The Sanders Campaign and the Left

written by Lance Selfa, Ashley Smith | January 31, 2016

Senator Bernie Sanders' run for the Democratic Party nomination for president has certainly energized thousands. It has also rekindled an old debate on the American left that revolves around the question: Should the left join, endorse, support, or work for campaigns in the Democratic Party?

Socialists should have nothing but sympathy for the aspirations of those thousands who support Sanders for all the right reasons: his call for "political revolution" against the "billionaire class," his support for a single-payer health care system and a massive "green jobs" program, and for his refusal to run away from the "socialist" label. Sanders is helping to inject some idea of socialism into the mainstream political discussion, and socialists and other radicals should take advantage of that to raise the profile of socialism in the broad left, especially with those who are new to radical and socialist ideas.

If that was all that had to be said about Sanders' campaign, there wouldn't be much of a debate to be had. But the strategic discussion of the left's relationship to Sanders' campaign specifically, and to the Democratic Party in general, is much more contentious. Nor is it a peripheral or academic discussion. In fact, the left's relationship to the Democratic Party is arguably the main explanation for its failure to build a sustained mass political alternative representing, and projecting the politics of, an anti-capitalist left.

Some readers may wonder why it's important to discuss building a mass anti-capitalist left party. If Sanders can win the Democratic nomination on the platform on which he has campaigned so far, wouldn't that constitute a victory for the left? Why would the left need its own political vehicle? This perspective—call it an "optimistic" scenario—presumes that the Democratic Party will actually allow Sanders to win its nomination. Second, it assumes that the left can take over the Democratic Party and even transform it into an instrument to stand up for working people. We will argue that neither of these "optimistic" outcomes is likely. In fact, history shows that betting against these outcomes is about the closest approximation to a sure thing there is.

But to establish that assertion, we have to understand just what the Democratic Party is and what it is not. Since at least the time of the New Deal, when organized labor gained a solid institutional foothold in the Democratic Party, liberals and activists have proposed that popular forces or the left can democratically take over the Democratic Party. If the left could accomplish this, the argument went, it could transform the Democrats, one of the two big-business parties in the American political duopoly, into a vehicle for progressive social change. This was the core contention of the "realignment" thesis of the post-World War II era.[1]

The realignment thesis was premised on the idea that the social movement pressure of the labor movement and the civil rights movement would provoke a split in a party that, after all, incorporated both those forces and (at the time) the leaders of the Jim Crow South. Even under better

circumstances for the left than exist today—back when a quarter to a third of U.S. workers were unionized and thousands engaged in mass action against Jim Crow—the Democratic Party remained a cross-class amalgamation of interests where labor and liberals consistently surrendered to business. Sanders' supporters today have a lot of enthusiasm and hope, but they have little of the social weight of the postwar labor and civil rights movements.

Only a Ballot Line?

Some on the left reject characterizing the Democrats as a party of capital. For example, Jason Schulman argues that the Democratic and Republican parties have now become "state-run ballot lines, whose 'membership' consists of registered voters rather than dues-payers. It is the state, not the party, which controls who can register as a Democrat or a Republican."[2] Given that, he and others contend that the Democratic Party can be taken over by progressive candidates and voters.

This claim does not stand up to the test of facts. It's true that the Democratic Party machine no longer exists as it once did and that it does not have "members," but only registered voters. But these developments do not weaken capital's hold on the party. They have actually strengthened it.

The party is now more dependent on capitalists because elections have become big business. The Center for Responsive Politics reports that nearly $6.3 billion was spent on the 2012 federal election: $3.7 billion for the Congress, and a whopping $2.6 billion on the presidential race.[3] By bankrolling campaigns, the capitalists control the Democratic Party and its candidates. The ones they back have an overwhelming advantage over those they don't.

Capitalists have also set up institutions to shape the party program. They fund think tanks that generate policy positions for candidates to advocate. They also possess an army of lobbyists that encircles politicians, dangling promises of cash support in elections if the politician turns their proposals into laws.

If anything, the capitalists are using the Democrats to advance their agenda more now than ever before. In fact, some conservatives are actually frustrated with how business and the rich have divided their investment between the Republicans and the Democrats. *Forbes*' Steven Hayward complains, "Of the ten richest zip codes in the U.S., eight gave more money to the Democrats than Republicans in the last two presidential elections."[4]

This is one reason why the election season is so interminable. Not only does it have to run through a series of state-based primaries, but wealthy individuals and companies can sustain the process as a virtual auction in which candidates bid for their support as much as—and probably far more than—the support of voters. Meanwhile, a whole industry of political consultants, pollsters, data-mining experts, "get out the vote" organizations, and the media thrive off the financial arms race that modern elections have become.

The corporate political parties exist at the confluence of all of these multiple tributaries of corporate and individual—typically derived from corporate—wealth. They still perform the function of officially nominating candidates, providing the label under which they run and an easy identification for voters to use when they choose. But before they get the party stamp of approval, candidates have already won the "money primary," signifying that corporate America has signed off on them. Voters don't determine party behavior—of either capitalist party. Instead, as Thomas Ferguson argues in *Golden Rule*, "parties are more accurately analyzed as blocs of major investors who coalesce to advance candidates representing their interests."[5]

Nor is it the case that "the party" is irrelevant to the process of deciding the Democratic presidential

nominee. As political scientist Marty Cohen and his colleagues wrote about the "invisible primary," "[P]arties remain major players in presidential nominations. They scrutinize and winnow the field before voters get involved, attempt to build coalitions behind a single preferred candidate, and sway voters to ratify their choice. In the past quarter century, the Democratic and Republican parties have always influenced and often controlled the choice of their presidential nominees."[6]

In Democratic politics, where corporate money outspends money from labor and liberals by many orders of magnitude,[7] the fix is usually in from the start. The preferred corporate-friendly candidate usually comes into the nominating convention with the requisite number of delegates locked up. But if that isn't the case, the Democrats have provided a fail-safe—the votes of "superdelegates," Democratic elites (elected officials, Democratic National Committee members, former presidents, and the like) who can assure that the preferred elite candidate wins.

The superdelegates, who in 2016 will account for 714 of the 4,483 delegates at the Democratic convention, will have a decisive role in picking the Democratic nominee.[8] If they vote in bloc, or close to it, they would account for about a third of the delegates needed to win the nomination. As of this writing (October, 2015), mainstream neoliberal candidate Hillary Clinton claimed the commitments of more than 400 superdelegates, compared to three committed to Sanders.[9]

Those who think that Sanders' impressive turnouts at rallies or popular policy positions will sway the superdelegates to his side are missing the point that, in the world of superdelegates, pleasing big donors, career advancement, lucrative contracts, and post-political-career sinecures count for much more that doing right by the people.

If their manipulation of funding and ballot-line restrictions doesn't work, corporations and their Democratic Party lackeys can always withdraw support from a rebel candidate, preferring that the rebel goes down to defeat rather than use the party to advance an anti-corporate agenda. The classic example of this is the Democrats' all-out war against Upton Sinclair, the long-time socialist writer who won the party's nomination for governor of California in 1934 with a progressive platform and the slogan "End Poverty in California." The Democratic establishment, from President Franklin Roosevelt on down, funded a red-baiting scare campaign against Sinclair, created a fake third party to siphon votes from him, and ultimately guaranteed reelection for Republican Frank Merriam.[10]

A Strategic Dead End

Some have caricatured those on the left who do not support Sanders' campaign as purists who are subjecting him to a litmus test.[11] Marxists don't, however, frame our position toward Sanders based on every point of his platform, though the platform is important. Actually, Sanders advocates many demands for reforms that we support. Who could disagree with his proposal to impose a Robin Hood tax on Wall Street transactions to pay for free public higher education? Similarly, everyone on the left should endorse his bill to break up the big banks and his plan for a federal green jobs program to rebuild the United States' decaying infrastructure. And of course it's to the benefit of socialists that a mainstream political figure is trumpeting socialism in the media.

There are many positions Sanders takes—from his near total support of Israel against the rights of Palestinians, to his China-bashing and his failure to champion the rights of immigrants, his support for higher military spending, and his reluctance to speak out on non-class social issues—that the left should roundly criticize. But the main problem with Sanders' campaign is his decision to run inside the Democratic Party rather than as an independent or third-party candidate. The Democratic Party is not a labor party or people's party. It is what Richard Nixon's former adviser Kevin Phillips has called it, "history's second most enthusiastic capitalist party," bankrolled and controlled by big business.[12]

The Democratic Party is not the same as the Republican Party, which has traditionally been the "A Team" of American capitalism. The Democrats with their liberal wing play a different role. When the Republicans' brazen capitalist rule loses popular support, capital turns to the Democrats as its "B Team" to come off the bench, coopt the left, and prevent it from building a third party that would pose a challenge to the system.

Once in office, the Democrats obey the dictates of their capitalist paymasters, not of their popular voting base. If lightning struck and Sanders was elected president, he would face a Congress stuffed with both parties' corporate lackeys who oppose all the good things Sanders stands for and only support his mainstream positions like support for Israel, China bashing, immigration controls, and the continuation of Obama's drone war. At best he could get little done. At worst, he would only do the things that the establishment approves of, thereby betraying his supporters. He would remain a prisoner of the two-party system.

And because the left and social movements suffer from the illusion that the Democrats are "our friends," they can get away with policies that would provoke protest if a Republican attempted them. The Democrats have launched some of the worst neoliberal attacks on workers and the poor, like Bill Clinton's destruction of welfare.[13] And, despite their mythical status as a peace party, the Democrats initiated most of America's imperialist wars, from World War I through Vietnam to Obama's war on Libya.[14]

In entering the Democratic Party, Sanders is violating the cardinal principle of his hero, the Socialist Party leader Eugene Debs, who advocated for working class independence from the two capitalist parties: "[The Democrats and Republicans] are pledged to the same system and . . . whether the one or the other succeeds, [the worker] will still remain the wage-working slave he is today." Even in cases where the two parties differ, such as on the issue of abortion rights, the Democrats rarely go beyond rhetorical opposition to the Republican attacks. More often than not, they meet the GOP half way. One recent example came during the legislative sausage-making that produced the Affordable Care Act (ACA, also known as Obamacare). Liberal House Speaker Nancy Pelosi pressured members of her caucus to pass the ACA even after conservative *Democratic* Representative Bart Stupak (D-Mich.) and Republicans inserted language barring government subsidies for health insurance to pay for abortion services. This came after Pelosi had pressured supporters of single-payer health care to withdraw their proposal—on the grounds that it would open the door to other amendments, including those barring abortion![15]

This example illustrates the "lesser evil" conundrum in which the Democratic Party traps the left. Even though most progressives (including Sanders) support single-payer health care, they surrendered to the argument that Obamacare was "better than nothing." They went even further, concluding that Obamacare with restrictions on abortion was acceptable, too. Here is yet another reason why building a mass independent party on the left is so important. It would help to shift the political terrain and widen the political spectrum. Our side wouldn't constantly face the electoral choice between bad (the Democrats) and terrible (the Republicans).

Although a self-declared independent, Sanders has been "basically a liberal Democrat" through most of his years in Congress, as his old nemesis, former Vermont Governor Howard Dean, once said.[16] Sanders has chosen to campaign inside the party that has proved to be opposed to the "democratic socialist" positions he supports.

Keeping Hope Alive in the Democrats

While there certainly are real disagreements between the mainstream neoliberals and more traditional liberals of the Democratic Party, that doesn't mean there's a fundamental divide within

the party. Indeed, the rise of "the new new left" of progressive Democrats celebrated a couple years ago has turned out to be more of a mirage.[17]

But even if we set aside the weaknesses of the party's liberal figures and accept the characterization of a two-winged Democratic Party, no one could deny—least of all readers of *New Politics*—that the tensions are a far cry from a couple generations ago, when the Democrats were much more fundamentally rent by the two burning questions of the 1960s and 1970s: civil rights and the Vietnam War.

Then, the pig-headedness of the barons of the Democratic Party in 1968, who imposed the pro-war liberal Hubert Humphrey on the party whose voters had largely come to oppose the war—helped create a generation of activists who spoke of "new politics" and radical change. But—and we should keep this in mind when we hear about the potential for a Sanders campaign to create an independent force for change—it's likely that many thousands more people moved from the Senator Eugene McCarthy campaign into the Democratic Party than into radical politics.

That's because leaders of the Democrats realized that they had to adapt to the political climate by opening up the Democratic nominating convention to young people, women, and people of color. The results proved very effective for Senator George McGovern, who locked up most of the votes he needed to win the presidential nomination before the 1972 convention. The outward appearance of his coalition of supporters—young, multiracial, anti-war, even "hip"—made it seem as if the "left" really had a chance to take over the Democratic Party. In reality, McGovern had the backing of a segment of business executives who had decided that the United States should end its war in Vietnam. McGovern's campaign pursued a conscious strategy of "co-opting the left," in the words of McGovern campaign manager Gary Hart, by recruiting anti-war activists to participate.[18]

But the bulk of U.S. business, and the George Meany-run AFL-CIO, weren't willing to follow the McGovern backers. These sections of the Democratic establishment largely abandoned McGovern and contributed to his landslide defeat in 1972 by incumbent Richard Nixon.

Even so, the McGovern campaign proved to be a watershed for the regeneration of the *neoliberal* Democratic Party over the next generation. Gary Hart went on to become a senator and future presidential candidate himself. Bill Clinton and his future wife, Hillary Rodham, managed McGovern's campaign in Texas. Sections of the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC), formed in 1971 by prominent feminists such as Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan to push for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion rights, became key McGovern supporters.

Also in 1972, more than 8,000 Black activists participated in a National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, to consider a Black political agenda that would include independence from the two corporate parties. But the Reverend Jesse Jackson, who played a key role in opposing a break from the two-party system at that convention, joined up with McGovern's 1972 Democratic presidential campaign afterward.

1972 may have marked Jackson's most prominent initial foray into Democratic Party politics, but his presidential runs in the 1980s are the most important to consider as historical precedents for Bernie Sanders' campaign today. In fact, it might be plausibly argued that Jackson's runs had a more left or movement character than Sanders' today. Jackson was a figure from the civil rights movement. Sanders is a sitting member of one of the United States' most elite clubs, the U.S. Senate, where, though formally an independent, he hasn't used his position to proclaim the need and build support for a new progressive party in this country.

Jackson's National Rainbow Coalition's (NRC) founding document called the NRC a "political

movement." Plus, Rainbow supporters argued, activists could use Jackson's rhetoric and his access to the media to build grassroots struggles, like the movement in solidarity with the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

The 1984 Jackson campaign won about 21 percent of the votes in the Democratic primaries, including outright victories in several key Southern states. Nevertheless, the party's rules limited Jackson's showing at the convention to only 11 percent of delegates. With an overwhelming advantage achieved well before the convention, former Vice President Walter Mondale won an endorsement from Jackson without conceding anything. Mondale dismissed all of the Rainbow Coalition's platform proposals—which, in fact, included only two of the seven proposals comprising a minimum Black political agenda, according to two Jackson advisers quoted by political scientist Adolph Reed, Jr.[19]

While many on the left at the time viewed the Rainbow as providing a mass base for an independent break from the Democrats, this was a highly unlikely proposition, no matter how disdainfully the party treated Jackson and the NRC. As Jackson explained at the 1986 conference that transformed Jackson's campaign into an ongoing organization, "We have too much invested in the Democratic Party. When you have money in the bank you don't walk away from it."[20]

After giving the party establishment a little discomfort in 1984, the 1988 Jackson campaign focused on a mainstream strategy based on gaining the support of the Black Democratic establishment. Jackson appointed Black California Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, one of the most powerful politicians in California, to be chairman of his campaign. With experienced Democratic hands in charge of the campaign, it was more difficult than ever to distinguish Jackson's "movement" from any other mainstream Democratic campaign. Nevertheless, the end result in 1988 was the same as in 1984, with Jackson delivering his supporters to the dull neoliberal, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis.

Activists who gave so much energy to nominate Jesse Jackson then went on to vote for the conservative ticket that Jackson endorsed—a stark illustration of the ultimate problem with the Rainbow Coalition strategy. From the start, the NRC only succeeded in binding activists to the big-business interests that really control the Democratic Party. A whole generation of the 1960s and 1970s revolutionary left, especially the "new communist movement," crossed the Rainbow into the Democratic Party.[21]

Bernie and Hillary

While many people today might consider this 30- and 50-year-old history to have little relevance, it's worth noting that much of what is being said on the left today about Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign was said about Jackson's campaigns in the 1980s. For those who would like a more contemporary example, consider how the 2000s campaigns of former Ohio Representative Dennis Kucinich ended up disappointing their left and anti-war supporters.

Both Jackson and Kucinich ultimately delivered supporters to the more conservative Democrats against whom they had mounted their challenges in the first place. They did this so effectively and seamlessly that it must be said their campaigns aimed to do this from the start. Solidarizing with people who invest their hopes in Sanders should not prevent the left from speaking clearly about these realities.

Candidates like Jackson or Kucinich occasionally flirted with the rhetoric of breaking with the Democrats, but their clear commitment in practice was to bring people disenchanted with the party back into the Democratic orbit. And meanwhile, Sanders, for his part, won't even use the

rhetoric—he has ruled out running outside the Democratic Party. “No matter what I do, I will not be a spoiler,” Sanders has said. “I will not play that role in helping to elect some right-wing Republican as President of the United States.”[22] History teaches us that the real impact of these inside-outside challenges was to, in the words of Jesse Jackson, “keep hope alive” in the Democratic Party.

Anyone who watched the first Democratic candidate debate on October 13, 2015, will know that Sanders hardly criticized Hillary Clinton at all. His most noteworthy moment occurred when he came to Clinton’s defense over the Beltway pseudo-scandal of Clinton’s email server. As Truthdig’s Robert Scheer put it,

Bernie blew it. By embracing rather than confronting Hillary Clinton, Senator Sanders fell into the trap of sellout mainstream politics, improving his personal brand as an appealing but ultimately non-threatening advocate for the downtrodden while studiously avoiding any suggestion that the smiley-faced woman standing next to him is deeply complicit in Wall Street’s rape of the nation.

Even Sanders’ applause line about Clinton’s “damn emails” undercut another of his appeals against Clinton:

Sanders remains proud of his opposition to the Patriot Act—still supported by Clinton—which authorized mass surveillance by the National Security Agency. So why didn’t he point out the hypocrisy of a Cabinet member not trusting the government with her personal emails but feeling perfectly fine about the most intimate private data of the rest of us being subject to a vast and secret system of government spying?[23]

By refusing to confront Clinton, Sanders seems content with a strong run for second place, cementing his role “to warm up the crowd for Hillary” in the memorable phrase of *Black Agenda Report*’s Bruce Dixon.[24]

Let’s be clear about the political climate that will be facing the left in November 2016. Barring a miracle, Sanders will not be the nominee of the Democratic Party. Hillary Clinton or some other corporate-friendly neoliberal will be and will most likely be locked in a very close race with a reactionary Republican. And liberals and progressives—led most likely by Sanders and Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren—will be warning us of the myriad disasters that will befall the working class, the elderly, women, people of color, and the poor if we don’t get behind Hillary and the Democrats. You can bet that leading social movement figures, possibly including people identified today with Black Lives Matter and climate justice advocacy, will be exhorting (or browbeating) their supporters to get behind the Democrats, too. Of course there’s no denying that the Republicans will try to implement vicious reactionary policies if elected, and these attempts must be resisted. But what should have become clear by now is that the Democratic Party, with its neoliberal policies, has helped to create the breeding ground for the right to take advantage of popular discontent.

For those who want to build a stronger left in the United States, there is no substitute for the work—however slow and painstaking it might be—of building a genuine political alternative. In 2016, that will likely mean supporting Jill Stein on the Green Party ticket. Even beyond 2016, we should dedicate ourselves to build a genuine left party independent of the twin parties of capitalism. Such a party could play a decisive role in reversing American capitalism’s agenda of austerity and empire. We are not now in a position to create such a party, but *we will never be in that position* if we allow ourselves every four years to be lured by the tinsel of left rhetoric waved in our faces by progressives whose purpose is to sweep up radicals back into the Democratic Party fold.

Footnotes

1. See Eric Chester, Socialists and the Ballot Box (Praeger, 1985), 131–47, for an account of the realignment perspective.
2. Jason Schulman, “The Sanders Campaign and the Democratic Party,” New Politics, May 27, 2015.
3. Center for Responsive Politics, “The Money Behind the Elections.”
4. Steven Hayward, “How Did the Democrats Become the Party of the Rich,” Forbes, January 8, 2014.
5. Thomas Ferguson, The Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 27.
6. Marty Cohen, David Karol, et al., The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3.
7. According to tabulations from the Center for Responsive Politics, labor unions donated $618,000 to President Obama’s 2012 reelection effort, compared to $21 million from the finance, insurance, and real estate sector, and $19 million from the health sector. No doubt this tabulation vastly understates labor’s contribution, much of which is “in-kind” (phone-banking, door-knocking, etc.), but it does give an idea of the huge gulf between labor and business money going to the Democrats. Even if the totals obtained from labor and liberal ideological groups are combined, they still accounted for only about 8 percent of Obama’s total haul, for funds that CPR could assign to an industry or sector. See Open Secrets website here.
8. See the superdelegate tally in the Green Papers here.
9. As of late August, 2015, the Clinton camp claimed the public support of 130 superdelegates and the private commitment of 440 superdelegates. See Mark Halperin and Jennifer Epstein, “Clinton Camp Says One-Fifth of Delegates Secured for Nomination,” Bloomberg Business Week, August 28, 2015. According to published reports, as of October 2015, Sanders has the commitment of at least three superdelegates: a DNC member from Maine, and Progressive Caucus Reps. Raul Grijalva (Ariz.) and Keith Ellison (Minn.).
10. Lance Selfa, The Democrats: A Critical History (Haymarket Books, 2012), 210-211.
11. For an example see Jacob Swenson-Lengyel, “Why Radicals Like Bernie Sanders Should Run as Democrats, Not Independents,” In These Times, May 13, 2015.
12. Kevin Phillips, “Reagan’s America: A Capital Offense,” The New York Times Magazine, June 7, 1990.
13. Selfa, The Democrats, 63-85.
14. Selfa, The Democrats, 166-198.
15. Eugene V. Debs, “Outlook for Socialism in the United States,” International Socialist Review, September 1900.
16. Dean made this statement on NBC’s Meet the Press on May 22, 2005.
17. Lance Selfa, “The left Democrat mirage,” Socialist Worker.
18. See Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rodgers, Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics (Hill & Wang, 1986), 31, 37 on the McGovern campaign.
19. Adolph L. Reed, Jr., The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of Purpose in Afro-American Politics (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), 14–15.
20. Guardian [US], April 30, 1986, 15.
21. Max Elbaum’s Revolution in The Air (Verso, 2006) tells this story.
22. Connor Jones, “If Bernie Sanders Runs for President, It Won’t Be as an Independent: ‘I will not be a Spoiler’,” In These Times, January 16, 2015.
23. Robert Scheer, “Bernie Blew It: He Sold Out Instead of Confronting Clinton,” Truthdig, October 16, 2015. In the debate, Sanders agreed with Clinton that an NSA whistleblower should suffer legal consequences: “He did—he did break the law, and I think there should be a penalty to that. But I think what he did in educating us should be taken into consideration before he is …” From the New York Times’ transcript of the debate.

24. Bruce Dixon, “Presidential Candidate Bernie Sanders, Sheepdogging for Hillary and the Democrats in 2016,” Black Agenda Report, June 6, 2015.