

We're Not Just Along for the Ride

July 11, 2020



Until the beginning of April, Bernie Sanders was in the race to be the Democratic Party candidate. Now, we face the likely nomination of Joe Biden, a pandemic of historic global proportions, and a new economic crisis beginning to send shock waves through the capitalist system. This crisis did not start with COVID-19, but it is deepening as a result, and, along with it, the radicalization against capitalism. While the Sanders campaign raised expectations and energized socialists around crucial policy demands, it has left the question open as to how we build longer-lasting democratic organizations for the struggle and independent activity of working-class people. This is the question that we on the socialist left must answer. My concern in what follows is not about the strategy of Sanders but about how socialists who are in organizations outside of his campaign should operate and what this situation demands of us. We cannot adequately sort out our next steps if we conflate our goals with those of the campaign.

For many within the working class today, in all of its diversity, disdain for and fear of Trump is closely followed by distrust and disillusionment with the Democratic Party establishment. There is evidence that a significant minority are beginning to politically harden in opposition to the lesser-evil logic that has dominated the political dynamics in the United States for decades. While liberal pundits continue to berate and cajole in the interest of keeping the Democratic Party unified around Biden, another dynamic is also at play. At the time of writing, with more than 40 million unemployed, more than 100,000—disproportionately Black and Latinx working-class people—dead from COVID-19, and the ruling class committed to forcibly reopening the economy in the face of all public-health logic, there is a wave of resistance. Wildcat strikes of essential workers in response to COVID-19 and the lack of basic health and safety protection are growing, while mass demonstrations against the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor are spreading from Minneapolis and Louisville to other cities. While all of these struggles are nascent in many ways, and overwhelmingly defensive, they point the way to what is needed in the face of the growing social crisis.

As protests, strikes, and socialist politics spread, Biden continues to reveal himself as incomparably incompetent, most recently telling African Americans who might consider not voting for him that they “ain’t black.” This is after writing off Latinx (and other) voters who question the Obama/Biden

record on mass deportation, and women (and others) who have the temerity to believe Tara Reade, who has bravely pursued her allegations of sexual assault by Biden despite the liberal establishment's smear campaign against her. There are layers of people, both inside and outside the organized socialist left, not willing to simply swallow disagreements with the only candidate on offer against Trump right now. This offers important opportunities for socialists, which we can take advantage of only if we are clear about the central importance of independent working-class political activity. By this I mean that socialist organizing cannot be restricted to the parameters of politics inside the Democratic Party; it must stand on its own principles and goals and the strategies that follow from those. Otherwise, we risk not projecting a socialist vision, but instead tailoring socialist politics to fit more conveniently within the two-party system, which will not line up with the logic of the protests and workplace struggles that are unfolding.

If the left needed to learn the lesson again, we have just seen firsthand that the Democratic Party is not going to be the cradle of a new left party. However high Bernie Sanders raised expectations and introduced important proposals for social democratic reforms, at the end of the day, the party has been able to blunt and absorb the radical edge of his campaign. Bernie created a joint task force with Biden¹ aimed at uniting the party around policy proposals. He also issued a five-page social-media agreement to his delegates,² asking them to pledge that they will refrain from making any negative comments about other candidates and warning that failure to comply can result in disciplinary action. Sanders appears to be doing his part, remaining relatively silent on the accusations against Biden and his consistently inept campaign. This is not brought up to denounce Sanders, who has been crystal clear about his orientation toward reforming the Democratic Party.

I believe the majority of the 60,000 members of the Democratic Socialists of America, despite their commitment to Sanders, agree that ultimately the working class needs a party of its own and that the Democratic Party is not going to be transformed into a vehicle for social democracy (let alone socialism). This is evidenced by the overwhelming support at the 2019 DSA convention against endorsing any other Democratic Party candidate besides Bernie Sanders.³ The debate inside DSA isn't whether we need to break with the two-party system or not, it's about what strategy is going to get us from where we are starting—a situation of two-party hegemony and uniquely undemocratic structures—to a new, independent formation of and by working-class people. Here lies the heart of the question about the post-Sanders moment. If we agree about the end goal, then there is ample discussion to be had about what strategy we must take to reach that objective. The wind has been in the sails of those in the socialist movement who favor a tactic of running elections on the Democratic Party line, ostensibly until conditions are more favorable for a future break to a new party. Is this enough to pave the road for an alternative in the future?

I am concerned that in the lack of specificity about what we are trying to do, an electoral tactic becomes a default electoralist strategy, working against our agreed goal of an independent party. This risks carrying us along for the ride, instead of intentionally using a series of tactics that bring us closer to a new party. At present, the dominant approach is overly (not exclusively) focused on elections and carries with it unstated assumptions:

Elections are the key avenue that we can use to “build power” and make change—either by having sympathetic candidates in office who can pass legislation or by being the catalyst for confidence that drives class struggle;

Elections are the way we build movements and power;

Elections are the primary way we get to an independent party.

My strategic argument has a different set of assumptions:

While elections are an important piece of political activity, they are but a reflection, and not the driving force, of the balance of class forces in society at large;

Winning elections is not the same thing as winning working-class power, which entails higher levels of class struggle, not more people in office (though there should be a way to do both at once);

There is no equation we can apply that concludes elections over here equals struggle over there. The relationship between struggle, consciousness, and new parties being brought into existence is much more dynamic.

While the Sanders electoral campaign has given national scope to the socialist movement, his campaign did not create the conditions for those ideas. In fact, if you compare Gallup polls from 2010⁴ through 2020,⁵ you will see that support for socialism spiked in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, well before the Sanders campaign. Similarly, on support for single-payer health care⁶ this is also true. Rather than Sanders creating the socialist movement, the conditions of radicalization fed into his electoral success. Real activity and real movement of ordinary people have shaped and informed the Sanders moment as much as Sanders has inspired it. Occupy, Black Lives Matter, and #MeToo, while they have not won their overall demands, have informed and continue to inform the post-2008 world.

There is an unfortunate dismissiveness by some in the new left, sometimes among those who themselves were first radicalized by Bernie in 2016, to invert cause and effect, insinuating that the left and the movement were for naught until Bernie came around. This is a one-sided view of the relationship between movements and elections and a static understanding of the history of the international crisis of neoliberalism, especially since 2007-2008. In reality, the experience of those post-2008 mobilizations, their ups and downs, are part of what convinced those who participated in them of the importance of national political organization like that found in the Sanders campaign. It is not surprising, under the conditions of the U.S. anti-democratic republic, that this has found expression first inside the Democratic Party, but it must transcend those bounds.

Labor, anti-oppression, and social struggles will shape and define politics in the near term. Elections are important, but they are not the decisive battleground. We need to develop as many organizations and networks of working-class people as possible as the threat of budget cuts and mass unemployment is reshaping our lives. There are inspiring examples of this: The number of essential workers organizing themselves⁷ is an indicator, but also Amazonians United;⁸ rent strikes;⁹ rank-and-file teachers caucuses putting forward solutions and demands to keep teachers, students, and families safe during the pandemic;¹⁰ and nurses in New York City protesting outside of the Rikers Island prison.¹¹ There are ample opportunities, but they must be prioritized over a never-ending electoral cycle. Rising class struggle—which includes anti-racist eruptions and community and workplace organizing—will pose new political questions and will make possible much greater electoral advances, as what we have yet won, if we are honest, is limited.

Socialists should be the ones helping to lead these struggles and creating the democratic spaces where we can fully hash out these strategic and tactical discussions. If we misunderstand the breadth and depth of the radicalization, and the possibilities (and dangers) of the moment, we will end up acting as a brake on the instincts of radicalizing socialists, and once again (like our predecessors in the last two generations of radicalization in the 1930s and 1960s) miss the possibility of creating real vehicles for independent working-class politics.

A left party in the United States would be composed of working-class members who are themselves rooted in organizing and activity. The role of such an organization shouldn't be primarily to win

elections, but to build an infrastructure that grows out of struggle and supports, sustains, and helps organize that struggle. The development of these layers of working-class activists is underway, and we should be guided by a strategy that puts as many of us at the helm of organizing as possible. This can and must be done now and won't be achieved by running in elections as our overriding strategy, which often inadvertently takes people out of this type of workplace and community organizing instead of feeding it. I want a future left party with an active and diverse membership in the tens and hundreds of thousands, a party that can both lead struggle and independently contest elections. Organizing more working-class organs of activity is what will bring us closer to this goal, rather than continuing to limit ourselves to the confines the Democratic Party creates—always delimited by the needs of capital.

Notes

1. NPR, May 13, 2020.
2. Houston Chronicle, May 20, 2020
3. Jacobin, April 29, 2020.
4. Gallup, February 4, 2010.
5. Gallup, May 20, 2019.
6. Physicians for a National Health Program, December 9, 2009.
7. Guardian, May 19, 2020.
8. Labor Notes, May 11, 2020.
9. New Republic, May 29, 2020.
10. New York Post, March 14, 2020.
11. News 12, May 7, 2020.