

# Graham Platner: A bogus “pro-worker” face for the Democratic Party in Maine

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The Democratic Party’s effort to refurbish itself with a new “populist” face accelerated Thursday after Maine Governor Janet Mills suspended her campaign for the U.S. Senate, clearing the way for Graham Platner, a former Marine and mercenary contractor, to become the party’s nominee against Republican Senator Susan Collins.

Mills’ exit represents a tactical adjustment by the Democratic Party establishment. The 78-year-old governor, backed by Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, proved incapable of generating enthusiasm. Platner was leading her by enormous margins in the polls before she withdrew. A February University of New Hampshire poll found Platner was backed by 64 percent of likely Democratic primary voters, compared with 26 percent for Mills. Later polling showed the same basic pattern, with Platner far ahead in the primary and leading Collins in several general election surveys.

Within hours of Mills’ withdrawal, leading Democrats moved to consolidate behind Platner. Minnesota Governor Tim Walz announced that he would appear with Platner in Portland to “kick off his campaign,” reposting a Democratic Party graphic hailing the candidate as an “oyster farmer” and “Marine and U.S. Army veteran.”

Bernie Sanders, who has functioned for a decade as the Democratic Party’s principal safety valve for social opposition, congratulated Platner as the Democratic nominee and claimed he was “taking on the billionaire class” and “fighting for working families.”

## Platner’s “populist” campaign and the New Deal myth

Platner’s rise is being presented as a rebellion against the Democratic establishment. In an April 30 column, *New York Times* columnist Michelle Goldberg described the campaign as part of “a Democratic version of the Tea Party,” writing that voters are seeking “to upend a system that they believe has failed them.”

Platner is being promoted as a vehicle through which the party can refurbish itself under conditions of mass anger over its collaboration with Trump and its complicity in war and genocide.

Like Sanders, Platner has generated some support because he advances a vaguely “populist” appeal, denounces “billionaires,” speaks sympathetically about the suffering of workers and the elderly, and criticizes the Gaza genocide.

Platner does not claim, as Sanders once did, to be a “democratic socialist.” He proudly presents himself as a “New Deal Democrat,” invoking Franklin Roosevelt as proof that capitalism can be reformed in the interests of working people. This is a historical falsification. The New Deal was not a gift from an enlightened president but a defensive response by the American ruling class to mass strikes, the growth of socialist sentiment and the threat of revolution during the Great Depression. Its

purpose was to save capitalism.

Platner’s own formulation exposes the class content of this myth. In a recent interview with Jon Stewart, he praised the New Deal on the grounds that without it, the United States would not have been “dragged out of the Great Depression” and would not have “set the stage to win the war.” Actually, Roosevelt’s turn to military intervention in the world war meant the end of the minimal social reforms provided by the New Deal.

## Recruited and packaged by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy

Platner has openly described how his campaign was initiated by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. He told Stewart that “last June [the] AFL-CIO” was “looking for someone to run against Susan Collins,” specifically “a working-class person on working-class economic policies.” Union officials, he said, “looked me up and saw I had donated to Bernie Sanders.”

After he initially rejected the offer, Platner said the AFL-CIO representatives returned the next week with a campaign operation already taking shape: “We’ve got someone who can help with small dollar fundraising, we’ve got someone who can get your name in the papers and someone who can shoot a launch video.” When he said he had no money, they replied, “We’ve got some people who can help early on.”

He gave a similar account in a November 2025 interview with *Breaking Points*. After citing Jane McAlevey’s *No Shortcuts*, a text widely promoted in the union apparatus and the pseudo-left milieu around *Jacobin*, Platner said “there was a move to try and find a candidate to run on economic populism.” The idea, he said, “literally showed up at our doorstep,” through “people affiliated with the AFL” and operatives who had worked on Dan Osborn’s Senate campaign. Osborn is a union official, who ran as a right-wing “independent” candidate in Nebraska in 2024 with the backing of the Democrats, and is running again this year.

The AFL-CIO did not search for a socialist, an antiwar candidate or a representative of rank-and-file workers to run in Maine. It searched for a marketable “working class” face: a Sanders donor with a military background, which turned out to include a Totenkopf (death’s head) tattoo and a kill count.

## The AFL-CIO: Anti-communism, imperialism and class collaboration

The AFL-CIO’s role in recruiting Platner exposes the class character of his campaign. The AFL-CIO is not a fighting organization of the working

class but a corporatist apparatus tied by a thousand threads to the Democratic Party, US imperialism and the capitalist state.

The federation was formed in 1955 through the merger of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

As the WSWS has explained, this merger took place “on the explicit basis of anti-communist red-baiting and support for American imperialism’s Cold War agenda.” AFL-CIO President George Meany combined class collaboration at home with support for US imperialism abroad, including the Vietnam War, while the federation’s foreign affairs department worked with the CIA and the State Department to establish pro-US unions and prop up right-wing dictatorships internationally.

The CIO emerged out of the mass industrial upsurge of the 1930s, but its leadership, working with the Roosevelt administration and the Stalinist Communist Party, blocked the development of a political movement of the working class. Instead, it politically subordinated this movement to the Democratic Party. This was bound up with the preparations of American imperialism for World War II, with the unions accepting no-strike pledges and enforcing labor discipline on the home front.

This history is directly relevant to Platner’s praise for Roosevelt and the New Deal. The New Deal was not socialism, nor was it a peaceful road to working class emancipation. It was a mechanism through which the capitalist state contained mass opposition. Platner’s own formulation to Jon Stewart, that the New Deal “set the stage to win the war,” gives a glimpse of this reality.

After the world war, both the AFL and the CIO conducted anti-communist purges, driving out socialist-minded workers linked to the Communist Party and the Socialist Workers Party, then the Trotskyist movement. The merger in 1955 was the final stage, not in uniting the working class but cementing the split in the bureaucracy on the basis of a common commitment to American imperialism.

In the decades after the postwar boom and in response to the globalization of capitalist production, the AFL-CIO’s apparatus integrated itself ever more directly into the state and corporate management. In the 1980s, it isolated the PATCO air traffic controllers after Reagan fired and blacklisted 11,300 striking workers, opening the door to decades of union busting, concessions, wage cuts and plant closures. The character of the trade union apparatus underwent a fundamental change, as they became nothing more than instruments of the corporations and the capitalist state, a labor police force entirely hostile to the interests of the working class.

The same role continues today. At the May Day Strong events in Chicago, the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and the Democrats sought to smother growing opposition to Trump, war and dictatorship, while figures such as UAW President Shawn Fain promoted economic nationalism and remained silent on US imperialism’s war drive.

Platner’s recruitment by AFL-CIO-connected operatives must be understood in this context. His campaign is an expression of the bureaucracy’s function: to package economic nationalism and pro-union rhetoric as a substitute for class struggle, while channeling opposition back into the Democratic Party.

Platner’s reference to Osborn is significant. The Nebraska union official is promoted by Sanders and sections of the pseudo-left as a model for supposedly “working class” politics outside the two-party system. In reality, his campaign is a reactionary blend of economic nationalism, military credentials, anti-communism and pro-union demagoguery. Platner’s campaign is a Maine version of the same operation, only more openly housed within the Democratic Party.

**A Sanders-style trap for workers and youth and new recruit for the “CIA Democrats”**

Platner’s own description of his politics makes clear the fraud of his “outsider” pose. “I’ve always been a registered Democrat,” he told Stewart. “My entire life [I] have been frustrated with the party.” He complained that the Democrats have “never been able to articulate what it is trying to do, what’s the end goal.”

But the Democratic Party’s “end goal” is not a mystery. It is a party of Wall Street, the billionaires, the CIA and US imperialism, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Vietnam and “terror Tuesdays” under Obama. Bourgeois politicians like Sanders and Platner seek to conceal this history from workers and young people, promoting illusions that the party can be changed from within even as it funds war, backs genocide, attacks immigrants, suppresses strikes and collaborates with the Republican Party in the defense of capitalist rule.

Should Platner be elected, he would not enter the Senate as a tribune of the working class. He would join the roster of former military and intelligence figures promoted by the Democratic Party in recent years, including Elissa Slotkin, Abigail Spanberger, Mark Kelly, Jared Golden, Jason Crow, Mikie Sherrill and Andy Kim.

Like Pennsylvania Senator John Fetterman, another supposedly populist Democrat marketed by *Jacobin* and Sanders as a voice of workers, Platner’s function would be to dragoon opposition to genocide and war back into capitalist politics.

Like Fetterman, as Platner’s campaign has progressed he has gone out of his way to repudiate any association with left-wing politics. In the same *Breaking Points* interview he rejected any association with communism. “No,” he said. “And I’ll be honest, I’ve never considered myself a communist.”

Platner gave a more forceful reply in an interview with CNN last year. “I’m not a communist. I’m not a socialist. I own a small business. I’m a Marine Corps veteran.” Platner presents his credentials to be a bourgeois politician as small business ownership and service in the US military. His phony “populism” is entirely consistent with the defense of private property, imperialism and the Democratic Party.

On immigration, Platner criticized the Trump administration’s use of “masked armed men” but immediately added, “that doesn’t mean that we don’t have a border” or “an effective system.” He called for “more judges,” “more courts” and “more energy and time” to adjudicate asylum cases and applications, adding, “I’m not saying that we don’t have to overhaul our immigration system. We absolutely do.”

This is the standard Democratic Party position. Platner criticizes Trump’s methods while accepting the framework of border enforcement, immigration control and the state’s power to decide which workers may live, work and remain in the country. The disagreement is not over whether the capitalist state should police and divide workers but over how efficiently it should do so and how best to conceal the essential brutality of the effort.

The lesson of Sanders’ career must be drawn. In 2016, millions of workers and young people rallied to Sanders because they wanted a fight against inequality, war and the domination of American society by billionaires. Sanders delivered them to Hillary Clinton. In 2020 and again in 2024, he backed Biden, the president of genocide, war and strikebreaking.

Platner is being prepared to perform the same function. His campaign is not a break with the Democratic Party but a new trap laid by it. Workers and young people looking for a way to fight fascism, war, genocide and social inequality will find no road forward through the Democratic Party, the AFL-CIO bureaucracy or the politics of the New Deal. The fight requires the independent political mobilization of the working class, and the creation of rank-and-file committees, in opposition to both capitalist parties, against the wealth and power of the ruling class and the capitalist system.



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