

USA and national electoral politics: An approach to the Bernie Sanders campaign

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The following document was discussed at Solidarity's 2015 Convention last weekend and approved by a majority vote, with the addendum that our organization also has many members engaged in the Green Party and that we support their work and the Jill Stein campaign. This resolution is intended to outline an approach to the Sanders campaign and his supporters, and not as an evaluation as Sanders himself or his political views.

Connecting Sanders' Audience's Aspirations to Clear Working Class Political Alternatives

Solidarity understands the strategic imperative of organizing a mass base for independent working class political action that unites working people, the independent social movements, and organizations of the oppressed in a battle for their common interests against capitalism and its political representatives. Unlike those on the left who continue to see the Democratic Party as a lesser evil that can be influenced from within, we regard the Democratic Party as unreformable, committed to imposing capital's neoliberal project. History has shown all too many times that the Democratic Party remains the graveyard of social movements. We reject being drawn into the slippery slope of Democratic Party politics.

Nevertheless, any significant advance in independent working class politics requires a fracturing away of the Democratic Party's mass base. As an austerity-first party, Democratic lesser-evilmism has lost much of its allure. We strongly disagree with Bernie Sanders' approach of running in the Democratic primary and his pledge to support the Party nominee. However, it would be a mistake for the left not to recognize the enormous significance and potential inherent in the millions of people rallying around his campaign looking to fight against corporate America and what they perceive as the highjacking of the democratic process. Despite Sanders running as a Democrat, we appreciate the significance of the mass support he is receiving for his basic message. It is the message of Occupy—the 99% versus the 1%—proving that eight years into the devastating recession and deepened neoliberal austerity presided over by the Obama administration it is very much alive and embedded in the consciousness of big layers of the US population. This is particularly true of young people who are just entering national electoral politics inspired by Sanders' message.

We should welcome this outpouring of fight back spirit, and seek to work together on the issues they raise while emphasizing that a Democratic Party orientation is a dead end; and instead win them over to the need for independent politics and building movements that can change society. We urge Solidarity members, those we can influence, as well as other revolutionary socialists to find ways to connect with the millions of people who are being drawn to the Sanders campaign, most of whom will have no patience for the Democratic Party establishment, much less see themselves in an ongoing fight to take the leadership of the Party. This is a key audience to connect with and make

inroads into if we are to accomplish any sort of breakthrough for independent left politics. Many Sanders supporters are already involved in, or can be won to, organizing ongoing independent anti-austerity and other social movements, to local independent electoral campaigns, and to the Green Party's fledgling effort to build a national independent party/movement.

We are supportive of the rank and file rebellions within labor, such as the independent, grassroots Labor for Bernie formation, that are developing around this election. They provide an opportunity to discuss what program and objectives should drive labor's political choices. The rebellion and disgust with bureaucrat driven, transactional, business as usual politics poses the need, and possibility, to build rank and file networks within labor that demand a real democratic process of endorsements, and that fight to hold the bureaucrats accountable to supporting only candidates that actually support union policies. Political endorsements will not "save" our unions or the working class. But a struggle over internal democracy inside our unions such as the one that has erupted in the AFT can build rank and file power.

Our job as socialists in the labor movement includes a strategy of fostering cracks in labor's slavish alignment with the Democratic Party establishment. A fissure in terms of a Sanders endorsement is a good thing. We are not indifferent to this fight. A mass, independent working class party will not be created in this country without the activity of the labor militants who are supporting the Sanders campaign. This is also the milieu of labor activists that grasp the necessary task of building the political capacities of workers—something far beyond the scope of any electoral insurgency.

We should embrace movements and mobilizing efforts around specific demands that grow out of the Sanders campaign. There is now a call by young people activated by the campaign for a million student march on Washington this fall, building on Sanders' call to make public universities and colleges tuition free.

We have yet to see the emergence of a large-scale challenge to austerity and a clear working class political alternative at the national level. An effective left politics, one that can win and implement a left program, requires an organizational infrastructure and political culture that does not exist right now. With a lack of ongoing, successful independent left politics, we have to contend with the reality that anger at the corporate control of politics reflects itself in vague populism and often within the Democratic Party.

We recognize that electoral initiatives like those of Kshama Sawant in Seattle, the late Chokwe Lumumba in Mississippi, the Vermont Progressive Party, the Richmond Progressive Alliance, United Working Families in Chicago, Howie Hawkins Green Party campaign, and others, while they have their limitations and problems, represent a challenge to the hold of the Democratic Party establishment. We support efforts to run pro-worker and labor candidates as independents or on the ballot line of non-corporate parties.

We are interested in working with people who are attracted to a campaign that warns that, "The best president in the history of the world ...will not be able to address the major crises that we face unless there is a mass political movement, unless there's a political revolution in this country." We should emphasize Sanders' call for building an ongoing movement beyond this election cycle. Yes, we do not expect the Sanders campaign itself to build lasting grassroots organization. The ball is in our, broadly defined, court. We should seize this potential organizing opportunity, reaching out to people excited by the Sanders campaign with the message, "Let's not waste this moment where folks are coming together around an anti-corporate, anti-austerity program by ending with the whimper of voting for Hillary and calling it a day. Let's build up our power." The tragedy would not be so much people pulling the lever for Clinton, but dissipating and disbanding this mass outcry, having nothing to show for our bottom up efforts.

Jesse Jackson, despite winning 8 million votes in 1988, chose to demobilize the ostensibly independent Rainbow Coalition organization after losing the Democratic nomination so no ongoing coalition went on to continue working around issues of economic and racial justice after the campaign ended. This time, the left should urge Sanders supporters to keep the fight going through joining anti-austerity struggles, social movements or building local, multi-racial coalitions, including independent electoral infrastructures, that live on well after the presidential campaign.

We agree with Howie Hawkins when he says: “We should talk about why independent politics is the best way to build progressive power, about the Democratic Party as the historic graveyard of progressive movements, and about the need in 2016 for a progressive alternative when Sanders folds and endorses Clinton. I don’t expect many will be persuaded to quit the Sanders campaign before the primaries. But I do expect that many of them will want a Plan B, a progressive alternative to Clinton, after the primaries.”

Traven and Joanna, July 29, 2015

P.S.

* <https://solidarity-us.org/site/node/4480>