

Responding to attacks on socialism

Bernie Sanders uses NY Times op-ed to reassure big business

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7 June 2019

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 fascist 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 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.

"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.

Sanders calls for a "revitalized" democracy within the framework of capitalism under conditions where the institutions of bourgeois democracy in the US and internationally are disintegrating and the entire ruling class is turning toward dictatorial forms of rule. Sanders does not even mention, let alone condemn, the Trump administration's Gestapo-like attacks on immigrants, with tens of thousands of men, women and children being seized and herded into overcrowded and unsanitary detention camps or picked up in their homes or places of work and deported without any due process. He says nothing about Trump's illegal denial of asylum rights, his deployment of active-duty troops to the border or his assertion of quasi-dictatorial powers and rejection of congressional oversight.

Defending unprecedented levels of social inequality and faced with mounting external geopolitical tensions and internal opposition from the working class, the bourgeoisie in country after country is seeking to defend its system by promoting ultra-right and fascist forces. Trump's open appeals to anti-immigrant racism and defense of fascist elements exemplifies the putrefaction of bourgeois democracy and the incompatibility of democratic rights with capitalist rule.

The opposition to Trump by the Democratic Party is not based on his real crimes, but on the demands of leading sections of the military-intelligence apparatus for a more confrontational posture toward Russia. Their fabricated allegations of Russian collusion with Trump's campaign are aimed not only at pressuring Trump to adopt a harder stance against Russia, but also at cracking down on oppositional views on the internet and delegitimizing left-wing opposition in the name of opposing "fake news" and "extremism."

Sanders is silent on all of this. In fact, he has endorsed the anti-Russian campaign and has long denounced open borders and Chinese trade in terms that echo Trump's fascist rants.

He also continues his virtual silence on the persecution of

Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, which began under the Obama administration, the aim of which is to outlaw independent journalism and destroy freedom of speech and the press.

Socialists understand that the defense of democratic rights is ultimately impossible as long as the objective source of dictatorship—the capitalist system—is left intact. Moreover, they understand that capitalist “democracy,” even in an earlier period, was always 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.

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.

The real political motive behind Sanders’ op-ed emerges clearly towards the end of the article, when 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 identifying revolutionary socialism with dictatorship. This is based on the lie that Stalin and Stalinism were the expression of the Russian Revolution, when, in fact, they represented its opposite. Both Sanders and his opponents within the political establishment seek to exploit the lack of 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.

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 so-called “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 its 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 demagoguery was his perception of the 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.

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, 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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