

In response to protests over police violence

Sanders opposes “defunding” police, calls for increased pay for cops

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Last week, Senator Bernie Sanders wrote a letter to Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer politely requesting “far-reaching reforms” to address the issue of police brutality. Amid nationwide calls against police violence, Sanders’ proposals include multiple appeals to increase the funding for police departments and to give police officers a pay raise.

The letter states that in order to “modernize and humanize police departments we need to enhance the recruitment pool by ensuring that the resources are available to pay wages that will attract the top tier officers we need to do the difficult work of policing.”

With regard to the epidemic of police murder, Sanders merely calls for the establishment of “independent police conduct review boards” that would have the authority to refer police violence to federal authorities for investigation. “Clearly,” he states, “we need to enhance federal funding for such investigations.”

In a lengthy interview with the *New Yorker* magazine released on Wednesday, Sanders was asked about his proposal to increase police department funding. In his response, he denied calling for an increase in funding but doubled down on his call for pay raises for police officers: “I didn’t call for more money for police departments. I called for police departments that have well-educated, well-trained, well-paid professionals.”

Sanders told the *New Yorker*, “I think we want to redefine what police departments do.”

He concluded by stating that “anyone who thinks that we should abolish all police departments in America, I don’t agree.”

It is difficult to state Sanders’ position more plainly than he does himself.

Beyond the police officer pay raises, the mild reformist measures that Sanders proposes to “transform” or “redefine” the police department broadly fall into one of two categories: either they would never be passed by Congress or, if passed, they would amount to nothing more than “lipstick on a pig,” as the saying goes.

The real significance of Sanders’ proposals is that he is openly defending the police against those who are calling for its “defunding” or abolition.

There is nothing that distinguishes Sanders’ proposals from any other Democratic Party politician. Under the Obama administration, police killings raged in the US unabated. Obama responded to the killing of Eric Garner in 2014, a police murder that bears a striking resemblance to the killing of George Floyd, by making similar calls for “patience and persistence.” At the time Obama proclaimed that “*this* was the time” to “start a conversation.”

The Obama administration proposed various commissions and bodies supposedly tasked with addressing police violence. Obama went on, however, to continue funneling military equipment to police departments and defending cops whenever cases of police abuse came before the Supreme Court.

Sanders’ position boils down to an absolute defense of the police, which are an instrument of class rule. Police violence and police repression of mass protests against this violence express this essential role.

Sanders’ attitude to the police, moreover, is inextricably connected to his defense of the state and in particular the Democratic Party, one of the twin parties of the ruling class.

In the 2020 elections, Sanders is attempting to reprise

his role in 2016 by channeling opposition behind the Democratic Party. In response to a question on his efforts to support Clinton in the 2016 election, Sanders told the *New Yorker*, “I did everything that I could in 2016 to move the Democratic Party in a more progressive way and to see that Hillary Clinton was elected. I worked very, very hard in trying to do that.”

Sanders’ then argued that “the difference now” is that he has “a better relationship” with Biden than he had with Clinton. He added: “Biden has been much more receptive to sitting down and talking with me and other progressives than we have seen in the past.”

Sanders must take his former supporters to be fools. Is one supposed to believe that Biden will be convinced to implement progressive reform based on Sanders’ friendly relationship to “his good friend Joe”?

Support for Joe Biden means support for the social interests that he represents and the program that he is advancing. Biden has spent nearly five decades as a faithful servant of the ruling class. He has an extensive record of support for war, austerity, capital punishment and mass incarceration. Furthermore, Biden has made clear that he plans to run a right-wing campaign that includes a major escalation of military tensions with Russia and China.

As in 2016, Sanders is insisting that everything must be done to “defeat Trump.” However, the Trump administration is a product of the capitalist system. It is acting at the behest of the financial oligarchy, which the Democrats represent as well. Moreover, the channeling of social anger behind the right-wing Clinton campaign in 2016 was what allowed Trump to posture as an opponent of the status quo and created the conditions for his victory.

Since Trump came to power, the Democrats have worked hand over fist to suppress popular opposition to his administration and have instead elevated the most right-wing military figures as the “official” opposition.

The Democrats—Sanders included—have said nothing about Trump’s efforts to overturn the Constitution and establish military rule. Instead, they have relied on the military as the arbiter of politics in the United States.

It is notable that in Sanders’ interview with the *New Yorker* he made a point of praising General James Mattis’s condemnation of Trump’s response to the protests, saying that he was “very impressed” by the

general’s statement. Mattis earned the nickname “Mad Dog” for leading the bloody US campaign to retake the Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2004 and boasted to his troops during his command of US forces in Afghanistan that “it’s a hell of a lot of fun to shoot” Afghans.

Sanders has proven again and again his commitment to upholding the interests of the American ruling class abroad through his consistent votes for the military budget, his support for the war in Afghanistan, his calls for drones—“all of that and more”—and his statement just this year that “some wars are necessary.” It should come as no surprise that he supports the defense of these same interests at home.

While Sanders is attempting to play the same role that he did in 2016, he is doing so under incredibly explosive conditions in which the class antagonisms within the US are bursting at the seams.

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, the corporate and financial oligarchy, after doing nothing to protect the population, moved quickly to transfer trillions of dollars into the coffers of corporations, big business and Wall Street. All of these policies have been unanimously endorsed by the Democratic and Republican politicians alike, including Sanders himself.

Whatever their tactical differences, the entire political establishment, Democratic and Republican, defends the police forces of the state and is preparing to use them against growing social opposition in the working class.



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