

Facing Reality: The Socialist Left, the Sanders Campaign and Our Future

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A little over a month ago, many on the new socialist left expected Bernie Sanders to win the Democratic Party nomination, defeat Donald Trump in the general election, and enact a program of social democratic reform as President of the United States.

These expectations hit the shoals of reality. Sanders ran a heroic campaign, championing key demands from Medicare for All to the Green New Deal, raising the profile of socialism even higher than in 2016. Despite widespread sympathy for these demands, Sanders was unable to overcome the Democratic Party establishment's support for Biden. Sanders not only suspended his campaign, but has endorsed Biden and offered him all of the resources of his campaign—staff, funds, contact lists, access to tens of thousands of volunteers, and his enormous moral capital among young working people.

Now we face the most unappealing general election in recent memory, pitting Biden against Trump amidst a spiraling pandemic and deepening global recession. Socialists must come to grips with a hard lesson: the Democratic Party remains under the control of the capitalist class and can neither be realigned nor used to prepare for independent politics.

The Democratic Socialists of the America (DSA) faces many challenges in implementing our commitment to “Bernie or Bust”—the convention resolution pledging that, as an organization, we spend no time, money or energy on supporting any other Democratic candidate for the presidency. DSA needs to put most of its energy into rebuilding mass resistance amidst the pandemic and engaging in electoral work when it advances organizing our power from below—something that is impossible within the Democratic Party.

Coming to Grips with Electoral Defeat

Many socialists predicted Sanders would win the Democratic Party's nomination this year and threw themselves heart and soul into the campaign. Now after the dust has settled, we need to face the fact that Sanders was more decisively defeated this time than in 2016.

Sanders never won more than 30 percent of the Democratic primary voters. His victories came because the establishment vote was split. He consistently failed to win over older Black voters, or turn out new, young voters.

Fearing that Sanders would run roughshod over a divided centrist establishment, Obama and others in the Democratic establishment worked behind the scenes to pressure the other centrists to drop out and line up behind Biden after South Carolina. Biden then swept the Super Tuesday primaries, building an insuperable lead in the delegate race.

The pandemic and recession only deepened support for Biden. He built double digit leads over Sanders in most of the upcoming primaries, including Wisconsin, which he won by over 30 percentage points.

Misreading the 2016 Campaign

The socialist left needs to understand the real reasons for this defeat, if we are to avoid worse ones in the future. Many comrades fundamentally misread Sanders' limited success in the 2016 primaries, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the "Squad's" victories in 2018 elections—hoping that a surging majority in the Democratic electorate would sweep Sanders to victory in 2020.

In 2016, Sanders benefited from the widespread hatred of Hillary Clinton's record of right-wing neoliberal policies, especially in the rust belt, as well as from the fact that he was the only serious candidate running against her.

Clinton's arrogance systematically underestimated and dismissed all of her opponents. She was first caught by surprise by Sanders and then defeated by Trump in the Electoral College (although she won the popular vote), largely because she ignored the key battle grounds states in the Midwest.

Confusing the Exception with the Norm in 2018

Many also misread the insurgent victories of AOC and others as further confirmation of the left's electoral opportunities inside the Democratic Party. These victories should be celebrated, and they have dramatically helped project socialist positions on many issues, but like Sanders in 2016 they benefited from catching the establishment by surprise and from exploiting its divisions.

However, most of the Democrats elected in the midterms were neither progressives nor socialists, but centrists, many bankrolled by none other than former Republican and Democratic Party pretender for the nomination, Mike Bloomberg. Failing to grasp these facts, many believed the left could be swept to power through the Democratic Party in 2020.

Faced with Sanders' defeat, many on left are casting about for explanations. Some argue that the Democratic again stole the nomination from Sanders with dirty tricks like they used in 2016. But there is little to no evidence to support that claim.

Others point to the pandemic, assuming that voters fled in fear to the supposedly safe choice of Joe Biden. But the turning points were the South Carolina and Super Tuesday primaries, well before COVID 19 changed the terrain of politics and everyday life.

The establishment, flush with victory, are presenting false explanation for Sanders' defeat. They claim voters do not support his social democratic program. Actually, his proposals for social reform like Medicare for All are wildly popular and have been for years even before his campaigns for the presidency.

The Real Reasons for Defeat

If Sanders' program is such broad and deep support, why did he lose so badly to perhaps the worst candidate the Democrats have put forward since the forgettable Michael Dukakis?

First, the establishment, despite the emergence of the "Squad," has a hammer hold on the Democratic Party. As Kim Moody points out, the Democratic Party is a fundraising cabal, run by an unaccountable layer of elected officials who are the conduits for capitalist donations. They ensure that outsiders like Sanders and the "Squad" are dismissed as "unrealistic" on MSNBC (their Fox News) and marginalized in the party.

Even more importantly, socialists need to recognize that the level of class and social struggle, despite the wave of teachers' strikes, has remained very low. Sanders' program, like former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn's in Britain, while popular, seemed unattainable for the vast majority of working people. In the absence of fighting and winning through strikes and disruptive street demonstrations, most working people will tend to accept the status quo.

Mark Fischer called this "capitalism realism"—the widespread acceptance of Thatcher's proclamation "there is no alternative" to capitalism. The bulk of workers and oppressed people were convinced that however much they liked Sanders' program, it was "unrealistic"—and that the tepid neo-liberalism of Biden is the only alternative to Trumpism.

Biden's claim that he and not Sanders was more electable against Trump thus found purchase in the existing Democratic Party electorate. Sanders was unable to mobilize new young and working-class voters. Instead, increased voter turn-out in the Democratic primaries was among older, middle class layers who supported Biden and other 'centrists.'

Can We Use the Democrats to Launch a New Party?

What does Sanders' defeat tell us about Seth Ackerman and Eric Blanc's "dirty break" strategy, as an alternative to both the reformist strategy of realignment/turning the Democrats into social democratic party; and the revolutionary left's call for a working-class party independent of the Democrats? They argued that the Democratic Party was not a party but a *ballot line* that socialists could use to run candidates, build a membership organization, and prepare for a new party in the future. The success of Sanders in 2016 and the Squad in 2018 were proof of the viability of this strategy.

Unfortunately, these breakthroughs were *exceptional events*. The Democrats are a bureaucratic machine without a pretense of membership accountability, under the control of capital which commands the unflinching loyalty of the officialdom of the unions and various NGOs that claim to speak for the oppressed.

The Democrats differ from the Republicans in their relation to the left, working and oppressed people. The Democrats use carrots as well as sticks to integrate socialists and neutralize our movements. They managed to get much more powerful forces in the 1930s and 1960s to obey their commands, throwing them some bones and whipping them when necessary.

The Democrats, having faced no internal left challenges since Jesse Jackson's 1988 campaign, were caught with their pants down in 2016 and 2018. However, they regained the initiative by 2020, securing the nomination for Biden. They are even better prepared to meet any left challenges in Congressional and local elections.

Retreating from Dirty Break to Realignment?

The utopianism of the dirty break strategy has led many back to the old realignment strategy that they initially rejected.

Dustin Guastella's article "After the Nevada Blowout, It's Bernie's Party Now" was among the first of the new generation of socialists to slip toward the realignment strategy. Bhaskar Sunkara, who has built *Jacobin* into the premier venue for socialist discussion and debate for a new generation, criticized Seattle socialist council person Kshama Sawant's speech at a Sanders' rally arguing that working people need their own party.

He tweeted, "I love Kshama, but not sure someone invited to speak at an event for a candidate for a party's nomination should go off message and talk about the need for a new party." Even worse, after Sanders' defeat became clear, Guastella penned, "Where Do We Go After Last Night's Defeat" that upped the attacks on those who advocate independent politics.

Guastella pooh-poohed leftists calling for a third-party challenge to Biden, dismissed the idea of protests at the Democratic Party National Convention, and shockingly chocked up Sanders' defeat to in part advocating the "fringe demands" of oppressed groups. In essence, he argued for socialists to move to the right to win inside the Democratic Party.

Fortunately, many on the left reject such a perspective, especially its dismissal of demands for oppressed groups in today's multi-racial, multi-gendered, and international working class. But many others embrace Guastella's argument to hunker down for another long and pointless fight to transform the Democratic Party.

Bernie Sanders, unfortunately, embraces this perspective. Despite his official status as an "Independent," Sanders has not supported third parties runs in decades, has caucused with the Democrats in the Senate, and promoted efforts like his NGO "Our Revolution" whose aim, reiterated in Sanders' concession speech, is to "rebuild the Democratic Party from the bottom up."

The Siren Song of Lesser Evilism

Faced with unbearably bad "choice" between the Biden and the execrable white supremacist Donald Trump, there will be tremendous pressure on the new socialist movement to follow Sanders' lead and campaign for Biden.

Instead of giving the Democrats that pound of flesh, DSA members need to maintain their "Bernie or Bust" commitments. We should not repeat the mistakes of earlier generations of socialists—in the Communist Party USA and the New Left—of abandoning independent politics and leading social movements to die in the graveyard of the Democratic Party.

The pressures toward "lesser-evilism" will only escalate as liberal Democrats, union officials, and the NGOs spending tens of millions of dollars and countless volunteer hours, which could be used to build class and social struggles, to ensure the Democrat's restoration of business as usual.

That will not work to defeat the right. As Sanders rightly argued that the Democratic Party establishment is primarily responsible for Trump's rise to power to begin with. Their bailouts of corporations, their austerity measures, and their vicious scapegoating combined to alienate working class and oppressed people.

"Lesser-evilism" facilitates this process. If the left folds its tent and campaigns for Biden, it would be forced to downplay our radical alternative to neoliberalism. And should Biden win, he will continue capital's attacks on working and oppressed people, and then the main voice attacking the "establishment" will not be the socialist left, but forces that will make Trump look like a moderate.

Socialist Electoral Strategy versus Electoralism

Another danger facing the new socialist movement after Sanders' defeat is "electoralism"—doubling down on the predominantly electoral turn DSA has taken since AOC's victory in mid-2018.

Many in DSA took seriously Sanders' rhetoric about "Not me, but us," and being the "organizer-in-chief." Those hopes have been dashed as Sanders, over the objection of his former press secretary, not only endorsed Biden, but has given all of his campaign resources to the neoliberal stalwart. Calls to give his resources to "Our Revolution" will further mire socialists in the Democratic Party. Nor has DSA made major organizational and political gains from their involvement in the campaign. As Andy Sernatinger has demonstrated, DSA has spent the bulk of its time, money and energy on electoral campaigns to the detriment of organizing class and social struggle.

The Sanders campaign, for all of its claims to be a social movement, has intensified electoralism. In his concession speech, Sanders argued that the key battle was "to elect strong progressives at every level of government—from Congress to school board."

In reality, decisive social change has rarely if ever come through the elections. In the 1930s and 1960s, big social reforms were driven by waves of disruptive, often illegal strikes and mass demonstrations that extracted reforms from the two capitalist parties and capitalist state.

As the great socialist historian Howard Zinn argued, "the really critical thing isn't who is sitting in the White House, but who is sitting in—in the streets, in the cafeterias, in the halls of government, in the factories. Who is protesting, who is occupying offices and demonstrating—those are things that determine what happens."

Clearly socialists can and have used elections as a compliment to, rather than a substitute for, building movements from below. A "movement-building" election campaign would prioritize educating and generalizing the demands of mass struggles, encourage participation in disruptive actions and building independent organizations—the real source of popular power and radicalism.

Such campaigns cannot be run within the Democratic Party. The Democrats are an electoral machine with one aim—winning office at all costs. While an occasional Democratic candidate may walk picket lines or even give limited support to struggles, they inevitably exert pressures to downplay radical demands and contain struggles within the bounds of legality. It is only election campaigns *independent* of the Democrats that can promote and be held accountable to organizations and struggles.

Sharp Shift to Organizing Struggle and Building a Party of Our Own

DSA and all socialists should center our activity to organizing and supporting the strikes and protests that have ripped out across the country amidst the pandemic. In particular, we need to promote the demands and actions of undocumented immigrants, people of color, and people in the global south who have and will bear the brunt of the healthcare and economic crises.

We have been thrust into 1930s conditions, and we have to adopt the approach of radicals and revolutionaries in that era—promoting immediate struggles and building the infrastructure of resistance for the even larger battles to come when the economy recovers. Our enemies are preparing—Bloomberg News is warning that if the ruling class does not grant workers reforms, they will face the radical challenges from below.

We must start the process of building toward a new socialist party precisely to lead that radical challenge. The brutal lesson of the Sanders' campaign is the Democratic Party is not ours, but

theirs—and they don't share. We need to organize meetings, discussions, and debates with all the forces on the left about how we can build a new socialist party over the coming years.

While the forces that could begin organizing a new socialist party will disagree on many strategic and tactical issues, we can agree that we fight for reforms that advance the interests of working class and oppressed people—not as an end in themselves, but a means to building our side's confidence, consciousness, and organization.

Our goal is not a kinder gentler capitalism, but international socialism. Today, in the midst of apocalyptic crisis—unprecedented in modern history—we face nothing less than a global choice between socialism and barbarism.