

An “All Hands on Deck” Moment: Sixty-Six Old New Leftists Urge Support for Joe Biden

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Anti-war march on Washington, D.C. on November 27, 1965

When I heard that a large group of people who had been prominent in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had written an open letter about the importance of supporting Joe Biden, I immediately wanted to read it, because long ago that was my organization. SDS, along with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), had been in the vanguard of the new left in the 1960s, and some of these oldsters now want to challenge a position taken by Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), currently the foremost organization on the left today. They tell us “this is an all hands on deck moment,” and that supporting Joe Biden in order to defeat Donald Trump “is our high moral and political responsibility.”

Some of those who don’t like what is said in the letter accuse the sixty-six of some crime called “shaming” – and I don’t quite get that. When someone disagrees with me and argues urgently for a different course of action than the one I am taking, I think that’s okay. Whether they happen to be older or younger or the same age as me doesn’t matter either (although that may be because I am old). Frank, open, democratic discussion is necessary if we are to build a vibrant Left. And it is clear to me that the sense of urgency to oppose and defeat the vicious policies and dynamics of Donald Trump and his right-wing administration is admirable – and it is shared by both sides in this little flare-up.

Given that, what explains this confrontation of “old new left” with “new new left”? Part of the answer may be found in differences between SDS and DSA. While many of its members were socialists, SDS was not an explicitly socialist organization. Also, in the last sections of its foundational document,

The Port Huron Statement, there was a commitment to working in the Democratic Party to make it a progressive force. Neither of these things is true of DSA as it currently exists.

DSA is an explicitly socialist organization, and it does not have the kind of commitment to the Democratic Party that was reflected in *The Port Huron Statement*. It supports certain Democrats sometimes, but its "Where We Stand" statement says something that could never have found its way into the old *Port Huron Statement*: "Democratic socialists reject an either-or approach to electoral coalition building, focused solely on a new party or on realignment within the Democratic Party. ... Electoral tactics are only a means for democratic socialists; the building of a powerful anti-corporate coalition is the end. Where third party or non-partisan candidates mobilize such coalitions, democratic socialists will build such organizations and candidacies."

Such differences may contribute to an explanation of the difference that has cropped up between the old SDS veterans and the younger DSA activists.

Memories of SDS

The letter of the sixty-six appeals to the lessons of history, which I think is always a good idea. What they do with history, however, strikes me as selective and superficial. The actualities of history undermine the case they make. After following my old friends down the pathways of the past, I will want to return to what seems to me to make sense in the present moment.

I have never regretted being part of SDS. We were not a perfect organization and never claimed to be, but we did the best we could to struggle for social and economic justice and a genuinely democratic society. We did some good things and learned from our experience. I read the letter with interest. Among the sixty-six signers are people I knew as comrades long ago, when I was a member of SDS from 1965 to 1969. It stirred memories.

Even before I joined, I was close to the organization, and I was influenced by the support that many of these signers (and SDS as a whole) were giving to liberal Democrat Lyndon Baines Johnson in the 1964 election campaign against conservative Republican Barry Goldwater, with the slogan "Part of the Way With LBJ." I organized as best I could other students in my high school to campaign for Johnson.

I was young and naïve (perhaps the same could be said, in those long-ago times, for the signers of the letter). I did not assume that Johnson was preparing the dramatic escalation of an imperialist war in Vietnam. In the face of that escalating horror, many of the signers played important roles in helping to build the anti-war opposition (as did I), going so far as to refuse to support Hubert Humphrey's pro-war Presidential candidacy in 1968 (as did I) - although now they regret doing that (unlike me).

One of my most profound educational experiences in SDS was engaging with the incredible speech by Carl Oglesby (at the time the organization's President) at a 1965 anti-war march on Washington. It contrasted "humanist liberals" and "corporate liberals." Humanist liberals are those who take to heart the writings of Tom Paine, the opening passages of the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address. Corporate liberals are those who represent the interests of the powerful business corporations that dominate our economy, our society, our government, our foreign policy - to enhance their profits and power, at the expense of the rest of us in the United States and throughout the world. Oglesby urged humanist liberals to join with radicals in breaking from the corporate liberals, in order to overturn the system they dominate, replacing it with a genuinely democratic and humanistic social, economic, and political order, "in the name of plain human hope."

I see the future society that Oglesby was describing, and that I have been fighting for since I joined SDS, as *socialism*.

Max Weber or Rosa Luxemburg

While inclined to touch on aspects of the history of the new left, the open letter leaves out any reference to what at the time was the influential perspective so eloquently articulated by this one-time leader of SDS. It does something similar when it refers to a couple of moments in German history. When I saw the letter mentioning the stormy year of 1919, I thought there would surely be reference to the great socialist Rosa Luxemburg. But no, she never comes up. Instead there is reference to the presumed wisdom of an anti-socialist, the liberal academic Max Weber, who warned left-wing students that “the best politics should be painfully aware of the consequences of action, not just intentions.”

This political mentor of the letter-writers had enthusiastically supported the German war effort during World War I, which he saw as necessary if Germany was to function as a leading world power. He had denounced revolutionary socialists as engaged in “dirt, muck, dung, and horseplay—nothing else.” He singled out Rosa Luxemburg (who had spent time in prison for opposing the war) as someone who should be confined to a zoo. Soon after, it is true, he expressed regret when she was brutally murdered in early 1919 by right-wing death squads, but he also suggested she had brought this on herself. Her criminal “horseplay” involved believing that humanity’s choices were either going forward to socialism or sliding down into barbarism. (See: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/>; also Paul Le Blanc and Helen C. Scott, eds., *Socialism or Barbarism: Selected Writings of Rosa Luxemburg* [London: Pluto Press, 2010].) In the wake of her murder, the moderate leaders of the socialist movement engineered a compromised democracy, with capitalism, militarism, and the fake “populism” of right-wing nationalism intact.

Barbarism would come, of course, in the form of Adolf Hitler’s Nazi movement that grew through the 1920s (in an atmosphere of corporate liberalism, pragmatic centrism, and growing crises) and took power in 1933. The open letter correctly notes that the moderate Social Democrats and the militant Communists might have prevented this had they joined together in a united front against Hitler. Instead they denounced each other, with the Communists engaging in ultra-left street fighting and the Social Democrats supporting the “lesser evil” in the elections of 1932 by helping to re-elect the old conservative nationalist Paul von Hindenberg as the most practical way to block Hitler. Of course, Hindenberg and those conservatives around him decided it would be most practical for them to adapt to the Nazis, and they brought Hitler into their government in 1933, after which he transformed it into his government. This important information, too, is missing from the open letter.

The Here-and-Now: Sanders and Biden

One historical lesson: neither ultra-left street fighting nor settling for a “lesser evil” in the electoral arena will necessarily bring about the results we intend. Instead, it makes sense to build a united front of revolutionary socialists, moderate socialists, and others to fight against lesser and greater evils – in our communities, in our workplaces, in the streets. And where we can elect our own people to public office, backed up by dynamic social movements, that makes sense too.

Another historical lesson: a failure for the working-class majority to move forward to socialism could result in the dynamics of capitalism generating a downward slide into barbarism.

A third historical lesson: it makes sense to grasp the difference between humanist liberals (potentially allies of socialists) and corporate liberals (without a doubt, opponents of socialists and humanist liberals).

I think it makes sense to keep such things in mind as we attempt to navigate the complexities of our own time.

First of all, although some on the left have argued that Bernie Sanders is more a humanist liberal than an actual socialist (I disagree, seeing him as a moderate socialist), there is certainly no question that Joe Biden's entire political history is that of a corporate liberal. When push comes to shove, there is no question - Biden is not on our side, he is on the side of the capitalist corporations. One could argue that Donald Trump is no better, and that in fact he is much worse. I think that is true. It doesn't take away the fact that Joe Biden is a corporate liberal.

Second, the Sanders campaign helped to advance the cause of socialism. The campaign identified the power structures and policies dominant in the United States as being controlled by the small class of billionaires, designed to preserve their power and expand their wealth at the expense of the rest of us. It put forward radical reform proposals that challenged the perspectives and power of the billionaires while making sense for our diverse working-class majority, including: Medicare for all; a \$15 an hour minimum wage; guaranteed employment and income for all; and a Green New Deal that combines protecting the environment with protecting the working conditions and living standards of the working-class. There is also the insistence that to pay for all of these things we need, we must tax billionaires and corporate profits, not the working class. The word "socialism" was positively associated with these understandings and proposals, inserting that into the popular consciousness and mainstream political discourse.

Third, DSA took a position early on that it would endorse Sanders as a socialist candidate running on the Democratic Party ballot-line, but it would not endorse any other Presidential candidate. This does not prevent any member, or group of members, in DSA from voting for another candidate (such as Biden). One could make a case that people should vote for Biden because he is not Trump, that he has a decent chance to defeat Trump, and that it is very important to defeat Trump. No DSA member who is a voter (and no voter who is not a DSA member) will be prevented in any way from acting on such a conviction.

Fourth, at the same time, the decision would seem to prevent DSA *as an organization* from doing what SDS did in regard to another corporate liberal in 1964 - campaigning for Lyndon Baines Johnson. There is a logic to this, given the nature of DSA as an explicitly socialist organization. As a corporate liberal, Biden is an anti-socialist, pro-capitalist, pro-billionaire enemy of what Sanders and his supporters were fighting for. While there was much that DSA could campaign for in supporting Sanders, since Sanders' program was basically consistent with DSA's socialist program, the same is far from true in relation to Biden. One might vote for him because he is not Trump, but beyond that, there does not seem to be much an explicitly socialist organization would be able to campaign *for* in what Biden offers.

Biden offers a return to "the good old days" of corporate capitalist America, before Donald Trump assumed the Presidency. Of course, those good old days were not so good, were increasingly problematical and crisis-ridden (in part because of the "pragmatic" policies championed by Joe Biden and other corporate liberals), generating the growing discontent that discredited "mainstream" politicians like Biden and paved the way for Donald Trump. A good dose of what Biden and those around him have to offer, should he win the Presidency, will set us up for the "solutions" offered by forces more disciplined and sinister than what Trump represents.

What Sanders represented was better than that, and in the opinion of many of us, was worth supporting. Sanders has now been defeated, and he - like the sixty-six - is urging us to support Biden in order to defeat Trump. Given who and what he is, Biden may not win, but if he does win, he will offer no solutions, and graver problems will be coming down on us in rapid order.

I have decided to support eco-socialist Howie Hawkins, Green Party candidate, so that I will be able to campaign for something I believe in during the upcoming electoral season. Others may think other choices make sense. But for me, this divergence is not the “bottom-line.”

The Bottom Line

Now more than ever, this definitely *is* an all hands on deck moment, and for more than one reason. The crises of capitalism are deepening in our country, and an increasingly desperate population is polarizing.

We all know of the remarkable (and well-financed) phenomenon of right-wing “populism” that has fueled the “Tea Party” movement and worse, and that has provided the base for Trump’s “Make America Great Again” campaigns and policies. Coming out of the shadows are elements prepared to defend old racist monuments of the Confederacy, shoot down young black men wearing hoodies, enter synagogues to slaughter Jews, and rally to state capitals, guns in hand, to push for an end to coronavirus restrictions - in order to “get the economy going again,” so that Big Business can retrieve its profits, even if significant numbers of “lesser people” have to die.

On the other side of the spectrum, thanks to various mass insurgencies that included the “Occupy Wall Street” and “Black Lives Matter” movements, and that found expression in the Sanders campaigns, there are statistics that offer hope. Those in the United States today inclined to identify positively with the notion of socialism include 43 percent of all U.S. citizens, 51 percent of young people (ages 18-29), and 57 percent of Democrats. There is clearly the basis, in the foreseeable future, for a mass socialist movement in the United States. And with it, there will be the possibility of waging coherent struggles on multiple levels that will be capable of moving our society to a transition from the tyrannies of capitalism to the economic democracy of socialism.

The urgency goes well beyond the 2020 elections. Now is a time that requires discussion, debate, planning, and the beginnings of efforts to help us prepare for what we must do in the decade that has just begun. How can we build a powerful and effective mass socialist movement? What is the strategic orientation that can help ensure the triumph of such a movement? This is what we need in order to shake the future, and shape the future, as Carl Oglesby once put it, “in the name of plain human hope.”