From the horse's mouth

Bernie Sanders at CNN Town Hall: My purpose is to promote the Democratic Party

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2 March 2019

On Monday night, Vermont Senator and Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders appeared on an episode of CNN's Town Hall, a series of interviews of 2020 presidential contenders. The hour-long segment was moderated by Wolf Blitzer and consisted of questions for Sanders from live audience members, pre-selected by the network.

Sanders' performance was more or less what one would expect. He denounced the fossil fuel, oil and gas industries, big Pharma and the billionaire class, and appealed to workers and youth with calls for healthcare, free university education and vows to make "an economy that works for everyone."

It is the type of rhetoric that has attracted a base of support for Sanders among young people and workers, who are driven by concern over social inequality. In the first 24 hours his campaign, Sanders raised $6 million from 250,000 individual donors, far more than other announced Democratic Party candidates.

Far more significant than such comments, however, is what Sanders had to say about his relationship with the Democratic Party. He was asked by one individual participating in the forum, "Why have you decided to pursue the Democratic Party nomination despite the fact that you have consistently run as an independent or other party for the last 50 years? And do you believe you can get a fair shake in the democratic process in light of your electoral history?"

Sanders replied, "Let's set the record straight. I am a member of the Democratic leadership of the United States Senate. I've been a member of the Democratic caucus in the Senate for the last 13 years and in the House for 16 years before that and won the Democratic nomination in my state. But in Vermont I have chosen to run as an independent, which goes way, way back."

After burnishing his Democratic Party credentials, Sanders went to explain why he has run as an independent: "You know, the truth is that more and more people are disenchanted with both the Republican and Democratic plank. And especially young people. They are registering as Independents, or not affiliated folks. And I think as somebody who was an Independent, we can bring them into the Democratic Party."

Sanders' role could not be stated more plainly. The Democratic Party, as a result of its right-wing policies, has lost significant support among workers, and particularly among young people. Sanders' aim, utilizing his reputation as an "independent," is to convince them not to seek an alternative.

What, however, is the character of the party he is trying to promote? Over the past two years, the Democrats have focused their opposition to the Trump administration on the most right-wing basis possible. They have facilitated the passage of a historic tax cut that will provide trillions of dollars to the wealthiest layers of society. They also ensured the passage of a $717 billion war budget.

At the center of the Democrats' maneuvers against Trump has been the anti-Russia campaign, aimed at enforcing a more aggressive line against Russia and an intensified war drive in the Middle East. They have campaigned for aggressive moves to censor the internet, under the pretext of combating "fake news" and "Russian interference." In the 2018 elections, Democrats ran an unprecedented number of former CIA and military candidates, part of their overall promotion of the military and intelligence agencies in

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their campaign against Trump.

Sanders, it should be noted, doubled down on his support for the anti-Russia campaign during the interview, declaring that the word will go out to Putin that “the attempt to destroy American democracy is a very, very serious offense that will not be taken lightly.” As if the threat to American democracy came from Russia, and not from the American ruling class!

Sanders understands perhaps more than any other candidate the depths of “disenchantment” of the broad masses of workers and youth who remember the two terms of the Obama presidency in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. They remember the Obama administration for its role in deporting more immigrants than any president in history, laying the groundwork for Trump’s anti-immigrant policies. They recall how the candidate of “hope and change” oversaw the largest transfer of wealth to the top one percent in history as he bailed out the banks.

The product of eight years of the Obama administration was a social catastrophe for the entire working class. It was in this political context that Sanders became one of the most popular politicians in 2016, by posturing as a socialist who calls for a “political revolution.” After his defeat in the Democratic Party primaries—aided by the machinations of the Democratic National Committee against him—Sanders responded by throwing his support behind Hillary Clinton, the candidate of Wall Street and the military.

As he proclaimed indignantly in the Town Hall event: “I knocked my brains out” campaigning for Clinton. “I went from state to state, I think we had 35-40 rallies in every battleground state. So I do not accept for one moment that I did not do everything that I could [to campaign for Hillary Clinton].” He added a vow that he will support whichever candidate the Democratic Party ends up nominating in 2020.

It is in this political framework that one must understand Sanders’ occasional talk of “socialism” and his rhetoric about social inequality. His presentation of socialism as a mild set of reforms that can be achieved through the Democratic Party and without any challenge to capitalist property relations is part and parcel of his entire political strategy: to lure in disenchanted youth and workers who are increasingly becoming interested in socialism, but do not have a clear idea of what it is and how it can be achieved.

President Trump has recently launched a global campaign against socialism because he understands that the mobilization of broad masses of people behind a socialist program represents the greatest danger to the interests of the ruling class. Amidst the growth of the class struggle that has characterized the past year, the ruling class is terrified that this movement will acquire a socialist orientation and program.

Nothing can be achieved, however, except through a frontal assault on the source of the power of the corporate and financial elite: its control of economic life, and with that, the entire capitalist system. This requires a political mobilization of the working class against both the Republicans and the Democrats, on the basis of a revolutionary and socialist program. All those organizations that promote Sanders—and through him, the Democratic Party—do so in order to prevent such a development, and thereby perform an essential service for the ruling class.

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