

Bernie Sanders and the myth of Franklin Roosevelt

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18 June 2019

Last Wednesday, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders gave a speech on “democratic socialism” at George Washington University. The main function of the speech was to define his supposed “socialism” as entirely in conformity with the politics of the Democratic Party—that is, a “socialism” devoid any opposition to capitalism and war.

Sanders’ speech comes within the context of a ruling class that is increasingly fearful of the growing popularity of socialism. Donald Trump has presented himself over the last several months as a bulwark against a “socialist takeover” in America. This theme has also been taken up by many in the Democratic Party, who insist that any reference to socialism in the party’s primaries is impermissible.

Sanders’ speech attempts to accomplish the same ends through different means. It exposes Sanders’ effort to combine populist and “socialist” rhetoric with a defense of American capitalism and the Democratic Party.

Three basic elements of Sanders’ speech demonstrate this political fraud. First is Sanders’ dishonest presentation of Franklin Roosevelt and the history of the Democratic Party.

In a speech billed as defining his conception of “democratic socialism,” Sanders explicitly places his own politics within the tradition of the Democratic Party, particularly the liberal New Deal reforms of President Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s.

“Over eighty years ago Franklin Delano Roosevelt helped create a government that made transformative progress in protecting the needs of working families. Today, in the second decade of the 21st century, we must take up the unfinished business of the New Deal and carry it to completion,” Sanders says. “This is the unfinished business of the Democratic Party and the vision we must accomplish.”

Sanders quotes the “Economic Bill of Rights” proposed by Roosevelt, but never seriously pursued, in his 1944 State of the Union speech. The centerpiece of Sanders’ speech is his call for a “21st Century Economic Bill of Rights” guaranteeing the right to a high-quality standard of living.

Sanders portrays Roosevelt as the leader of a popular revolt involving “organized labor, leaders in the African American community and progressives inside and outside the Party,” and which “led a transformation of the American government and the American economy.”

He declares, “Despite [the opposition of the rich], by rallying the American people, FDR and his progressive coalition created the

New Deal, won four terms, and created an economy that worked for all and not just the few.”

Sanders’ glowing references to Roosevelt are designed to obscure the fact that the Democratic Party was, and is, a party of the ruling class. Roosevelt was not the political representative of popular struggles, much less a “democratic socialist,” but a particularly astute representative of the capitalist class, who understood that concessions had to be made in order to preserve the capitalist system, which was in a state of collapse and widely discredited, and avert the danger of socialist revolution.

The gains that were won during this period were not dispensed as gifts by any section of the political establishment, but were wrung from the ruling class through mass, semi-insurrectionary struggles of the working class, which Roosevelt and the Democratic Party sought to contain. Moreover, poverty and unemployment remained endemic throughout the United States even after the New Deal. The gap between rich and poor, while lower than before, remained massive. In the South, which remained mired in rural backwardness, African-Americans continued to face segregation and lynch mob terror.

The New Deal reforms also proved unable to lift the United States out of economic crisis. This came through World War Two and its destruction of much of the European and world economy, and at least 60 million lives. Under Roosevelt’s leadership, the United States entered World War II in December 1941.

Prior to and during the war, the “progressive” Roosevelt cracked down on democratic rights, jailing leaders of the Trotskyist movement, the most class conscious representatives of the working class, enforcing a ban on strikes with the assistance of the union bureaucracy and imprisoning hundreds of thousands of Japanese-Americans in concentration camps.

Roosevelt’s “Economic Bill of Rights,” proposed but never acted upon towards the end of the war, was a left feint that reflected his fear that if the end of the war brought with it a return to Depression-era conditions, American capitalism would face even more serious revolutionary convulsions than in the 1930s. Roosevelt dropped his vice president, Henry Wallace, from the 1944 presidential ticket, replacing him with Harry Truman—a concession to the right wing of the Democratic Party.

After the war, Roosevelt’s program of liberal reforms, now coupled with Cold War anticommunism, was continued only as long as it could be financed out of rising productivity made possible by the emergence of the United States as the world

superpower. But the “Economic Bill of Rights,” even during the zenith of American capitalism, remained a dead letter. By the end of the 1960s, with the end of the postwar boom and the beginning of the long-term erosion of American hegemony, the Democrats abandoned these programs and moved sharply to the right.

But this is precisely the point at which Sanders’ historical excursion stops. This enables him to suppress the fact that the Democratic Party long ago repudiated these reforms and became a full partner with the Republicans in undermining and dismantling the very social programs whose further development Sanders presents as the “unfinished business” of the Democratic Party. In fact, as far the Democratic Party is concerned, the “unfinished business” is destroying every gain won by the working class in a century of struggle.

The second element of Sanders’ speech is the complete absence of any reference to foreign policy or war. Events outside of the United States are barely mentioned at all. This guilty silence, which Sanders has long maintained in speeches meant for a broader audience, is aimed at covering for Sanders’ support for imperialist war and American nationalism.

Sanders gives indirect signals to the ruling class of his support for war at points throughout his speech. When Sanders lists a series of “authoritarian rulers” throughout the world, he begins with Vladimir Putin in Russia and Xi Jinping in China, a sign of support both for his party’s demands for confrontation with Russia and Trump’s trade war measures and military buildup against China.

Sanders manages to avoid even mentioning World War II in a speech supposedly centered on the political legacy of Franklin Roosevelt. He also favorably cites former presidents Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson, without referencing the fact that both were widely reviled as warmongers and mass murderers: Truman for his dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and for the Korean War, and Johnson for his massive escalation of the Vietnam War.

The reference to Johnson is particularly significant. Johnson’s Great Society programs foundered against the massive costs of the war in Vietnam, signaling the end of the whole period of liberal reform. By the late 1960s, the Democratic Party could no longer balance within itself social programs aimed at securing the support of the working class with the needs of American imperialism.

As Sanders well knows, having begun his political career as a student protester in the 1960s, this pushed a whole generation of students and working class youth to the left towards anti-capitalist and radical politics, among whom Johnson’s name became an epithet. A popular slogan during the protests against the Vietnam War was “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?”

By glossing over this and presenting Johnson in a favorable, even “democratic socialist,” light, Sanders is not only rehabilitating Johnson, he is promoting a more basic falsehood—that an imperialist and militaristic foreign policy is compatible with democracy and social equality at home, a lie that forms the center of Sanders’ own politics.

The third element of Sanders’ speech is that he does not explain how it is possible to guarantee a high standard of living for everyone without a frontal assault on the capitalist system,

especially under conditions where the ruling class considers even a modest increase in the share of income going to workers impermissible. Sanders’ “socialism” is demagogic. He proposes a whole series of “rights” without any suggestion that they would require a fundamental change in social relations.

Moreover, the turn towards authoritarian forms of rule, a fact that Sanders himself is obliged to note, demonstrates that the levels of social inequality are no longer compatible with democratic rights. This is expressed not only in Trump, as Sanders implies, but also within the Democratic Party itself, which is engaged in palace coup methods in alliance with the CIA and FBI its internecine struggle against Trump.

If an “Economic Bill of Rights” was unachievable during the high point of American economic and political power, then it is all the more impossible today, when American capitalism is mired in terminal decline. There can be no doubt that Sanders, were he elected president, would jettison this proposal even more rapidly than Roosevelt.

Indeed, while Roosevelt was prepared to take on powerful elements within the political establishment in order to force through his program of reforms, Sanders has already demonstrated his political spinelessness. The defining moment of Sanders’ political career remains his groveling capitulation to Hillary Clinton in 2016 after an election campaign marred by corruption and fraud.

A genuine fight for the social rights of the working class, including the right to a job, a secure retirement, high quality health care and education, requires an uncompromising struggle of the working class against the capitalist system. This means the establishment of a workers’ government, in the United States and internationally, to massively redistribute the wealth and transform the giant banks and corporations into publicly owned utilities, democratically controlled by the working class.

This requires a persistent struggle against the influence of all forms of bourgeois ideology within the working class, above all “left” variants such as that promoted by Sanders.



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