

Bernie Sanders and the Dilemma of the Democratic “Party”

January 31, 2016

Some months ago I responded to a piece that appeared on the *New Politics* blog by my longtime fellow *NP* editorial board member and friend Barry Finger.¹ In my own blog, I argued that Barry had a better, more sophisticated understanding of the peculiarities of the Democratic Party and the U.S. electoral system than do many on the radical left who refuse to support any Democratic candidate regardless of that candidate’s personal political platform. However, I also made clear that I believed that Barry still suffered from certain misunderstandings regarding just how different American political parties are from parties that exist anywhere else in the world, and this meant there were defects in his suggestions as to how left-wing socialists should relate to the Sanders campaign. Other defects still characterize the arguments of those who claim that to support Sanders, however critically, is to support a candidate of a party of capital. While invoking my debate with Barry, I’ll touch upon those other arguments and their problems and explain why I think that critical support for the Sanders campaign is a necessity if we’re to build a much larger socialist movement and how the campaign may lay the basis for an independent party of the left.



The Non-Party Party

Barry writes:

The totality with which socialists have traditionally viewed the Democratic Party has been this. The agenda of the Democratic Party is determined by its corporate financiers. It is they who keep the party competitive, who write and prioritize legislation and it is they who provide lucrative post-electoral revolving door employment opportunities for faithful party standard bearers. The two parties provide a full spectrum career subculture, designed to incentivize, entice and indoctrinate candidates and office holders to ruling class perspectives. Its base, organized as voting blocks, has no membership privileges.

Indeed, the two parties are not private, voluntary organizations sustained by membership fees, but political utilities of the ruling class, which, like other public utilities, are internally regulated by the state and protected from outside competition by upstart third parties through a dense network of legal encumbrances to market entry. Because the Democratic Party is sustained and disciplined by the mobilization of outside capitalist wealth, the voting blocks aligned to the Democrats cannot compete for influence on this terrain. Their power is limited primarily to the threat of abstention from electoral participation.²

Much of this is true. Regardless of their origins, today the Democratic Party and Republican Party are not real, “European-style” political parties. They ceased to be so over the course of the twentieth century. The political machines with their party bosses that used to control who could run for office on which party label—particularly in the Democratic Party—are overwhelmingly a thing of the past. In the words of former *NP* editorial board member Arthur Lipow,

Only in America is it true that direct membership participation in the parties does not exist except in the sense that individuals register their party preference with an official agency of the state or are habitual voters for one or another party. The parties themselves and the choice of candidates are

strictly regulated by law in the states in which the individual parties exist. ... As a party, control over its own candidates is virtually non-existent.³

That is to say, both the Republicans and Democrats (and any “third” parties on the ballot in any state) exist as state-run ballot lines, not private voluntary associations that can control their own memberships or who runs on their ballots.



Barry and others have some understanding of this. But where their analysis goes awry is the conclusion that if you are running on the Democratic Party ballot line, you yourself are *necessarily* being “sustained and disciplined by the mobilization of outside capitalist wealth.” Were this true, it’s unlikely that Bernie Sanders—with his rather radical platform and his steadfast refusal to take any money from “the billionaire class” to fund his campaign—would be able to run for president in the Democratic presidential primary in the first place. Michael Hirsch, another *NP* editorial board member, was not wrong to write, “The Democratic Party is barely a party; it’s a series of shifting coalitions in 50 state organizations and some 3,000 U.S. counties. In many states, the center-right controls it. In city and county politics, real estate and banking interests dominate the local councils. But that doesn’t make it a corporate party.”⁴ Why not? Because its leaders at either the national or local level have no control over who runs on the Democratic Party ballot line. Each candidate runs on their own specific political platform (the official Democratic Party platform is an irrelevancy that no one reads). And party leaders find it all but impossible to ensure that all elected Democrats will vote in legislatures the way that they’re “supposed to.” Hence, different Democrats will vote in different ways—with no fear that they’ll be kicked out of the Democratic Party for disloyalty. There exists no legal basis by which they can be kicked out, unlike in parliamentary systems with real, private-association political parties. Dissidents can get kicked out of Democratic Party or Republican Party clubs, of course—but as those have no real power over what the elected officials do, they don’t really count.

Obviously, those Democrats who do rely on “outside capitalist wealth” have an advantage over those who do not—just as in our single-member-district, winner-take-all electoral system, those who run for office as Democrats or Republicans have an advantage over those who do not. (In nonpartisan races this advantage is greatly diminished; this helps to explain why an open socialist like Kshama Sawant, taking no corporate cash and winning support from local unions, was able to win a seat on the Seattle City Council.) And it is true, unfortunately, that at the national level even the most left-wing Democrats do take some corporate political action committee (PAC) money. For example, a cursory glance at opensecrets.org reveals that the top three contributors to Rep. Keith Ellison for 2013-2014 were TCF Financial, General Mills, and Masimo Corp.; for Rep. John Conyers, DISH Network, Avenue Ventures, and Sony; for Rep. Barbara Lee, a union, the IBEW, but also the San

Francisco Regional Center and Gallo Winery.

Of course, *proportionally* Ellison, Conyers, Lee, and other progressive Democrats take more PAC cash from labor than from capital. But why do these elected officials accept corporate PAC money at all? It's not because as Democrats they're required to do so, but because of the horrendous U.S. campaign finance system. If one hopes to win a major House (let alone Senate) race against an opponent with much more money to spend, and who gets 95 percent of his or her funding from business PACs, then it's almost inevitable (except in Bernie Sanders' Vermont, it seems) that one will take some amount of corporate PAC money—albeit much less than the truly pro-business candidate. Further, the bulk of business PAC contributions will come from those who are ultimately unable to press the leftmost Democrats to vote the wrong way on important legislation. Money may buy *access* but not always *influence* in regards to votes. This is what explains why the leftmost Democrats are able to vote the right way most of the time. (On Israel/Palestine, matters are often different—but Sanders himself, as many of his leftist critics have noted, is also rather imperfect on this issue.) As long as the current rotten system of private financing continues—and as long as the labor movement remains a shadow of its former self—one will find few progressive politicians, at least at the national level, who take no money at all from corporate PACs. Will those campaign contributions that one needs to win be a heavy influence on one's voting record? The evidence suggests that if one has a diversified contribution base and receives one-third or more of one's money from labor and progressive ideological groups, then one will most likely be able to vote from the left without serious problems. (It's worth noting that business PACs are incredibly dispersed, as no PAC can give more than \$10,000 to any one candidate.)

Given these circumstances—parties that are not really parties and an oligarchical system of campaign financing—I do not consider supporting the leftmost Democrats to be a betrayal of class-struggle politics, or to be the equivalent of supporting (say) the Canadian Liberals. There are, of course, Democrats who obviously represent the ruling class, like Barack Obama and his dominant wing of the Democratic Party, and also there are Democrats who, however very imperfectly, represent the working class. I see nothing class-collaborationist in opposing the former and critically supporting the latter. Yes, ruling-class politicians *usually* win Democratic primaries simply because they raise more campaign funds, have name recognition, are incumbents, and so on—but not always. (Only the Democratic Party fundraising committees are pure shills for corporate America, and left-liberals and radicals running as Democrats aren't *required* to take any money from those committees.) So when genuine left-liberals or radical leftists win office on the Democratic Party ballot line, as has happened and will continue to happen in various parts of the country, the Democratic Party is *not* simply a “political utility of the ruling class.” It *would be* if the neoliberal, bourgeois leadership of the Democratic Party could impose parliamentary discipline on all elected Democrats, but there really is very little that it can do beyond removing dissidents from congressional committees.

Does this mean that it's likely that the Democratic Party will be taken over by progressives, that the “realignment” sought by the late Michael Harrington is near? No. But the primary reason for this, aside from the fact that it's rather hard to democratically control a state-run ballot line, is the same reason why an independent labor party, which left-wing socialists have advocated for years, is not forthcoming any time soon. Organized labor is simply too weak and, due to the AFL-CIO's lack of control over its affiliated unions' political choices, too diffuse. I agree with most American socialists that a labor party based on the unions should have been formed at least by 1948, when 35 percent of the U.S. workforce was unionized and the United Auto Workers in particular was a real power in the country. But Walter Reuther didn't do what we wanted him to do, and today we are unfortunately where we are. I was active in Labor Party Advocates and then the Labor Party in two states in the 1990s; I really wanted it to take off and become politically important. It didn't. Nor is it likely that

the Green Party, which has existed in one form or another since the 1980s, will ever displace the Democrats. As former Labor Party national organizer Mark Dudzic has said, “If you can’t even put out enough poll watchers to cover every precinct in an election campaign, and you can’t call on a substantial portion of the labor movement to come out and support your candidate, you’re not building anything, and there’ll be little that remains afterwards.”⁵ I’ve voted for Greens many times in my life but eventually one tires of voting for protest candidates.

Pushing Political Discourse to the Left

This brings us back, finally, to Bernie Sanders. Whatever the flaws in some of his political positions, his running as a candidate in the Democratic presidential primary has led millions of people, even in the corporate media, to talk about “democratic socialism” and “political revolution.” His interpretation of those terms may be far more moderate than that of *NP* writers, but he is pushing political discourse in the U.S. significantly to the left, and in a country where “socialist” has long been a swear word in mainstream politics, this is no small feat. His campaign is providing an opening for U.S. socialists that hasn’t existed in decades, and he’s made it clear that it won’t be possible to win the radical reforms that he (and we) want without an ongoing mass movement that will outlast his campaign. Yes, we must, as Barry says, “hold Sanders’ feet to the flames if he wavers or weakens his stance against the Party establishment.” But to do this *effectively* we have to *actively support him*, not abstain and only offer criticism, however constructive, from the outside. Both the “critical” and “support” in “critical support” are very important in this case. Support of Sanders is the only way to get the thousands of working-class people already involved in Sanders’ campaign—most of whom know nothing of Marxism or the organized socialist left—to take us seriously. Criticism of Sanders’ shortcomings will fall on deaf ears if we do not work with such people in an honest effort to get Sanders elected president.

And Sanders would not be winning over millions of Americans if he had not decided to run for president as a Democrat. He would not have been able to introduce himself to millions who knew little or nothing of him via the Democratic presidential candidates’ debates. The mainstream media would have simply ignored him, and so would have virtually everyone else in the country, had he run as an independent or as a Green. As the late Julius Jacobson, founding co-editor of *NP* and a genuinely revolutionary democratic socialist, said of Jesse Jackson’s run for president as a Democrat in 1988, “To take advantage of the facilities offered by a Democratic Party primary involves no necessary compromise of socialist principles” provided that it is being used “as a vehicle for propagandizing a position with an eye on building a movement outside the Democratic Party.”⁶ Jackson failed to do this, but this describes precisely what Sanders *is* doing, which is commendable.

Furthermore, contrary to the “Bernie Sanders as sheepdog for Hillary Clinton” argument made by various far-leftists, at the moment there’s hardly anyone at all to “sheepdog,” not even a quasi-mass movement for a left-wing third party. If there was, my judgement of Sanders running in a Democratic primary would be quite different. I do acknowledge that Ted Kennedy in 1980, Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988, Dennis Kucinich in 2004, and John Edwards in 2008 all ended up endorsing the candidate of the ruling class in their respective Democratic presidential primaries once they lost. And they *should not have done so*. But it’s important to realize that they did not *have* to do so but *chose* to do so. Most have forgotten, but Jerry Brown did *not* endorse Bill Clinton in 1992. More recently, on the Republican side, look at Ron Paul. He very openly *did not* support John McCain in 2008 or Mitt Romney in 2012; he supported minor right-wing party presidential candidates. And yet he remained in office as a Republican. Look at the Seattle Democratic elected officials that have endorsed Kshama Sawant’s re-election campaign. Such a thing is simply not possible anywhere else in the world—try to imagine Canadian Liberals endorsing New Democratic Party candidates for office!—and it further proves that our “parties” are not real parties because they lack party discipline, and that applying class-struggle principles to U.S. electoral politics is a far

messier business than it is anywhere else in the world.

Yes, Sanders has already said he would endorse Hillary Clinton if he loses to her in the 2016 Democratic presidential primary. But Sanders, as explained above, can't be *forced* to do this. He's made a *choice*. Contrary to what some socialists believe, there are no actually enforceable Democratic Party rules that prohibit him in advance from "harming the Democratic Party." So, I think that socialists should pressure Sanders' campaign to "pull a Ron Paul"; at the very least he should *not* encourage his voters to support Clinton if he loses the presidential primary. If he refuses this request we should openly criticize him for it. But again, the only way we can effectively apply such pressure is if we are active in his presidential campaign. Pressure from the outside simply won't work. By all means, let's relentlessly attack Clinton and other "billionaire class Democrats" who dominate the Democratic Party line. One can do this just as easily as a registered Democrat as a registered Green or independent. No one can silence you, just like Fannie Lou Hamer couldn't be silenced as a civil rights and anti-Vietnam War activist of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which in 1968 did become the official Democratic Party of Mississippi, despite being betrayed by Lyndon Johnson and those who supported him in 1964.

Barry argues that

If the Sanders campaign is competently run, Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party establishment will be confronting an incipient rank-and-file mutiny demanding the complete overhaul and repudiation of what the party currently stands for. An increasingly politically conscious grassroots movement motivated by a militant and credible anti-austerity message heralds the development in the foreseeable future of a "split" situation in the Democratic Party when these demands are blocked, watered down, frustrated or compromised with, as they invariably must.

This split may very well happen. Sanders campaign activists are quite aware of the problem of Democratic Party Superdelegates. To quote a recent email I received from People for Bernie, the Superdelegate system is "*one of many ways that the system is rigged to ensure corporate-friendly Democrats almost always get the presidential nomination.*" And it's almost always longtime party insiders that cast votes as Superdelegates. In an ordinary election year, it's one of many ways that they disenfranchise people like us." This is why it's important that Rep. Raul Grijalva and Rep. Keith Ellison endorsed Sanders, and more pressure needs to be put on other Congressional Progressive Caucus Democrats to do the same. Selection of Superdelegates in fact depends on state Democratic Party rules, and state Democratic parties are not immune to popular mobilization.

But let's assume the ruling-class Democratic Party Superdelegates turn out to be the sole barrier keeping Sanders from winning the Democratic presidential primary. Then it's entirely possible that People for Bernie and the mass movement supporting Sanders will make up the base of an independent left-wing party, sooner rather than later. But again, we need to be *in* the Sanders campaign to help make this happen, and, as *NP* writer and lifetime class-warrior-unionist Steve Early has said, we need to get as many unions as possible to support Sanders and not Clinton (either in the primary or the general election).⁷ And we will need the leftmost elected Democrats—the ones who support social-democratic reform and primarily rely on union PAC money and the financial contributions of "ordinary" people—to "jump ship" to this new party, which requires critically supporting them as well. (I see this as no worse than voting for the social-democratic wing of a popular front, which revolutionaries certainly did in the past, and the Democratic Party today is more like a popular front unto itself than a genuine political party.)

Yes, this is a complicated process, and I wish Marxists could simply stand outside Democratic Party politics entirely and convince the toiling masses to "break with the elephant, break with the ass, build a party of the working class." But decades of revolutionary socialists doing precisely this has

been no more successful than the attempt in the 1970s by the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, a predecessor of today's Democratic Socialists of America, the only U.S. socialist group fully supporting the Sanders campaign, to realign the whole of the Democratic Party into a social-democratic party. The movement to elect Sanders represents the best opportunity to build a much larger socialist movement—and hopefully a split from the Democratic Party that results in an independent leftist party—that I've seen in my lifetime. To make that party a reality, ironically enough, means getting involved in a Democratic Party presidential campaign. Yes, most elected Democrats are ruling-class politicians; yes, the Democratic Party was once *the* party (a real party) of white supremacy in the United States; yes, it was the party of dropping nuclear bombs on Japan and of the Vietnam War. Therefore any involvement in Democratic Party primaries involves “dirty hands” to some extent. But, to paraphrase a French philosopher, “it is easy to have clean hands if you have no hands.” Better dirty hands than none at all.

Footnotes

1. Jason Schulman, “The Sanders Campaign and the Democratic ‘Party,’” New Politics blog, May 27, 2015.
2. Barry Finger, “Further Reflections on the Sanders Campaign,” New Politics blog, May 26, 2015.
3. Arthur Lipow, *Political Parties & Democracy: Explorations in History and Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 1996), 20-21.
4. Michael Hirsch, “Socialists, Democrats, and Political Action: It's the Movements That Matter,” *New Politics* (Vol. XI, No. 2, Summer 2007), 119.
5. Mark Dudzic and Derek Seidman, “Whatever Happened to the Labor Party?” Jacobin blog, October 11, 2015.
6. Julius Jacobson, “The Duality of the Jackson Campaign,” *New Politics* (Vol. II, no. 2, Summer 1988), 5-6.
7. Steve Early, “Labor for Bernie,” Jacobin blog, May 26, 2015.