

Bernie Sanders Calls for Political Revolution Against Billionaires: Campaign Needs to Build Independent Political Power

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This is the latest in a series of articles discussing the pros and cons of a Bernie Sanders campaign in the Democratic Party. Scroll down to find other articles. - Ed.

Boldly calling for a “political revolution” against the “billionaires and oligarchs” who have hijacked the political system, Bernie Sanders has launched an insurgent campaign for President. The only self-described socialist in Congress, Sanders explained his decision to run to ABC News, saying “We need a political revolution in this country involving millions of people who are prepared to stand up and say ‘Enough is enough,’ and I want to help lead that effort.”

Contradicting the cynics who say Americans are hopelessly apathetic and conservative, his announcement has been met with a tremendous wave of enthusiasm. In the first day of his campaign 100,000 people signed up to get involved on his website and 35,000 people donated \$1.5 million, more than any other presidential contender raised in their first day. By the fourth day of his campaign, an incredible 75,000 people had donated \$3 million at an average of \$43 per donation. Over 99% of contributions to Sanders were for \$250 or less.

This campaign can gain a big echo among the millions who are disgusted by corporate politics that are making the rich richer while living standards for the rest of us are increasingly lagging behind. This is why first the Occupy movement and now the Fight for \$15 have won such support across the country. It is also why there is increasing openness to the idea of a “third party” and explains how Kshama Sawant won almost 100,000 votes in 2013 when she was elected as a socialist to the Seattle City Council.

Unfortunately, despite Sanders being an independent member of Congress for the past 25 years, he has declared he will be seeking the Democratic Party nomination, a move Socialist Alternative has argued against over the past year.

Sanders is calling for taxing the rich and big business, a trillion-dollar public works program to create 13 million jobs, a \$15 minimum wage, single-payer universal healthcare, stopping the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and other pro-corporate free trade deals, strengthening union rights, and closing the gender pay gap.

His campaign stands in sharp contrast to the waffling and empty rhetoric of Hillary Clinton and other establishment politicians. He was one of the few members of Congress who voted against the Patriot Act in 2001 and calls for dismantling the NSA’s domestic spying programs. He stands for

bold action to address climate change, demanding a rapid transition away from fossil fuels towards energy efficiency and renewable energy.

Sanders highlights his opposition to corporate power and the 1%, calling for overturning Citizens United and saying that his campaign is devoid of billionaires. On the campaign's website, underneath the requisite disclosure phrase "Paid For By Bernie 2016" proudly stands the addition: "Not The Billionaires."

Sanders' Politics

Socialist Alternative welcomes Sanders' decision to run for President to help create, as he says, "an independent voice, fighting for working families" to "bring the fight to the Koch brothers, Wall Street, and corporate America." His campaign will give Hillary Clinton a much-deserved challenge and will widen the spectrum of political discussion, injecting some working-class reality into the increasingly surreal and narrow parameters of official debate.

Given the overwhelming disgust with status-quo politicians and the weakness of independent left-wing forces, Sanders' campaign has the potential to rally millions against the political establishment and their billionaire masters.

In our view, however, Sanders is making a fundamental mistake by running in the Democratic Party primary. Instead, we have argued that he should run as an independent to help build a political alternative to the corporate-owned political parties. There is a glaring contradiction between Sanders' call for a political revolution against the billionaire class and attempting to carry that out within a party controlled by that same billionaire class.

This contradiction will be posed starkly when Sanders loses the Democratic primary. Sanders has said he will endorse the Democratic nominee, which is very likely to be Hilary Clinton or - if Clinton stumbles badly - another safe pro-business Democrat. This will mean that those mobilized by Sanders will be told to support a pro-corporate Democrat, the exact opposite of a "revolution" against the "billionaires and oligarchs." This could result in the demoralization of those mobilized by the idea of fighting corporate power and the loss of a historic opportunity.

Notwithstanding his mistaken decision to join the Democrats, there will be another path open to Sanders when the Democratic machine blocks him. Sanders should continue running in the general election as an independent to provide working people an alternative to Hillary Clinton and the right-wing Republican. Such a step could open up a completely new chapter in U.S. politics, acting as a huge impetus towards the building of a new political force to represent the 99%.

Such a step would go against Sanders' stated intention and his general political approach, but it cannot be excluded. It will be influenced by how events unfold and how much pressure Sanders comes under from his own supporters demanding that he continue running in the general election rather than endorse Clinton.

Sanders' platform points in the right direction, but as socialists we would go further. For example, Sanders calls for breaking up the huge Wall Street banks, a radical reform which we would support. But far better would be to bring the big banks under democratic public ownership.

While Sanders limits himself to a program of reforming capitalism along the lines of Western Europe, we stand for a fundamental socialist transformation of society. While the European workers' movement won huge reforms during the post-war period, capitalism was not overthrown. Under intense pressure, the European capitalist classes made big concessions in order to maintain their social and political power, but since the end of the post-war boom they have carried out an

unrelenting neo-liberal offensive to roll back these reforms.

In relation to more immediate political issues, Sanders needs to speak out clearly in support of the Black Lives Matter movement against racist police brutality and mass incarceration. Also, while Bernie honorably opposed both the Patriot Act and the invasion of Iraq, he has, on numerous occasions, voted for military appropriations. Regrettably, he did not oppose the war in Afghanistan and failed to oppose the recent Israeli massacre in Gaza.

Despite these political shortcomings, Bernie's campaign stands out as fundamentally different from those of all the other business-as-usual politicians running for president. To much of the population which has come of age over the past 25 years, he is "still the most radical politician from the Left they have ever seen."

Building Mass Movements is Key

To achieve the demands Sanders is campaigning on will require building powerful mass movements of working people. To carry out his platform, Sanders' campaign needs to be strategically orientated towards helping to strengthen movements from below.

Bernie made similar points in an interview with *The Nation's* John Nichols when he argued "a campaign has got to be much more than just getting votes and getting elected. It has got to be helping to educate people, organize people. If we can do that, we can change the dynamic of politics for years and years to come. If 80 to 90 percent of the people in this country vote, if they know what the issues are ... Washington and Congress will look very, very different from the Congress currently dominated by big money and dealing only with the issues that big money wants them to deal with."

Sanders also pointed out that "We can elect the best person in the world to be president, but that person will get swallowed up unless there is an unprecedented level of activism at the grassroots level."

Therefore, from a socialist standpoint, strengthening the struggles for economic and social justice will be more important than who is elected president in 2016. The key will be to use the 2016 election to help raise the level of organization, confidence, and consciousness of workers and social movements.

The experience of Kshama Sawant's election is an example of what is necessary to build the forces to run the strongest possible campaign and to win its demands. Kshama Sawant and Socialist Alternative organized a grassroots force that elected the first socialist in 100 years. Once Kshama was elected, the momentum from her victory was used to build 15 Now, a grassroots organization that mobilized hundreds of activists across the city and worked in coalition with labor unions to push through the highest minimum wage in the country at that time.

But experience has shown again and again that the Democratic Party is the graveyard of social movements. In recent times we saw this when the Occupy movement was brutally repressed by police forces under the direction of primarily Democratic mayors with the assistance of an FBI operating under the Obama administration. Even worse was how the Occupy movement was politically demobilized by elements tied to the Democrats with their appeals to support Obama against the Republicans in 2012. In 2004, the anti-war movement was systematically undermined by the rallying behind the pro-war campaign of the Democratic presidential nominee, John Kerry.

The Black Lives Matter movement, the Fight for \$15, and Occupy Wall Street have greatly altered the political terrain on the issues of racism and economic inequality. By comparison, much of the left poured tremendous energy and resources into electing Barack Obama and the Democrats only to see

them advance the agenda of Wall Street.

Joel Bleifuss, editor of *In These Times*, argues that “a Sanders candidacy offers American progressives the chance to build the infrastructure for future progressive electoral campaigns ... Unlike the 1988 Democratic primary, in which Jesse Jackson carried 11 states only to have his campaign organization disappear into the political ether, a Sanders campaign is set to build a movement with future electoral capacity. Sanders understands that the organization that coalesces behind him must survive the campaign itself and endure.”

We agree that this is needed and possible, but Bleifuss’s wishes will not be enough to bring it fruition. To avoid Sanders’ campaign “disappearing into the political ether” will require that he continues running all the way through the November 2016 election and does not make the mistake, as Jackson did in 1984 and 1988, of endorsing the Democratic nominee once he loses the primaries. This is the clear lesson from Jackson’s shipwrecked campaigns, and we must fight to avoid the same mistake being repeated with Sanders’ campaign.

Left Primary Challengers and the Democratic Establishment

Activists need to be realistic in recognizing that the Democratic Party establishment opposes Bernie Sanders and will make sure he does not win the Democratic primary. If necessary, they will use all the tools at their disposal, including their access to big money, the mass media, the authority of prominent politicians, and their control over the party structures.

The history of anti-establishment Democratic Party primary challenges underscores this. The Jesse Jackson campaigns of 1984 and 1988 were the strongest left Democratic primary campaigns in recent history. Jackson’s radical, populist campaigns garnered huge support – more than it appears likely Bernie will be able to mobilize – and at one stage appeared to be within reach of winning the Democratic primary. Exactly because of this, the Democratic establishment moved decisively to defeat him.

As Ron Jacobs pointed out in *Counterpunch*, “Anti-Palestinian and big business donors and media commentators took a private comment made by Jackson out of context and splashed it across the pages and television screens of America. Racial code words began being heard in relation to Jackson’s name. Soon, his chances of winning the Democratic Party nomination were gone. Instead, the party limped out of San Francisco that summer with the Cold War liberal Walter Mondale as its loser candidate [in 1984].”

More recently we saw how key sections of the Democratic Party establishment acted to break the rise of the populist anti-war campaign of Howard Dean in 2004, instead ramming through the pro-war candidate John Kerry to run a failed campaign against George Bush in 2004.

These examples illustrate how the big-business Democrats who control the party are far more determined to defeat anti-corporate insurgents than they are to stop right-wing Republicans.

On the other hand, as long as Bernie does not stand a serious chance of winning the primaries, he will be welcomed and even encouraged. Even Hilary Clinton recognizes that Sanders will bring enthusiasm and attention to the Democratic primaries and provide them with a progressive legitimacy. Clinton calculates that by Sanders shifting the political debate towards the huge concentration of wealth it will also help to undermine the Republicans electorally.

After Sanders is defeated in the primaries, if he goes on to endorse Clinton (or whoever is the establishment pick), the energy behind his campaign will be directed into “safe” channels which represent no threat to Corporate America. In this way, Sanders’ campaign would be used as a

convenient “left flank” by Clinton to draw in support from union members and activists who are fed up with corporate politics.

It would be tragic if Sanders’ campaign ends up playing this role. Unfortunately, he has indicated he will support whoever wins the Democratic primaries. But there is another path available, which Socialist Alternative will be urging Bernie to take and discussing with those supporting his campaign.

We believe Sanders should not limit himself to the narrow framework of the Democratic Party. Rather than endorsing Hillary Clinton he should continue running in the general election when the majority of workers and youth are paying the most attention.

But to even seriously challenge Hillary Clinton in the primaries, Sanders will need to build up an independent base of support. This means building a campaign based on those people not represented by the corporate politicians: organizing people fed up with Congress, building campaign committees rooted in neighborhoods, workplaces, unions, and social movements like Black Lives Matter and the Fight for \$15.

Sanders’ campaign could play a key role in bringing together these elements into an organized force that can democratically discuss and debate what policies best represent working-class interests and how to advance those struggles. Such a force would be necessary to continue campaigning in the general election and beyond, or else the momentum created by Sanders’ campaign will disappear “into the political ether.”

In this way, Sanders’ campaign could play a critical role in helping to lay the basis for a new political party, a third party, to provide an alternative to the increasingly unpopular Republican and Democratic parties. A broad left-wing or working-class party would be an organization which brings together different struggles and generalizes from them a common set of interests, a political program.

Bernie himself pointed to such an approach when he told John Nichols “there is no question that the Democratic Party in general remains far too dependent on big-money interests, that it is not fighting vigorously for working-class families ... The more radical approach would be to run as an independent, and essentially when you’re doing that you’re not just running for President of the United States, you’re running to build a new political movement in America—which presumably would lead to other candidates running outside of the Democratic Party, essentially starting a third party.”

Spoiler?

Some on the left object that such an approach would end up weakening the Democratic candidate and help the Republicans to win the presidency. The fear of another Republican president is real and understandable. Socialist Alternative wholeheartedly agrees that the Republicans need to be opposed and we in no way want to see them elected.

But the danger of an independent left-wing candidate tipping a close election to the Republicans is far outweighed by the more important need for working people to begin to build their own political voice to represent themselves.

Further, the big-business Democratic politicians have proven themselves incapable of defeating the right-wing policies of an increasingly unhinged Republican Party. Let us not forget that despite the “hope” and “change” of Obama’s 2008 campaign, once in power Obama’s pro-business policies prepared the ground for Republican victories in 2010 and 2012 by demoralizing progressives and

allowing the Tea Party to demagogically tap into anger at the Democrats as the party in power.

Sanders pointed this out when he told Nichols: “[M]ost people have given up on the political process ... They think there is no particular reason for them to come out and vote ... [Hillary Clinton’s] centrist politics ... That is not the type of policy that we need. And it is certainly not going to be the politics that galvanizes the tens of millions of people today who are thoroughly alienated and disgusted with the status quo.

“One of the things that I find most disturbing ... is that the Democrats now lose by a significant number the votes of white working-class people. How can that be? When you have a Republican Party that wants to destroy Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, etc., etc., why are so many people voting against their own economic interests? It happens because the Democrats have not been strong in making it clear which side they are on, not been strong in taking on Wall Street and corporate America.”

We need to break out of the cycle of Democratic disappointment leading to Republican gains, and begin to build a working-class political alternative to the Democrats and Republicans. If not now, when?

Over the next year the main arena for discussion and debate on anti-corporate politics will be within and around Sanders’ campaign. All those forces which recognize the vital need for independent left politics need to orient towards the large audience that will likely gather around Bernie.

Sanders’ campaign is heading for a political crisis in 2016, when he will need to choose between supporting the Democratic nominee or continue running in the general election. Socialists need to build the strongest possible base among Sanders supporters in preparation for this debate. A strong left current can mobilize Sanders’ supporters to demand Bernie continues running, or lead as much of the campaign as possible away from the Democrats if Bernie insists on endorsing Clinton.

Historic Opportunity for Left Politics

The political system in the US is bankrupt. Even pro-capitalist strategists like the editorial boards of the New York Times, the Washington Post, and The Economist agree their political system is dysfunctional. According to Gallup the approval rating for Congress averaged just 15% in 2014, close to an all-time low. Record numbers are registering as independents.

Sanders points out “there is profound disgust among the American people for the conventional political process ... the frustration and disgust with the status quo is much, much higher ... than many ‘pundits’ understand.”

There is a historic opening for independent left-wing politics. One sign of this was in 2013, when Kshama Sawant was elected as a Socialist Alternative candidate with almost 100,000 votes to the Seattle City Council. At the same time, another Socialist Alternative candidate, Ty Moore, came within 229 votes of being elected to the Minneapolis City Council. This opening is shown again with the enthusiastic grassroots support for Sawant’s re-election campaign this year (see www.KshamaSawant.org).

In 2014 Howie Hawkins received nearly 5% of the vote for Governor in the highest vote for a left candidate in New York State since 1920. The 2015 Chicago mayoral elections also showed the openness to challenge corporate politics. Tragically Karen Lewis, the president of the Chicago Teachers Union who had filed as a non-partisan candidate, was not able to run due to health problems. She could have defeated “Mayor 1%” Rahm Emanuel. Nevertheless, a real debate in the Chicago labor movement opened up about what kind of representation workers need. The election

showed the potential for labor unions to play a powerful independent role rather than their current position of surrendering to corporate Democrats.

There are millions of people in the U.S. who are ready for a “political revolution” that rolls back the tide against big business. Instead of dividing these forces by channeling some of those who want far-reaching change back into the Democratic Party establishment and thereby alienating another section completely fed up with both corporate political parties, an independent campaign behind an unapologetic working-class fighter could create the kind of unity needed to challenge the capitalist oligarchy that is strangling our society.

Sanders running independently could help to open the floodgates. Our movement is not strong enough to elect an independent candidate like Sanders in 2016, but more importantly an independent Sanders campaign could change U.S. politics forever, laying the basis for a new third party that could give millions a powerful tool to begin organizing against Wall Street.

If you agree, join Kshama Sawant and Socialist Alternative to make sure this historic opportunity is not squandered. We will be campaigning with Sanders supporters against the corporate politicians while politically arguing for Sanders to run all-out through the November 2016 election, as a step toward building an independent political alternative for working people.

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