

Bernie Sanders promotes nationalist poison in interview with *New York Times*

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On November 3, the *New York Times* posted an extensive video interview with Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders on its “The Opinions” website. Conducted by *Times* editor David Leonhardt, the interview afforded Sanders yet another opportunity to posture as an opponent of oligarchy and authoritarianism, while never uttering the word capitalism or, for that matter, socialism.

What, however, made this interview particularly significant was Sanders’ concentration on promoting a nationalist perspective. He and his interlocutor Leonhardt insistently sought to associate opposition to social inequality and the interests of the working class with economic nationalism and the defense of the US nation state.

Nothing could more clearly expose the deeply reactionary role of Sanders and his pseudo-left supporters than their attempt to divert the growing opposition of the working class to Donald Trump and the corporate oligarchy along nationalist lines. In his 1933 essay “Nationalism and Economic Life,” Leon Trotsky explained that in the 20th century, world economy and the international division of labor had come to dominate over the national economy. Hence, the politics and ideology of nationalism played an essentially reactionary role. The foundation of the socialist politics of the working class was internationalism.

Trotsky wrote:

The growth of world exchange took place parallel with the formation of national economies. The tendency of this development—for advanced countries at any rate—found its expression in the shift of the center of gravity from the domestic to the foreign market. The 19th century was marked by the fusion of the nation’s fate with the fate of its economic life; but the basic tendency of our century is the growing contradiction between the nation and economic life.

He continued:

Attempts to save economic life by inoculating it with virus from the corpse of nationalism result in blood poisoning which bears the name of fascism.

In his recent interview with *The Economist*, fascist conspirator and adviser to Trump Steve Bannon said the White House had “a plan” for Trump to retain power in a third presidential term, in violation of the US Constitution. He called his politics “populist, nationalist” and noted that he borrowed many of his positions and much of his rhetoric from Bernie Sanders.

Sanders’ reactionary nationalism emerges clearly in his *New York Times* interview. Early on in the discussion, Sanders claims “the Democratic Party was the party of the working class,” but that in the 1970s it began to abandon the working class. He says:

No, what I think is if you talked to working class people during that period, as I did, if you talked to the union movement during that period, as I did, you said, Guys, do you think it’s a great idea that we have a free trade agreement with China. No worker in America thought that was a good idea. The corporate world thought it was a good idea. The *Washington Post* thought it was a great idea. I don’t know what the *New York Times* thought, but every one of us who talked to unions, talked to workers, understood that the result of that would be the collapse of manufacturing in America, the loss of millions of good-paying jobs because corporations understood, if I could pay people 30 cents an hour in China, why the hell am I going to pay a worker in America a living wage? We understood that.

The Democratic Party was never a party of the working class. In the 19th century it was the party of the slavocracy until it was defeated in the Civil War. For the rest of that century and for most of the 20th century it was the party of Jim Crow segregation and lynch law in the South. It was and remains one of the two parties of capitalism and imperialism. That was so even during its brief periods of social reform in the 1930s and 1960s, when Democratic administrations, besieged by working class struggles and haunted by the specter of the Russian Revolution and the threat of revolution at home, enacted measures such as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

Highly significant, however, is the fact that to prove the Democrats abandoned the working class, Sanders invokes the nostrums of economic nationalism. He argues that the Democrats

turned against the workers when they supported “free trade” with China. (In point of fact, the US and China have never signed a free trade agreement. In 1999, the two countries entered into a bilateral agreement that paved the way for China’s entry into the World Trade Organization and granted China Normal Trade Relations status with the US).

In other words, according to Sanders, American workers should consider workers in China (and Canada, Mexico, Europe and elsewhere) not as class allies in the struggle against capitalism, but as enemies in a zero-sum struggle for jobs and wages. They should also, in accordance with this perspective, line up behind “their” ruling class in economic and future military warfare against American imperialism’s rival powers around the world.

Further on, Leonhardt plays a clip from a previous interview with Sanders conducted by Ezra Klein, in which Sanders declares: “Open borders. That’s a Koch brothers proposal. I mean, that’s a right-wing proposal which says essentially there is no United States.”

In response to the clip, Sanders tells Leonhardt, “Look, there are people who want cheap labor coming into this country to lower wages, no question about it.”

Like all opportunists, Sanders speaks out of both sides of his mouth. At one point in the interview, he criticizes Trump for scapegoating undocumented immigrants, saying, “So Trump is clearly doing outrageous things that deny people their civil rights and that violate their basic humanity...”

But in the next breath he says:

Well, what I do think in terms of the Biden administration, so long as we have nation states like the United States of America and Canada and Mexico, you have borders. And if you don’t have any borders, then in a sense you don’t have a nation state. And Biden tried to make some progress at the end of his tenure. You saw the pictures in Texas of just all kinds of undocumented people and that does not resonate. And it’s not right. We need to have an immigration policy, but you also need to have strong borders, period.

Last month, Sanders was interviewed on the podcast of Tim Dillon, a Trump supporter who has conducted interviews with Steve Bannon, JD Vance, Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene and other fascists. Sanders praised Trump’s border policy, saying he has done better than Biden:

So has historically the United States done well under Democrats and Republicans protecting the border? The answer is no. Trump did a better job. I don’t like Trump, you know, but we should have a secure border and it ain’t that hard to do. Biden didn’t do it.

In the same interview, Sanders repeated his position that “Israel

has a right to defend itself,” and reiterated his support for the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

At the conclusion of the *New York Times* interview, Leonhardt asks, “Is there a version of progressive patriotism that can counter right-wing nationalism?

Sanders replies, “Good question.”

Leonhardt goes on to ask, “I don’t know if you think of yourself as a patriot?”

Sanders then says:

Absolutely...So you want a nationalism? You want a patriotic nationalism? That’s what it is. People fought and died not just in the Civil War and the Revolutionary War. World War II died to defend democracy. And we need a government and an economy that works for all of us, not just a handful of wealthy campaign donors. That’s your nationalism.

Sanders is not entirely uneducated politically. He knows enough about history and socialism, from his early years when he claimed to be influenced by Marxism and supported the Cuban Revolution, to understand that World War II was, in essence, a conflict between imperialist powers. While the Stalinists (as Sanders knows full well) cynically sought, in the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy, to promote the war as a struggle for democracy, the Roosevelt administration waged the war to secure the global interests of Wall Street and American corporations.

Strikes by workers, and the coal miners in particular, against brutal exploitation were met with state repression. The US Trotskyists who exposed the imperialist interests of the ruling class were sent to prison. In the aftermath of the war, a ferocious witchhunt was unleashed against the left, and socialists were ruthlessly purged from the trade unions in order to eliminate domestic opposition to the violent international operations of the CIA and military-industrial complex.

Sanders’ promotion of nationalist populism is duplicated by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left organizations, which express the interests of privileged sections of the middle class. Last month, following the massive “No Kings” demonstrations across the US, *Jacobin*, the unofficial organ of the DSA, published an article by Meagan Day headlined “Patriotism Against Authoritarianism.”

Genuine socialism is grounded, from Marx and Engels to Lenin, Trotsky and the International Committee of the Fourth International today, on internationalism. “Workers of the world unite!” remains the rallying cry of the class conscious working class. It is the foundation for a struggle today against oligarchy, fascism and war.



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