

Bernie Sanders answers attacks on socialism with defense of capitalist “democracy”

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A revealing comment by Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders was published in Monday’s edition of the *New York Times*. The purpose of the article, titled “Helping Americans Make Ends Meet,” is not to criticize Trump, who is referenced only sparingly, but to make use of the ruling class’s main newspaper of record to reassure the American bourgeoisie that it has nothing to fear from the author.

The op-ed column comes in the midst of an escalating campaign by Trump and the Republicans against socialism, aimed at de-legitimizing left-wing views and presenting the fascistic president as a bulwark against the emergence of a mass socialist movement. This has been joined by a number of Democrats, including contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination John Hickenlooper and Michael Bennet. The latter is the brother of James Bennet, the editorial page editor of the *Times*.

Under these conditions, Sanders, who has used his “democratic socialist” label to attract growing left-wing sentiment among workers and youth, is eager to remind the ruling class that he has nothing to do with genuine socialism.

Sanders begins his article with a stark portrayal of the extreme levels of poverty and social inequality that are pervasive features of American life. The US child poverty rate is the highest in the developed world, he writes. Millions are forced to work multiple jobs to survive, roughly one-quarter of all Americans have no or inadequate health insurance, wage growth has stagnated for forty years, and half a million Americans are homeless on any given night.

Meanwhile, Sanders notes, “the wealthiest three families in the country own more wealth than the bottom half of the American people and the top 1 percent owns more wealth than the bottom 90 percent. Millions of workers earn starvation wages even as nearly half of all new income is going to the top 1 percent.”

The facts laid out by Sanders in the first two-thirds of his piece are a damning indictment of American capitalist society. The inescapable conclusion is that America is ruled by a criminal oligarchy that long ago lost any historical right to rule.

But this is precisely the conclusion that Sanders rejects. And, of course, he is silent on the role of his own party and the Democratic administrations of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama

in creating the social disaster and unprecedented levels of inequality he describes.

“We must understand that unfettered capitalism and the greed of corporate America are destroying the moral and economic fabric of this country, deepening the very anxieties that Mr. Trump appealed to in 2016,” Sanders writes. “The simple truth is that big money interests are out of control, and we need a president who will stand up to them.”

“We must change the current culture of unfettered capitalism in which billionaires have control over our economic and political life,” he continues. “We need to revitalize American democracy and create a government and economy that works for all.”

Sanders chooses his words carefully. He speaks of “unfettered capitalism,” not capitalism itself. He locates the root problem in the “current culture” of this “unfettered capitalism,” giving the profit system itself a pass.

He covers up the fact that capitalist “democracy” is a veiled *dictatorship* of the bourgeoisie, whose political hegemony is based on its ownership of the means of production and exploitation of the working class, the vast majority of society. He wants us to believe that a “government and economy that works for all” can exist on such an economic and social foundation!

All of this is boilerplate Sanders, who has long sought to use left populist phrases to bolster illusions in the possibility of reforming capitalism and “revolutionizing” the Democratic Party.

Sanders’ statement that Trump appealed to popular anxieties caused by widespread social misery, while true, omits the fact that far larger numbers of American workers and youth have responded by moving to the left, not to the right. Moreover, the ability of Trump to make any appeal to economic and social discontent is due to the Democratic Party and its middle class “left” allies.

The Democrats long ago abandoned any program of serious social reform and adopted policies of austerity at home and militarism abroad. With his endorsement and vote-hustling for Hillary Clinton, who was rightly despised by millions of workers and ran as the candidate of the national security establishment and Wall Street, Sanders gave Trump a free hand

to demagogically capitalize on social anger and desperation.

The real purpose of Sanders' comment emerges in the second-to-last paragraph, where he writes: "Conservatives dishonestly try to link the policies I favor with those of authoritarian regimes. But I am calling for a true democracy, one that abides by the principle of one person, one vote, and that doesn't allow billionaires to buy elections."

Here Sanders invokes the standard tropes of anti-communism, by implication linking revolutionary socialism with dictatorship. Both he and his opponents seek to exploit the lack of historical knowledge of the history of Marxism and the Soviet Union, especially the struggle waged by Leon Trotsky and his supporters against the Stalinist bureaucracy's betrayal of the Russian Revolution.

Sanders is not a socialist. He explicitly upholds capitalist property and rejects the expropriation and nationalization of major corporations under the democratic control of the working class. He is a longstanding supporter of imperialist war, including the wars in Libya, Syria, Afghanistan and the former Yugoslavia. He opposes the international unity of the working class, promoting instead a toxic economic nationalism that differs little from Trump's.

In support of his pipedream of an egalitarian capitalist democracy, Sanders invokes Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt. "Back in 1944," he writes, "in his State of the Union speech, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt reminded the nation that economic security is a human right, and that people cannot be truly free if they have to struggle every day for their basic needs. I agree." He concludes his article by declaring: "FDR did it. We can do it again."

Roosevelt's "Economic Bill of Rights," which spoke of the right to a job and a living wage, the right to decent housing, food, health care and education, was a dead letter from the start. It was never seriously pursued either by FDR or his successors. If American capitalism, at the height of its world economic, political and military domination, was neither able nor willing to secure these elementary social rights for the American people, how can it be credibly argued that it is possible now, in a period of economic decline?

Roosevelt was not a defender of "democracy" (and here Sanders might have mentioned that the "democratic" Roosevelt jailed Trotskyist opponents of war and banned strikes during World War II) but a shrewd capitalist politician, whose reforms in the 1930s were aimed at heading off the danger of socialist revolution. The limited social reforms of the New Deal were not gifts dispensed from on high by Roosevelt. They were concessions extracted from a vicious and unwilling ruling class by a mass semi-insurrectionary movement of the working class, led by socialist-minded workers.

But by the time Roosevelt made his 1944 State of the Union address, his administration had already shifted to the right. This was expressed in the dropping of liberal Vice President Henry Wallace as his running mate in the 1944 elections in favor of

Harry Truman, considered more acceptable to conservative layers within the Democratic Party leadership.

The context behind Roosevelt's populist demagogy was the real danger that, if the end of the war brought with it a return of economic depression, the capitalist system would face an even more serious threat than it had in the 1930s. Indeed, the years 1945 and 1946 saw the largest strike wave in American history. Truman, now president, responded to the strike wave by threatening to draft strikers into the army to face possible execution for treason.

The Democrats' repudiation of Roosevelt's New Deal policies and Johnson's Great Society over the past forty years exposes the dead-end of the politics of capitalist reform. With the end of the post-war boom in the early 1970s, the American ruling class responded by clawing back everything it had previously been compelled to give up.

The tepid character of the half-measures Sanders proposes in his *Times* op-ed is summed up by his call for a miserable \$15 minimum wage, which he calls a "living wage." As though one can live a decent life in America today on a yearly income of \$30,000!

One question that Sanders evades completely is how his talk of an egalitarian democratic America is to be realized. He would have us believe that with his election as president, the corporate-financial oligarchy that controls the state, both political parties and the media, has at its disposal the military and the CIA and wages war all over the world, killing millions and overthrowing governments, and is immersed in criminality, would simply accede to social reforms that would consume a significant portion of its wealth.

In reality, were Sanders elected, he would abandon his campaign promises and enforce the dictates of the ruling class whose interests he serves, just as other "left" bourgeois parties and politicians, from Syriza in Greece to the Greens in Germany. By working to channel mass social discontent behind the Democratic Party and opposing the development of a socialist movement of the working class, Sanders plays a vital role for the "billionaire class" he occasionally criticizes.



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