Democratic debate begins the 2020 election campaign with a blast of demagogy

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Wednesday's debate among ten Democratic presidential candidates, the first of a two-night event held in Miami, was the first official event of the campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. It follows the kickoff of Republican President Donald Trump's re-election campaign June 18, in Orlando, Florida.

The initial Democratic debate is being held over two nights, ten candidates each night, with the Democratic National Committee claiming that the huge number of candidates made any other arrangement impractical. Candidates are limited to one-minute answers and 30 seconds in rebuttal, a format that ensures that empty slogans and prepared one-liners will be the main content of the debate.

There was demagogy aplenty on the first day, with candidates claiming that if only they were elected president, the American people would have decent health care, improved living standards, plentiful jobs, a clean environment, secure pensions and a rebuilt social infrastructure.

The proceedings took on the character of the absurd, or the grotesque. The various candidates doing their best to speak in hackneyed Spanish, as if this would cover up the Democratic Party's active participation in the victimization and deportation of immigrants—including under Obama, the "deporter-in-chief." Bill de Blasio, for five years the mayor of New York City, the center of American finance capital, declaring that the Democratic Party must become the party of the working class. New Jersey Senator Cory Booker attempting to convince listeners that he personally confronts gang violence and police killings on a daily basis outside his front door.

Throughout, there was a studious avoidance of the actual record of the political organization, the Democratic Party, for which the candidates are vying to be the representative. There was much fulmination over social inequality, without anyone—including the moderators—caring to take note of the fact that the Obama administration presided over the bailout of the banks and the greatest transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich in world history.

For decades, under Democrats and Republicans alike, the US ruling class has been engaged in a social counterrevolution, driving down living standards, social benefits, pensions, the environment and every other aspect of social life.

The debate was held against the backdrop of the Trump administration's escalation of the fascistic attack on immigrants. In the wake of the horrifying events on the US-Mexico border, Democratic presidential candidates have cried crocodile tears over the detention camps housing child and adult prisoners of Immigration and Customs Enforcement and its private prison contractors.

But when the Senate voted Wednesday on legislation that would provide $4.6 billion more for Trump's concentration camps, the Democratic leadership and most Democrats joined in an 84–8 bipartisan vote to approve the bill. The seven Senate Democrats who are running for president were all in Florida, preparing for the debate, and did not vote, although most agreed with giving Trump the money.

In one of the few intelligent media comments ahead of the debate, John Harris of Politico noted that the radical-sounding slogans like "Medicare for All" and a "Green New Deal" are being voiced by politicians with distinctly non-radical records, "ladder-climbing careerists." In Harris' words: "This cadre of Democrats believes the ideological tides, within the party and the country more broadly, have shifted leftward."

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The purpose of the "left" talk of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, now taken up by many other Democratic candidates, is to head off the radicalization of workers and youth in America and divert it back inside the framework of the second-oldest capitalist party in the world, to block the emergence of a genuinely independent political movement of the working class that would threaten the capitalist system.

The real class loyalty of the Democratic Party was summed up by the current frontrunner, former Vice President Joe Biden, who assured a Wall Street audience last week that the promises being made by the Democrats to working people would not impose any significant burden on the rich. "No one has to be punished," he said. "No one's standard of living would change. Nothing would fundamentally change." Biden, along with Sanders, will participate in the second stage of the debate tonight.

This allegiance to the capitalist class is expressed in foreign policy as well as domestic policy. The Democratic Party is unshakably committed to the defense of the worldwide interests of American imperialism. This is shown by the Democrats' embrace of Trump's trade war against China and their rubber-stamping of Trump's record military build-up. Through the anti-Russia campaign based on bogus allegations of a conspiracy between Trump and Russia during the 2016 election campaign, the Democrats have acted as the political attorneys for a section of the military-intelligence apparatus, seeking an expanded US intervention in Syria, Ukraine and Eastern Europe against Russia.

One of the more chilling, and revealing, episodes in yesterday's debate was when the candidates were asked to list the most important threat to the United States, with many taking the opportunity to denounce China and De Blasio attacking Russia.

Despite the profusion of candidates and pretense of popular consultation, the selection of the next Democratic presidential candidate is anything but an exercise in genuine democracy. Over the next eight months, not a single vote will be cast. Instead, the candidates will rise and fall based on media-driven polls, fundraising, and sordid backroom maneuvers by the powerful business and military-intelligence factions that call the shots in capitalist politics.

And once the primary voting begins next February, the corporate media and the Democratic Party establishment will intervene aggressively to ensure that whichever candidate emerges as the nominee is acceptable to the party's two main constituencies: Wall Street and the CIA.

The 2020 elections are unfolding under conditions of deepening world economic crisis, rising conflicts between the major powers and a growing movement from below, expressed in strikes, mass protests and outright rebellions against longstanding dictatorships, as in Sudan and Algeria. There will undoubtedly be political upheavals and surprises in US politics as well.

There is already the example of Pete Buttigieg, a political nonentity, the mayor of South Bend, Indiana, number 306 among US cities as ranked by population. The 37-year-old Buttigieg has been built up into a major political figure over the past six months, with the help of his identity as an openly gay man (exciting the advocates of identity politics) and his record as an intelligence agent who helped direct Navy SEAL death squads in Afghanistan (reassuring the military-intelligence apparatus).

After rising to fourth place in some polls, Buttigieg may now plummet in the wake of the police killing of a 53-year-old black man in South Bend last week. After hurrying from campaign events in Florida to a town hall in South Bend, "Mayor Pete" was heckled and denounced by an angry crowd, mainly working class and African-American.

The particular event was an expression of a more general reality. Whatever the rhetoric of the candidates, employed with varying degrees of skill or lack thereof, the Democratic Party is a right-wing party of Wall Street and the military. Genuine opposition to the Trump administration, social inequality, authoritarianism and war, will not come through this organization, but in irreconcilable opposition to it.

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