

Left Politics after Sanders: Think Internationally, Historically and Dialectically

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Rally organized by Brazil's Party of Socialism & Liberty (PSOL)

I agree with most of key points in Charlie Post and Ashley Smith's important New Politics article, "Facing Reality: The Socialist Left, the Sanders Campaign and Our Future." In the wake of Sanders' withdrawal from the race, I agree that the left (including DSA) "needs to put most of its energy into rebuilding mass resistance amidst the pandemic and engaging in electoral work when it advances organizing our power from below—something that is impossible within the Democratic Party."

As Post and Smith underline, citing Kim Moody's essential work, "the Democratic Party is a fundraising cabal, run by an unaccountable layer of elected officials who are the conduits for capitalist donations." As they say, within this framework and in these times, since "the level of class and social struggle, despite the wave of teachers' strikes, has remained very low," "Sanders' program, ... while popular, seemed unattainable for the vast majority of working people."

I'm afraid however that the article's diagnosis of the left's problems is stronger than the alternative they put forward. Yes of course, we should focus on "organizing and supporting the strikes and protests that have ripped out across the country," and especially "promote the demands and actions of undocumented immigrants, people of color, and people in the global south." (I would add women, whose organizing around social reproduction issues has been central to the resistance to Trump over the past four years, and trans people and other especially oppressed queers, who are experiencing violence and poverty that Black Lives Matter has insightfully linked to those facing people of color.)

But social struggles cannot in isolation capture and substitute for the excitement that Sanders' political campaign generated. Saying that we need to debate "how we can build a new socialist party

over the coming years” is too vague. It offers zero guidance about what to do this November, as the frightening prospect looms of Trump’s winning a second term, or more generally about what political action to take. Not many leftists need convincing that Biden is uninspiring; but you can’t effectively fight this year’s lesser evil with some misty vision of a better political alternative in some indefinite future.

I would argue that the radical left can offer a more credible alternative to lesser-evilism by adding in three dimensions. First, the US left needs to look beyond its own country’s frontiers, at countries where the left has done a better job over the past two decades at building parties to the left of social democracy. Second, it should look critically at the political legacy of past US radical upsurges, particularly at the 1930s/40s and 1960s/70s. Third, it needs to draw on the rich discussions among Marxists over the past half-century about the complex dialectic between social struggle and politics.

Obviously the US political system poses extreme challenges to the socialist left. On top of the barrier to left third parties posed by the first-past-the-post system (which also exists in, e.g., Britain and Canada), the US has the sad distinction of not having had any even nominally socialist party as a credible electoral contender over the past century. But the US Democratic Party’s complete surrender to neoliberalism and austerity over the past 40 years has not been unique. Not only the British Labour Party under Tony Blair but virtually every mass social democratic party in the world has a comparable sorry record – including responsibility for massive, catastrophic cutbacks to healthcare in the run-up to the Covid-19 pandemic.

And Sanders’ radical political response to the Democrats’ neoliberal sellout has not been unique either. Several new left parties in different countries have occupied the space opened up by social democracy’s rightward rush. In general, these parties have anti-capitalist programs that are far clearer and more radical than Sanders’ wishful admiration for Denmark as “socialist.” For me, the success of Brazil’s Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL), Portugal’s Left Bloc, and Denmark’s Red-Green Alliance in growing into major political players have been particularly noteworthy.

Besides more democratic electoral systems, these new parties may benefit from the historical legacies of their countries’ past struggles, from the Resistance to the Portuguese Revolution to the fight against the Brazilian dictatorship. The US has a different history of struggles. But we should not exaggerate these parties’ continuity with the earlier history of their countries’ workers’ movements. In Portugal, for example, the SP has kept most of its popular base despite its betrayals and the CP despite its sectarianism.

In many other countries, where the traditional left has massively lost support because of its sellouts, embittered workers have turned more to the far right than the new left. (This is the case in Rotterdam, the city where I live.) The new left parties have much of their base in newer generations that were previously politically unorganized. Something similar might happen in the US.

Politics has its own dynamic

I would draw a couple of key lessons from these parties’ experience. First, the Left Bloc and Red-Green Alliance in particular have grown steadily over the years to win about 10% of the electorate without springing from stable, militant, mass social movements. So a period of relative social quiescence doesn’t have to be a period of political impotence for the anti-capitalist left.

Second, the issues that have catalyzed these parties’ breaks to the left have been diverse and unpredictable. Besides opposition to austerity, the Portuguese Left Bloc, for example, built itself partly through campaigns for abortion rights, immigrants’ rights and drug decriminalization – not exactly the traditional focuses of workers’ movements. In the US, important and inspiring as the

Amazon and Target strikes are, the impetus for new political initiatives might come from activism that has more directly apparent political implications, for instance around climate change.

Third, as Post and Smith would probably expect, these three parties have all felt the tug of institutionalization and had a hard time keeping their centers of gravity outside the electoral arena; but so far they have not played the game of lesser-evil management of capitalism and have not joined capitalist governments.

Both in Portugal and Denmark, they have had periods when social democratic-led governments were dependent on their parliamentary support, which has enabled them to extract concessions. This has involved some tough tactical choices and compromises (which I would not necessarily always defend) and some fierce internal debates. It has not moved their countries any closer to breaking with capitalism or even with neoliberalism; but so far it has not led to large-scale disillusionment among their voters either, much less turned their parties into graveyards of social movements like the US Democrats.

The movements in their countries have stayed independent and critical, but at the same time capitalized on victories that these parties have helped wrest from the state by leveraging pressure from the movements. I would argue that this has done more for the movements than just turning their backs on politics would have - and that the US left could learn from these examples.

So periods without big social upsurges don't have to be periods of political helplessness for adversaries of capitalism. Are periods with big social upsurges necessarily good for anti-capitalist politics? Unfortunately not. In the US, the 1934 citywide general strikes, the big CIO organizing drives and the 1946 strike wave led to a few promising independent initiatives, but in the end the labor movement was more tightly bound to the Democratic Party than before.

Again in the 1960s and '70s, the big battles against Jim Crow and the Vietnam War led to some promising initiatives like the Peace and Freedom Party, but not to a mass break from the two capitalist parties. Specifically political factors - like the Communist Party's Popular Front and National Front strategies in the 1930s and '40s, and Maoist groups' sectarianism and rapid rightward shifts in the 1960s and '70s - were key to this dismal outcome.

So building social movements isn't enough; political arguments and organizing are vital too. The politics of the next upsurge is bound to be marked by an additional half-century of bureaucratization and reformist reflexes, on top of forty-plus years of atomization of the workers' movement by neoliberalism. In these conditions, the complex organizational and tactical debates of recent decades will have to be dealt with and learned from, in detail and in depth - along with some new ones.

Luckily socialists can draw on a rich legacy of thinking about politics in the Marxist tradition, going back to Marx and Engels' time, continuing through the mass and not-so-mass workers' internationals (Antonio Gramsci's work especially repays study), and including a period of rich theoretical development from the 1960s into the 1980s.

In the past, for example, Charlie Post has written about things to be learned from the Greek-French Marxist Nicos Poulantzas' writings on the state. Poulantzas showed on the one hand that the working class and its allies cannot exercise any power of their own within the capitalist state, but on the other hand that social struggles can fuel conflicts within the state that work out to labor's advantage. As he wrote in *State, Power, Socialism*, the state "bathes in struggles that constantly submerge it."

Within the state, "various fractions of the power bloc often seek to enlist [the support of the popular

masses] against the other fractions,” and these conflicts in the ruling class are “condensed in divisions and contradictions” inside the state. It is a mistake to imagine that the exploited and oppressed can win real power of their own through these conflicts; but equally a mistake to neglect the benefits that the exploited and oppressed can gain from them. New left parties have sometimes shown this in practice.

Don't waste your vote!

Insights like these could be useful to the practice of anti-capitalist politics in the US. Socialists should talk more about how independent politics can be planned and practiced.

Kim Moody has pointed out that most of the biggest cities in the US are virtual Democratic Party one-party states, where the Republicans are barely serious contenders and the Democrats are the main instrument of local capitalist rule. In San Francisco, the Greens have at times replaced the Republicans as the city's main opposition party. So why isn't the radical left mounting more insurgent campaigns in these cities, especially when there are major strikes or other struggles to be built on? This would be a real contribution, now, to building the future socialist party that Post and Smith advocate.

And what about the national election this November? Leftists are understandably preoccupied with stopping Trump. But Biden is a terribly weak reed to lean on in the fight against the racist far right.

Particularly in the forty-odd states where either Trump doesn't stand a chance (California, New York, Massachusetts) or Biden doesn't stand a chance, a vote by leftists for Biden - up to his knees in the shit of the Iraq war, the destruction of welfare, the growth of mass incarceration, the power plays of Big Pharma and more - is a wasted vote if ever there was one. Especially when there is a clear alternative - presumptive Green candidate Howie Hawkins - who is himself a long-time stalwart of the socialist left.

Given the groundswell on the left toward a critical vote for Biden, independent-minded socialists may be tempted to soft-pedal this debate. I think that would be a mistake. Of course, we shouldn't push the debate to the point of alienating our allies in the movements. But neither should we imagine that what people do for a couple of minutes in the privacy of a polling booth is harmless.

In times of polarization like these, people and especially activists usually don't keep their voting plans secret. Their declarations that of course they'll vote for Biden to stop Trump help keep broad social milieus in the Democratic Party's orbit. Even more serious, movement organizations' success in delivering votes to Biden will be the currency for years of their quid pro quos with the Democrats: some crumbs for my base, some jobs for my staff, in return for lasting political allegiance.

For all their imperfections - notably their shallow roots in social movements - the Greens, who explicitly declared themselves anti-capitalist in 2016, offer the clearest possible rebuke to this kind of lesser-evilism. A vote for them is a small but meaningful step in the direction of the future new socialist party. So let's take and advocate that step.