The “socialist” and the former CIA officer: Sanders and Slotkin team up to bolster the Democratic Party

Jacob Crosse
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Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders appeared alongside Michigan Senator and former Central Intelligence Agency officer Elissa Slotkin at a press conference Tuesday at the Capitol to call for “change” in the Democratic Party. The self-described “democratic socialist” offered workers and youth an empty program centered on an alliance with the military-intelligence agencies.

The occasion was Sanders’s announcement that he would not support Chuck Schumer’s reelection as Senate Democratic leader. But the political significance extended beyond the question of which Democrat would preside over the party’s new majority. Sanders was presenting one of the most prominent “CIA Democrats” as a partner in renewing a party discredited by its service to Wall Street and American imperialism.

Tuesday’s joint conference came after an election expressing mass hostility to the Trump administration and its attacks on immigrants, war mongering and corruption. Democrats secured control of both chambers, with at least 55 Senate seats and projections of roughly 260 House seats.

A post-election analysis by the American Enterprise Institute showed 53 percent of voters viewing Democrats unfavorably and 57 percent viewing Republicans unfavorably. Fifteen percent had a favorable opinion of neither party.

Slotkin herself acknowledged the character of the vote at the press conference. “People are so exhausted with Trump and so exhausted at the economic stress in their life that they’re willing to vote for anything different,” she said. “That’s very different than people falling in love with Democrats and saying like, that’s where my heart is.”

Throughout the event, Sanders referred affectionately to “Chuck” and approvingly to “Elissa.” Sanders began with his familiar denunciations of inequality, declaring that “the billionaire class has never ever had it so good.” The election, he said, was “about change” and “the need for the Democratic Party, in my view, to move in a new and bold direction.”

He continued: “I personally have known Chuck Schumer for over 30 years, and I like Chuck... [T]here’s nobody who works harder than Chuck Schumer. But in my view, the time is now for change, and I will not be supporting Chuck to be re-elected as the Democratic leader.”

After calling for a “vigorous debate” to demonstrate “that a new day has come,” Sanders handed the microphone to Slotkin.

Slotkin was a prominent example in Patrick Martin’s 2018 series, “The CIA Democrats,” which documented the Democratic leadership’s systematic recruitment of candidates from the military-intelligence apparatus. Before entering Congress, she served three CIA tours in Iraq, worked as an aide to Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte and held national security positions under George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Her election to the Senate exemplifies the growing authority of these forces within the party.

This process has accelerated. As Martin documented in his latest series, the Democrats nominated 67 congressional candidates from the military-intelligence apparatus in 2026, including 10 incumbents, more than double the number in any of the previous four elections. Meanwhile, figures from the first wave have moved into statewide office. Slotkin and former National Security Council official Andy Kim entered the Senate, and former CIA officer Abigail Spanberger and former Navy helicopter pilot Mikie Sherrill were elected governors of Virginia and New Jersey last year.

Republicans and the pseudo-left alike have seized on the election of a handful of DSA-affiliated Democrats, the former to warn of a “communist” takeover of the party, the latter to claim it is moving left. The far more substantial development is the influx and promotion of military officers, intelligence operatives and national security officials, which is making the Democrats ever more openly a party of the military-intelligence apparatus.

Sanders’s appearance beside Slotkin shows how the party’s nominal left helps legitimize this transformation by presenting its leading personnel as partners in the fight for social reform.

Slotkin’s record earned her the endorsement of Liz Cheney, daughter of former Vice President and war criminal Dick Cheney, in her 2022 House reelection campaign. This is Sanders’s partner in moving the Democrats in a “new and bold direction.”

Later on in the press conference, Slotkin claimed the election results did not represent a leftward political radicalization among workers and youth. “So look, I think what one of the big messages out of this election was also that it’s not just like progressive versus moderate. It is literally economic security at the forefront of people’s minds,” she said.

“It’s not about one wing or the other wing. It’s about are we going to have a strong middle class in this country or not?”

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Sanders followed: “Let me just say I don’t want to get into all the policy issues.” He added that “Elissa was exactly right” to call for a “vigorous debate.”

Slotkin offered no concrete commitment to any policy proposal, including whether the next leader of the Senate Democrats would block funding to the illegal war against Iran, impeach the fascist in the White House or abolish the murderous immigration Gestapo. Instead, the former CIA officer declared the division between “progressives” and “moderates” irrelevant, while Sanders supplied his endorsement.

The exchange demonstrated the relationship the *World Socialist Web Site* has long identified between the “CIA Democrats” and the party’s nominal left. They perform complementary functions within the same capitalist party. The former bring the personnel and priorities of the military-intelligence apparatus directly into Congress; the latter supply rhetoric aimed at keeping workers and young people tied to it.

In 2021, Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the DSA, transferred $5,000 each to 32 vulnerable House Democrats, among them Slotkin and fellow former CIA officer Abigail Spanberger. Slotkin returned the money rather than be associated with Ocasio-Cortez.

Only months earlier, after the November 2020 election, Spanberger had blamed Democratic congressional losses on associations with socialism, declaring on a caucus call: “We need to not ever use the words ‘socialist’ or ‘socialism’ ever again.” Ocasio-Cortez answered this open hostility to socialism by helping to finance its authors.

The press conference addressed the problem this poses for the Democratic establishment: how to contain opposition to Trump, inequality and war within a party no less committed to capitalism and war than the Republicans.

Slotkin said Americans had “voted for their pocketbooks” and were “exhausted by costs and corruption.” Whoever sought to lead the caucus, she said, should explain what they would do “in the first 100 days to put money in people’s pockets” and “how they’re going to communicate differently.”

Unlike Sanders, she did not rule out supporting Schumer. “I’m a no until and unless I see that from anyone,” she said. “I personally will work with anyone who wants to work on that mission.”

Virtually the entire press conference concerned domestic issues, and Sanders’s remarks on foreign policy were brief. Standing beside a former CIA officer who served three tours in occupied Iraq, he declared:

> Foreign policy is a very important part of that debate, in my view. Uh, the war in Vietnam was based on a lie. The war in Iraq was based on a lie. The war in Iran is based on a lie, in my view. I think US military aid to Israel is certainly a very sensitive subject among tens of millions of people. These are issues that have got to be debated and discussed.

Sanders did not ask Slotkin to account for her years with the CIA in occupied Iraq. He did not name the genocide in Gaza, describing military aid to Israel only as a “very sensitive subject.” Ukraine and Yemen went unmentioned.

Even the war against Iran, which Sanders called a lie, was presented as one more issue to be “debated and discussed.” No demand to end military aid to Israel or halt the war emerged from the event. Nor did anyone explain how the Democrats would address people’s “pocketbooks” while spending billions on war and police.

Opposition to imperialist war cannot be separated from the social questions Sanders invokes. The same ruling class that demands military spending and war abroad insists that workers accept deteriorating living standards at home. Sanders’s alliance with Slotkin is aimed at chloroforming workers and youth to this reality.

Both senators mentioned Maryland Senator Chris Van Hollen as a possible leadership candidate. Neither endorsed him. The recurring demand was for a vague plan, with the political content left to future negotiations among Democratic senators.

Asked where Schumer had fallen short, Sanders again began by saying he did not want to get too deeply into the issues. After describing the healthcare system as broken and unaffordable, he declared: “I don’t want to get into specific proposals.

“The time is now to deal with the need to create an economy that works for all, not just the people on top,” he said. “And do I think Chuck has been leading in that direction? No, I don’t.”

Even so, Sanders praised Schumer’s fundraising. “I think Chuck and Kirsten [Gillibrand] raised a whole lot of money, which is a great help to many candidates, and I think they do deserve credit.”

Schumer’s supporters, meanwhile, rallied behind him. Rhode Island Senator Sheldon Whitehouse said Tuesday that Schumer’s role in winning the Senate majority “certainly justifies another term as leader.”

Schumer’s service to the financial oligarchy is hardly a discovery. Sanders has worked alongside him for years while urging workers to support the Democratic Party. His presidential campaigns in 2016 and 2020 ended in endorsements of Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden, and in 2024 he campaigned for Kamala Harris. Each time, opposition to inequality was channeled behind the preferred candidate of the Democratic establishment and Wall Street.

Tuesday’s press conference continued this record, now with a former CIA officer at his side. Sanders’s denunciations of billionaires go hand in hand with appeals to support their political representatives and illusions that capitalism can be reformed. Workers and youth moving toward socialism confront the need to break with this party and its defenders.



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