

Sanders’ “Fighting Oligarchy” tour: A political trap to promote the Democratic Party

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Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders has resumed his “Fighting Oligarchy” tour, drawing thousands at recent events in West Virginia and Asheville, North Carolina, with more stops planned across the Midwest.

The upcoming stops on the “Fighting Oligarchy Tour” seek to boost the campaigns of the Democratic Party’s candidates in the states and localities where Sanders will be speaking. In Wisconsin, Sanders will appear with congressional candidate Rebecca Cooke; in Kalamazoo, Michigan, with Senate primary candidate Abdul El-Sayed; and in Chicago, with Rep. Delia Ramirez and state Senator Robert Peters.

Sanders’ events have drawn large audiences because workers and young people are seeking a way to oppose the immense crisis engulfing the United States. Trump is implementing a dictatorship—deploying troops in Washington D.C. and threatening to extend military occupations to Chicago, Los Angeles, and other major cities—while carrying out a fascistic assault on immigrants and democratic rights. The genocide in Gaza is continuing, part of an escalating global war.

These conditions, combined with staggering levels of social inequality, have produced deep frustration and anger in the working class and among young people.

But Sanders’ role is not to lead a fight against this crisis, but to capture and divert opposition back into the Democratic Party—the very party of Wall Street, war, and repression. By insisting that the Democrats can be pushed to the left, he works to dissipate the anger of workers and youth and prevent the emergence of an independent movement of the working class, which is what is above all necessary.

A central claim of Sanders’ “Fighting Oligarchy” tour—and of his politics more broadly—is that the Democratic Party was once a party of the working class and can be pushed back in that direction. In Asheville, North Carolina, he told the audience, “The Democratic Party in many, many respects, has turned its back on the working class of this country ... If Democrats want to win elections, they’re going to have to stop taking money from billionaires.” In Mingo County, West Virginia, he told the attendees, “You can take over the Democratic Party.”

The claim that the Democrats were once, or could again be, a party of the working class is contradicted by the party’s entire history.

Before and during the Civil War, the Democratic Party was the political representative of the Southern slave-owning aristocracy, allied with wealthy Northern business interests. After Reconstruction, it became the party of Jim Crow apartheid in the South.

As capitalism expanded, the Republicans emerged as the party of the robber barons, while the Democrats postured as reformers to contain working class unrest. Woodrow Wilson introduced the graduated income tax but at the same time took the US into World War I, unleashed the Red Scare, and sent troops against the Russian Revolution.

During the Great Depression, the Democrats under Franklin D. Roosevelt responded to insurrectionary class struggles with the New Deal—a program of social reforms designed to contain these struggles and prevent the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class. Roosevelt also led the US into World War II, jailed Trotskyists under the Smith Act, and oversaw the internment of Japanese-Americans.

In the 1960s, Johnson’s “Great Society” enacted Medicare and Medicaid to contain upheavals such as the civil rights movement, the urban rebellions, and mass strikes. This was the last gasp of social reform in the US, which was shipwrecked by the imperialist war in Vietnam. As the ruling class lurched to the right, it dismantled past social reforms while presiding over the expansion of American militarism.

At the same time, the Democrats increasingly embraced identity and racial politics to divide the working class, elevating a privileged layer of the upper-middle class into positions within the state, corporations, academia, the media, and the trade union bureaucracy to help prop up the capitalist order.

Throughout his career, and above all over the past decade, Bernie Sanders has played a very definite role: serving as a lightning rod for popular discontent, only to funnel that opposition back into the Democratic Party. Sanders began his national political career in 1990, first in the House of Representatives and then the Senate.

Over these decades, the Democratic Party—alongside the Republicans—presided over the deindustrialization and financialization of the US economy, policies that devastated working class communities. The Clinton administration dismantled welfare, deregulated Wall Street and oversaw sweeping attacks on

workers' living standards. Obama responded to the 2008 financial crash with a multi-trillion-dollar bailout of the banks, paving the way for record corporate profits and a staggering growth of social inequality.

A decade later, in the opening months of the pandemic, Democrats and Republicans again joined hands to orchestrate an even larger bailout of Wall Street, transferring vast sums to the financial elite while millions of workers faced unemployment, illness and death.

Sanders' two presidential campaigns stand as the clearest expression of his political role. In both 2016 and 2020, Sanders won mass support by presenting himself as a critic of the "billionaire class" and advocate of a "political revolution." But each time, after securing millions of votes and mobilizing workers and youth, he backed the candidate of the Democratic Party establishment, Hillary Clinton and then Joe Biden—the chosen representatives of Wall Street and the military.

Sanders' subsequent support for the Biden administration, which oversaw unprecedented handouts to the banks and the prosecution of imperialist war, further demonstrated his function as a prop of capitalist rule. Until the eve of the 2024 elections Sanders was telling workers and young people that Biden was the "most progressive, pro-worker president since FDR." This created the political vacuum that enabled Trump to channel social anger in a reactionary direction.

The real politics of Sanders is most clearly exposed in his positions on foreign policy. However much he postures as an opponent of the "billionaire class" at home, Sanders has never opposed the global interests of American capitalism.

Speaking to CNN after his stop in West Virginia, he defended Washington's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. Ignoring the imperialist nature of the war, Sanders called Putin "a really awful guy" who "invaded Ukraine with incredible destruction." He continued: "People in Ukraine are suffering terribly because this guy wanted to start the largest war since World War II in Europe."

These remarks are in line with the broader orientation of the Democratic Party, which has denounced Trump not for his wars and authoritarianism, but for seeking to reorient US imperialist strategy. While Trump escalates the drive to war against China, the Democrats insist on maintaining the bloody proxy war in Ukraine as the spearhead of American imperialist interests in Europe.

The invasion of Ukraine was a reactionary act by a bourgeoisie-nationalist regime in Russia that enriched itself by plundering the former Soviet Union. But the war was not "unprovoked." It was the outcome of NATO's relentless expansion to Russia's borders and the 2014 right-wing, pro-Western Maidan coup in Ukraine, engineered by Washington and Berlin.

Sanders has refused to call Israel's actions over the past two years a genocide. To this day he repeats the line that Israel "has a right to defend itself." Even the bill he sponsored to suspend certain arms shipments would have barred only so-called "offensive weapons."

Under conditions of mass murder and ethnic cleansing—including starvation carried out with full US backing—the distinction between offensive and defensive weapons is meaningless. It is akin to proposing to withhold only "offensive weapons" from Hitler

during the Holocaust. In any case, Sanders' measure was rejected by the majority of Senate Democrats, including Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer.

On all fundamental issues, Sanders is in full agreement with the foreign policy objectives of American imperialism. Even in relation to Trump, he has for the most part maintained a criminal silence on the fascistic assault on immigrants, declaring in March of this year, "Nobody thinks illegal immigration is appropriate." At the same time, he champions a program of economic nationalism that dovetails with Trump's trade wars, which are direct preparations for war abroad and attacks on the working class at home, driving up the cost of living and fueling mass layoffs.

The question posed is not simply the role of Bernie Sanders as an individual, but of an entire type of politics that seeks to capture the anger of workers and youth, preserve the authority of the Democratic Party, and block the development of an independent movement of the working class.

This is the politics of middle-class pseudo-left organizations such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which promote Sanders and his myths about reforming the Democrats. As the rise, consolidation, and now return of Trump have demonstrated, such politics, in fact, strengthen, rather than weaken, the far-right.

The United States is passing through an extraordinary crisis. The danger of fascist dictatorship is embodied in Trump's military takeover of Washington D.C. and his preparations for nationwide repression. Abroad, the ruling class is waging a global war, and the colossal levels of social inequality are incompatible with democratic forms of rule. None of this can be opposed through the Democratic Party, which bears chief responsibility for Trump's rise and collaborates with him on war and repression.

What is required is a decisive break from both capitalist parties and from all illusions that they can be reformed. The fight against dictatorship, war and oligarchic rule must be carried forward through the building of an independent party of the working class, based on socialist internationalism. Only on this basis can workers and youth find the political means to oppose fascism and imperialist war and advance the struggle for socialism.



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