

Bernie Sanders' response to the COVID-19 pandemic: A lifeline for the ruling class

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In a live-streamed town hall Saturday evening, Vermont Senator and Democratic Party presidential candidate Bernie Sanders outlined his response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sanders repeated many of the proposals he originally made prior to the corporate-Wall Street bailout passed last month in Congress, for which he voted. These include the call for all health care treatment related to the coronavirus to be free; \$2,000 cash payments to workers every month for the duration of the crisis; expanded unemployment insurance; a moratorium on evictions, foreclosures and utility shut-offs; and the suspension of mortgage interest for primary residences as well as utility payments.

Sanders has characterized this proposal as “the boldest piece of legislation ever written in modern history.” It is, in fact, nothing of the sort. Under conditions in which the coronavirus pandemic is discrediting capitalism in the eyes of millions of people, Sanders is attempting to provide a lifeline for the ruling elite.

First, nothing in Sanders' proposal challenges the domination of the corporations and Wall Street over social and economic life. Strikingly absent from Sanders' demands is the call for the shutting down of all non-essential production. There is no suggestion that vital industries such as health care and pharmaceuticals or logistics and delivery companies such as Amazon be placed under public control. Nor does Sanders propose any increase in taxes on the rich.

On the contrary, everything Sanders advances is from the standpoint of “saving” the economy in its present form. “I believe the main point that we must follow and appreciate is that our goal should be to prevent the collapse of our economy,” he said, “rather than figuring out how we can put it together after it crumbles.”

One of Sanders' main proposals is to replicate the bailout of the airline industry, orchestrated in the first stimulus bill, for all industries.

“What we did is give them [the airlines] a large sum of money which goes directly to the two million workers in that industry who through the end of September will continue to receive their paychecks,” he said on Saturday.

While it is true that Congress handed over a large sum of money to the airline industry, over \$50 billion, it is far from a victory for workers. At last half of the money, \$25 billion, has nothing to do with paying workers' salaries. The bill also bans layoffs of more than 10 percent of the workforce wherever “practicable,” a huge loophole which will almost certainly be abused. Furthermore, the bill limits layoffs only through September, and it is still unclear what will happen to the thousands of airline workers who were laid off before the passage of the bill.

Second, Sanders' new proposal is part of a political cover-up of the first stimulus package, which passed with unanimous bi-partisan support.

Before the passage of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Sanders insisted that the response to the crisis could not be “another money-making opportunity for corporate America and Wall Street.” He made token demands for the institution of an “oversight agency to fight corruption.” He proclaimed in numerous live appearances that this was “not the time for profiteering or price-gouging.”

But the act for which he voted is a boondoggle for major corporations and banks. The \$2.2 trillion-dollar stimulus package, almost three times what was allocated in 2008 to bail out the banks, has put hundreds of billions of dollars up for grabs. All of corporate America is scheming as to how it will secure

the biggest possible share.

Sanders emphatically defended his vote for the misnamed CARES Act on Saturday, saying: “I voted for the \$2 trillion bill that passed ten days ago or so because it had a number of important provisions that go to working people. By the way if you compare this bill to the 2008 Wall Street bailout bill [there is] no question in my mind that this is a far far superior bill because many of us fought to make it a better bill.”

This is a remarkable claim. In practical terms, the economic fallout from this catastrophe will be a repeat, though on a much higher level, of the 2008 bailout, which saw the largest transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich in the history of the US. The only way in which the CARES Act is “superior” to the 2008 bailout is in its unabashed handouts to corporate America.

In particular, the act provides backing for the unlimited transfer of funds from the Federal Reserve to banks and major corporations. Already last month, the Fed bought up \$1.6 trillion in assets, and this is only the beginning.

Finally, throughout the crisis Sanders has avoided any serious discussion of its origins. Despite his “democratic socialist” pretensions, Sanders has virtually ceased uttering the words “socialism” or “capitalism” in any of his campaign material. Unsurprisingly, neither word was spoken in his Saturday appearance.

Furthermore, his “Emergency Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic” on his website does not mention President Donald Trump. On his new webpage, “Priorities for the next Coronavirus relief package,” the word “Trump” appears only once, in reference to a demand that he utilize the Defense Production Act more aggressively.

All of his proposals are presented as a framework for discussion with the Democratic Party leadership, the Republicans in Congress and the Trump administration.

In concluding his town hall event, Sanders repeated the lie that workers have heard a hundred times already from every section of the political establishment: “[The] bottom line is we are all in this together.”

No, Senator Sanders, “we” certainly are not. The ruling class is using the crisis to pursue its interests in complete conflict with those of the working class. It is making it clear that it places no value on human life, above all, that of workers. It is prepared to sacrifice the

lives of untold workers in order to resume and even expand its profit-making.

Sanders, pulling out all the stops, went on to implore his audience to keep Congress honest: “I look forward to hearing your ideas. We need your support to make sure that Congress has the courage to respond in the necessary way to the unprecedented crisis that we face. We will be back to you asking your help to make sure Congress does the right thing in standing up for working families.”

So much for Sanders’ “political revolution.” It turns out that this “revolution” is nothing more than a call to support “Congress”—that is the Democratic and Republican parties, the parties of the ruling elite.

Sanders is currently working out the precise form in which he will end his presidential election campaign and try to convince workers and youth who have supported his campaign to back whichever right-wing candidate the Democrats choose.

Those who have been attracted by Sanders’ populist rhetoric and confused by his attempts to associate his warmed-over liberal reform politics with socialism should draw sharp conclusions. There is nothing remotely socialist about Sanders or his policies. He is a loyal servant of the ruling class.



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