

United States: Sanders and the Democrats

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Bernie Sanders wrote an opinion piece in June, titled "How Democrats Can Stop Losing," in the *New York Times*.

He noted: "In 2016 the Democratic Party lost the presidency to possibly the least popular candidate in American history. In recent years, Democrats have also lost the Senate and House to right-wing Republicans whose extremist agenda is far removed from where most Americans are politically. Republicans now control almost two-thirds of governor's offices and have gained about 1,000 seats in state legislatures in the past nine years. In 24 states, Democrats have almost no political influence at all.

"If these results are not a clear manifestation of a failed political strategy, I don't know what is.... The Democratic Party, in a very fundamental way, must change direction. It has got to open its doors wide to young people. It must become less dependent on wealthy contributors, and it must make clear to the working families of this country that, in these difficult times, it is prepared to stand up and fight for their rights. Without hesitation, it must take on the powerful corporate interests that dominate the economic and political life of the country."

He looks to the upsurge in support of Jeremy Corbyn and the British Labour Party in the recent British elections, as a model. He says "there is widespread agreement that momentum shifted to Labour after it released a very progressive manifesto that generated much enthusiasm among young people and workers. One of the most interesting aspects of the election was the soaring turnout among voters 34 or younger."

He charges that "too many in our [sic] party cling to an overly cautious, centrist ideology," and he proposes the Democrats adopt some of the positions he campaigned on in the Democratic primaries last year:

"Democrats must guarantee health care to all as a right, through a Medicare-for-all, single payer program....

"Democrats must support a progressive tax system that demands that the very wealthy, Wall Street and large corporations begin paying their fair share of taxes.

"Mr. Trump wants to sell our infrastructure to Wall Street and foreign countries. Democrats must fight for a trillion-dollar public investment that creates over 13 million good-paying jobs....

"Democrats must take on the fossil fuel industry and accelerate our efforts to take on climate change by encouraging energy efficiency and the use of sustainable energy....

"Democrats must make public colleges and universities tuition free, and substantially lower student debt."

He notes that "our failed approach to crime has resulted in the United States' having more people in jail than any other country. Democrats must reform a broken criminal justice system and invest in jobs and education for our young, not more jails....

“Democrats must fight for comprehensive immigration reform and a path toward citizenship.”

Leaving aside that he says nothing about war, institutionalized racism, and other obvious serious issues, and the vagueness of many of these proposals, what is Sanders’ actual political project?

The title of this opinion piece and his “Democrats must” comments give an indication. He is primarily concerned with how the Democrats can stop losing elections, and makes his proposals as a strategy to do that. The framework is how to reform “our” party so that it wins elections.

The Democratic Party establishment has a different strategy for winning future elections: to run as the anti-Trump party, and to unite the different factions in the party, including Sanders’, around that single issue. These adherents of “a cautious, centrist ideology” don’t care if Sanders criticizes them and makes some proposals for progressive reforms of the system, as long as he is part of the team, and in the end calls for a vote for the Democrats to “stop Trump.”

Some Democratic candidates in the upcoming 2018 elections may adopt aspects of Sanders’ suggestions. Others will stick with the neoliberal line. But the party as an institution will reject adopting Sanders’ appeal that the party make a fundamental change of direction. That was made clear in last year’s Democratic primary, when the party establishment went all out to defeat Sanders, including the dirty tricks Wikileaks exposed (with or without Russian help).

The present fight between and within both capitalist parties over health insurance is a case in point. The problems with Obamacare stem from its reliance on the insurance companies. The Republicans’ proposals are worse, take away the present law’s positive aspects, and rely even more on the insurance industry.

The Democrats could adopt Sanders’ obvious (and popular) proposal for nationalized health insurance, which would cut through all this mess, get rid of the insurance companies and the failures of Obamacare as well as the reactionary Republican proposals, and guarantee health coverage for all from birth.

But they won’t. Instead they are vociferously defending Obamacare against the Republicans - and against nationalized health insurance. The framework is set: vote Democrat to stop Trumpcare. Hurrah for the crappy status quo!

Sanders’ trajectory is clear in his “Our Revolution” movement, which seeks to reform the Democratic Party along social democratic lines. This not a new idea. Since the mid-1930s, the Communist Party and its descendants down to today have been trying to do this. So has the Socialist Party and its descendants, the union bureaucracy, and others in the same time period. The result has been the Democratic Party’s overall move to the right over these decades, the opposite of what these folks envisioned.

Sanders could leave the neoliberal Democrats and form a new social democratic party, breaking the death hold of the two-party system. He has explicitly rejected doing so.

Sanders’ appeal to the recent experience in the British Labour Party is disingenuous. The Labour Party is a membership party. The Democratic Party is not. It is controlled by its establishment in a top-down structure. Its “membership” are the voters registered as Democrats, who are expected to vote for whoever the party nominates. These voters have no say in Democratic Party policy, and there isn’t even any structure that would allow this.

The Labour Party has its establishment, too, consisting of its Members of Parliament (MPs) and other elected officials. This establishment changed its rules on who elects the party’s leadership in

the belief that the members would vote for them. They were wrong. Corbyn ran for the leadership position on a left-wing platform, and the membership elected him, not their candidate.

As a result hundreds of thousands workers and youth poured into the Labour Party. The membership endorsed what Sanders correctly describes as a “very progressive manifesto that generated much enthusiasm among young people and workers. One of the most interesting aspects of the election was the soaring turnout among voters 34 or younger.” This manifesto was way to the left of Sanders’ proposals.

The Labour MPs predicted a disaster for Labour in the recent elections, because of this manifesto, which they thought was way far too left. They were dead wrong again. Labour made big gains in the election because of its new program and leader, and while not winning a majority (no party did) emerged as the real winners.

Nothing like this could happen in the Democratic Party.

What the Democrats are trying to do is capture the deep distrust of Trump in much of the population into support for them. Neoliberal Hillary even made the ridiculous claim that she is part of the “resistance,” the big demonstrations against Trump’s policies in the first part of the new year. This stance has had some success, and is one of the reasons for the downturn of such actions since early May.

Sanders, whatever his intentions, is becoming part of this con game.

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