

El-Sayed: “I am a capitalist”

Stevens and El-Sayed debate in run-up to Democratic Senate primary

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On July 27, Congresswoman Haley Stevens and former Wayne County health department director Abdul El-Sayed held their final debate ahead of the August 4 Democratic primary election for US senator from Michigan. The winner of that contest will face Republican Mike Rogers, former congressman from Michigan’s 8th Congressional District, in the November general election.

The Democratic primary has attracted a great deal of national attention. El-Sayed ran for governor in 2018 and lost in the Democratic primary to the incumbent governor Gretchen Whitmer. He has gained popular support among workers and young people in the current election by running as an anti-establishment “progressive,” calling for Medicare for all, the abolition of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and a cutoff of military funding to Israel.

He is seeking to capitalize on the wave of election victories—in New York, Washington D.C., Denver and other cities—of candidates backed by Bernie Sanders and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), some of whom call themselves socialists. These elections, along with the election last November of DSA member Zohran Mamdani as New York mayor, express a broad and deep shift to the left toward socialism in the political orientation of working and young people and sections of the middle class. On July 18, Sanders, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Representative Rashida Tlaib and UAW President Shawn Fain shared the platform with El-Sayed at a campaign rally in Detroit.

During the July 27 debate, El-Sayed made a point of declaring his opposition to socialism, signaling to the corporate oligarchy that he did not represent a threat to its basic interests. “I am not a socialist,” he said. “I am a capitalist who understands how capitalism works.” He went on to say he was in favor of government regulation of business and opposed to monopolies. He made no attempt to explain how he would implement these changes under conditions of record levels of wealth concentration and control of both parties by Wall Street.

Stevens is serving her fourth term as congresswoman from the 11th Congressional District, based in Oakland County and the northwest suburbs of Detroit. She is running openly as the

candidate of the Democratic Party establishment, arguing that she is better positioned than El-Sayed to defeat Rogers in the general election.

At stake is the Senate seat being vacated by Democrat Gary Peters, who has held the position since 2015. From the standpoint of electoral politics, the outcome of the race is pivotal, since the Democrats must retain Peters’ seat to have any hope of winning control of the chamber from the Republicans. On the other side, Donald Trump’s plunging approval ratings make flipping the Senate seat critical to maintaining Republican control.

Record sums are being poured into the Democratic primary, overwhelmingly for Stevens. Outside groups have spent \$60 million in her behalf, the bulk, somewhere between \$30 million and \$34 million, coming from super PACs backed by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

Stevens is an ardent defender of Israel. She refuses to call the US-backed mass murder carried out by Israel in Gaza a genocide and voted in July against an amendment to cut off \$3.3 billion in US military aid to the Zionist state. She has said that Israel “comes to me in my dreams.” On Thursday, she placed a post on X accusing El-Sayed of being an antisemite: “Everyone in America understands you want to blame all of your problems on Jewish Americans.”

The most recent opinion poll on the primary race has El-Sayed leading by a substantial margin, but other polls have Stevens ahead. El-Sayed has gained ground since the early days of the race and appears to have the momentum on his side.

In the July 27 debate, broadcast by Fox 2 Detroit, Stevens boasted of her establishment credentials. She said she had been endorsed by Governor Whitmer, Attorney General Dana Nessel, Senator Gary Peters, former senator Debbie Stabenow and the chair of the legislative Black Caucus. Following the debate, Detroit Police Commissioner Victoria Camillo posted a video on X announcing her endorsement of Stevens.

The debate for the most part consisted of mutual mud-slinging, with El-Sayed attacking Stevens for taking “foreign” money and voting to fund “foreign governments” (Israel) rather than investing in Michigan. Stevens for her part denounced El-

Sayed for failing to release his tax returns and claimed she was the only non-millionaire running for the Senate seat.

The two candidates vied for the distinction of having the closest ties to the trade union bureaucracy. Stevens touted her 17 “labor endorsements.” El-Sayed said, “I’m grateful for the endorsement of the UAW,” and added, “The UAW built the US auto industry.” He boasted as well of his endorsement by the American Federation of Teachers.

Both candidates espoused economic nationalism. Stevens denounced Trump and Rogers, saying they “lick the bootstraps of China.” She has a record of anti-China demagoguery.

A member of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, she participated in a March 26 hearing one week after the suicide of University of Michigan researcher Danhao Wang at which members of both parties railed against the supposed theft of US scientific research by Chinese researchers. Wang jumped to his death after being interrogated by federal agents, including ICE officers.

This followed the frame-up, jailing and deportation of several Chinese post-doctoral researchers at the University of Michigan for allegedly smuggling harmless research materials. At the hearing, Stevens promoted legislation to expand the definition of partnerships with “malign foreign talent programs,” a bill, since passed by the House, that broadens federal spying on researchers engaged in routine academic exchange, data sharing, or co-authorship with foreign nationals.

El-Sayed echoed the nationalist (and pro-Trump) line of UAW President Shawn Fain, denouncing the US-Mexico-Canada (USMCA) trade agreement and attacking Stevens for voting for it. He also declared his support for “targeted tariffs.”

On ICE and the rampage against immigrants, Stevens said she would not vote for a “penny more” for the immigration Gestapo, meaning she would leave it intact. El-Sayed said he would abolish ICE, but went on to make it clear he supported the anti-immigrant system.

He declared, “We can have a safe and secure southern border and we can enforce immigration policies. But ICE is not about that.” Advocacy of a “secure border” is code for denying immigrant workers seeking refuge from poverty and repression caused by US imperialist intervention and plunder the right to live and work where they choose. El-Sayed reinforced his support for the apparatus of state repression, adding, “That is not to say that we are not going to keep our streets secure. It is not to say we are not going to enforce immigration policy. It is not to say you can’t have a safe border.”

The escalating war of aggression in Iran and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine went virtually unmentioned. The same was the case with the Trump administration’s drive to dictatorship, including its preparations to call off, rig or overturn the results of the November midterm elections.

Stevens was entirely silent on the war against Iran. El-Sayed referred to it once, but only to claim that it was “pushed by a foreign country (Israel).” This line, that the war in Iran is

Israel’s war, into which the dupe Trump was dragged by Netanyahu, obscures the real relationship between US imperialism and its attack dog in the Middle East, Israel. It provides cover for the chief instigator of war and reaction internationally, US imperialism. It is promoted by pseudo-left organizations and, on the right, by overtly antisemitic forces.

The point at which the debate most clearly exposed the class lines dividing both the “progressive” and the establishment candidate from the working class came when Stevens said she was “deeply proud” of her role as a member of Barack Obama’s auto task force, which oversaw the structured bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler in 2009. This was a multi-billion-dollar government bailout of the auto companies that imposed savage attacks on the autoworkers to ensure to profitability of the bosses and Wall Street investors going forward.

The “restructuring,” carried out with the full support of the UAW bureaucracy, including then-local union president Fain, slashed the wages of new-hires in half, to \$14 an hour, and institutionalized the two-tier wage system, which remains in place to this day. It directly cut 35,000 auto jobs and shuttered dozens of plants. The economy-wide impact, including suppliers, dealers and ripple effects, eliminated an estimated 171,000 jobs.

The plan gutted retiree health care. GM was allowed to pay half of its \$20 billion obligation to the union-controlled retiree health care fund in stock rather than cash. This gave union officials a direct financial stake in the companies’ profitability and made them partners in further wage-cutting.

It imposed a six-year ban on strikes.

El-Sayed, in line with his alliance with the UAW bureaucracy, was silent on Stevens’ touting of her role in imposing this devastating attack on autoworkers.

Neither candidate made any call to mobilize mass popular opposition to the corporate oligarchy and its policies of war, austerity and repression. El-Sayed, in particular, sought to use his left rhetoric and reform demands to contain working class resistance and rebellion within the confines of the Democratic Party. Along with the DSA and the pseudo-left as a whole, his candidacy is aimed at blocking the emergence of an independent movement of the working class.



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