

Sanders' rise in polls alarms Democratic political establishment

Patrick Martin
14 January 2020

Three weeks before the Iowa caucuses, the first contest in the campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders has taken a narrow lead in polls in that state. The *Des Moines Register* poll published January 10 showed Sanders with a three-point lead, with the top four Democrats bunched closely together: 20 percent for Sanders, 17 percent for Senator Elizabeth Warren, 16 percent for former South Bend, Indiana, mayor Pete Buttigieg, and 15 percent for former Vice President Joe Biden.

It was the first poll in several months to show Sanders with a lead in Iowa, with the results seeming to reflect the impact on the Democratic campaign of rising popular antiwar sentiment. The polling period followed the January 3 assassination of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani by US drone-fired missiles, when there were widespread fears that the Trump administration was about to launch a major war in the Middle East.

Sanders has been openly appealing to antiwar sentiment since the Iran crisis exploded with the killing of Suleimani. He publicly condemned the warmongering of the White House and, in a statement issued jointly with Representative Ro Khanna, a co-chairman of his campaign, noted the connection between war and mounting social inequality in the United States. "We know that it will ultimately be the children of working class families who will have to fight and die in a new Middle East conflict, not the children of the billionaire class," they said.

Sanders also stepped up his criticism of the foreign policy record of former Vice President Biden, the choice of the Democratic Party establishment for the presidential nomination, citing Biden's 2002 vote for the Authorization for Use of Military Force resolution that gave the green light for the Bush administration to invade and occupy Iraq.

While antiwar voters may have illusions in Sanders, his own record is that of an adamant defender of American imperialism, who has only tactical differences with open warmongers like Trump and more cautious warmongers like Biden. In recent months, in his foreign policy statements, Sanders has referred to an "axis" of dictatorial rulers linked to Trump, including Vladimir Putin in Russia.

In this way, he has sought to link his criticisms with the

ongoing right-wing Democratic campaign to impeach Trump for withholding US military aid to Ukraine. Sanders has suggested that, as Trump supposedly did in relation to Ukraine, the president was subordinating the overseas interests of American imperialism in the Middle East to his personal political interests by using the assassination of Suleimani to boost his standing with ultra-right elements in his political base.

Reinforcing the poll numbers, there were three significant new endorsements of the Sanders campaign over the past week: from the Sunrise Movement, which is focused on opposing climate change; from the Dream Defenders, a civil rights group formed after the murder of Trayvon Martin in Florida; and from Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1984, the largest union in New Hampshire.

The Sunrise Movement said that 80 percent of its members, most of whom are under 35, supported Sanders. The group participated in a rally in Iowa City, the home campus of the University of Iowa, attended by more than 900 people and addressed by Sanders and Rep. Rashida Tlaib of Michigan.

SEIU Local 1984, with about 10,000 members employed by the New Hampshire state government, backed Sanders over four other candidates who sought its endorsement. According to polls, Sanders has also opened a small lead in New Hampshire, followed closely by Biden, Warren and Buttigieg.

In response to the strength of the Sanders campaign, particularly in Iowa, the Democratic Party establishment has voiced growing concern. Former Secretary of State John Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate who lost to George W. Bush in 2004, made his first appearance of the 2020 campaign at a rally for Biden in Iowa, where he defended Biden's vote for the Iraq war, claiming Biden, then chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had been deceived by Bush's promise to negotiate with Saddam Hussein rather than invade Iraq.

Jim Messina, Barack Obama's campaign manager in 2012, gave an interview Saturday to *Politico* in which he claimed that Trump preferred Sanders as the Democratic candidate because the Vermont senator embraced the label "socialist," which is supposedly poison in American politics.

An accompanying article in *Politico*, under the headline, "Endangered Democrats sound the alarm on Bernie and

Warren,” cited comments by Representative Cedric Richmond of Louisiana, a co-chair of the Biden campaign, warning that Democratic candidates for the House of Representatives and the Senate could be wiped out at the polls in November. “The wrong person at the top of the ticket—and I’m not saying who that is—there would be down-ballot carnage all across the country, and I think that people are starting to recognize it,” Richmond said.

Joining in an effort to boost the Biden campaign were three members of the House of Representatives from the group identified by the *World Socialist Web Site* as “CIA Democrats.” The three—Conor Lamb of Pennsylvania, a former Marine Corps prosecutor; Chrissy Houlahan of Pennsylvania, a former Air Force captain; and Elaine Luria of Virginia, a former Navy commander—announced January 4 that they are supporting Biden.

These were the first of the 11 CIA Democrats to endorse a candidate for the presidential nomination. The godfather of the group, Representative Seth Moulton, a former Marine Corps officer and Iraq war veteran who won a House seat in 2014 and later founded VoteVets, a political action committee to recruit former military-intelligence operatives to run for Congress, was briefly a presidential candidate last year.

Perhaps the clearest suggestion of a concerted stop-Sanders effort, developing behind the scenes, came in a report published in Sunday’s *New York Times*, in which former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a last-minute entrant in the race for the Democratic nomination, suggested that he would not use his vast personal fortune to block a Biden nomination.

According to the *Times*: “Mr. Bloomberg’s advisers... have indicated to Democratic officials that he would not be inclined to keep pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into a prolonged contest with Mr. Biden for the nomination. If the former vice president emerged as an overwhelming favorite after Super Tuesday, Mr. Bloomberg would reorient his campaign into an organization dedicated to battering Mr. Trump...”

The clear implication of this account is that if Sanders or Warren, rather than Biden, were to emerge as the frontrunner, Bloomberg would stay in the race and spend virtually unlimited sums against them. After deciding early last year not to run for president, because of the perceived strength of Biden as the frontrunner, Bloomberg reversed himself and entered the race in late November, at the point when Biden’s poll numbers and fundraising were at a low ebb.

The entry of Bloomberg and the stepped-up spending by fellow billionaire Tom Steyer have the potential to reshape the race for the Democratic presidential nomination. The latest estimates peg Bloomberg’s spending at \$211 million and Steyer’s at \$106 million, with their combined total dwarfing the spending for the nearly two dozen other candidates who have at one point or another sought the nomination.

Fueled by the two billionaires, total campaign spending in

December 2019 tripled from December 2015, from \$50 million to \$150 million, even though in 2015 there were nominating contests in both capitalist parties while this year Trump is effectively unopposed as the Republican incumbent.

Steyer has poured more than \$22 million into TV and radio ads in South Carolina and Nevada alone, the states which vote third and fourth in the contest, making him responsible for three-quarters of the combined spending in both states and boosting him into second place in some polls. Bloomberg has ignored the first four states in favor of dumping resources into the March 3 “Super Tuesday” contests that will choose nearly 40 percent of Democratic delegates.

Three more candidates who participated in the early debates sponsored by the Democratic National Committee have dropped out of the contest since January 1, mainly for lack of sufficient funds to compete either with the four frontrunners or the two billionaires.

Former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Julián Castro quit the race on January 2 and endorsed Senator Warren four days later, making campaign appearances with her in New York City and Iowa. Author Marianne Williamson, who qualified only for the first two debates, laid off her entire campaign staff and on January 10 announced her withdrawal from the race.

Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey announced Monday that he was leaving the race for lack of funds and “a path to victory,” as he put it. Booker, with close ties to Wall Street and billionaire supporters of charter schools, raised \$22.3 million for his campaign. This sum would have been sufficient for a general election campaign, let alone the primaries, a few decades ago. Now such a war chest is considered a drop in the bucket.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact