

El-Sayed—Stevens debate in Michigan: Neither “progressive” nor establishment Democrats offer anything for the working class

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The televised debate between Senate candidates Abdul El-Sayed and Haley Stevens on Tuesday evening in Grand Rapids, Michigan exposed both the sharpening factional crisis within the Democratic Party and the narrow pro-capitalist political limits within which the conflict is being waged.

The Democratic Party winner in the August 4 primary in Michigan will face the unopposed Republican, former Representative Mike Rogers. Rogers, who served 14 years as the Representative from Michigan’s 8th Congressional District, is a Trump-backed candidate for the Senate seat being vacated by Democrat Gary Peters.

The debate on Tuesday followed a sudden shift in the primary field. WOOD-TV8 and CBS News Detroit had planned a three-way event featuring El-Sayed, Stevens and state Senator Mallory McMorrow. However, after polls showed her running a distant third, at between 5 and 6 percent, McMorrow suspended her campaign and abruptly left the race two days before the debate.

The event moderators framed the contest as a pivotal primary in a “closely watched” battleground state, stressing that control of the Senate might hinge on the outcome. This fact has intensified the drive by the Democratic Party establishment and its corporate backers to close ranks around Stevens.

Stevens, who has represented Michigan’s 11th Congressional District, in the western and northern Detroit suburbs, since 2019, invoked her years on Capitol Hill, presenting herself as a “workhorse” legislator who knows how to shepherd legislation, secure appropriations and work within the existing structures of Congress. She emphasized her connections with the auto corporations in Michigan and boasted about serving in the Obama

administration’s auto task force during the 2009 restructuring of the industry.

Her work on Obama’s task force ultimately led, with the support of the UAW bureaucracy, to the slashing of wages in half for newly hired autoworkers and the entrenchment of the despised tiered wages system. El-Sayed, while saying he stands with Michigan’s working families, did not criticize this aspect of Stevens’ resumé and instead spoke of how proud he is to have been endorsed by the UAW.

El-Sayed presented himself as part of the “progressive” faction inside the Democratic Party, claiming to represent “a threat to politics as usual” and to the corporate and political elites. A physician and former director of the Detroit Health Department, he previously mounted a left-talking campaign in the 2018 gubernatorial race, losing to Gretchen Whitmer in the Democratic primary, and later headed the Wayne County Department of Health, Human & Veterans Services.

El-Sayed focused his comments on a claimed rejection of corporate money and referred multiple times to the fact that Stevens has accepted \$40 million in political action committee funds. According to published information, of the estimated \$40 to \$46 million in total advertising spending supporting Representative Haley Stevens, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and its affiliated groups accounted for approximately \$30 million to \$34 million. AIPAC has targeted El-Sayed, who was born in Detroit of Egyptian-American immigrants and is a practicing Muslim, because of his vocal condemnation of the Gaza genocide.

El-Sayed has been riding the recent wave of “progressive” and “democratic socialist” wins in the New

York City and Colorado primaries going back to the victory of Zohran Mamdani in the New York City mayoral race last November. In the early months of 2026, El-Sayed was running third in the polls behind both Stevens and McMorrow, but by May he had surged past both opponents, in large part because of his vocal opposition to the US war with Iran.

When asked about the rising cost of living, both candidates acknowledged that workers across Michigan confront soaring housing costs, medical bills and food prices, but neither advanced a program that challenges capitalist property relations or the priorities of the corporations.

El-Sayed talked in abstract terms about “economic dignity” and linked inflation to corporate profiteering, calling for expanded social spending and stronger unions, while presenting these as attainable within the existing socio-economic system.

Stevens spoke about her role in crafting and defending the Biden administration’s industrial policy, claiming that investments in electric vehicles, semiconductors and green manufacturing will eventually “bring good-paying jobs” and lower costs.

Both candidates advanced economic nationalism as the solution to the problems facing the industrial working class in the US, thus demonstrating their fundamental agreement with the Trump administration, despite their pretense of unbending opposition to the fascist president.

El-Sayed denounced Trump’s war of choice against Iran, claiming the US president was carrying out the policies of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In this way, he sought to avoid any discussion of the historical role of US imperialism in the Middle East, in which Israel is an instrument of Washington, not the other way around.

The moderators pressed both candidates on the administration’s unrelenting military support for Israel as it continues mass killings and destruction in Gaza, as well as on Washington’s confrontation with Iran, which has included escalating air and missile strikes and preparations for a wider regional war.

Stevens reiterated standard pro-Zionist talking points about Israel’s “right to defend itself” and supported continued military aid, and never used the word “genocide,” while mentioning humanitarian aid and the need to “protect civilians.”

On immigration and the role of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), El-Sayed called for the abolition of the police agency, while Stevens said it was

“out of control.” At the same time, they both called for secure borders and a “comprehensive” immigration policy, political code for continued deportations with less open bigotry and violence.

Under the guise of “fiscal responsibility,” Stevens signaled her willingness to support bipartisan deficit reduction deals, stressing her willingness to “make tough choices” on spending while asserting that she would “protect” Social Security and Medicare through tweaks, such as lifting the payroll tax cap or “strengthening” the trust fund.

While El-Sayed denounced Republican calls to cut Social Security, he issued vague assurances that “working people’s earned benefits” would be safe, but he did not address the contradiction between Social Security and maintaining the massive military budget, tax cuts for corporations, and the prerogatives of Wall Street under conditions of the massive \$40 trillion national debt.

Neither candidate linked the debt discussion to the trillions poured into war, bank bailouts and corporate subsidies, nor did they oppose the bipartisan attacks on pandemic-era social supports that have already driven millions back into poverty.

The debate exposed the efforts by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) to present El-Sayed as a “left” and even a “socialist” candidate. Despite his endorsement by Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, El-Sayed has never called himself a socialist, avoiding even the pretense that he opposes the capitalist system.

Whatever the ultimate outcome on August 4, the Democratic Party, in Michigan as across the US, offers no alternative to war, dictatorship and capitalist exploitation. The essential task for workers remains not choosing between rival factions of the two parties of the military-industrial-information complex and the financial oligarchy on Wall Street but building an independent political movement of the working class, based on a socialist program and dedicated to putting an end to capitalism in the US and on a world scale.



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