

United States: Political Revolution — What Is It?

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THE “POLITICAL REVOLUTION” proclaimed by Bernie Sanders refuses to fold its tents in the wake of the Democratic primary season. Although Hillary Clinton is the Democratic presidential nominee, Sanders and his movement promise to carry the fight to the Philadelphia convention, and beyond — in some form (or several) still very much remaining to be determined. We’ve solicited several perspectives in this issue of *Against the Current* which appear in the section on “Bernie and Beyond.”

At the same time, the horror of the Orlando massacre — and the toxic poison spread by Donald Trump seeking to exploit it — shockingly reminds of us all of how sick a society this really is, and how desperately “a true revolution of values,” in Martin Luther King’s memorable phrase, is needed to cure the diseases of homophobia, Islamophobia and so much else.

Here, we’d like to step back from these immediate events to look at the content of a “political revolution.” Most of what Bernie Sanders calls “democratic socialism” is terrific for openers: Make “the billionaire class” pay for the destruction of the financial system its greed caused, and end its domination of politics through its massive campaign cash. Bring the United States into step with every other advanced economy with guaranteed health care through single-payer “Medicare for all.” Expand Social Security — not destroy it — make public university education tuition-free; end mass incarceration and racist police abuse; raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour now; stop the plague of corporate-written “free trade” deals that drive global wages and workers’ rights to the bottom.

But how is any of this going to happen — to say nothing of more radical changes? As many observers have noted, most of Sanders’ program represents traditional New Deal policies that used to be mainstream Democratic politics. But after three decades of a massive capitalist assault on the working class and social programs, defending and expanding them has a genuinely radical edge in today’s political context.

That’s exactly why Sanders has stimulated so much excitement and energy among people who have been on the sharp end of the vicious neoliberal stick. And of course, in one crucial respect Sanders has gone beyond the old New Deal formula, in correctly identifying the biggest “global security threat” of all: runaway climate change.

As more and more people recognize, stopping the climate disaster requires action on every level, from “above” and from “below” — including political action through national and state legislation, effective executive action, and popular mobilizations with solidarity all the way from our neighborhoods to indigenous peoples and the entire global system.

Confronting the crisis of the environment encapsulates everything that a political revolution needs to be. It's not only about voting on policies proposed by elites, but about active engagement that changes policies and transforms our own communities and lives.

But how to actually pay for universal single-payer health care, tuition-free public university education — and the monumental transition to a carbonless renewable-energy infrastructure, among other things? Health care and education for all must be properly funded, not starved the way so much of the public sector has been. (The Canadian single-payer system for example, while vastly superior to the mess in the United States, doesn't cover prescription drugs and is afflicted with inequalities and budget shortfalls.)

Creating an equitable tax system where the wealthy pay a reasonable share, eliminating the absurd waste and public health failures of the private health insurance system, wiping out mountains of unpayable student debt and creating the millions of jobs needed for sustainable energy conversion are all surely a necessary start — but far from sufficient.

The War Machine

To make such promises viable, a political revolution surely must be about massive cuts in military spending and stopping the U.S. mission of policing the world's peoples. It's bizarre when the reactionary economic nationalist Donald Trump, amidst his semi-coherent rants and posturing, states that the United States "can't afford to be everyone's protector" — and gets a positive popular response to a demagogic "America First" message — while the debate on the Democratic side evades the whole issue.

Aside from rightly criticizing the "regime change" adventures that have created such catastrophic results in places like Iraq and Libya, even Sanders has chosen to leave the issue of the bloated military budget out of his message. Criticizing Israel's rampages in Gaza as "disproportionate" is an astonishing and most welcome break with the Israel-uber-alles consensus in U.S. political campaign discourse. Sanders, however, has not questioned the bipartisan policy of delivering ever-greater weapons systems to Israel. Nor has he proposed ending military sales to the likes of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which have brought about the near-destruction of the country of Yemen.

All these and many other horrors, with the civilian carnage they inevitably bring, are structural manifestations of a violent, destructive and ultimately insane "global security architecture." For any hope of "political revolution," issues of militarism and the permanent war economy — its costs and its consequences for the whole structure of society — can't be passed over.

A political revolution is about coming to grips with the full costs of the war machine. Beyond the burden of direct expenditures alone are the physical and mental destruction of soldiers and civilians and families, hollowing out of communities, and after-effects ranging from domestic violence to mass shootings.

Class and Race Injustice

Nothing has touched a raw nerve in the popular mood more than Bernie Sanders' observation that almost all the increase in wealth in the past two decades "has gone to the top one percent" while the wages of living standards of working Americans — called "the middle class" in this country's uniquely backward political discourse — have stagnated or declined.

Clearly a political revolution must put this issue at the top of its agenda, but that requires getting at its roots. Yes, a \$15 minimum wage with further increases indexed to inflation would help, as would a reformed tax structure not designed to transfer wealth upward to the rich. But these are bandaids, not cures for rampant rising inequalities that no tax structure in a capitalist economy can overcome.

Mitigating, let alone reversing, the growth of inequality is about rebuilding and renovating an activist labor movement. Political action to reform labor laws stacked against workers and unions is required, but the heavy lifting of a labor revival can only happen at the base. The Labor for Bernie project, continuing beyond the primary season and the electoral cycle, could contribute significantly, along with the growing network of rank and file-based efforts.

Many may object that today's weakened and nearly-paralyzed union movement is in no shape to spearhead any kind of political revolution. That is true, and social movements can't and shouldn't "wait for the working class" — quite the contrary. But the inescapable reality is that the state of working-class organization effectively sets the ceiling on the level of structural reforms that can be won and maintained, and the degree to which wages and working conditions can be raised.

There is simply no shortcut or substitute for working-class organization. It was the explosive rise of industrial union organizing that underpinned the New Deal reforms of the 1930s and their extension during the postwar capitalist boom. The anti-labor onslaughts of the past three decades have gone hand in hand with the weakening of labor organization, reducing union membership in the private sector to well under ten percent.

At the same time, no political revolution is possible unless it's about facing the reality of the United States' racial capitalism. The fact that African-American unemployment is always double the national rate; that the systematic destruction of public education is gutting the futures of children, families and communities of color; that police forces in Black and Brown neighborhoods feel empowered to harass, brutalize and ultimately kill unarmed people — none of these are accidental, or relics of bygone racist practices. They are rooted in the structures of the economy and society from the time of slavery to the present.

That's why Black Lives Matter has blossomed across the country. It took the Sanders campaign a while to understand that this movement's concerns were not side issues, but rather go to the heart of the devastating social crisis of African Americans and the entire society. To Sanders' credit, he has subsequently embraced racial justice issues, which must remain central to what the "political revolution" is about — whether Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump or whoever else sits in the White House.

Democracy and Moving Forward

Political revolution must be about democracy. Many Sanders supporters are outraged by the unfairness of the Democratic Party's system of superdelegates, the exclusion of many voters from the primaries, the party leadership's manipulation of the debate schedule to Sanders' disadvantage, premature media announcements of Clinton's victory and other examples of "a rigged process."

But it's absurd to imagine that the decision-making process of a party of corporate capital could somehow be an expression of grassroots popular democracy. And in any case, Hillary Clinton did not "steal" the Democratic nomination. Her cynical corporate centrism and militarism is the very core of what the Democratic Party stands for.

The denial of democracy in U.S. politics is much more fundamental. The "duopoly" of the capitalist

parties is sustained by keeping third parties and independent candidates off the ballot. Voter suppression laws are deliberately designed to keep away African Americans, Latinos and the poor. District gerrymandering assures that the House of Representatives in particular has a rightwing Republican majority. And of course, wiping out election financing laws gives billionaires' dark money and SuperPacs an overwhelming advantage in federal and state elections.

All this is where a supposedly "democratic process" becomes the tool of the one percent. Democracy itself is a revolutionary concept in a political system that's become an effective plutocracy. But the economic and ethical issues at the core of Sanders' appeal — the destruction of the financial system and of people's lives by corporate greed, the utter corruption of politics by billionaire donors and lobbies in their service, state legislatures' brutal attacks on women's reproductive rights — are fundamentally not separable from the deeper structures and the far-from-random stratification of American capitalism.

There is every reason to hope that the "political revolution" will proceed. The Bernie Sanders campaign by its very nature is unique and not reproducible, but this upsurge did not emerge in a vacuum. It's been a new manifestation of the same spirit that surfaced in the Occupy upsurge, the Fight for \$15, the mushrooming campus movements to divest from fossil fuel industries (and from corporations profiting from the Israeli occupation!), Black Lives Matter and many more struggles.

Whatever their problems of organizational sustainability and continuity, all these are fuelled by a common and intractable crisis of capitalist production and rule. Neither Donald Trump's walls and tariffs nor Hillary Clinton's corporate centrism will solve inequality, racial injustice or environmental disaster. The polar ice caps continue to melt, northern Canada is burning up and horrifying droughts are devastating the Horn of Africa and Indian subcontinent. Even Trump can't work out a deal with nature, let alone by denying it.

The political revolution is essential, and the most central responsibility for socialists right now is to help build it. To do so, we've argued repeatedly in these pages, requires among other things, finding a route to break away from — not into — the Democratic Party. A political revolution will need political organization, at the local, statewide and national level, that responds to the movement's objectives rather than obstructing and burying them.

Beyond that, as the struggle advances it will confront not only the political power of "the billionaire class," but the need to take apart a system that creates billionaires and privilege at one pole and mass insecurity, oppression and misery at the other. The political revolution will need to turn, ultimately, toward social revolution too.

The Editors, *Against the Current*

P.S.

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