

Getting From Here to There: A Response to Barry Finger

Category: Electoral Politics

written by Jason Schulman | March 27, 2016



I must admit that I'm somewhat reluctant to write a response to my friend Barry Finger's response to my article in the Winter 2016 issue of *New Politics* on Bernie Sanders while the Democratic presidential candidate race between Hillary Clinton and Sanders is still going on. Nevertheless, I will do so.

First, it should now be clear, in the wake of Sanders' victories in yesterday's Democratic caucuses, that Barry's assertion that "the Sanders challenge within the Democratic Party has come to its natural conclusion" is not justified. Let's not make grand pronouncements of this sort until we're far closer to the Democratic National Convention.

Second, it's certainly my contention that "American democracy is more reactionary and less responsive to the will of the masses than most all other democratic capitalist societies." I've been saying this for years. One should note that the Constitutional Framers never intended for the United States to have political parties in the first place. (Think back to James Madison's obsessive fear of "faction" as expressed in the *Federalist Papers*.)

I do wish, however, that Barry had noted that if you have to win governorships, mayoralities, county executives, and the presidency to fend off the veto possibility by the executive branch, you "naturally" get two very broad parties competing for office. Such is the nature of the U.S. political system. This should be challenged, of course, by changing electoral laws - which probably requires electing officials who want to change said laws - but one has to first acknowledge the problem.

I have already discussed much of what Barry brings up. I did make it clear that I think it is highly unlikely that the whole of the Democratic Party could ever be taken over by the left in the way that Max Shachtman and then Michael Harrington came to believe. I discussed the DP superdelegates, and I noted that People for Bernie and other Sanders supporters are well aware of the problem of the superdelegates. I even argued that the Sanders campaign should, I hope, come to be the foundation of an independent left-wing (not merely "liberal," even in the American sense) party democratically controlled by its members.

And regarding the superdelegates: they were established when the DP became more neoliberal as a whole in the early 1980s. The DP had become more democratic internally in 1965-78 because left-

wing forces (left labor activists, civil rights activists, feminists) forced them to do. With the end of the post-World War II economic boom, the rise of the New Right and the New Democrats (the Democratic Leadership Council, etc.) – only then did the superdelegates come into existence. But every left-liberal and radical doing “DP work” is certainly aware of the problem.

So what are we arguing about then? I suppose we’re arguing about whether or not it’s *ever* permissible to support Democratic Party candidates. I say yes. Barry, it seems, still says no. Which means that, for example, he won’t be supporting Debbie Medina’s run for State Senate in New York’s 18th District, despite the fact that Medina is an open socialist inspired by both Sanders and Kshama Sawant. Forgive me, Barry, but I can’t join you there. I would feel hopelessly sectarian if I *didn’t* support Medina.

In regards to how Dennis Kucinich was ultimately replaced by Marcy Kaptur – who is supporting Sanders, I should note – I must ask: if Kucinich had been an independent, or a Green, how would his fate have been any different? He still could have been redistricted out of existence. I never argued that the DP wasn’t dominated (not 100% controlled, contrary to what Barry says, but certainly dominated) by forces that are hostile to labor and leftists. Barry also should have checked on this matter, as it appears that redistricting Kucinich out of office was more a Republican plot than a Democratic one. See here. This only makes sense, as Republicans have dominated the Ohio legislature for some years now.

I am as aghast at the behavior of the Congressional Black Caucus (most of whom never had anything resembling a pro-worker class-struggle perspective) and most of the Congressional Progressive Caucus as is Barry. But my analysis of the reasons for the behavior of many CBC and CPC members differs from his. As I stated, the U.S. has a particularly horrible campaign finance system and therefore many CPC members end up taking at least some corporate campaign cash. If they endorsed Sanders, that cash flow would dry up. (Example: Sherrod Brown and Elizabeth Warren have voted perfectly on financial regulation issues – and Brown explicitly supports a Robin Hood Tax – yet some in finance still give them money. If they supported Sanders over Clinton, I suspect that would change.) If these elected officials became independents, *the campaign finance problem would not suddenly go away*. Being an elected non-Democrat (or non-Republican) doesn’t mean you just can do whatever you want very easily. It doesn’t solve the “committee problem” unless you have a new party that can very, very quickly sweep away the Democrats. And only do we not currently have a party, but even if we had the numbers to form one, it would *not* just immediately sweep away the Democrats everywhere – not even if all Sanders supporters joined it. It will most likely take some time for the DP to be displaced even if the Sanders campaign leads to a new mass party.

I have made it clear that I think that an independent labor party should have been formed decades ago. It did not form. The most progressive wing of what remains of U.S. organized labor doesn’t have the power to form an labor party that could win very many elections all by itself. I wish this was not the case. But given this reality I do not blame democratic, left-wing unions like National Nurses United (NNU) for supporting Sanders or supporting left Democrats in general. What choice do they have? Ignore electoral politics? That isn’t an option. Are NNU really sellouts, Barry, as you imply? One should not so offhandedly condemn movements that strive for legislative victories and the organizers who work for those campaigns, even if those campaigns are left DP campaigns. Such campaigns are vital organizing tools for building a mass left, not inevitably stepping stones to selling out.

Barry still seems to be saying that socialists, and the labor movement, must stand outside the DP at all times and that an independent and successful left/labor party could have been formed at some point in the past half century if only left-liberals and socialists had mustered sufficient willpower. But every attempt at building such a party has failed because the constituencies that socialists must

reach have had no interest in the various “third parties” of the last 50 years. One must ask: if the social forces in and around the left wing of the DP (left-wing feminists, labor unionists, Blacks, Latinos, and environmentalists) were too feeble to even *weaken* the neoliberal hold on most of the Democratic “Party,” weren’t those forces also far too weak to build a credible third party? The creation of a party cannot be put ahead of the movements that would be the basis for that party. I thought Barry understood this.

Now, it seems that times are finally changing. I hope that Sanders’ seriousness about a “political revolution” that lasts beyond his campaign does lead to a real movement of the left and not a repeat of the Jesse Jackson experience of 1988 (i.e., Jackson shutting down the Rainbow Coalition) even if that movement *initially* mostly takes the form of “Sanders Democrats” getting elected. We can’t yet be sure what will happen. But note, Barry: every European social democratic party privileges its “electeds” at its convention, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of the DP superdelegates. Would a labor party, or an ideologically leftist party, in the U.S., *automatically* be any different? Would electeds would even abide by convention decisions if they didn’t have to? There’s nothing holy, so to speak, about workers’ parties, unless they’re *revolutionary* workers’ parties – and mass revolutionary workers’ parties currently exist almost nowhere in the world. Absent a commitment to workers’ democracy, radical class-struggle politics, and structures *guaranteeing* one member, one vote at conventions and in party referenda, any structure can turn in on itself.

As to Sanders’ “acquiescence” to the DP leadership – I’ve already commented on how little it really means. No, he won’t run as an independent if he loses the DP primary (unless perhaps if there’s a split in the Republican Party – which I certainly hope for, as does Barry). Yes, he’ll most likely *say* “vote Clinton to beat Trump.” (As many of his voters will do anyway, no doubt, out of understandable fears of a Trump presidency – not that Clinton’s foreign policy would be to the left of Trump’s in any way.) And that, I believe, will be it. The sheer nastiness of the Clinton/Sanders contest tells me that nothing more “non-defiant” than that is coming – I highly doubt that Sanders will be actively working for Clinton, appearing at her general-election events, at the Democratic National Convention, etc. It would be too embarrassing for him, if nothing else. It would make many of his supporters feel betrayed. One should also note that Sanders, in an interview on MSNBC, made it clear that he’s running for president as a Democrat because it was the only way he could get mainstream media coverage. This is absolutely true. Does this sound like “loyalty” to the Democratic Party? Establishment Democrats who’ve thrown hissy fits on television – Donna Brazile in particular – certainly don’t see it that way.

It is not likely that anything that happens in the near future, regardless if Sanders wins or loses the Democratic presidential party, will make it impossible to *work towards* creating the independent democratically-run mass leftist party that we need. Nor will waging electoral class war inside DP primaries (“Sanders Democrats” vs. Establishment Democrats), particularly given the hatred that the two sides now feel for each other (or have you not been following social media, Barry?), make that impossible. If anything, that class war inside the DP *will finally make a split in the party possible*. There is historical precedent for this in Vermont: Jesse Jackson’s run for president in 1988 led to the creation of the Progressive Party, the most successful statewide left-wing “third party” in the U.S. For details, see this link. Jackson may not have planned for anything like the VPP to appear, but appear it did.

My original point was simply that if Marxists abstain from the Sanders campaign then we will be utterly ignored by millions of working-class people whom we now finally – finally!! – have a chance of reaching. I refuse to let this chance slip through our fingers just because the DP is dominated by ruling-class politicians. Again, if the only choice for U.S. socialists is dirty hands or no hands, we should damn well make sure that we have hands.