

Anti-genocide protesters silenced at Bernie Sanders “Fighting Oligarchy” rally

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For nearly two months, tens of thousands of people across the United States have been attending rallies held under the banner of “Fighting Oligarchy” and headlined by Bernie Sanders and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) member and New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

The rallies have drawn large crowds not only in major cities, but also in areas that have traditionally supported Republican candidates. After 36,000 people—the largest crowd in Sanders’ career—rallied in Los Angeles on April 12, the following night another 20,000 people gathered in Salt Lake City, Utah. On April 14, in Nampa, Idaho, 12,500 people filled the Ford Idaho Center arena to capacity. Some 9,000 turned out in Missoula, Montana, Wednesday evening.

On April 5, millions of people took part in mass protests against the Trump administration in over 1,500 cities and towns throughout the United States. The substantial attendance at these rallies and protests expresses the broad and deep opposition within the population to Trump’s fascist agenda. Millions of people are outraged over unending genocide and war, attacks on democratic rights, living standards, immigrants and students, and the efforts by the Trump administration to erect a fascist dictatorship.

The size and scope of these rallies put to rest Trump’s lie, echoed by the media, that he has a “mandate” and that his trampling of the Constitution and Bill of Rights has broad support. The democratic traditions, ideas and principles that animated and guided the Revolutions of 1776 and 1861-1865 have not been forgotten and will not be given up without a fight by the working class.

However, it is necessary to take stock of the political tendencies claiming to be “fighting oligarchy.” What role do Sanders, his protégé Ocasio-Cortez and the

Democratic Party play in this struggle?

An episode in Nampa, Idaho helps answer this question. Two anti-genocide protesters were ejected from the event by police for unfurling a banner depicting the Palestinian flag with the phrase “Free Palestine.” As the protesters were dragged away by police, thousands in the arena erupted into cheers of “Free Palestine,” drowning out Sanders’ attempts to quell their anger.

Under conditions in which Israel is systematically exterminating, starving and ethnically cleansing the entire population of Gaza, Sanders declared at the rally that Israel “has the right to defend itself.”

This is not true. The United Nations and the International Court of Justice have repeatedly ruled that the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, which it seized during the Six Day War of 1967, is illegal. Israel has no right of “self-defense” against a population it illegally occupies and imprisons.

As Sanders said these words, two rally attendees dropped a Palestinian flag banner over the giant American flag that was positioned behind the stage.

At the sight of the banner, the packed auditorium roared in approval, with many standing and cheering in extended applause.

An order was quickly given by Sanders’ campaign to have the banner removed. Local police ripped down the banner and detained those who unfurled it. Sanders did not tell the cops to leave the anti-genocide protesters alone, doing nothing to protect them even as the crowd continued to protest the police assault.

Amid growing boos and chants from the crowd, Sanders raised his hands and said, “Shhhhhh!” This had the opposite effect; thousands began chanting, “Free Palestine! Free Palestine! Free Palestine!” with many raising their fists in solidarity.

This episode highlights two critically important political facts. First is the role of Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez. Sanders' response to the censorship and arrest of anti-genocide protesters reveals a politician who is not in any genuine sense oppositional to the "oligarchy," genocide or the Democratic Party.

He and Ocasio-Cortez, along with other so-called "progressive" elements, play a vital role in American politics. Their job is to corral and suffocate growing anti-capitalist and anti-war sentiment within the Democratic Party. Ocasio-Cortez declared last year that Vice President Kamala Harris was working "tirelessly" for a ceasefire in Gaza, as part of an effort to convince young voters to back the party which made the genocide possible, while Sanders claims the fight against "oligarchy" and war can be waged by voting for Democrats.

For the last 18 months, the Democratic Party, in alliance with the Republicans, has armed, funded and politically backed the genocide in Gaza. In the opening months of the genocide, both Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez vocally opposed a ceasefire in Gaza, with Sanders declaring in November 2023, "I don't know how you can have a ceasefire, [a] permanent ceasefire, with an organization like Hamas."

Ocasio-Cortez publicly backed US arms sales to Israel, declaring, "on the sole principle of Iron Dome and defense, I absolutely think there's an openness, for sure." Both Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez endorsed Biden in 2020 and, after he had orchestrated the Gaza genocide, in 2024.

As the response of the crowd to the Palestinian banner showed, there is broad support among those attending these rallies, no matter where they are held, for a stop to the genocide and for genuine left-wing politics.

Despite what Sanders says, the defense of democratic rights and the living standards of the working class are not separate from the genocide in Gaza. They are interlinked, as the ongoing kidnapping, harassing and possible deportation of anti-genocide student protesters such as Mahmoud Khalil, Momodou Taal, Mohsen Mahdawi, and Rümeyşa Öztürk demonstrate.

The second critical point is the enormous significance of the response of the crowd itself and how quickly Sanders found himself losing control of the situation. For several minutes, Sanders tried to talk over and quiet

down the crowd, to no avail. It was only after the police had taken away both protesters and after several attempts that Sanders was able to resume his speech.

Under conditions in which fascism is being actively cultivated and promoted by large sections of the ruling class, millions of people are undergoing a profound political radicalization. During such periods, figures such as Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez are brought forward by the ruling class to blunt this leftward movement and channel it back into the two-party system and electoral politics.

This takes place as Trump is openly defying the courts and disappearing immigrants without due process, while threatening to do the same to citizens.

It is within this context, when virtually all the institutions and organizations that previously held purchase in the minds of workers—such as the two big business parties, Congress, the corporate media, the Supreme Court and the trade union apparatus—are increasingly hated and discredited for their role in ushering in Trump's attacks, that Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez are brought forward.

The objective conditions that are drawing masses of people to these rallies will also, in conjunction with the fight for a socialist perspective, drive them far beyond what Sanders is offering and into genuine revolutionary socialist politics, fighting for the expropriation of the billionaires and the transfer of political power to the international working class, to put an end to genocide, inequality and war.

The Socialist Equality Party and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), in political solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), are spearheading the international movement against Trump, Musk and the capitalist system that created them. We urge you to join us in this fight and take up the struggle for socialism.



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