

United States : Strategy after reading—From Bernie to movement building from below

samedi 29 février 2020, par [MAHOOD Stephen](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 20 février 2020).

Bern After Reading : Sanders and Socialist Strategy [1] (love the title) by Andrew Sernatinger reminds those of us active in DSA and movement work to think about how we can elevate movements behind the “Not me. Us !” of the Bernie campaign.

As a resident in a neighboring state that is the largest media outlet close to New Hampshire, living in (East) Boston, I understand the attention Bernie’s New Hampshire campaign drew and the attraction for DSA members to canvas up north. But I also have concerns that come out of my experience in primary campaigns. Prior to joining Solidarity and then DSA ten years later, I was first introduced to organizing in the Howard Dean campaign with training by way of the Marshall Ganz school of organizing.

One thing I learned from the organizing model we used in NH, which is similar to Bernie’s campaign, is that while some organizing infrastructure can be built through the campaign, such as connecting neighbors and learning of local struggles, it is often too challenging to bring these local struggles to the national campaign. Full time staff tend to have little interest in local issues and as canvassers we end up making false promises to “bring these issues” to the candidate. So while there is some direct benefit of the infrastructure built through the primary which can be used for local struggles, there is an even stronger benefit to bringing that canvassing home to our local community. So how do we do this ? Well, before going into detail, let’s highlight the four points that Andrew brings forward at the end of his article on how we in DSA can think and move forward in organizing for Bernie, while staying true to the larger socialist project.

“1) that election campaigning explicitly should lead to labor and social movement organizing, and not the other way around ;

2) that our first priorities should be moving existing organizations towards democratic endorsements to strengthen collective bodies and create the infrastructure that can move more people ;

3) that we not refrain from criticizing Sanders and that we inoculate against the potential of Sanders losing and the counterattacks that will come ;

4) that we favor local activity and organization building over national contacts. This does not preclude canvassing but is intended to shift the center of activity.”

I think all four points are equally important, but I am going to focus here on examples that speak to points 4 & 1. At the time of this writing, just after the New Hampshire primary, it is worth exploring ways we can make connections to local struggles in upcoming primaries and caucuses. The energy of the national campaign is drawing new socialists/activists into campaign work. The job of more seasoned organizers in the Bernie campaign is to develop strategies for connecting local work to canvassing and training new activists to talk about local struggles in the context of campaigning for Bernie. As new activists learn about these important local struggles, they are more likely to become

interested in joining local movement work. And these movements are going to be there long after the campaign.

Here in East Boston we have a number of struggles that need further elevation. One local multilingual organizing effort of which I am a part (P.U.E.B.L.O. Coalition [2]) is comprised of community activists, some connected to the local democratic party, some not, many immigrants, many children of immigrants, those involved in environmental justice work, community radio, teachers, and residents to name a few.

We are fighting a large private development project, one that will bring 10,000 housing units of which 9,090 will be luxury rental units of one-bedroom apartments or studios in an area that has seen drastic gentrification in the last five years. This development is backed by a 33 year old billionaire (William Bruce Harrison of Houston, TX), oil rich mind you [3]. We are also concerned about an electrical substation being proposed by the so-called public utility, Eversource, to convert high voltage to low voltage distribution to be installed in a floodplain with a huge tanker of jet fuel on one side (I could not make this up if I tried) and a playground on the other, and all in a neighborhood that does not want or need it [4]. English is not the majority spoken language and the city agency public meetings on these issues have been dismal in providing space or interpretation for the community to ask questions and hear explanations. With these two examples of local struggles we can start exploring how Bernie canvassing can support movements.

Both of these issues connect with Bernie's Housing for All and the Green New Deal. Canvassers can not only discuss these planks in Bernie's program but more importantly let residents know when the next meeting will be held, which actions to support, and how to join the local struggle and in this way strengthen the local movement. An example of this is a call-to-action from P.U.E.B.L.O. to gather signatures and contact the mayor to support transparent negotiations with the developer for a community benefits agreement [5]. Canvassers can bring the petition around while they canvass for Bernie.

In addition to sharing information about existing movement work, it is just as important to find out about less visible issues facing residents, such as struggles with landlords, rent, transportation, healthcare access, and gentrification by development projects that are less high profile than the one P.U.E.B.L.O. is currently fighting. Seasoned organizers can teach canvassers how to draw people out about the challenges they are facing. Debriefing at the end of a canvass can include funnelling these issues to existing movements as well as alerting movement organizers to potential new campaigns.

Andrew suggests that electoral work should be organized to build labor and community organizing. The P.U.E.B.L.O coalition includes teachers who are seeing students displaced by development/gentrification, with many of them forced to move in the middle of the school year. The private development project has no plan for a new school, no plan for a public gym, pool, or library and does a dismal job on addressing climate change (for example, the development site is located on a former wetland and next to an existing one). Here is an opportunity to involve public sector workers—parks and recreation workers, librarians, teachers—with the community they serve. The same is true of the organizing to resist the electrical substation, because teachers in those neighborhoods directly see the environmental racism facing their students and they can join the canvass to share when the next meeting is to confront the substation. Reaching out to these public sector workers for the Bernie campaign offers an opportunity to inform and involve them in this labor-community movement. But only if the campaign is organized to integrate local struggles into the work.

As Andrew argues :

“We should have the larger view of how our forces can come out of this election stronger rather than employ a get-rich-quick scheme of going all-in for Sanders. The opportunity is to use the campaign of a politician who is favorable to a view of changing society through mass movements – connecting Sanders supporters back into labor union organizing, community groups, local campaigns and other efforts that are recognized by Sanders as being important. We should prioritize grassroots efforts like Labor for Bernie over campaign-affiliated ones precisely because it is self-organization, it is directed at power-holders, and it prepares the basis for more long standing activity.”

Go Bernie ! And for the seasoned organizer make the organizing local, building movements from below that go beyond the election cycle, because whether it’s a win or a loss, we will need them !

Stephen Mahood

P.-S.

- Solidarity, February 20, 2020 :
<https://solidarity-us.org/strategy-after-reading-from-bernie-to-movement-building-from-below/>

Notes

- [1] <https://newpol.org/bern-after-reading-sanders-and-socialist-strategy/>
- [2] <https://www.facebook.com/PUEBLOEastie/>
- [3] <https://www.dirt.com/moguls/power-players/william-harrison-billionaire-paseo-de-la-playa-redondo-beach-12013/>
- [4] <https://www.greenrootschelsea.org/news/2019/12/2/east-boston-a-controversial-substation-and-opportunities-ahead>
- [5] https://www.reclaimboston.org/mayor_walsh_suffolk_downs_petition