Moving on from Bernie

written by Taheerah Barney | July 11, 2020

The concerted effort of the media, Democratic National Committee, and Democratic establishment to bring Bernie's campaign to a grinding halt highlights the limits of electoral politics. On the campaign trail, Bernie proposed mild social-democratic reform that would widen the social safety net while keeping capitalism intact, but you wouldn't know that from the way the aforementioned reactionaries swiftly moved to put the kibosh on Sanders' campaign.

The truth couldn't be plainer: Democrats would rather lose to Trump than upend their power status. They would rather lose to Trump than win with a politician who would implement milquetoast social democracy, and they will even abandon their purported principles to defend a candidate accused by a former aide of violating her sexually.

The Impotency of Electoral Politics

> "My vote will probably not get me a job or a home or help me through school or prevent another Vietnam or a third World War, but it may keep me here long enough for me to see, and use, the turning of the tide—for the tide has got to turn." —James Baldwin

Baldwin gives a blistering account of the limitations of electoral politics, one that many leftists across the country share after Sanders' crushing loss.

While identifying the powerful interests that were a major impediment to a Bernie victory, I'd be remiss if I didn't address the shortcomings of the Sanders campaign. Bernie failed to bring in the legions of hard-boiled nonvoters who checked out of electoral politics ages ago. He performed worse than he did four years ago, despite the campaign's exhaustive mobilizing efforts. A few factors explain this. First, contrary to popular belief, young people did show up, but more older people turned out overall. One factor is likely the pandemic, with more younger people adhering to the advice of the medical community and avoiding crowds in order to decrease their chances of being infected and infecting others with the virus. Biden and his staffers, on the other hand, encouraged his older base to go out and vote in person.

Second, younger voters who did turn out were forced to wait in lines for hours. Scores of these folks had no choice but to leave before casting their vote lest they be late for work or school. Third, Bernie cleaned up in states like Nevada but underperformed in Rust Belt states that he swept in 2016, not because his politics changed, but because voters' perception of him changed. To people living in communities hollowed out by Clinton-era trade deals, Bernie's anti-TPP stance was a refreshing alternative. In 2016, more people voted for him because of who he wasn't—rather than for who he is, a factor that hurt him this time around.

When Bernie suspended his presidential campaign, many argued that this was a wise decision because he had no "clear path to victory," but creating a contrast with Biden, not securing a win, should have been his end game. For example, why didn't Bernie use the COVID-19 pandemic to

eviscerate Biden's neoliberal insistence that health coverage continue being tied to employment, even as tens of millions of workers lose their jobs? Why didn't he highlight Biden bragging about putting the entire social safety net on the chopping block, which would shaft scores of already struggling people? Why didn't Bernie address Biden's decades-long history of pathological lying, noting parallels to Trump's sociopathic behaviors? Why didn't he hammer Biden on his prolonged disappearance and lack of leadership regarding COVID-19?

Bernie refused to hold Biden and his record accountable post-dropout partly because of who Bernie is—a career politician—and where he ran—within a party controlled by lobbyists and big money. His social-democratic policies put him outside of the liberal establishment, but the limitations of his campaign and his person were shown in his 2019 pledge to endorse the eventual nominee, even when the other candidates refused to rule out pursuing a contested convention. After sharply criticizing his opponents' flaws for months, Sanders quickly fell in line behind them to endorse Biden, ignoring Biden's long history of opposing most of what Bernie had advocated in his campaign as well as Biden's new political baggage of rape allegation and naked contempt for anyone under the age of 50.

Could Bernie have run his a more cost-efficient and far-reaching campaign through a decentralized organization, like People for Bernie? Perhaps, but arguing in favor of that scenario assumes Sanders would be ready to lead an aggressive political struggle to break with the Democratic Party, which is what's needed now. Continuing to work within the confines of the Democratic Party is a colossal waste of time, and our resources are put to better use organizing amongst ourselves to change our communities and create solidarity with our comrades, both here and abroad.

Mobilizing the Broad, Diverse, and Cross-generational Base of Sanders' Supporters Beyond Bernie

One of the reasons why Antifa and the Black Lives Matter movement are so effective is that they're decentralized. Leaderless protests have the potential to introduce thousands of people across the globe to politics and to mobilize them. The more that activists can scale this dissent, the more likely it will influence policy. What this might look like is organizing for national and international solidarity, sorely lacking within the American left.

We should build coalitions amongst the working-class left by taking a page out of the visionary 1970s Black feminist, socialist Combahee River Collective: bonding over our shared working-class identities while also acknowledging, centering, and learning the myriad of ways that capitalism oppresses through the identities of the group's most marginalized members.

Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor succinctly sums up the importance of building interconnected working-class alliances on the podcast "Hear the Bern": "Racism is the way for Trump and the Republicans to wage class warfare, and they've done it very successfully. We need our side to be organized around clear politics. … We have to be able to articulate how these things [race and class] are connected. We can see that racial profiling is a policing strategy invented for black people, when you allow racism to exist for one group, understand that it can be weaponized for all. … The billions of dollars that are going to police the border, to control the border, to imprison people on the border. That is about normalizing that for our greater society, to make it easier to do that to citizens."[1]

COVID-19 is wreaking havoc and misery across the globe and laying waste to the myth of American exceptionalism at home. Trump callously ignored pandemic warnings for months; deaths in America are exploding and have surpassed 100,000. But Trump's indifference to human suffering is exactly what we should have expected under a ghoulish administration that tried to kick millions off their already anemic health care plans and an economic system that prioritizes profit over people. And

since health care is a commodity tied to your employment instead of a human right in this country, if you've just lost your job and aren't one of the lucky few who have the option of hopping on your parent's or partner's insurance policy, you're basically screwed.

Every political cause that we're fighting for converges upon the coronavirus, which is why we should organize around it. For example, Trump gave fracking, cruise, and airline companies, the same industries responsible for polluting the planet, hundreds of billions of dollars, while workers received a paltry one-time payment of $1,200. This dovetails seamlessly with climate change and income inequality protests.

COVID-19 is a deadly viral truth serum that lays bare the systemic rot and structural inequalities that were always lurking just beneath the surface: health care, employment, wages, systemic racism, food supply chain, poverty, and so on. If you can name a cause, assume that COVID-19 is exacerbating the suffering.

We must also be wary of authoritarianism, with public fears in crises used to quickly jam through the most draconian legislation, which usually involves decimating our civil liberties as occurred in 9-11 and bipartisan support for the Patriot Act.

Now is the time for the left to push through our agenda and to use this virus to make our communities and the public aware of the alternatives to a failing economy that only serves the elites at the expense of the workers.

"No One Is Free Until We Are All Free." —Martin Luther King Jr.

The term "mutual aid," meaning the act of caring and taking responsibility for one another (particularly the most vulnerable members of our society), is quickly approaching mainstream status. On the one hand, it's heartening to witness everyday citizens in a hyperindividualistic capitalist society such as the United States embrace selflessness and the idea of collective well-being, if only temporarily. During this harrowing pandemic, one of the few bright spots is seeing so many people reach the same conclusion: that our economic system is designed to neglect the many at the expense of the few. However, what concerns me is that people will come to view today's version of mutual aid as the limit to our collective imagination and accept it as the end, instead of as a means to achieve something more far-reaching.

Mutual aid rooted in commodity exchange is a temporary fix in times of capitalism run amok; it was never designed for the long-term. And the reason why is simple: Mutual aid efforts that revolve around providing items to people in the absence of power aren't scalable. It's impossible for local community organizers, many of whom are working-class themselves, to scrounge up enough resources to feed every community. The goal of any mutual aid program should be to pressure local politicians to bend the knee to the people. Establishing class consciousness within a given neighborhood can be used to encourage civil disobedience at the state level to pressure local officials to use their resources to send quarantined people food care-packages, similar to what's been done in South Korea and China.[2]

A goal for socialists in this pandemic is to highlight human worth, seeing and treating all people as worthy and valuable, not for the labor they can provide but because they are human and exist. We can do this if we center class consciousness within our communities and establish anti-capitalism as the only viable economic alternative, by organizing to fill in the gaps that capitalism (by design) creates. In addition to providing people with the essentials, comprehensive mutual aid also builds relationships with disaffected voters who have long checked out of electoral politics and shines a spotlight on the cruelty that capitalism has wrought upon their lives.

An example of this took place during the 1970s with the gang-turned-revolutionary-socialists and -communists called the Young Lords. Of the first generation of children born in America to Puerto Rican migrant parents, these teenagers had the foresight and vision to organize in ways that would rival adults twice their age. A standout victory is their comprehensive "garbage offensive," which resulted from the New York City Sanitation Department's neglect of their East Harlem neighborhood resulting in an overflow of trash compared to the pristine streets of white Manhattan neighborhoods. The residents teamed up and swept the garbage themselves. When they asked the racist Department of Sanitation for better brooms, they were denied, so they took matters into their own hands (literally) and swept the trash into a huge pile in the middle of a major street to block traffic.

This monumental protest, the first of its kind within the Puerto Rican community, was more than a courageous act of defiance. It was a searing indictment of capitalism for all in their neighborhood to bear witness to. These teens proved that even though the system is rigged against them via race and class, it's also fragile and can be inconvenienced with nothing more than a few brooms, a radical mindset, and a little imagination. The way forward is building "people power" by organizing in local communities, gaining the trust of residents by proving to them how capitalism has failed them, and then channeling their anger into building mass movements that put the screws to establishment politicians at the local and federal levels.

In short, we must break away from electoral politics and organize within our communities to build relationships with our neighbors and comrades.

Bernie's platform only scratched the surface of what is possible, and his vision is the bare minimum that we should demand.

Notes

1. Briahna Joy Gray and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Hear the Bern Ep. 19: Building Coalitions," August 2019.
2. Marie Genries, "Food, Water and Masks: South Korea's COVID-19 Quarantine Kits," France 24, March 5, 2020.