

US Primaries: Bernie Sanders for President?

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Media coverage of the US presidential primaries is largely concentrated on the Republican Party. Among others, the performance of Donald Trump and other obscurantists, as well as the weak showing of Jeb Bush, have attracted particular attention. In this, the Republican candidates show some of the current limitations of US imperialism: alongside the 'moderate' Jeb Bush, most of the remaining candidates represent the right wing of the party close to the Tea Party. These stand for isolationism and a confrontational policy against China, like Trump, and/or for an uninhibited attack on social benefits domestically (Cruz, Di Rubio) and anti-Mexican racism (all candidates) or even the construction of the fence on the Mexican border, Trump. Among the Republican candidates, Trump has emerged as the major challenge to the initial favourite, Bush. It is not only with regard to financial donations and media presence that Trump's positions now take centre stage in the Republican primary.

The media have shown less interest in the Democrats. This is partly because there are fewer candidates, only five against the Republicans' 15, but more particularly because of the candidacy of Hillary Clinton who, as the former Secretary of State and the candidate beaten by Obama in 2008, is the favourite to win the primary. She is presented as not only a continuation of Obama's policies but also as the best-placed Democrat to win against the Republicans who currently have a majority in both houses, the Senate and the House of Representatives.

A socialist as US president?

In Europe, especially on the Left, the candidacy of Bernie Sanders has attracted great attention. He has raised a number of left demands and describes himself as 'a democratic socialist'.

Sanders began his political career in the state of Vermont, where he was for many years the mayor of Burlington and sat in the House of Representatives from 1991 to 2007. At that time, he stood as an independent candidate who, nonetheless, joined the Democrat fraction just as he is now standing in the primaries for the Democrats. Since 2007, he has been active as a Senator from Vermont, a state with 600,000 inhabitants best known for tourism, the production of maple syrup and the processing of marble.

As an independent 'democratic socialist', Sanders made his name as an opponent of the anti-terrorism law, 'the Patriot Act' of the last Bush government as well as of the tax cuts for employers and highly paid that both Obama and the Republicans adopted. In addition, he was critical of the free trade agreement TTIP. As a result, Sanders is well liked, and can mobilise support within, the trade union movement led by the two main confederations, AFL-CIO and SEIU. Other demands, such as 'take the country back from the billionaires' and 'for a political revolution against the establishment' and calls for crushing the big banks and corporations have also added to his reputation.

Sanders' platform

Bernie Sanders considers himself a socialist, albeit what he once described as a 'vanilla socialist', but, in fact, his platform is not socialist. Although he certainly stands on the left of the American political class, in truth he is nothing more than an old-style Roosevelt-style Democrat. If some of his positions do go further than FDR did, they are nonetheless firmly within the framework of bourgeois democracy and capitalist rule over society. There is no clarion call for a social revolution to be heard from Bernie Sanders.

All of his economic policy prescriptions are based on the Keynesianism that held sway in the middle of the last century and was adopted by European Social Democratic and Labour Parties and that were then taken up in the US until the 1970s. Fighting income and wealth inequality by means of progressive taxation on wealthy individuals and profitable multinational corporations and using this taxation to fund government-sponsored infrastructure projects for job creation, free public education to university level, an expanded and single-payer healthcare system, strengthening and expanding the Social Security trust fund and funding a living wage for workers are not, in themselves, anything new. These programmes, and the means for paying for them, just a reworking of what most of Europe and even the United States had until the neoliberal attacks on such programmes began in the 1980s.

Even the policy prescriptions on the so-called 'social issues', such as racial injustice, immigrants' rights, women's rights and LGBTQ rights, are just a rehash and expansion of the identity politics that have been used by the Democrats to win elections since the 60s. Once again, if Sanders takes these policies further than in the past, and sincerely supports them, they are still essentially Keynesianism.

However, it is in the area of foreign policy that the failings of Sanders' policies can be most clearly seen.

Imperialism and Bernie Sanders

History has shown that neoliberalism is not the only way for capitalism to restore markets and profitability. In fact, neoliberalism is the easy way. War has always been the weapon of last resort to restore capitalism to growth and is always an available option. The production of arms and munitions to sell at a profit to governments for various wars, even if they are known as 'police actions' and 'humanitarian aid', is always a way to boost the economy and profits in the short term and the destruction caused always opens up markets for rebuilding from the war itself. War and weaponry have always been empire's most profitable export. Bernie Sanders, more or less, seems to support the concept of the American Empire.

Although he is on the left of American bourgeois politics, and has not supported all the empire's wars, Sanders has nonetheless been prepared to support war in, for example, Kosovo and Afghanistan and gives tacit support to Israel's oppression of Palestinians. As a Senator, he has even brought war industries to Vermont. Now, as a candidate, he has pledged to support 'American interests in the world'. Since the main American interest in the world is maintaining its empire, both militarily and economically, it is difficult to see how Sanders could resist the call to arms when that is presented as vital to American interests. In his support for the American bourgeoisie, he is reminiscent of the socialists of the Second International who supported 'their' bourgeoisies at the outbreak of World War I.

That there is a 'left' candidate in the Democrat primary is not altogether surprising. In a way this was also true of Obama in 2008 (although he was not so left with regard to social demands) or Howard Dean or, earlier, Jesse Jackson, who presented themselves as left populists. Apart from that, the trade unions that are close to the Democrats have repeatedly backed candidates in the primaries who supported their demands. In this respect, Sanders is initially taking over this role as a mouthpiece for the trade unions that have always supported the Democrats. After the primaries, little, if anything, is left of their demands. The workers' votes that are mobilised by the trade unions, however, can be an important factor in the elections. This subordination to one of the two parties of US capital is one, if not the historically decisive,

weakness of the US working class movement.

In contrast to some of the earlier 'left' candidates, Sanders has, nonetheless, been able to mobilise tens of thousands to his electoral rallies. He has enthused masses of people with his demands for a minimum wage of \$15 per hour, the abolition of student fees and loans, a massive increase in the taxation of the rich, the expansion of public services and of employment. While Hillary Clinton brought together 5000 to her New York rally, Sanders filled a sports stadium with 25,000 and, week by week, is closing the gap to the favourite. In the polls, Clinton's advantage shrunk nationally from 35 to 15 percent and as a result the Clinton camp have had to take Sanders seriously and engage him in a real electoral struggle. All the same, we have to warn against illusions in Sanders. He will not be in a position to shift the balance of forces in the Democrats and at most will only pressurise Clinton to make compromises on social policy.

A progressive campaign?

Bernie Sanders' campaign for the presidency has certainly had some positive and progressive results. To deny that, as some on the far left do, would be to ignore objective reality. Millions have been drawn into the political process for the first time, many of them young people and many of them from formerly marginalised social strata. His candidacy has shown that, especially on economic issues, there is an audience for a more left-wing view than has been espoused over the last 50 years. His self identification as a 'socialist' has raised an interest in the word that has not been seen in almost a century. It is a shame that his platform can only be seen as 'socialist' by the fevered right-wing hacks of Rupert Murdoch's chain of propaganda businesses like Fox News and their supporters in the Republican Party.

Even leaving aside the weaknesses of his platform, Sanders' decision to run as a Democrat makes it unprincipled for any anti-capitalist, let alone a socialist, to support his candidacy. The Democrats are one of the two main parties of the American bourgeoisie. This does not mean, however, that it would be wrong to support campaigns for some of the policies he promotes. On the contrary, revolutionaries should support movements for reform that can improve the position of workers and the oppressed within capitalism. Moreover, by arguing for mass mobilisations and direct action to achieve such aims, not only the living conditions but also the morale and organisational ability of the working class can be raised. In this way, the position of the working class can be advanced, despite, and probably against, the Democrats.

When tens of thousands can be mobilised for 'left' demands and ideas for the first time since the Occupy movement in the USA, then this is something that the labour movement and the 'radical' left has to take up. Of course, it has to be made clear, that the 'independent' Sanders is not at all independent if he is standing as a representative of the capitalist Democrats. As the Obama administration has shown, this would change nothing in the character of US capitalism. Although a small supplementary health insurance has been introduced Obama has, at the same time, agreed with the Republicans the biggest austerity package and programme of cuts ever seen in US history. By 2025, \$10 billion is to be cut annually from the public services. Anti-capitalists and socialists must therefore be very clear in their opposition to any support for the Democrats, including any support from the trade unions, and must fight for a 'political revolution' in the party system in the USA.

Despite presenting themselves as more 'humanitarian', the US Democrats are not fundamentally different from the Republicans. Both are parties of the ruling class in the USA, openly bourgeois parties to which the trade unions are merely hangers on. As far as their social base and their relationship to the working class is concerned, they are fundamentally different from the European Social Democratic and Labour Parties that, despite their thoroughly bourgeois politics, emerged historically and socially from the working class and are still organically linked to it today. The Democrats, however, are not comparable to these 'bourgeois workers' parties' and therefore even the most critical support for left candidates in this party is

categorically excluded for revolutionaries.

For a workers' party in the USA

This is the key question for the US working class, the antiracist movement and the left. It will not be solved by so-called left candidates of the Democrats who will once again tie the trade unions to that party. What is needed is a clear political break with the two-party system. Even to win those policies that Sanders rightly proposes, such as the minimum wage, higher taxation to the rich, perhaps even the destruction of US monopolies or liberation from student fees and loans, will require an independent class politics and a party of the class, not an 'independent' candidate of a bourgeois party.

The two biggest 'socialist' organisations in the USA, the Socialist Alternative and the International Socialist Organisation, have raised correct criticisms of Sanders. However, what they lack is a perspective for the building of a workers' party. The ISO even goes so far as to take over the Green party, that is a petty bourgeois party which itself can only be an obstacle to the building of a workers' party. The Socialist Alternative, with its independent candidates such as Swant in Seattle has been able to celebrate electoral successes at a local level however it lacks a revolutionary programme as well as any tactics with which to break the trade unions from the Democrats.

The minimum wage campaign, which is essentially maintained by the SEIU, is currently trying to persuade democratic local majorities in cities and states, little is left of the strike actions and demonstrations of 2014.

There are still over 16 million workers organised in the two confederations, AFL CIO and 'Change to Win'. Instead of becoming the left wing of the apparatus, as does the ISO in particular, what is needed is an initiative for the building of a class struggle rank and file movement and for a workers' party independent of all bourgeois forces. Then it would be possible to present an alternative to the Democratic party for the tens of thousands who are at the moment inspired by Sanders, an alternative that can take up and continue the struggle the justified demands of the workers, Blacks and Hispanic population even after the primaries. The USA does need a 'political revolution' but in the form of a workers' party which fights for social revolution and declares an uncompromising struggle against US imperialism.

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