

Bernie Sanders as I've Known Him



I haven't had a chance yet to write up my own view of the Bernie Sanders campaign, but I want to give some background, going back to 1980, on what I know about the man.

In 1980 I was in Vermont trying to get on the ballot for the Presidential campaign – seeking the line of Liberty Union, a minor party which had hoped to become a “second party” in Vermont.

Liberty Union's own history goes back to the late 1960's when there was an effort in several states, at the height of the Vietnam War, to get alternative radical views on the ballot. The main base for this effort was in California, with the Peace and Freedom Party which, in 1968, nominated Eldridge Cleaver for President. (I ran for Congress in Lower Manhattan on that ticket that year, picking up the endorsement of the Village Voice and getting nearly 5% of the vote).

Liberty Union was founded in Vermont in 1970. Wikipedia lists the three original founders as former Congressman William H. Meyer, Peter Diamondstone and Dennis Morrisseau. Bernie Sanders joined Liberty Union in 1971 and was a candidate for several offices before deciding to run as an independent.

The man who has provided the glue to hold Liberty Union together was Peter Dimondstone, who may still be in the Socialist Party. His home outside of Burlington reminds one of the old movie "You Can't Take it With You" – the backyard has maple trees which can be tapped for syrup, and the front yard has a collection of broken cars, making up almost an informal study in decay. The house is large, and when I was last there housed one huge (friendly) dog, and at least one cat.

Liberty Union has one major asset that some of you may have encountered – this is Jerry Levy, who puts on a remarkable one man performance of "Marx in Soho," Howard Zinn's play. Leaving politics aside for the moment (as if, in the context of this play, one could), I give that play five stars and urge anyone interested in a view of old Karl as a human being, in London's Soho district, to find out when Jerry is coming your way – and book him.

When I was there in 1980 I met Bernie, who was just then in the process of disengaging himself from Liberty Union. Bernie was a great fan of Debs and I have a memory of him working on something to do with Debs, perhaps a collection of his speeches.

Bernie was determined to enter the arena of "serious politics" (which, even at the most generous, was not where Liberty Union was going). In 1981 he was elected Mayor of Burlington. After several terms he went on to run for Vermont's one Congressional seat. He lost the first time, by a narrow margin, and was chided by *In These Times* for not having entered the Democratic Party primary.

Ignoring that advice, he ran again as an independent, won, and went on to become one of Vermont's two Senators. Within the Senate he blocks with the Democratic Party.

In 1983 he came down to New York City to speak to the Socialist Party's national convention, so he was politically

at home in the democratic left and was endorsed by the SP in his later races.

Bernie Sanders takes his socialism seriously – and it is, I think, the old Debsian form of socialism, with more in common with the socialist movements in the Nordic countries.

His race for President is not a case of a “left Democrat” but of a truly independent socialist.

On the question of his current race, and my feelings on that, I’ll comment later and at some length since more is involved than Sanders but also the problem of democratic radicals confronting the two-party system.

Sanders does not have what I would call a “perfect voting record.” He has been cautious about Israel and on foreign policy he can’t be called a pacifist. As with any successful politician he has made compromises – one thinks of the career of Vito Marcantonio in New York City.

But Bernie has had an honorable career in the Congress and one watches in fascination as he draws the crowds in Iowa which Hillary must envy.

* David McReynolds is a democratic socialist and pacifist activist who described himself as "a peace movement bureaucrat" during his 40-year career with *Liberation* magazine and the War Resisters League. He lives in New York City.