isolate ourselves from all those” who support the Democratic Party, and “must meet them where they are.” This sophistry was aimed at justifying Socialist Alternative’s political support for the Democratic Party.

In response to an audience member who pointed to the role Socialist Alternative has played in promoting illusions in the Democrats, Sawant argued, “This is not about can we can attain in our abstract ideas the ultimate moral purity, but it’s a question of how we can actually organize the millions of Americans who are seething with anger.” Sawant’s conclusion? To organize these millions, it is necessary to work with sections of the Democratic Party.

Brana let the cat out of the bag when he said that what “our movement is lacking,” making it possible for “the Democratic Party to dismiss us,” is because we lack “leverage.” He added, “The case that we have made with Draft Bernie... is that the best way to reform the Democratic Party, if you believe that is possible, is to start a new party”—a remark that produced applause from all the panelists.

The political character of the event reflected the social forces for which the groups that organized it speak. They represent sections of the upper-middle class that are seeking, on the one hand, to advance their own particular interests and achieve a greater distribution of wealth within the top 10 percent, and, on the other hand, to block any independent movement of the working class. Their aim is not to organize the growing opposition of workers and youth, but to subordinate this opposition to the political establishment and the capitalist system.

The Sanders campaign was a mechanism for doing this. The forces at the “People’s Convergence” conference are now casting about for a new mechanism, whatever particular form it might take.



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