

Bernie Sanders adapts to racial politics at Chicago campaign rally

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On Sunday night, over 12,000 people gathered at Navy Pier in downtown Chicago to hear Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders speak, the second of two weekend rallies to kick off his presidential campaign. The first was held at Brooklyn College in New York City Saturday afternoon, also attended by many thousands.

In the Chicago speech, while similar in many ways to his address in Brooklyn, which focused on a “left” appeal for economic equality, Sanders made a shift in emphasis. He appealed directly to racial minorities, referring to his experiences in organizing housing and school desegregation efforts as a student at the University of Chicago, and to police violence, segregation, racial inequality and “institutional racism,” which, he declared, permeates Chicago and the rest of the United States.

Earlier on Sunday, Sanders attended a breakfast in Selma, Alabama, commemorating the 1965 civil rights march that ended in a violent police assault. This was also attended by Cory Booker, Sherrod Brown, Jesse Jackson and Hillary Clinton, who was given the 2019 International Unity award at the event.

The Chicago campaign venue featured the usual patriotic display of bourgeois electoral campaigns, including two massive American flags on either side of the stage, while a third was positioned in the back area of the rally space where volunteers for the Sanders’ campaign took photos in front of it with large letters spelling “Bernie.”

As the crowd waited for Sanders to speak, the Thompson Community Singers gospel choir sang while its director called out to the crowd to repeat and sing the words, “We love you Bernie!” As the choir wound down, six campaign co-chairs spoke on different issues before Sanders made his appearance.

Destiny Harris, from the organization #NoCopAcademy, spoke first, highlighting her experiences leading to her becoming an activist, including the closure of her elementary school in 2013, one of 50 schools closed by Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama’s former chief of staff. She was followed by the photographer and Sanders’ former roommate, Danny Lyon, who recounted his experiences of Sanders’ involvement opposing housing segregation at the University of Chicago. Following him, Ashley Galvan Ramos from Logan Square Neighborhood association spoke out against gentrification in Chicago.

The cofounder of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream, Ben Cohen, whose net worth amounts to over \$150 million, putting him among America’s wealthiest, spoke next. The appearance of this capitalist served multiple functions. For one, it makes clear that Sanders’ program does not fundamentally threaten the profit system. Under a Sanders’ presidency, millionaires and billionaires will keep their fortunes. Secondly, Cohen’s appearance is an attempt to give the impression that millionaires and billionaires can be made to change their ways and become more “conscientious capitalists.”

Cohen was followed by Ro Khanna, a “left”-talking Representative from California’s 17th Congressional District. Khanna excitedly told the crowd that Sanders would not start another war that was not approved by the United States Congress, although he avoided the term “antiwar,” as did every other speaker.

Lastly, Nina Turner, national co-chair of Sanders’ 2020 campaign, praised Sanders’ role as an ally of the right-wing, pro-corporate American trade unions, particularly the UAW, an organization embroiled in corruption scandals and hated by workers it claims to represent for its role in implementing sellout contracts.

She boasted, “This is the man who marched with Nissan workers in 2017 trying to unionize with the UAW!”

Sanders’ speech was very similar to that given in Brooklyn the day before, in which he outlined a series of limited reforms without explaining how any of these could actually be implemented given the hostility of the US ruling elite, including the leaders of the Democratic Party whose presidential nomination he is seeking.

As he did in Brooklyn, Sanders studiously avoided uttering the words capitalism, imperialism or socialism. Save for mentioning a recent vote taken to stop funding for the US-Saudi war on Yemen, Sanders did not mention any country outside of the United States or the mounting danger of war with nuclear-armed powers like Russia and China.

In highlighting his time in Chicago in the early 1960s, where he came as a transfer student to the University of Chicago, Sanders spoke of his experiences in organizing housing and school desegregation efforts. He said, “Have we made progress in civil rights in this country since the early 1960s? No question about it. Do we still have a very long way to go to end the institutional racism which permeates almost every aspect of our society? Absolutely.”

Sanders has always used demagogic phrases to conceal the class content of the issues that he very tentatively raises, and to disguise the central issue facing working people: the need to break with capitalist politics, including the Democratic Party, and build a mass independent political movement to fight the profit system.

The past two years have seen record strikes from different sections of workers all across the world. Already in 2019, massive struggles by workers in Mexico, India, and America have taken place. The purpose of the Sanders campaign is to corral and divert this growing mass opposition to social inequality, unemployment, poverty and chauvinistic attacks against immigrants, back into the confines of the Democratic Party.



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