

United States: Sanders's Speech Presents a Conundrum for New Left's Socialist Strategy

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In the U.S., the failures of capitalism are being refracted in the race for the White House, just as they were in 2016. On one side, President Trump is rallying his predominantly [middle-class voters](#) to re-elect him based on his program of economic nationalism and bigotry that has wreaked havoc at home and abroad.

On the other side, Democrats are in a battle for their party's presidential nomination to challenge the bigot billionaire in 2020. Predictably, the party has banded together, at least for now, around [the establishment's favored candidate](#), Joe Biden, who defends the existing capitalist order, albeit with minor reforms.

His challengers, however, have moved to the left, adopting (however honestly or dishonestly) much of the program Sen. Bernie Sanders put forward in 2016, while at the same time, rejecting Sanders's self-proclaimed democratic socialism. They all know, including Sen. Elizabeth Warren, that to win the party's support if Biden stumbles, they must toe its pro-capitalist line.

Worried about Sanders and the [growing popularity of socialism](#), Trump and bottom-dwellers for the Democratic nomination like Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper have [red-baited Sanders](#), trying to discredit his politics by associating him with Stalinist regimes. Recently, Sanders took his detractors head-on in a [landmark speech](#) at George Washington University.

He argued that the threat from authoritarian oligarchs like Trump cannot be defeated by centrist neoliberals like Biden and Hickenlooper, but only by democratic socialism. He defined that as an extension of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal through a [new economic bill of rights](#) that would include a right to a decent job, health care and secure retirement.

Sanders also integrated the fight against climate change and all forms of bigotry as essential parts of the struggle for socialism. He underscored that he could not win any of this on his own but only as part of a political revolution in which millions of people join the political process, take over the Democratic Party and win control of the government to transform the priorities of U.S. society.

Predictably, the establishment in the media and both parties brushed off the speech. The Washington Post's Robert J. Samuelson called Sanders a "[refugee from the 1930s](#)." Senator Warren — who recently proclaimed she's "[capitalist to my bones](#)," perhaps an electorally foolish mistake that may alienate Sanders's supporters — reacted with [laughter when asked about his speech](#).

Some on the left have also dismissed the speech as merely Sanders's attempt to [woo radicals back](#)

[into the Democratic Party](#). Others breathlessly celebrated it as the most profound and transformative speech since those [delivered by Martin Luther King Jr.](#) and rejected criticisms of Sanders as [missing the forest for the trees](#).

The left should not reduce its role to cheerleading Sanders's speech and gloss over its weaknesses, because what's at stake is the politics, aims and strategy of the new socialist movement.

But these responses on the left fail to grasp the contradictory nature of the Sanders campaign, his electoral strategy in the Democratic Party, and his conception of democratic socialism. In contrast to Sanders's ultra-left detractors, radicals must appreciate that, for the second consecutive presidential primary, an open advocate of socialism is in the running for the Democratic nomination.

Of course, those who credit Sanders for creating the new socialist movement are exaggerating his impact; his popularity was made possible by the Great Recession, the capitalist parties' bailout of banks, and the popular resistance to austerity and scapegoating. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that Sanders has encouraged this resistance and given a name to its politics — socialism — and helped fuel the rise of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

We should celebrate his attacks on “unfettered capitalism,” the oligarchic billionaire class, authoritarians and fascists, as well as his full-throated defense of socialism as means to achieve freedom for workers and oppressed people.

Moreover, Sanders's proposed economic bill of rights raises the stakes for all of us to fight for an agenda that puts people before profit. That a mainstream candidate is putting forth such demands should be grasped as an opportunity and used to advance social and class struggle in order to achieve them.

At the same time, though, the left should not reduce its role to cheerleading Sanders's speech and gloss over its weaknesses, because what's at stake is not Sanders per se, but the politics, aims and strategy of the new socialist movement. His speech exposed three key problems we must overcome in order to win the systemic change we so desperately need.

The Democratic Party: The Graveyard of the Left

First, Sanders's strategy of pursuing a political revolution through the Democratic Party, however much it may raise the profile of socialism, is a trap. As everyone from House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) to many (if not most) members of DSA recognize, the Democratic Party is a capitalist and imperialist party, not a labor party rooted in unions like that led by Jeremy Corbyn in Britain.

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It is tightly controlled by a bureaucracy and elected officials, both of which depend on the bosses for funding. That does not mean it is no different than the Republican Party, which has historically been the capitalists' “A Team” that openly serves their interests and espouses conservatism.

The Democrats are the ruling class's liberal “B Team” that appeals to workers and oppressed groups by promising change within the system. Capitalists send them onto the field only when the “A Team” has played badly and are in danger of losing.

The Democrats' function in the political game is two-fold: to co-opt the left and prevent it from building a workers' party; and to confine class and social struggle to tinkering with capitalism

instead of replacing it with socialism. That's why Marxists have always called the Democratic Party the graveyard of social movements and the left.

Every attempt to use the capitalist's "B Team" has backfired, from the [Communist Party's popular front](#) during the Great Depression, to Michael Harrington's [realignment strategy](#) that tried to turn it into a labor party in the 1960s and 1970s, to the [Maoists' similar effort](#) in Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition during the 1980s. Each time the left was co-opted, movements demobilized in support of a party that then took them for granted and moved to the right, betraying their promises in the process.

Today, the Democrats are in a stronger position to co-opt the new socialist left. As [Kim Moody documents](#),

The party has become a well-funded, professionalized, multitiered hierarchy capable of intervening in elections at just about every level. It selects candidates, provides funding, furnishes endorsements, offers media relations, and supplies computer and digital campaign and get-out-the-vote services. In Congress and most state legislatures, its leaders impose a high level of party discipline, such that for the last two decades 90 percent of floor votes in both houses have been along strict party lines.

Sanders's run in 2016 exemplifies the ruling class's stranglehold on the party. Although he electrified a new generation with his call for socialism and did better than he or anyone expected, he was, in the end, stymied by the bureaucracy, elected officials and capitalist funders. While they treated him politely in public, they ensured that their anointed candidate, Hillary Clinton, won the nomination.

The Democratic establishment is even more prepared to neutralize Sanders this time. Now backing Biden, it has encouraged a host of pro-capitalist progressives to split Sanders's vote and [greenlit Hickenlooper and others' redbaiting](#). The party will try to persuade voters desperate to kick Trump out of office to play it safe, take no risks on Sanders's socialism, and vote for Biden or some other "electable" candidate who is moderate enough to win over conservative voters.

Even Anita Hill, who suffered the worst sexist discrimination from Biden and has every reason to oppose him, has accepted this logic, telling reporters, "[Of course, I could](#)" vote for him. These tactics have successfully driven down [Sanders's poll numbers](#) over the last couple of months with [Warren in particular gaining at his expense](#), proving yet again the difficulty of advancing socialism in a capitalist party.

Socialists, regardless of their position on Sanders's campaign, must unite to organize an exit from the Democratic Party and build a new independent socialist party.

While DSA has endorsed Sanders, its left wing understands that the Democratic Party cannot be taken over, but rather must be replaced. Instead of backing third parties now, though, one of its most prominent caucuses, [Bread and Roses](#), supports a [dirty break strategy](#) of using the Democrats' ballot line to run socialist candidates, project its program, encourage class struggle, win office and build an organization within the Democrats to eventually split off and set up a new workers' party.

While this strategy has led to some stunning breakthroughs, like the election of Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to Congress, as well as candidates for state and city council offices, Sanders does not support it. Instead of [advocating taking over the party](#), he has already promised that if he loses, he will [campaign for whichever Democrat wins the nomination](#) in the general election.

The left must challenge his argument, especially because he has the greatest influence over the trajectory of our new movement. To avoid the fate of our left-wing predecessors, socialists, regardless of their position on Sanders's campaign, must unite to organize an exit from the Democratic Party and build a new independent socialist party.

Socialism Not Liberalism

Second, as part of his accommodation to the Democratic Party, Sanders — who used to extol Eugene Debs's Socialist Party as his model — now explicitly associates socialism with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. While he may do that to reach a popular audience, as [some on the left have argued](#), it both sows illusions about Roosevelt's program and limits the horizons of socialism to, at best, reformist management of capitalism.

Let's be clear: Roosevelt was, as he declared, "[the best friend the profit system ever had](#)" and the "savior" of "[the system of private profit and free enterprise](#)." FDR's aim was not to institute socialism through the New Deal, but use government programs to revive the system, stabilize it through social reform, and co-opt a workers' movement that threatened to break with the two-party system and challenge capitalist rule.

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Even FDR's call for an economic bill of rights, which Sanders resuscitates, never threatened to nationalize capitalism's means of production. That's why 169 capitalist countries — including Germany, Australia and France — ratified the U.N. version of it called "[The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)."

That's where many on the left are mistaken, [confusing liberal tinkering with actual socialism](#). Norman Thomas, the longtime leader of the reformist Socialist Party, [was right when he wrote](#), "What Mr. Roosevelt has given us is State capitalism: that is to say, a system under which the State steps in to regulate and in many cases to own, not for the purpose of establishing production for use but rather for the purpose of maintaining in so far as may be possible the profit system with its immense rewards of private ownership and its grossly unfair division of the national income."

Thus, as much as Sanders raises expectations for social reform, he narrows the vision of democratic socialism below even that of social democracy to New Deal liberalism. Classic social democracy, whatever its weaknesses, at least promised to use nationalization to socialize and democratize control of the economy, whereas liberalism merely promises adjustments to capitalism, not its transformation into workers' democratic control of society, which is the goal of socialism.

Compromising Socialist Internationalism

Third, Sanders's speech failed to uphold socialist internationalism on today's central questions of immigration and U.S. imperialism. This failure flows from his collaboration with an imperialist party, as well as the nationalist logic of social democracy, which has always put use of the state for domestic reform for workers at home above international solidarity. It was thus not an accident that he delivered the speech before a sea of U.S. flags.

Of course, Sanders rightly denounces Trump's attacks on immigrants. But he opposes open borders as an [idea hatched by the Koch brothers](#), and instead supports the Democrats' preferred "solution"

to the “problem” of undocumented immigrants — Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR). At best, this is a lesser evil; it includes increased policing of the border to stop further immigration, onerous conditions for legalization, and pro-corporate guest worker programs.

As [Lucy Herschel argues](#), in practice, this policy was responsible for “a reign of terror on immigrant communities that former President [Obama himself elevated to a high art](#) during his eight years in office. For the past decade, CIR has required the deportation of more than 100,000 people a year, the detention of hundreds of thousands more [in inhuman conditions](#) and the terrorization of millions of families — all in exchange for comprehensive legislation that never came and now seems further away than ever.”

Socialists should reject CIR and instead demand amnesty for all undocumented immigrants and open borders. Our slogans should be those [Jesse Myerson advocates](#): “No penalties, no electric fences, no drone surveillance, no papers, no fear. Instead, universal human rights, consecrated in struggle, enforced by solidarity. The unification of the world’s workers demands this.”

Such internationalism also requires [opposition to imperialism](#) — something Sanders strangely left out of his speech. Socialists must remember that the U.S. is not just any other state. It runs an informal empire that reproduces and enforces global capitalism; it is in competition with other imperialist powers, especially China; and it oppresses weaker nations throughout the world. Under the misnomer “national defense,” Washington’s war machine gobbles up hundreds of billions of dollars a year on conventional and nuclear weapons, troops, and [over 800 military bases](#) around the world.

Of course, Sanders has rightly opposed George W. Bush’s occupation of Iraq, Saudi Arabia’s U.S.-backed war in Yemen, and Trump’s threat of war on Iran. But he voted for the war in Afghanistan and war budgets that funded the occupations of both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Underlying this mixed record is his mistaken belief that the U.S., under progressive leadership, [could play a positive role in the world](#), especially in forging what he calls an international alliance in defense of democracy against authoritarian rulers like China’s Xi Jinping, who he explicitly singles out in his speech. Such a position risks giving left-wing cover for [Washington’s confrontation with Beijing](#), an inter-imperial rivalry driven not by the politics of either regime, but their capitalist economies’ competition for domination over the world market.

The new socialist movement should instead follow the lead of Martin Luther King, Jr. who viewed the U.S. state not as a potentially benign force, but “[the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today](#).” King further called attention to how the massive expenditure on the war machine killing people abroad drains funds and resources that could otherwise go to workers and the oppressed at home.

That’s why he spoke out against the Vietnam War and argued that the poor people’s movement he initiated near the end of his life had to oppose what he called the “[triple evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism](#).” The new left should heed this call and build an independent mass movement to confront all of the system’s inequalities at home and abroad.

To win that struggle, we must build a new party of our own, uphold fierce internationalist opposition to all imperialisms, organize international solidarity from below, and challenge both parties of capital not only in the ballot box, but more importantly, in the streets and in workplaces where we have the power not only to win a political and social revolution for socialist democracy in the U.S., but throughout the world.

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P.S.

- Truthout, June 25, 2019:
<https://truthout.org/articles/sanderss-speech-presents-a-conundrum-for-new-lefts-socialist-strategy/>
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