

USA: What the Sanders' Campaign Opens

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BERNIE SANDERS' CAMPAIGN of four years ago put socialism on the U.S. political agenda for the first time in generations. He's on the trail again, explaining what a "democratic socialist" vision means, beginning with building mass movements and supporting unions and union organizing.

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Bernie distinguishes his vision from others running in the Democratic primary in several ways. First, Sanders doesn't accept corporate funding. Bernie has built a funding model based on small donations and continues to build that base. No one thought that could be done until he did it!

Second, he organizes independently of the Democratic party's political machine and welcomes the support of other independent organizations such as Labor for Bernie and DSA's committees.

Third, he outlines a platform focused on the needs of working people, who have suffered from a growing inequality over the last quarter century. Unlike other politicians who endlessly identify "the middle class" as their audience, Bernie talks about the needs and desires of working-class people.

His campaign champions a \$15 an hour minimum wage and the right to belong to a union. In fact, he joins picket lines and encourages his supporters to do so.

His platform for racial justice outlines a comprehensive program to end discrimination in housing, education, health care, employment, an end to police violence and voter disenfranchisement. He calls for comprehensive immigration reform, dismantling deportation programs and detention centers, expansion of DACA and a path to citizenship. When asked what is the greatest problem facing the world, he says right up front: climate change.

Fourth, unlike any other candidate running, Bernie has a history as a movement activist since his college days when he was a member of the Young People's Socialist League. This enables us to have more confidence that he speaks with greater conviction than those who live their lives as politicians.

Fifth, he does not claim he will represent the interests of working people, rather he maintains that without independent political organization, it is impossible to implement such the program he outlines. In a recent talk he pointed to the example of the Puerto Rican people in forcing the resignation of Governor Ricardo Rosselló as the kind of action necessary to defeat Wall Street.

The Capitalist Party Straitjacket

Frankly, I come from the socialist tradition that identifies both the Democratic and Republican

parties as controlled by different sections of the corporate elite. We have worked to build independent political parties, particularly the Labor Party founded in the 1990s, but also socialist campaigns and the Green Party.

I don't think either of the two "major" capitalist parties, even the Democratic party (which is seen as more open to initiating change), can be transformed into a tool controlled by those who vote for it. The party's funding and structures are controlled by corporate power.

But given the lock the two-party system maintains under a winner-take-all system, an independent third-party formation has been unable to gain a mass audience in the United States.

It's a century-old problem, underpinned by undemocratic election laws. These have been reinforced by the 2010 Supreme Court ruling in *Citizens United vs. FEC*, allowing unlimited amounts from disclosed donors to be spent on elections as well as extensive use of gerrymandering made more precise with new technology. Clearly a break from the two-party system isn't imminent.

Sanders, who has run as an independent for years but stayed aloof from building a party, developed a strategy of running on the Democratic primary party ballot line while refusing corporate funding and remaining fairly independent of party structures. Since Vermont doesn't record party registration, Sanders is technically an Independent who receives the Democratic nomination. This novel tactic has attracted support from people committed to social change — but although useful in the short term, its potential is questionable.

While some folks were disappointed that in 2016 Bernie kept his pledge to support the Democratic Party candidate who won the primary, in fact he did what he promised to do. I don't think he would have been allowed to run in the Democratic primary if he hadn't. That's the compromise he made.

Bernie's Campaign This Time

Some thought that for his second run Bernie would move to the "center," but interestingly enough he is staking out a fuller social democratic program. His highlighting the need for an economic bill of rights has opened up an important discussion.

He's pointing out that political democracy without economic democracy doesn't offer much more than the possible right to vote. While that right is important, particularly for those who have been disenfranchised, by itself it doesn't offer much security in one's life or for one's family.

What Bernie's campaign does, particularly for the socialist left, is to provide us with a larger platform on which to outline our own socialist vision of society. He points to the reality of a battle between working people and the corporations. He supports and defends the unions and programs (starting with Medicare for all) that decommodify what people need for their lives.

That vision gives power to some of his smaller proposals. For example, Bernie and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Congresswoman for NY-14 (the Bronx & Queens), introduced a bill to have the post office issue money orders as it used to do.

There are several million people who rely on check cashing outfits that charge an arm and a leg because people lack a bank account. It's a simple reform, yet with consequences not only for poor people, but also strengthening public sector workers, the majority of whom are women and African Americans.

What does this simple have to do with socialism? It puts the needs of people before the megaprofits of the check-cashing business. That means something in today's corporate-ravaged neoliberal America.

It is true that Bernie doesn't raise nationalizing industry under workers' and community control, and his opposition to U.S. wars abroad doesn't scrutinize U.S. imperialism's role in the world — issues that the independent socialist left needs to foreground. However the reality of his program — support to workers' rights, expansion of Medicare for all, an end to a fossil fuel economy and the call for women to control our own bodies — can only be implemented if millions mobilize in the streets.

The Democratic party does not see Sanders as "reliable," and will once again find a way to block his winning their spot on the ballot. That was true in 2016 and I believe it's true this time. In fact, this time around there is a surplus of candidates so delegates will be able to "pick" from a range — whether it's Elizabeth Warren, who echoes a great deal of his program, or someone much closer to the center, whether Kamala Harris or Joe Biden.

Given that Sanders' road will be blocked once again, what then is the point in supporting his primary run? Won't that experience just demoralize his grassroots support, especially as he will then endorse a figure the establishment prefers? Won't it reinforce reliance on the Democratic party?

Of course all that's a possibility, just as the re-election of Trump is a possibility. But it's significant that at its August convention, DSA voted not to support any candidate for president if Bernie is not a nominee. That doesn't seem as if supporting Bernie's run traps individuals and organizations inside the Democratic party — whatever choices Individuals make in pulling the lever on election day, whether that's for the "lesser evil," progressive independent or third-party option.

It's blindness to ignore how Sanders' platform and dynamism have changed political discussion throughout the country. It gives socialists the opportunity to engage friends, family and coworkers in a discussion, far beyond support to a particular reform and without sounding like futile utopians. This broader vision of social, political and economic democracy is a battering ram against the austerity program that all wings of the corporate elite demand.

Although it doesn't confront, let alone solve, the huge problem that we don't have a party run by working people and in our interests, nonetheless Bernie's campaign reveals a positive alternative to corporate domination. That insight will flourish, of course, only if millions find their voices in the struggles for justice.

Let's not kid ourselves: The struggle to win a majority to realize that the destructive nature of capitalism can be replaced through mass intervention is still at a beginning stage. It can be nourished through the daily community struggles for clean water, affordable housing and quality schools. It lives in Black Lives Matter and the fight for a democratically-run union.

If we can pry open more political space during this electoral season, we may invigorate movements out of which these demands first arose. Isn't that's the point of the exercise?

It is unlikely, given the tools we currently lack, to immediately do more than widen the discussion for economic, political and environmental justice. But the deeper our roots the greater chance of success. The point Bernie makes, which socialists need to amplify, is that change comes about when millions mobilize for ourselves and each other.

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P.S.

- Againstthe Current (ATC) n° 202, September-October 2019:
<https://solidarity-us.org/atc/202/bernies-campaign/>