A fork in the road confronts the Bernie Sanders movement

Andy Yorke Thu, 09/06/2016 - 16:51

Bernie Sanders’ decision to run for president has done more than shake up the Democratic Party, it has created the possibility of a new political party in a way that has not been seen since the 1960s. In May 2015, when he launched his bid for the Democratic nomination he had just 5 per cent support, 56.6 points behind Hillary Clinton, the millionaire candidate of the Democratic Party establishment. By April 2016, that gap was just one percent. Sanders’ stinging attacks on the billionaire class, his ceaseless agitation for demands like universal healthcare and higher minimum wage, his calls for a political revolution, have rallied hundreds of thousands to his campaign, in particular from a generation of youth radicalised since 2008. By the end of the primaries in June, he will have received over 10 million votes, something astounding for an openly “democratic socialist” candidate in the US. He has even exceeded Obama’s record pull of the youth vote in 2008, winning 71 per cent of voters under thirty in the primaries up to June.1 His campaign has been kept afloat by a record number of small donations, over two and a half million, that average $27, while Clinton’s funding has been mostly big donations and SuperPAC money, the fundraising machines that take in the unlimited, often anonymous, donations from big business, that Sanders has refused to use.2

But despite this, Clinton will be crowned the nominee at the Philadelphia party convention in late July, barring a miracle. Sanders isn’t too far behind in elected, “pledged” delegates from the primaries and caucuses (1,615 to Clinton’s 1,926). But after winning the giant California on 7 June she has passed the fifty per cent mark, because she is also supported by the bulk of “super-delegates”, the 700-plus Democratic Party elite who get to vote how they want (571 to Sanders’ 48), handing her an unassailable lead.3

The primaries are structured to weed out left anti-establishment candidates like Sanders. Conservative Southern states vote early, shifting the contest to the right. In the “closed” primaries in New York and many other Northeast states, only registered Democrats could vote, often with deadlines for registration weeks or even months before the vote, skewing the election towards the older, better off, whiter and more conservative party loyalists, at the expense of the young, black, immigrant and poor. The New York primary, particularly strict and requiring registration in October, six months earlier, saw three million independent voters excluded and 125,000 voters removed from the Brooklyn rolls. These rules have helped give Clinton her lead in the primary vote.4

Sanders may have brought in millions of new young voters and independents, but Clinton has the entire Democratic Party machine behind her, including its leadership, the Democratic National Committee, DNC, which, along with 32 state Democratic Committees, has openly raised funds for her.5 The Democratic establishment includes not just politicians but the wealthy top layer of the big, corporate-money stuffed, advocacy groups launched by the historic social movements of the sixties and seventies that have become
Democrat constituencies, turning out the voters via community groups, churches and local party caucuses. Clinton early on won the support of most unions, without their members having a say, and locked in the bourgeois feminist groups like NOW. The Clinton dynasty’s near-monopoly on the African-American establishment dates back to Bill Clinton, sickeningly referred to as ‘America’s first Black President’ for his assiduous courting of the Black vote, via the community and religious leaders, politicians and business elites that largely delivered the Super Tuesday Southern states to her. Meanwhile, the bulk of local and state Democratic-leaning journalists and papers have backed her.

Seeing likely defeat ahead, Sanders has begun to hedge his bets and emphasise inserting the key demands of his programme into the Democrats’ platform to be decided at the Convention. The problem with that is that the Democrat platform in no way binds any of its politicians, the president especially, to carrying it out. Clinton will sign up to as little as possible, and likely ignore the rest. Those hoping to use the Democratic Party for radical change will find their way blocked at every point, it is the first line of defence of the American political system’s array of circuit-breakers, aimed at preserving the status quo and upholding the interests of US capitalism.

Obama generation turns to Sanders

A key moment came in the last debate between Clinton and Sanders during the New York primary on 14 April in Brooklyn. Clinton repeatedly attempted to present herself as the continuity candidate, laying claim to Obama’s record. Against Clinton’s calls for realism, however, it was Sanders who proved himself the successor to Obama’s message of hope and change, echoing the optimistic ‘yes we can?’ slogan that launched Obama’s meteoric rise eight years before.

Obama called for unity, including of ‘rich and poor?’ and Republicans and Democrats against gridlock, but the experience of his presidency has left those illusions in tatters, with years of falling real wages and stubborn unemployment, deepening poverty and skyrocketing inequality. Finally, the tensions exploded among the poorest and most oppressed, with the fast food strikes and Fight for $15, and the Ferguson revolt which exposed the mass incarceration and escalating police killings of African American men. Sanders’ young supporters are inspired not just by his ‘authenticity?’ (the fact that his rhetoric and record match up) but by his blunt talk of disunity, his denunciations of the ‘billionaire class’ and a ‘rigged economy?’ and his call for a political revolution against big business control of elections, the two main parties and the political system. Attacked by CEOs after he supported striking Verizon workers in April, Sanders hit back in a way very few (if any) Democratic politicians would, declaring ‘I welcome their contempt.’

The Democrats’ 2008 platform promised to increase union rights for workers through the Employee Free Choice Act, EFCA, to reform the North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA (and Obama promised to ‘not support Nafta-style trade agreements in the future’?) and ‘cut poverty in half within ten years?’ Instead, EFCA was dropped immediately after his inauguration, NAFTA reform was replaced by pushing the Trans-Pacific Partnership, TPP, and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, TTIP, and there are now 6.5 million more below the poverty line. These issues have resurfaced now with far more radical force. A shocked GOP pollster found a sea change in the consciousness of 18-26 year old Americans, with a majority rejecting American exceptionalism (the US is the best country in the world), while almost two thirds, 58 percent, rate socialism and even communism, 9 percent, as more compassionate than capitalism. Their least-respected professions were bankers, 2 percent, elected officials, 4 percent, and business leaders, 6 percent. Not surprisingly, 31 percent liked and respected Sanders more than any other politician.

Particularly heartening is the way the Black youth have struck out independently of the old Civil Rights
Movement establishment over its slow reaction to police killings and mass incarceration, launching the new, radical anti-racist movement. Black Lives Matter, BLM, its most prominent national grouping, has so far refused to endorse any candidates or the Democrats because we are pushing a real revolution?. Indeed, BLM activists began by protesting Sanders' events as well as Clinton?s, forcing him to abandon his Seattle rally last August. However, many have been increasingly disgusted by the way the Democrat black leaders and politicians have attacked and smeared Sanders and backed Clinton, who campaigned for president Bill Clinton?s crime and welfare bills in the 1990s, which have hiked poverty and criminalisation of the black community, and her ?dogwhistle? racist rhetoric at the time that smeared black youth as ?superpredators?. Many prominent black activists and intellectuals, such as Michelle Alexander, have rallied (critically) to his defence, condemning Clinton's record and welcoming Sanders? call for a political revolution. The Atlantic?s Ta-Nehisi Coates has also endorsed him.

The potential for a new party of the exploited and oppressed is underlined by these new developments, and by the multiracial youth protests that spilled out of the primaries and into the streets to confront Trump supporters in St Louis and Chicago in March, and again in California, foreshadowing a mass Stop Trump movement in the coming months. However, although many might see Sanders as the ?change we can believe in?, to use the old Obama slogan, as president he would be a virtual prisoner in the White House, besieged by a Congress of Republicans and mainstream Democrats, and a hostile Supreme Court. Sanders' call for a political revolution requires a far deeper social struggle, outside the political system and elections, a struggle that could not remain shackled to the Democratic Party.

**Sanders? programme**

As well as openly calling himself a socialist, Sanders has relentlessly agitated for an economic programme that addresses the burning issues of the US working class, the poor and African-Americans which, if enacted, would mean a significant reversal of a decades-long trend of falling standards of living. He has reiterated its key planks as demands on a Clinton candidacy and the Democrats? platform, to be decided at the Convention:

> This campaign is going to the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia with as many delegates as possible to fight for a progressive party platform that calls for a $15 an hour minimum wage, an end to our disastrous trade policies, a Medicare-for-all health care system, breaking up Wall Street financial institutions, ending fracking in our country, making public colleges and universities tuition free, and passing a carbon tax so we can effectively address the planetary crisis of climate change.

His plans to tax the rich and speculators to fund his reforms and massive, green infrastructure investment, are absolutely anathema to corporate America and the top 1 per cent. His policies, even a limited hike in taxes on the wealthy and raising the minimum wage, would hit US capitalism in its pocket, just as the world economy looks weaker and quantitative easing seems to have run out of steam as an antidote to outright stagnation. In total his economic programme represents substantial damage to the neoliberal order that has enriched the American capitalist class, whose future profits rely on its further extension not reversal.

Worse, speech after speech banging away at a system rigged against the poor to enrich the billionaires patently speaks the truth and therefore does real damage. Along with his calls for a mass movement and ?political revolution?, his campaign is organising hundreds of thousands, radicalising millions and threatens to spark real, militant resistance to neoliberal austerity at home. It is this threefold attack on US capitalism - on its domestic and international sources of profit and its legitimacy? and threat to organise outside of elections that have made him the enemy of the US ruling class and the Democratic leadership.

While Sanders calls himself a socialist or, more often, a democratic socialist, and has a portrait of the early
twentieth century Socialist Party leader Eugene Debs on his wall, his models are the Scandinavian countries and the Democratic presidents Lyndon Johnson and, particularly, Franklin D. Roosevelt who used government to create jobs, attack poverty, and create a welfare system. Sanders may use the S word but in reality his programme is little different from the left liberal wing of the Democratic Party.

The emphasis on economic issues goes alongside a more mixed, mainstream liberal-interventionist record on political issues. While opposing the mass incarceration, Sanders has voted for law and order bills that expand sentencing and use of the death penalty and against immigration reform to protect jobs. He wants to shrink military spending but supported US imperialism's operations and invasions; Somalia and Kosovo under Clinton, Afghanistan in 2001, or the appropriations to sustain them, as in Iraq. He is ?closer to Obama? than Clinton on foreign policy issues, endorsing the sending of 250 more US troops to Syria if they are for ?training and support? and for continuing Obama?s drone programme but using it ?very selectively?. His commitment to Israel is only qualified by his stubborn insistence that it ?over-reacted? in its assaults on Gaza which, unbelievably, is close to heresy in a national election campaign.

Sanders is against NATO's expansion, not NATO itself, and wants European allies to take on more of its funding, like Trump. His rejection of trade deals is part of his appeal to white workers, again like Trump. But there the similarity ends. The loud, bragging demagogue Trump is a billionaire property developer, the system's beneficiary and its best symbol, who has bought his way into the election, while Sanders felt forced to jump on board the Democrats for a national platform, the only option he could see in the monolithic two-party system.

Sanders? ?independent? label has worn thin over the years; he is the longest serving independent in congressional history, but has been increasingly integrated into the Democrats' operations in Congress and at elections, they do not stand candidates against him anymore, and he votes with the Democrats more than the average Democrat in Congress! Even so, US capital will breathe a sigh of relief at a Clinton win and will look to the Democratic Convention to limit Sanders' impact on policy.

Wild cards in the election

Trump's open racism and ?America First? foreign policy, which threatens to lose Latino votes in swing states and smash up the USA's postwar alliances and free trade agreements, are a nightmare for big business and Republican bosses alike. However, now that he has clinched a majority of delegates, they are even more frightened of him carrying out his threat to run as an independent if they deny him the nomination. He, in turn, has toned his rhetoric down and dropped the off-the-cuff policy making to win the Republican establishment's support. The ?Never Trump? Republicans have nearly fizzled out, fatally weakened by House Republican Speaker Paul Ryan finally endorsing him on 2 June. Barring wild cards (an FBI investigation into Clinton's illegal use of a private server to send classified documents, and the pressure on the billionaire Trump to release his tax returns, disclosing possible avoidance or worse) it looks like a Trump vs Hillary election.

Republican nightmares are Democratic dreams. Clinton and the DNC are hoping to win on an anti-Trump ticket, aiming to clean up among women voters repulsed by his sexism and anti-abortion stance. Latino voter registration is skyrocketing, angered by Trump's racist plans to deport 11 million undocumented workers, make Mexico build a wall to keep immigrants out and stop remittances. Two million extra are expected to vote compared to 2012, which could see swing states like Florida go to the Democrats. The DNC are already planning to pitch their platform to win moderate Republicans, minimising concessions to Sanders while demanding he deliver his supporters. Sanders' repeated assurances that he will support Clinton if he loses actually weaken his hand in these negotiations. Clinton hopes that most of the Sanders youth, even the ?Bernie or Bust? wing, will turn to her out of hatred of Trump, in a vote for the ?lesser evil?. 
The DNC’s dream opponent may be Trump, but they should be careful what they wish for. The ultimate politician and Washington insider, Clinton is already proving a gift to the anti-establishment Trump. Polls show that she has a negative rating, 55.4 per cent unfavourable to 40.8 per cent favourable, and this trend has been growing throughout 2016.\textsuperscript{28} Many see her as untrustworthy and, while Trump’s unfavourable ratings are marginally higher, they are falling.\textsuperscript{29} Trump vs Clinton projections saw her lead drop to nothing in late May.\textsuperscript{30} Most worryingly for the DNC, her ratings are even worse with Sanders’ supporters, a high percentage of whom are non-Democrat independents, and keep dropping, with only 55 percent saying they would vote for her and 15 percent saying they would actually vote Trump.\textsuperscript{31}

On the other hand, Trump’s campaign has boosted Republican turnout, at least in the earlier primaries, higher than the Democrats, the highest since 1980, the year Ronald Reagan swept into office and imposed the neoliberal order in the US.\textsuperscript{32} The conservative news outlet, Breitbart, claimed Democrat primary turnout was 20 percent lower than in 2008, while Donald Trump had already received 2 million more primary votes than Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney in 2012, in the states polling so far.\textsuperscript{33} There are also signs Trump’s message is resonating in key swing states of the Northeast ?rust belt?, a traditionally Democrat area hit by the very free trade agreements Clinton supported.\textsuperscript{34} There is more room for the Democrats to raise youth and Hispanic turnout than for Trump to raise the white male turnout, but in a year when even the pollsters are saying their models look less reliable than ever, there are a number of unknowns: the possible switch of poorer white voters from the Democrats to the anti-establishment Trump, the youth turnout and Bernie-or-busters, the disproportionate role of a few crucial swing states; Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, where the two candidates are currently neck and neck, the possible crises over his tax returns or her illegal emails and the possibilities a radical anti-Trump movement gives to the left.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{Break from the Democrats}

Many have compared the Sanders movement to the supporters of Jeremy Corbyn in Britain’s Labour Party but, while there are certainly similarities, the differences are fundamental. Labour is the party of the trade unions, from which it overwhelmingly draws its funding and a large part of its membership, and is the historic party of the British working class, while the Democrats are a party of US big business with the unions as, at best, a junior partner, and the union bureaucracy as just one strand in the Democrat coalition. The trade union bureaucracy in the US, without a party of its own, is under even more intense pressure to concede to ?realism? as one constituency within the confines of the Democrats. Its contributions are dwarfed by those of big business: in the 2012 election cycle (not just the presidency) business gave $9.5 billion, compared to the trade unions’ $1.7 billion.\textsuperscript{36} In the 2016 election cycle so far, trade union contributions to the Democrats, $25.1m, have been dwarfed by corporate money, $468.4m, ensuring labour’s subordination.\textsuperscript{37}

The contradiction between the capitalist apparatus and the working class base that exists in Labour is thus of an entirely different order in the Democrats. Because of the trade union bureaucracy’s acceptance of its subordinate status in the name of realism, the Democratic Party has never come close to splitting but rather has blunted, taken over and incorporated every upsurge of popular political protest from the farmer-led Populist Party of 1892-6 to the working class 1930s upsurge and the social movements of the seventies and the anti-war movement after 2003.

An attempt to develop a labor party in the 1990s, led by a section of the left union bureaucracy in response to Clinton’s rightwing policies, failed to go forward due to its bureaucratic caution and refusal to use elections until it had won a ?substantial portion of the actually-existing labor movement?. It stagnated and was then abandoned in the face of the challenges of the Bush years, with the union movement cowed by the War on Terror, the AFL-CIO moving rightward and splitting into two rival federations, and the ?anyone
but Bush? mood to elect the Democrats.38

Left-liberal leaders inside the Democratic Party ? from FDR himself to anti-Vietnam war Senator Eugene McCarthy in 1968, Jesse Jackson of the Rainbow Coalition in the 1980s, the anti-Iraq war Dennis Kucinich in 2004 ? have been crucial to coopting radical voters and movements into the Democrats, helped along by the ?progressive? (reformist) left outside the Democrats, from the Communist Party to the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the remnants of the old Socialist Party. If Sanders plays the same role again, initiating a movement but seeking to bind it to the Democrats, his supporters will have to resist this and demand political independence.

In the US, the only road forward is for the most political workers and youth, who have seen through the Democratic illusion, to band together and struggle for a new working class party, and recognise that the class struggle comes before elections.

Contradictions of Sanders? strategy

Even before he decided to stand, Sanders stressed he would not run as a ?spoiler? candidate and will back the Democrats against the Republicans in November.39 He has always worked with the Democrats and he made it clear from the start that he would support the Democratic nominee. After his New York primary defeat, when the media and Democrat hacks demanded he say whether he would get his supporters to vote for Clinton in November, he did strike a defiant note: ?We're not a movement where I can snap my fingers?it's incumbent on her to tell millions of people who right now do not believe in establishment politics or establishment economics, who have serious misgivings about a candidate who has received millions of dollars from Wall Street and other special interests, how she will take on Wall Street, take on corporate interests.? Even then, however, he stated that ?I will do everything in my power to make sure no Republican gets into the White House in this election?.40

His strategy since the 26 April wipe-out is clear; to take the process as far as possible and, if not win, at least extract the maximum concessions from Clinton for an ?agenda for working people? and then back her in November.41 Having jumped on board the Democrats to gain a national platform for the presidency, he built his core message in part around uniting the Democrats in November to keep out the Republicans, one of the ?crowd pleasing? themes in the primary rallies, it will be difficult for him to back out now, and the Democratic establishment would ruthlessly attack him if he were to do so. Of course, he should buck the system and split with them anyway, running as an independent, his supporters would see that he had taken his fight as far as he could within the Democrats and many would not vote for Clinton anyway.

The calculation of the Democratic leadership in accepting Sanders? candidacy must always have been to energise the left and extend the vote, or even ?better in the tent than out? in case he decided to go it alone. Certainly, they never saw his campaign going so far, but their calculation is still likely to prove correct that he will bolster not damage the Democrat vote, particularly in the context of Trump where even many Bernie-or-busters may change their mind.

Where now for the Sanders movement?

Many on the US left have laid aside the principle of working class political independence to support Sanders? campaign. For reformists, of course, there never was a question of principle; active support for the Sanders campaign inside the Democrats will be followed, if necessary, by a vote for Clinton to keep out Trump. The Democratic Socialists of America, DSA, which claims 7,000 members, hopes the Sanders campaign and its ?social democratic programme? will help in its long-term goal to ?strengthen the party?s left wing, represented by the Congressional Progressive Caucus?, at least until something better comes
Along.42

Similarly, the Communist Party chairman, John Bachtell, calls for a vote for Clinton against Trump because a rightwing Republican government will set back that political revolution many, many years. Sanders’ democratic rhetoric fits particularly nicely with the reformist, Stalinist schema of a never ending democratic stage of the revolution before we can finally fight for socialism. The idea that the Democratic Party could be a tool for a political revolution, much less socialism, is something Socialists should reject. Like the American political system at large, the Democratic Party is a powerful national apparatus built to obstruct, co-opt, and breakdown radical movements, its establishment far larger and with far more funds behind it than the British Labour Party’s rightwing, its membership with far fewer avenues through which to organise democratically.

Socialist Alternative, the US section of the Committee for a Workers’ International, CWI, does reject transforming the Democrats, but backs Sanders, arguing for the need for a politicized movement from below, and a new party?, saying it is sectarian to do otherwise. They have initiated the Movement4Bernie campaign which aims to bring millions behind Bernie’s campaign to win in 2016? and building a new political party for the 99 per cent that refuses to take any corporate money. Now they are petitioning Sanders to continue running through November as an independent or on the Green Party ticket with Jill Stein, if he is blocked in the rigged primary process, and to call a conference to discuss launching a new party of the 99 per cent?, while avoiding swing states that might see the Republicans get in.

The basic problem for the socialists that want to support Sanders is, in for a penny, in for a pound?. Compare it to Labour. From campaigning for a vote for Corbyn in the leadership race, it immediately follows to campaign for Labour in power, and that means building Labour and voting Labour across the board to get a majority and a Labour government, as opposed to distractions like anti-cuts? candidates from the Socialist Party (CWI) and its TUSC coalition. We can mobilise in the unions, which will likely provide the bulk of the funds for the campaign, along with individual donations. This sharpens the left’s forces and develops the working class movement and its consciousness, if socialists intervene with consistent policies and organise rank and file members independently of the leadership. We can fight to replace Corbyn-hostile MPs, using the extra avenue of our trade unions to maximise our strength, something that would be a weak tactic in the Democrats.

If socialists followed Sanders down those same pathways, it would mean supporting a Sanders presidency, building the Democratic Party, and supporting a Democratic government. The SA leaves it open what to do if he wins the nomination, either betting he will not, so they will not have to decide, or leaving open the possibility of voting for him in November, but socialists have a duty to tell the truth to workers. The question to the Sanders-supporting socialists is, at what point do they pull back and break with this logic? At whatever point socialists refused to be towed along by the movement, they would be rounded on by the rest as sectarian? and damaging Democrats? chances of getting in.

Socialists can attend Sanders’ rallies and meetings, and engage with his supporters without building his campaign. After all, either the break with Sanders will come because he refuses to split from the Democrats or, alternatively, he will split from the Democrats himself and initiate a movement or party independent of the Democrats, which most of the left would rightly support. What the US left needs to do now is agitate for an independent, working class party, and found a national campaign to start the ball rolling.

A Sanders movement?

By agitating ceaselessly for his platform, naming the enemy (the billionaire class?) and regenerating the
idea of revolution and of Socialism, Sanders has so far advanced the working class movement, despite his overall political limits and Democratic strategy. From the beginning, he has emphasised the need for a mass movement: ?No president, not Bernie Sanders or anybody else, can do it alone. We don't need a saviour. We need a political movement with millions of people ? The only way that real change takes place is when millions of people stand up and fight back. That's what this campaign is about.?47

Now, Sanders? allies are launching such a movement; the DSA, The People for Bernie Sanders, Students Against Sweatshops and the 185,000 strong National Nurses United have come together to call a People?s Summit to discuss ?building the political revolution? in Chicago 17-19 June, before the Democratic convention in July. With the CWA strike and the Democracy Spring demonstrations, with hundreds arrested at the Capitol for peaceful civil disobedience and the Fight for $15 and #BLM movements already in existence, besides the hundreds of thousands who have attended his rallies and millions who have voted for him in the primaries, a new movement to unite these different strands has enormous potential. The Convention aims to:

?hold all elected officials accountable to popular demands for justice, equality and freedom. We envision this Summit as further deepening the relationship between participating organizations rooted in principled anti-corporate politics, development of community leaders, direct action not based on partisan identification, and strategic organizing to build power.?48

A national movement to ?build power? and with ?no partisan identification? would be a big advance on the current situation, though what will keep it from being as formally ?independent? as senator Sanders was for two decades?49 The only way to ensure it does not just end up as an adjunct for the Democrats or have the byproduct of boosting the Greens, is a campaign for a new working class party that appeals to the more militant sections of the unions? grassroots, the anti-racist movement, women's and immigrants? rights groups, and the millions of Bernie supporters. With Sanders? key economic demands, which have captured the imagination of millions across America, as the starting point and with basic anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-imperialist demands added, it needs to organise and take action now.

There is potentially widespread support for such an initiative. Besides the millions of #Bernieor bust supporters, there is a layer of intellectuals and activists in the new anti-racist movement who will not endorse any of the Democratic candidates, Sanders included, indeed, #BLM has not. Some of these have floated the idea of a new party, which is a real development since 2008. A movement for a new labor party could take part in building solidarity and resistance, it could stand independent candidates, and put demands and pressure on the Democrats, in order to strain their links to the union movement and the grip of the union bureaucracy, even further. Leon Trotsky laid out such a ?labor party tactic? in the 1930s for the struggle against the CIO leadership and CP, who were marshalling the new mass unions and labor party initiatives into the Democrats. He called for an alternative movement for a new labor party, uniting with all those that support such an initiative, reformist or revolutionary. Once it had rallied significant working class forces, a genuine party could be founded in a democratic conference deciding its rules and programme.

Revolutionaries would be in the forefront of building such an initiative, discussing politics and proposing tactics while organising and building action, in order to win it to revolutionary politics.50 The time to build such a party is now, at the height of this politicisation and when many activists distrust the Democrats and many more are threatening not to vote for them. The Democratic Party has wrecked every attempt to build a working class party in the US, given the current period, with the crisis, racism, war in the Middle East again, and now Trump, we cannot afford to let them do it again.

Democrats: too big to fail
Without a mass movement and an independent, anti-racist, working class party that gives American workers and youth a different horizon of possible change, one that they create themselves through debate and activism, the voice of moderation coming from community leaders and the union bureaucracy wins out: we can’t let the Republicans in. The Democratic Party and its vote is just too big to fail? in elections, like the banks in 2008. But this is political blackmail because, even when the Democrats win elections, they fail us.

The Democrats are the second party of American Capitalism, its plan B to maintain its profits and power. Unions pour money, endorsements and resources into the Democrats, knocking on doors, manning the phone banks and holding meetings with members to get out the vote, but the real money bankrolling and controlling the party comes from the employers. The great gains the working class and oppressed groups made in the 1930s and 1960s were the results of mass struggles, before their incorporation into the DP as mere ?constituencies?, with their affluent leaders getting out the vote at election time. As these movements then receded and the Democratic establishment reasserted itself, as the long boom turned to crisis, the forward march of the living standards and rights of the people they represented went into reverse.

The ?New Democrats? under Clinton turned to neoliberalism and triangulation using rightwing policies on drugs, tax and crime, while defending a shrinking handful of key demands like abortion or social security, often seeking to compromise even here, and increasingly relying on fear of the Republicans to discipline people to vote. The Democrats are not defenders of the poor, oppressed and working class, they are a tool to rule the plebeian classes and continue to make inroads on their limited protections, when the Republicans are too unpopular to continue.

Sanders’ chosen strategy, to join the Democrats and go for the Democratic nomination, which seems like the only path open, is ultimately a trap for workers if followed through. If he were to run as an independent Labor candidate, then the movement he created could patiently build for a new party and end the political blackmail that is the DP. After all, if the Greens can create a national organisation, step by step, and get a presidential candidate on the ballot, why not the working class movement and left, especially with so many alienated by mainstream politics?

Millions, looking at Trump in horror, may say that the year of a presidential election is not the time to play dice with the Democrats? hegemony. But, given the stakes are so high and millions are coming out in support of Sanders, when would be a better time to launch a national party? There is no end to the blackmail, every two years we confront the election question over Congress or the Presidency ? vote Democrat or let in the Republicans. Socialists should point to the long-term fall in wages and union jobs, look at the decline in the position of black people and women’s abortion rights at the state level. Can we afford not to change direction?

**Look to the future**

Whatever happens in the election, there is likely to be an anti-Trump protest movement before it and certainly one if he wins. A Clinton or Sanders presidency will face the same obstruction and blackmail as Obama, and likely a similar rightwing movement. With Republicans in control of a majority of states and both houses of Congress, they have huge power to obstruct a Sanders presidency and reshape social and fiscal policy across large swathes of the country beneath his feet. While Washington gridlock has dragged on under Obama, the Republicans have used the state level for a lightning war of manoeuvre and frontal assault on our rights, passing a slew of laws; anti-immigrant, anti-union and ?right to work?, voter restriction and anti-abortion measures, to hollow out national legislation.
To even begin to break through these obstacles and turn the tide, US workers need a mass movement, based on protests and strikes in defence of our gains. The Democratic Party, even with a president Sanders at the helm, is completely useless for such a struggle, which would have to be built outside of it and necessarily independent of it. Only such a movement would allow labor to unite with the Sanders youth, the #BLM and democracy movements in action, and allow the creation of rank and file networks in the unions to push back the union bureaucrats and leaders who would be afraid of going beyond token actions, particularly against a Democratic president. The possibilities for building a new party from such a movement would be huge.

The International Socialist Organisation argues for a genuine left party independent of the twin parties of capitalism. Such a party could play a decisive role in reversing American capitalism’s agenda of austerity and empire. We are not now in a position to create such a party, but we will never be in that position if we allow ourselves every four years to be lured by the tinsel of left rhetoric waved in our faces by progressives whose purpose is to sweep up radicals back into the Democratic Party fold. That is absolutely true, but then, like Socialist Alternative, they put forward the idea that In 2016, that will likely mean supporting Jill Stein on the Green Party ticket? who is a ?genuine leftwing candidate?.

That is wrong in our opinion, the possibilities of a new, independent party go way beyond the Greens, not just in terms of its membership (248,000 Green members in 2014, against ten million votes for Sanders) but in terms of the shift left in young people's consciousness (socialist) and labour movement participation. Marxism demands clarity of categories and concrete material analysis, general terms like ?leftwing? are useless at junctures such as this. Socialists have to struggle alongside and inside the unions, youth and anti-racist movements for class independence and a workers' party, based on the class struggle for workers? control and ultimately a workers? government, not a cross-class people?s party fundamentally centred around elections.

We need to build a different kind of party to the Democrats or the Greens, a party that makes its goal sinking down roots in working class communities, a new wave of unionisation from below, a struggle in the unions to break from the Democrats and to organise the rank and file independent of the bureaucracy, all aimed at building a mass, insurgent working class movement. That would lay the groundwork for a debate on its programme, and winning the most radical wing of its activists and leaders to a revolutionary programme for the transition to socialism from capitalism. The achilles heel of all attempts to found a new party in the USA has been to see a division of labour between elections and struggle, when the USA with its first-past-the-post system and huge national scale of politics presents exceptional obstacles to advance by elections. A party that does not put struggle before elections, or understand that socialism cannot come through a parliament, will inevitably be blunted by demoralisation. That is truer now than ever, given the hollowing out of US democracy, with the parties wielding ever higher piles of money at election time, deeper in hock to the millionaires and billionaires of the capitalist class. We face another historic period of depression with US imperialism weakening internationally, not the long boom and superpower era of the fifties and sixties that ultimately allowed the integration of labour into the Democrats. The new period opening up since 2008 will put sustained, mounting pressure on the party?s stability and hegemony, a process already started. The prospects of breaking from the Democrats and launching a new political party are better than ever.

Socialists should seize upon the opportunity Sanders has created to advance the working class movement in a lasting, sustainable way. The working class has not yet taken its first step forward, as it did in Britain with the election of Corbyn. Sanders has raised it up and shown to millions that they can be a movement, but everything is still hanging in midair. If a real movement of the working class and oppressed takes off, it will have taken a big step forward. If Socialists fight to build it into one genuinely independent of the
Democrats, then it will take many more. If a new labor party based on genuine rank and file democracy, real roots in the working class and a socialist programme is built out of the coming struggles, it will transform the working class movement and pave the way for the last, great revolutionary struggle in American history, for socialism and complete liberation.

Notes

http://www.redflagonline.org/2016/03/sanders-pledges-to-fight-after-supe... [7]

See forthcoming article on fifthinternational.org


The top 1% garner 58 percent of new income gains since 2009, so they own as much as the bottom ninety percent, while the US has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the developed world.


It is this fidelity to working class and union issues that has garnered some of his union support:

http://www.labornotes.org/2016/03/labor-bernie-activists-take-political-... [12]


Obama on free trade:

http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/sep/08/obama-tr... [16] 2008 platform:

http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=78283 [17]

https://theintercept.com/2016/02/24/top-gop-pollster-young-americans-are... [18]

This was foreshadowed by the protests over the Trayvon Martin shooting in 2012. An account of the Black Lives Matter be found here: http://www.fifthinternational.org/content/black-lives-matter-movement [19]

http://www.democracynow.org/2016/3/9/we_are_pushing_real_revolution_black [20]

Ta-Nehisi Coates

http://www.thegreenpapers.com/P16/D [21]
http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-live-updates-mid-at-sanders-says-h... [22]
http://thinkprogress.org/world/2015/08/31/3697175/bernie-sanders-wouldnt... [25]

Sanders was open about his reasoning to stand as a democrat, to test the possibilities of building ?a political movement of millions of people who are prepared to work on taking on the billionaire class? that?s what I'm trying to find out?it is awfully hard to run as an Independent if you're not a billionaire. I am not a billionaire. How do you put together a political infrastructure? How, outside of the two-party system, how do you get invited to debates? In all due respect to the media, is the media going to follow somebody who is running as an Independent? Not debating. In some cases, it?s literally impossible to get on the ballot as a third party candidate.?


https://www.opensecrets.org/pres16/candidate.php?id=N00000528 [27]


Registration among Latinos is ?skyrocketing? with 13.1 million Hispanics projected to vote nationwide in

Huffington Post poll chart, updated 14 April 2016: http://elections.huffingtonpost.com/pollster/hillary-clinton-favorable-r... [29]

http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/general_electi... [31]
http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/08/so-far-turnout-in-this-y... [33]

Those dismissing this, arguing ?history suggests that there is no relationship between primary turnout and the general election outcome? the party that had higher turnout in the primary won the national popular vote three times and lost three times? 1976-2008 ignores that while it is just one factor, it can be an important one for the winning party ? 1980, 1992, 2008, 2012 ? and that the scale of it is key too.

http://www.breitbart.com/2016-presidential-race/2016/04/26/exclusive-dat... [34]
http://workingamerica.org/frontporchfocusgroup [35]

https://www.qu.edu/news-and-events/quinnipiac-university-poll/2016-presi... [36]
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/15/kochs-brothers-labor_n_4966883.... [37]

Open Secrets shows an even greater disparity, with that business responsible for 71.9% of contributions in 2012 (nearly half and half to each of the main parties) against labour?s contribution a measly 3.8 percent (most of which went to the Democrats): http://www.opensecrets.org/overview/blio.php?cycle=2012 [38]

http://www.opensecrets.org/overview/blio.php# [39]
http://newpol.org/content/looking-back-labor-party-interview-mark-dudzic [40]

http://thehill.com/blogs/ballonet/presidential-races/277609-sanders-cl... [41]

His demands are quoted above, footnote 12: http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-live-updates-mid-at-sanders-says-h... [22]

http://www.dsausa.org/the_sanders_campaign_and_the_revival_of_socialism ... [43]
http://www.dsausa.org/aren_t_you_a_party_that_s_in_competition_with_the ... [44]

http://www.movement4bernie.org/ [46]
http://www.socialistalternative.org/2016/03/17/sanders-run-independent-n... [47]
http://www.socialistalternative.org/2016/04/21/undemocratic-primary-part... [48]

For those who say this isn?t helping him to win, it is extremely unlikely that if those sections of the left that have not joined the vote Bernie campaign had done so, he would have defeated Clinton.

http://www.thepeoplessummit.org/ [50]

Some are advocating a hybrid movement/party organization like the Momentum movement in Britain built to support the new Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn Arguments for an organisation that straddles this divide between a more traditional party form and labor and social movements? movements that are associated with parties? explicitly seeks to turn the Sanders movement into building the Democrats and kicking out the business interests. This also misconstrues what Momentum is ? it can?t replace a mass anti-austerity movement, though it could help relaunch one in Britain:

http://inthesetimes.com/article/19049/bernie-sanders-jeremy-corbyn-labou... [52]
http://www.fifthinternational.org/content/labour-party-tactic [53]

For instance, 288 anti-abortion restrictions were enacted at state level from 2011-2015, more than in the previous decade: https://www.guttmacher.org/united-states/abortion/state-policies-abortion [54]

http://newpol.org/content/sanders-campaign-and-left [55]; http://socialistworker.org/2016/02/02/iowas-radical-message?quicktabs_sw...