

Bernie Sanders's Presidential candidacy— an auspicious development for the left

May 6, 2015



It's all over the news, mainstream and left/alternative alike, as well as social media, and is certainly one of the most important items of political news of recent vintage: after much consideration and testing of the political waters, Bernie Sanders (whom only the staid *New York Times* refers to as "Bernard"!), Independent Senator from Vermont and self-proclaimed "democratic socialist," is running for the Democratic Presidential nomination.

This makes Sanders the first candidate so far to challenge the inevitable shoo-in of Hillary Clinton. (Unless we consider the clown show of declared Republican Presidential candidates, of course.) This is a very auspicious development for the left for a number of reasons I will elaborate on; for I consider the Sanders candidacy auspicious and positive even for those of us of the left (myself included) who feel that "in principle" there can be no truck with the Democratic Party. But, as I hope to show, sometimes we have to "transcend" the rottenness of the Democratic Party when an exceptional individual candidate comes along and gives us a long-awaited opportunity.

Sanders insists that this will be a serious campaign, and he has a necessary fundraising strategy for this, a strategy as populist, as grassroots advocacy, as he is, and in stark contrast to Clinton and the usual gaggle of big-money donors and aspiring officeholders groveling before them. Rather than rely on such donors ("Billionaires do not flock to my campaign," Sanders quips correctly [Quoted by Matt Taibbi, "Give 'Em Hell, Bernie," April 29, 2015, *Rolling Stone*]), he wants, instead, 3,000 ordinary individuals who will contribute \$100 each. The contrast between his approach and that of the declared Republican candidates, as well as Clinton herself, who is expected to raise \$2 billion, is as stark as the difference between twelve o'clock noon and twelve o'clock midnight. And already an auspicious sign that a Sanders Presidential campaign will not go the way of "politics as usual."

Certainly Sanders's campaign message will not be "politics as usual." He has already built himself a base, garnered influence, and made a name for himself as an outspoken and fiery advocate for those of us Occupy called "the 99%." Not only did he endorse the Occupy Wall Street sit-in and the Occupy movement, he has also spoken out extensively and plainly against the oligarchs and plutocrats who dominate and pillage today's U.S. politics and economy; he has actively denounced the rampant economic inequality and economic gains of more employment and productivity going only to those at the very top, pointedly noting that 99% of new wealth created goes only to the top 1% of income-holders; he has actively supported a raise in the minimum wage to a livable \$15 an hour; firmly supports the rights of labor and unions so much under attack, and has frequently spoken at labor and minimum wage-increase rallies; calls for a single-payer healthcare system and expansion of Social Security; wishes to put people back to work at decent wages rebuilding the country's devastated infrastructure; and has frequently noted publicly that underneath the often touted "official" unemployment statistics is the "real" unemployment rate hidden in the Bureau of Labor

Statistics data, which shows an actual unemployment and underemployment rate nearly double the “official” one. He also wants to give relief to students crushed under onerous debt, and calls for a tuition-free four-year college education for all. Sanders is also one of the strongest environmentalists in Congress, has regularly warned of the dangers of climate change and the need for action, and voted against the Keystone XL pipeline. He openly supports same-sex marriage and abortion rights as well. Moreover, he’s in the opposition forefront against the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), another spurious “trade deal” that works only *for* the corporations and *against* the workers, the environment, and human rights.

Obviously these are not the “ordinary political fare” of “mainstream” political discourse. Yet these are the programs and issues that Bernie Sanders speaks on widely, directly, and regularly, and with a bluntness that does not fudge, obfuscate, or try to straddle fences—something that clearly marks him as a rare genuine Tribune of the People, a populist champion of the “ordinary person” articulating a clearly left-wing program we who read *New Politics* can certainly feel comfortable with.

Matt Taibbi wrote of him glowingly:

He is the rarest of Washington animals, a completely honest person. If he's motivated by anything other than a desire to use his influence to protect people who can't protect themselves, I've never seen it. Bernie Sanders is the kind of person who goes to bed at night thinking about how to increase the heating-oil aid program for the poor.

Certainly this domestic political program of Bernie Sanders outlined above, as well as Taibbi’s remarks on the personality and character of Sanders himself, give the left good political reasons to both admire Bernie Sanders personally and support programmatically his understanding of “democratic socialism” in action, an understanding he will raise on the candidate’s podium now that he’s declared himself. One good reason to support Bernie Sanders’s run for the Presidency. His left populist, deeply egalitarian program can now reach millions, and even directly challenge Democratic Presidential frontrunner Hillary Clinton and her desired political agenda. In some ways he already has.

Sanders, who officially announced his candidacy April 30, though it had been unofficially reported a few days earlier, has already garnered endorsements from Progressive Democrats of America (PDA), Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the social-democratic newsmagazine and website *In These Times*, and several former leaders of Occupy Wall Street, who have set up websites on his behalf, and are committing the Occupy name on his behalf—a first for Occupy, which had previously eschewed involvement in electoral politics. Even the business newspaper *Bloomberg View* thinks editorially that a Sanders candidacy could be a good thing in sparking political debate! (“What is a Sanders Democrat?”)

The chief problematic for the left in a Sanders candidacy is his intention to run, not as an independent, but as a Democrat. Sanders has always previously run and won elections as an independent, all the way back to his election as Mayor of Burlington, Vermont, then Vermont’s Congressional Representative for 16 years, and now its Senator since 2006. However, he did seriously consider running as an independent, but decided against it—I think for realistic reasons. As a Democratic candidate he will automatically be taken seriously by the media, and will be able to participate in the candidates’ debates, something he could not do if he ran as an independent. He will thus be able to reach millions on his issues, not the mere thousands he would reach solely as an independent. That is simply the reality of having to play by the rules of the “two-party shell game” that is *de rigueur* as “serious” politics in the U.S. today. And even if certain comrades feel they cannot support the Democratic Party *as a party* (and that includes a lot of us, including myself), they

should certainly consider, as a matter of simple realism, the necessity of supporting certain *individual* candidates who choose to run as Democrats. Simply because there really is no other realistic choice in most electoral races, and no truly viable left third party exists, nor is likely to exist in the foreseeable future.

The hapless nature of Jill Stein's run as President on the Green ticket in 2012 should be a tocsin for us all—try as she might, she could not get invited to any of the “significant” candidates' debates; the best she was able to do was participate in a “third party debate” that was scheduled in the summer of 2012, a token effort at “inclusiveness” that pitted Stein against such ultra-wingnuts as the Presidential nominee of the Constitution Party, a far-right splinter off the “too liberal” Libertarians! As it was, she was only able to garner 0.3% of the vote, or about 400,000 votes, only a tenth of what Ralph Nader had gotten in 2000, when his 2.7% of the vote cast him as the “spoiler” who made George W. Bush President! But as a Democratic candidate Sanders will be on the ballot in all the Democratic primaries, have to be acknowledged as a candidate at all the Democratic state caucuses and conventions, and be able to debate and confront Clinton and all the Republican challengers on the issues, be heard and listened to, and at least given respect as a “serious” candidate; something that Jill Stein was never able to achieve.

Not that he's expected to win the nomination—but he will be a force to be reckoned with in terms of policy and issues. Already Hillary Clinton's new-found “populism” is a sign of that. The Sanders candidacy will amplify the voice of liberals, leftists and progressives in U.S. politics, and realistically that's all we can hope for. Despite the new ferment and unrest that's emerged, first through Occupy, then through the protests that erupted in places such as Ferguson and Baltimore, left forces are very small, and programs and proposals almost nonexistent. Anger and disgust are there, certainly, but they in themselves do not constitute a political force, much less an effective one. We are stuck with the system of two-party dominance for the foreseeable future, and we of the left need to find ways to effectively work with or around it as we can. Sometimes that even means joining “the ranks of the enemy,” as Sanders is doing. Unfortunately, there is no viable alternative.

All of this is very “Leninist”: “Leninist” as in Lenin's own admonition to the Bolshevik Central Committee when the Left Communists wished to continue the fight against the invading Germans while the Russian soldiers were “voting with their feet” and deserting *en masse*. Lenin reminded the members then, “Politics begin where the masses are, not where there are thousands, but millions.” A theme he also reiterates throughout one of his most important works, *Left-Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder*. And in the U.S. today, the millions of our fellow citizens are not considering third parties of the left, certainly not in national elections. For better or worse, they are wedded to the Republican and Democratic Parties as the *only* choices, and only handfuls will even consider voting for an independent or third-party candidacy. More good reasons for the left to look favorably upon the Sanders Presidential run.

To be sure, Bernie Sanders is not a “perfect” candidate; no candidate who is actually capable of running for and holding office is, is or is likely to be. And there are positions of Sanders which we of the left would take exception. But even here, Bernie Sanders is better than what the “mainstream” proffers as “acceptable;” even when Sanders is allegedly “accommodating capitalism and imperialism,” as certain ultra-leftists would have it. Simply because this “accommodation” by Sanders is still “fringe” by “mainstream” political standards, still generally “too far left” for “mainstream” tastes. For example, though Sanders supports the need for a military, he also wants to drastically cut spending on “defense” and shift the funds to social programs that benefit ordinary people. Even as he supported the establishment of F-35 fighter bases in Vermont, his “accommodation” could properly be seen as a “necessary evil” to bring jobs to his state by one of the few avenues realistically open. And yes, Sanders did support Bill Clinton's military foray in Kosovo, which gave rise on the left to the notion of “humanitarian imperialism”—but which also caused the

left to give a blind eye to the atrocities of “socialist” Milosevic. Yes, he’s supported Democrats over other independent candidates even as he is an independent who but caucuses (until now) with the Democrats, so his “political soul is not pure”—but he is in office and able to get things done! And yes, he supports Israel; but he has also sternly criticized Israeli policies in Gaza as unjustified overreaction, and was the first Senator to declare he would boycott Netanyahu’s speech before a joint session of Congress. Which he did. Sanders also voted against the Bush’s war in Iraq, and while originally voting for the war in Afghanistan (shortly after 9/11, let us remember), he also wanted the U.S. out of Afghanistan sooner and more permanently than did Obama.

So “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders is not the “perfect” socialist candidate. So what? He is still an admirable candidate by socialist standards, advocates for his domestic populist political program as an example of applied socialism, and his program put into action in the U.S. would certainly be a boon to actual workers caught up in the living hell that 35 years of neoliberalism have foisted upon us. And can we actually name a better candidate that would be viable, and not just an ideological token proffered forth out of a senseless devotion to purity? Being politically realistic means working with what’s available, and though Bernie Sanders actually even getting the Democratic nomination is an extreme long shot at best, what he could actually accomplish as a candidate overcomes by far whatever “shortcomings” his Democratic Presidential run entails.

It is delusory to think that we of the left must only do “pure” ideological propaganda, only engage in “pure socialist” politics, lest we fool the working people from “seeing the light.” Yes, we of the left must work only to fulfill the magical “long run” of history, something which would somehow be shorted by supporting a Sanders candidacy. But maybe it’s better to recall the pointed but trenchant words of a brilliant “liberal economist,” John Maynard Keynes: “In the long run, we are all dead.” Let’s face it, fellow comrades of the left, we have been waiting for the magical Revolution longer than the protagonists in Samuel Beckett’s famous play have been waiting for Godot! To this writer, Bernie Sanders’s Presidential campaign has so many good things going for it it’s time to be “right opportunist” and positively embrace it (critically, it that’s the way some feel) as an auspicious opening for the left we haven’t had in a very long time. Work on behalf of Bernie Sanders, not the Democratic Party! That’s a way forward for our immediate time.

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