

At “No Kings” rally in Washington, Bernie Sanders covers for the Democrats and capitalism

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In his 1938 article “The Priests of Half-Truth,” Leon Trotsky denounced those who “feed upon half-thoughts and half-feelings” and “live by half-truths, that is to say, the worst form of falsehood.”

From this standpoint, it is worth examining the speech delivered by Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders at the massive rally in Washington, D.C., held as part of the nationwide “No Kings” protests on October 18. The main sponsors of the event, including Indivisible and MoveOn.org, are adjuncts of the Democratic Party. They organized the demonstrations to let off steam and channel mass opposition to Trump back behind the Democratic Party, the graveyard of social movements.

Alarmed by the scale of the opposition and the growing radicalization of the masses—including their increasing disgust with the Democrats and interest in a socialist alternative—the organizers made the decision to have Sanders, who had planned to speak at a small rally in Vermont, address the main rally in Washington, the better to neuter the movement politically.

This is Sanders’ specialty, and he has been at it for decades. When the ruling class needs someone to use radical-sounding phrases to divert workers and youth away from a struggle against capitalism and into the dead-end of the two-party system and electoral politics, Bernie is their man. He is the consummate demagogue.

The perfidy of his role stands out all the more under conditions in which Trump is using Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) thugs to terrorize working-class communities, kidnapping immigrants and even US citizens to send them to concentration camps; dispatching National Guard troops to occupy cities; defying the courts; branding all opponents as “antifa terrorists”; and preparing to invoke the Insurrection

Act, which would empower him to deploy active-duty troops across the country.

In its structure, the Washington address was a variant of Sanders’ basic stump speech: a denunciation of Trump’s “authoritarianism” (never fascism or dictatorship) and the power of the corporate oligarchy, a list of social evils—inequality, poverty, the destruction of education, housing, public health and education—and a corresponding list of social reforms. There is no social or historical analysis. More revealing than what is said is what is not said: there is no mention of capitalism or socialism.

Nor is any strategy proposed to halt the drive to dictatorship and defeat Trump and the oligarchy. The implication is that protest alone, accompanied by the election of more Democrats, will suffice. This is a fatal illusion.

In his Washington speech, Sanders’ self-censorship extended to the silence and complicity of the Democratic Party in Trump’s assault on democratic rights and the role of the trade union apparatus in suppressing the resistance of the working class to mass layoffs and cuts in social programs. There was no mention of the bipartisan support for genocide in Gaza or the Democrats’ demands that Trump escalate the war against Russia in Ukraine.

Of course, there are glaring contradictions. On the one hand, Sanders declares: “I am talking about a billionaire class who believe they have the divine right to rule, and who not only want massive tax breaks for themselves, but who reject any form of accountability or checks on their power.” On the other, he suggests that the oligarchy’s death grip over society can be removed without a revolutionary struggle to

expropriate its wealth and property.

At one point, Sanders said: “This is about a handful of the wealthiest people on earth who, in their insatiable greed, have hijacked our economy and our political system in order to enrich themselves at the expense of working families throughout the country.”

Thus, according to Sanders, the oligarchs have “hijacked” the economy and the political system, which otherwise, and presumably at some earlier point in time, was a model of equality and democracy. This is a myth designed to separate oligarchic rule from the capitalist system which breeds it.

In 1950, in the midst of the post-war “Great Compression,” when income inequality declined, the top one percent in the US still controlled one-third of the nation’s wealth and the top 0.1 percent controlled 10 percent. In other words, pervasive inequality is lodged in the very structure of capitalism and today’s oligarchy is its product, not the other way around.

In his speech, Sanders appealed demagogically to the deeply felt allegiance of Americans to the democratic traditions of US history. He declared:

Throughout the history of our country, when Americans have stood up and fought for justice, they have prevailed.

When the Founders stood up to King George, they were told it was impossible. But they won.

When abolitionists fought to end slavery, they were told it was impossible. But they won.

These, of course, were revolutions that overturned the existing order. Sanders cites them, however, to claim that protest alone can defend democratic rights and social revolution is neither possible nor desirable.

Sanders exposed the impotent and bankrupt character of his politics when he appealed to Trump’s fascist accomplices in the GOP (“my Republican colleagues”) to end the government shutdown:

Today, I say to my Republican colleagues: Come back from your monthlong vacation, start negotiating and do not allow the American health care system to be destroyed. End this

shutdown.

Sanders’ hostility to the working class and his rank nationalism are starkly revealed in his indifference to and virtual silence on the savage persecution of immigrants. As in all of his stump speeches, Sanders in Washington omitted any demands relating to the democratic rights of immigrants.

He did not call for the release of all detained immigrants and the relocation to the US of all deportees who want to return. He did not demand the shutdown of the immigrant concentration camps and the dismantling of the ICE and Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) Gestapo. He did not demand an end to immigration raids or assert the right of all workers, documented and undocumented, to live and work where they wish with full democratic rights.

Sanders has, in fact, publicly declared his agreement with Trump on the need to “secure the border.” During an interview aired on ABC News’ “This Week” program last March, he told host Jonathan Karl there was “one thing I agree with Trump about”—that the US had to curb “illegal” immigration across the southern border.

Such is the political perfidy of not only Sanders, but the entire retinue of middle-class pseudo-left organizations such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) that promote him and other Democratic Party “progressives” (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Zohran Mamdani). On its way to a political break with the Democratic Party and the building of a mass socialist movement to bring down Trump and defend democratic rights, the working class must consciously repudiate the rotten, pro-imperialist and pro-capitalist politics of such forces.



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