Race vs. class in the South Carolina primary

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The victory of former Vice President Joe Biden in Saturday's South Carolina presidential primary is being hailed by the Democratic Party establishment and its allies in the corporate media as a milestone in their joint effort to block the nomination of Senator Bernie Sanders.

This celebration may be premature, with Biden expected to perform poorly in the "Super Tuesday" primaries tomorrow, when Democratic voters in 14 states go to the polls, including California and Texas. Sanders is expected to win a large plurality, if not the majority, of the more than 1,300 delegates to be chosen on March 3.

But *how* Biden prevailed in South Carolina is nonetheless portrayed as an important lesson for the Democratic presidential contest going forward. He ran up a huge margin among African-American voters, who comprise 60 percent of the Democratic electorate in South Carolina, and particularly among older black voters, since Sanders won a majority among black voters under 30, just as he did among young voters as a whole.

The final push for Biden was spearheaded by Representative James Clyburn, the congressman from the Sixth District of South Carolina for the past 28 years, a senior leader of the Congressional Black Caucus and, as House minority whip, the third-ranking Democrat in the House of Representatives. Clyburn gave his endorsement to Biden on Wednesday, and half of all black voters in South Carolina, according to exit polls, said that his support had influenced their ultimate choice in the primary.

Clyburn was speaking for both the Democratic congressional leadership as a whole and for a specific social layer—the upper-middle class and bourgeois blacks who have made use of identity politics to advance their interests, even while poor and working class blacks continue to face grinding poverty and social misery.

In the 2020 primaries, even more so than in 2016, this layer of the black upper-middle class is being mobilized to prop up the Democratic Party establishment against the challenge posed by the Sanders campaign. The influence of figures like Clyburn and an array of lesser black politicians is being used to cut across the appeal to class interests made by Sanders with his (very timid) avowals of "democratic socialism," his denunciations of billionaires and his claims to advocate for those struggling to survive from paycheck to paycheck—which includes the vast majority of the African-American population of South Carolina.

Sunday's television interview programs were full of speculation that the Biden campaign might be able to use the assistance of other "influential" black politicians in southern states like Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee and North Carolina to win the primary elections in those states on Tuesday, or at least cut significantly into Sanders' lead among convention delegates. Biden himself appeared on four of the five network and cable interview programs to push this narrative.

The use of race-based appeals to black working people in South Carolina as a means of blocking Sanders' class appeal was so brazen that one black professor, Eddie Glaude Jr. of Princeton, appearing Sunday as a pundit on NBC's "Meet the Press" program, admitted, "I would have never imagined, although I understand the data, that African Americans would in some ways be the firewall for the moderate wing of the Democratic Party. To me, that is just stunning news."

At one point it appeared that the most venal layer of black Democratic Party operatives in South Carolina had been swayed by the millions pumped into the state by billionaire Tom Steyer—$20 million in all, 18 times what the Biden campaign was able to spend. Several black state legislators endorsed Steyer, and his poll numbers rose. But ultimately the pressure from the Democratic Party establishment prevailed: Biden won 48 percent of the overall vote, compared to only 11 percent for Steyer, who failed to win a single delegate.

Every Democratic candidate opposing Sanders has upheld the primacy of racial politics in one form or another. This was made plain in last Tuesday's debate in Charleston, South Carolina. Senator Amy Klobuchar—whose record as a district attorney included

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railroading innocent young black men to prison—postured as an opponent of "racism in the criminal justice system." Former South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg, who oversaw racist attacks by his police force, declared his sympathy with poor black rural residents. Steyer chimed in, declaring, "Every single policy area in the United States has a gigantic subtext of race."

Elizabeth Warren had gone further than any other candidate in an earlier debate. On February 7 in New Hampshire, she declared herself in favor of "race-conscious laws," supposedly to rectify past injustices, and she repeated a variant of that formulation in the debate in South Carolina.

When Warren's remark in New Hampshire came under attack on the grounds that "race-conscious laws" were the essence of Jim Crow segregation in the South prior to the civil rights movement, she received support from a revealing corner: Nikole Hannah-Jones, creator of the "1619 Project."

This is the effort by the *New York Times* to reframe the entire history of the United States as the working out of black-white racial conflict. It denigrates the American Revolution as a revolt of the slaveholders against British-backed plans for emancipation, and dismisses the Civil War, in which hundreds of thousands of white Americans gave their lives in a war to destroy slavery, claiming that blacks fought for their freedom largely alone.

Hannah-Jones tweeted in defense of Warren's support for "race-conscious laws," writing, "race-conscious laws to discriminate are different than race-conscious laws to address centuries of said discrimination."

It is no wonder that the 1619 Project entirely ignores the work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement: King's goal was to build a multi-racial movement against injustice and oppression, fighting for racial and social equality, not the establishment of special privileges for a section of upper class blacks in return for their services in maintaining the suppression of the vast majority of working class blacks. The author of that policy, which he called "black capitalism," although it was ultimately given the less obnoxious title "affirmative action," was Richard Nixon.

The political strategy of the Democratic leadership is evidently to attempt to re-create the electoral base of its defeated candidate in 2016, Hillary Clinton, as well as its victorious right-wing candidates for Congress for a series of Republican-held seats in 2018. That strategy focuses on obtaining a heavy turnout of minority voters, long the main popular base of the Democratic Party, together with an appeal to upscale suburban voters, particularly women.

In the 2020 primaries, the intent is to consolidate the "moderate" wing of the Democratic Party around Biden. This process that is now underway, with the withdrawal first of Steyer, who quit the race Saturday night after gaining zero delegates from his quarter-billion-dollar investment, followed by the announcement Sunday night that former South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg is suspending his presidential campaign.

Sanders himself has no answer to these political maneuvers. While the mass support for his campaign shows an important shift to the left among millions of youth and working people, for whom his identification with socialism is a positive attraction, Sanders seeks to trap his supporters within the framework of the Democratic Party, an institution of the capitalist ruling class that is unshakably committed to the defense of Wall Street and American imperialism.

The struggle to unite the working class across all lines of race, gender, national origin and sexual orientation can go forward only through a revolt against the entire structure of two-party politics in America, which is completely controlled by the ruling elite. The working class must establish its political independence from the Democratic Party and every other political representative of big business.

That is the purpose of the Socialist Equality Party campaign in the 2020 elections. Our candidates, Joseph Kishore for president and Norissa Santa Cruz for vice president, fight to unite the working class, not only within the United States, but internationally, in a common struggle against world capitalism and the capitalist ruling elite, on the basis of a socialist program.

For information on the SEP presidential election campaign and to get involved, visit socialism2020.org/townhall.

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