

A New Politics in America - Part 9 - From the Sanders Campaign Forward: Where Do We Go From Here?

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Part 9 of A New Politics in America. This concludes the series. All nine parts can be found on the New Politics website, newpol.org

So what does this era of a new politics in America mean? How significant are new right and new left in America today? Where do we go from here? What are we in the left to do? Should we be building progressive Democratic Party campaigns? Should we just go back to building the movements? Or is there another option? To figure this out, we have to understand that though we are in a new political era, many of the old problems still remain.

It seems today in late March 2016, that Donald Trump will become the Republican nominee and Hillary Clinton will be the Democratic Party candidate. If that happens, where do Sanders supporters go? The attempt will be made to carry Sanders' supporters into the Democratic Party and to get them to campaign and vote for Clinton by portraying their contest as a battle between reaction and democracy. The cry will be: "Vote Hillary to Stop Fascism!"

Many no doubt will rally to this cry, but neither the danger or the remedy are what they seem. While Trump represents racist and reactionary policies, and while his campaign has conjured up all of the little fascist group, there is not, at least yet, a fascist movement in the United States. Once nominated, Trump will likely move a little toward the left, toward the center; and given his erratic political history, it is not inconceivable that he will adopt some relatively progressive economic and social rhetoric. At the same time Hillary will move to the right, toward the center—dropping the slogans and issues she has picked up from Sanders. In no way will Sanders campaign—no matter how successful it has been—influence Hillary Clinton to change her real views or future behaviors. She belongs to Wall Street and Washington.

When Ryan Lizza, a writer for the *New Yorker*, asked Bernie Sanders what he thought about Clinton's role he was unequivocal. "He was adamant that Clinton could not deliver the kind of change that voters are demanding, no matter what policy positions she adopted," writes Lizza. Said Sanders,

The issue is creating an economy and a political system that works for all Americans and not for the one percent. That does not happen through a speech. That happens by reaching out and mobilizing millions and millions of people. There is no indication that Hillary Clinton has ever done that, or ever wants to do that. You don't go and give speeches behind closed doors to Wall Street and be the same person that is going to rally the American people. That just does not exist.[1]

While Sanders has promised to endorse the Democratic Party nominee, who seems likely to be Clinton, it is hard to think that he could do so sincerely or enthusiastically, or that he could convince his followers to support her. And at the same time, it seems unlikely that he will organize a third party, since So where will they go and what will they do? Deeper into the Democratic Party?

Can the Democratic Party be Reformed?

Some argue that the Sanders campaign has laid the foundation for building a progressive movement within the Democratic Party. Eric Stetson writing in the *Daily Kos*:

The only effective antidote to the seduction of neo-fascism is a new progressive populism — the Sanders path, basically. That's the way to get the swing voters who are dissatisfied with the establishment of both political parties — a huge and growing portion of the American electorate — to vote for the Democratic Party instead of the newly populist version of the Republican Party after Trump is done transforming it.

I would feel more confident in the future of American politics and the Democratic Party if I could see that hundreds of progressive candidates in the mold of Sanders are being groomed to run for Congress in 2018 — and that down at the state level, thousands of ordinary citizens are getting ready to run for office on a Sanders-inspired platform, building a base from which seasoned candidates can rise up and win Congressional seats in the future.

He goes on to say: “Really, there is no excuse for this not to happen — if, in fact, a progressive political revolution is to be created, which is what Bernie Sanders is asking for, and what we know is needed.”[2]

Stetson here is reviving an old strategy, arguing that the left can transform the Democratic Party into a progressive vehicle for social change, that is, into a social democratic or anti-capitalist party. There is virtually no chance of this happening.

The Democratic Party, while not a political party in the European sense with affiliated mass organizations, individual memberships, party programs, and a disciplined parliamentary delegation[3]—nevertheless is not a vehicle that can be commandeered by the left or the working class. The Democratic Party—while it is a broad party in terms of class, candidates, and permissible platforms—is not an amorphous collection of ordinary people and politicians; it is actually a tightly controlled, highly structured, and quite effective capitalist political party at the service of corporations and high finance.

Despite the name, the Democratic Party is not a democratic organization that can be taken over and controlled by working people. The Democratic Party has state-mandated structures, legislative organizations at the federal and state levels (speakers, party leaders, whips, party caucuses, committee appointments, sanctions against dissidents, etc.). The Democratic Party has policy organizations and think tanks, and it works closely with Madison Avenue advertising firms. And, of course, it is well connected to the banks, corporations, and wealthy individuals whose money funds the party and its related institutions. Most Democratic Party politicians in both houses of Congress

are professional politicians, businesspersons, or lawyers (and, while the other of the three largest occupational groups in Congress comes from education, virtually few if any are there as representatives of the teachers unions or working people).[4]

The constellation of organizations and individuals who make up the Democratic Party is deeply committed to capitalism and the great majority is committed to its current neoliberal form, supporting policies of austerity for working people. Moreover, the growth of the rightwing of the Republican Party has tended to move the entire spectrum further to the right, pulling the Democrats along with it. However repugnant he was, Richard Nixon and the Republicans of his era were to the *left* of the Democratic Party today. The Democratic Party has not been able to resist the gravitational pull of the Republicans, and like twin stars they swirl toward the black hole of reaction.

True, there have been some liberal voices and victories in the Democratic Party recently, namely Elizabeth Warren and Bill de Blasio, and there is the Progressive Caucus of Congress with its 69 of the House's 435 members in its ranks. But de Blasio's career as mayor, joining with Governor Andrew Cuomo to crush the progressive Zephyr Teachout's bid for endorsement by the Working Families Party, and then backing Hillary Clinton, demonstrates clearly the limits of progressivism in the Democratic Party. To change the Democratic Party we in the left would have to elect thousands of Sanders-type candidates and to do so in a short enough time period to actually influence the party's direction. At best this is an idealistic dream—at worst it is a distracting fantasy.

The 1930s Labor Upheaval and the Democratic Party

The Democratic Party can only be moved and changed, and American politics can only be transformed by building powerful social movements *and* a political party to the left of the Democrats. Most important, working people can only set their own agenda and challenge both employers and the government if they have their own party, a working people's party.

Consider the 1930s. The Democratic Party of the 1930s was profoundly transformed, from a moderate party with the profound deformations of the Solid South's racism, the second Ku Klux Klan's anti-immigrant (anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic) views, and the crime and corruption of the big city machines. The Democratic Party was not transformed by progressive campaigns—though there were some of those—but rather by the labor upheaval of the 1930s which pushed the Democrats to the left.

The Communists, Socialists, and the tiny Trotskyist groups organized the first citywide general strikes in San Francisco, Toledo, and Milwaukee in 1934. Union organizing campaigns continued throughout the 1930s with mass picket lines, factory occupations, and pitched battles between workers and police that led to the organization of the auto, rubber, glass, electrical, and steel industries, eventually created the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Those movements—which many Americans at the time were the beginning of a revolution—forced the Democratic Party to create public works programs, to pass Social Security, and to pass the National Labor Relations Act, giving unions legal rights to unions nationally for the first time.

The socialist leaders of those movements did not simply fight for unions, however. Most of them, when the period began in 1935, fought for three things: industrial unions, a labor party, and socialism. [5] Some socialists and labor unionists organized independent labor parties at the local or state level and some pressed for a national labor party,[6] but—though CIO leaders John L. Lewis suggested it in 1940[7]—no progressive or labor party was ever built. The Democrats, therefore, captured the labor unions, and the labor party and the struggle for socialism were pushed off the agenda.

Roosevelt and the Democratic Party, after granting unions the right to organize, succeeded in derailing the second and third goals of the left of the 1930s. During the World War II and in the post-war period, the Democratic Party was able to domesticate the labor unions, government, capital, and the labor leaders working together to win the war. The Communist and Socialist parties, though they ran presidential candidates in the 1930s, practically supported Roosevelt in an American version of the Popular Front. Independent politics disappeared during the war and afterwards the bipartisan prosecution of the Cold War and McCarthyism eliminated the left.

The Civil Rights Movement and the Democrats

The same thing happened with the civil rights movement of the 1960s. President John F. Kennedy and his brother Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy worked at first to contain the civil rights movement. The Democratic Party refused in 1964 to seat the movement's Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, leaving many Black activists feeling betrayed by the party. But the growing movement, engaging in civil disobedience that led to massive violent confrontations in several cities, finally forced Lyndon B. Johnson to push through Congress the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, a total victory for the civil rights movement.

After that, the Democratic Party opened its doors to Black civil rights leaders and to Black politicians in general. Once in Congress, these politicians formed the Congressional Black Caucus in 1971, initially advocates of civil rights and progressive policies, they also gradually became integrated into the Democratic Party without fundamentally changing its character. In this election, the Black Caucus endorsed Hillary Clinton and has played an important role in mobilizing Black voters support for her.[8]

Reverend Jesse Jackson's 1988 presidential Democratic Primary campaign also showed the limitations of the strategy of reforming and transforming the Democratic Party. Jackson ran on a progressive program advocating for workers and for Blacks, and in the course of his campaign he made links with virtually every social and labor movement, participating in protests and walking picket lines from Maine to the Mexican border in California. His campaign challenged both corporate capital and racism and even American foreign policy,[9] and he received support from much of the far left. The campaign, much like Obama's in 2008 and Sanders today, took on the characteristics of a social movement.

Jackson did remarkably well, receiving 6.9 million votes and winning 11 states: seven primaries (Alabama, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Puerto Rico and Virginia) and four caucuses (Delaware, Michigan, South Carolina and Vermont). But in the end, he went to the convention where he gave his famous two wings to fly speech: "Progress will not come through boundless liberalism nor static conservatism, but at the critical mass of mutual survival. It takes two wings to fly. Whether you're a hawk or a dove, you're just a bird living in the same environment, in the same world." [10] A loyal Democrat, Jackson led his movement back into the Democratic Party, where it died.

The point should be made that candidates like Jackson have in the past played the role of both building the left and keeping the left in the Democratic Party, keeping those in it from leaving. So those who argue for strengthening the left wing of the Democratic Party should keep in mind that when they talk about changing the Democrats, they are also talking about *preventing* the development of an independent party. For it is from those in such a left that such a party would otherwise be built.

Build the Movements?

A second strategy for the future of Bernie Sanders supporters is put forward by Brad A. Bauerly and Ingar Solty who, after correctly assessing the important success of the Sanders campaign, then write, "the American left now has the opportunity (and, we think, obligation) to not let the Sanders mobilization eventually dissolve but integrate the millions of enthused, but often - not least because of their extremely young age - politically inexperienced Sanders supporters into (the already existing) social movements mobilizing around those concrete demands of 'Medicare for all,' 'Fight for 15 and a union' etc."

Bauerly and Solty are certainly right that the movements must be built, but to direct Bernie Sanders' supporters to the social movements without providing a political direction represents a retreat from politics. Many in the American left have for decades engaged in building social movements—some of them powerful—but have failed to recognize that the seeds they sowed in the movements were ultimately harvested by the Democratic Party. The labor and social movements need and deserve a political party of their own. Unless one provides a political alternative, movement activists will by default turn to and vote for the Democratic Party because it is the lesser of the two great evils. We have to offer something more to Sanders' activists than protests, demonstrations, or even labor union activism.

Independent Political Action?

There is also a third alternative, this one proposed by former *New York Times* correspondent Chris Hedges—who calls for what would be a real revolution as opposed to Benie Sanders' "political revolution"—and who has suggested that the vehicle for that revolution is the Green Party whose presidential candidate is Dr. Jill Stein.[12] Stein's Green Party campaign, with its radical platform, certainly represents a left political alternative to the Democratic Party, whoever its nominee should finally be. Given the tremendous excitement surrounding the Sanders campaign, Stein and the Green Party have been hard pressed to get much attention.

The Green Party has had some real electoral successes, for example, Howie Hawkins' campaign for governor of New York in 2014 in which he won 5 percent of the vote. The GP has elected legislators in Arkansas, California, and Maine, and a number of city council and school board members. But in national elections, however, the Green Party has received less than one percent of the vote for all of its candidates for congress or senate in all states, and only with Ralph Nader's presidential campaign in 2000, which got 2.74 percent of the vote is the only occasion that the party has won more than 1 percent of the vote.[13] And though it came out of the environmental movement, the Green Party today is not well rooted in the social and labor movements today. The Green Party, while it has the aspiration to become or to lay the foundation for a left third party, represents at this point a fine way to cast a principled vote against the capitalist parties, but is not at this point a vehicle to changing the balance of political power in the country. It will be hard for the Green Party to grow through the recruitment of Sanders followers, though it will get some.

The Role of the Left

The American left is small and divided into a large number of groups, and the Sanders campaign has not united them.[14] Many on the left want not only Sanders "political revolution," suggesting mass democratic participation and a changed agenda towards Keynesian liberalism, but they also want a socialist revolution that would overturn capitalism and the existing state and create a democratic socialist economy. Some Benie supporters have become interested in socialism, many have also become interested in the debates about the difference between social democracy and democratic socialism.

Only a few left groups have become actively involved in the Sanders campaign, particularly Socialist

Alternative (SAlt), a Trotskyist group, and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), historically a left social democratic group. The Communist Party USA is also silently involved in the Sanders campaign—but seems to be preparing to plump for Hillary Clinton to stop Trump.[15] Still, despite differences, there is some healthy discussion and cooperation on the left. In 2015, before the Sanders campaign got under way, several left organizations met in Chicago for a conference on the importance of independent political action.[16] And the Sanders campaign has led to respectful debates among both supporters and left critics of the Sanders campaign such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and the Green Party (GP).[17] What are the prospects for the various left organizations as they attempt to relate to Sanders' supporters?

Kshama Sawant's successful election and reelection to the Seattle City Council gives her organization, Socialist Alternative, great authority on the left. Sawant, a model socialist in office, has not only been active in promoting legislation in the city council, but has also used her position to support movements such as the Fight for \$15. SAlt decided to support Sanders' campaign in the primary, and even created their own pro-Sanders organization, #Movement4Bernie.[18] Socialist Alternative has been the most active socialist recruiter from the Sanders campaign.

At the same time, from early on, SAlt made it clear early on that they want Sanders to leave the Democrats and run as an independent. If Sanders loses the primary, Socialist Alternative will immediately leave for the Green Party and the Stein campaign. As SAlt's newspaper wrote:

Sanders should not allow the political revolution to die at the July Democratic Convention...The emerging movement for a political revolution needs to urge Sanders to run independently all through November or to develop a plan B of support for the remaining strongest left, anti-corporate challenger, Jill Stein of the Green Party.[19]

The SAlt approach has won the support of some Bernie supporters, but the independent #Movement4Bernie organization and the advocacy for a Plan B before Plan A has been either successful or defeated, has alienated some rank-and-file Bernie supporters. Will Sanders supporters want to follow Socialist Alternative into the Green Party? Also a supporter of the Green Party option is the ISO, though since it has not been involved in the Sanders campaign is even less likely to attract many Sanders supporters. The small socialist-feminist group Solidarity—half-in and half-out of the Sanders campaign and not officially endorsing it—also likes the Greens, but it is in the same boat, having little presence in the movement.

The DSA seems like the group best positioned to offer a left alternative to the Sanders supporters. Like Sanders, DSA has for 35 years defined itself as a "democratic socialist" organization, making it a logical destination for many Sanders supporters. DSA members have been very active in the campaign, principally in the many locally initiated organizations as well as mobilizing their own members to register votes and knock on doors. A democratic, multi-tendency organization with nearly 7,000 members, chapters throughout the country, and a youth group, the Young Democratic Socialists (YDS), DSA also has the size and resources to attract and hold new left activists.

DSA members have always been active locally in the social movements. And while DSA has throughout its history worked with progressive candidates in the Democratic Party, some in the organization have recently proposed the option of running socialist candidates both within the party and as independents. Finally, some DSA members are advocating that DSA make work among rank-and-file union members and union reform caucuses more central to the organization's strategic goals. This combination of independent political action plus militant labor movements and powerful social movements represents the best future for Sanders' supporters.

Setting aside the difference among left organizations, all of us who have been involved in or simply

enthused about Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign need to find a way to working together to build a new American left, independent from Wall Street and Washington, both a social movement and a political power. The Sanders campaign has shown us that there are hundreds of thousands of young people in the United States who want to change American politics and who are not afraid of the word "socialism," who in fact want to work to define it for a new era.

We need to build a larger and more united left that can work with these new leftists. We have the opportunity and responsibility to present to these activists the genuinely democratic socialist alternative, the building of an independent party for the socialization of our economy, for not only a political revolution, but also a social and cultural revolution that changes the face of our country and the world.

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[1] Ryan Lizza, "The Great Divide: Clinton, Sanders, and the Democratic Party," *The New Yorker*, March 21, 2016, pp. 38-44.

[2] <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2016/2/28/1492958/-After-Sanders-How-Can-We-Build-Bernie-s-Political-Revolution> Steton is only one of several to advocate this strategy, see also: Peter Bloom's variant: <http://www.commondreams.org/views/2016/03/19/sanders-must-build-progressive-movement-all-way-convention-and-beyond>. A more systematic version of this strategy as once popularized by Michael Harrington, *Socialism* (1972), Chapter XI, "The Invisible Mass Movement."

[3] <http://newpol.org/bernie-sanders-and-dilemma-%E2%80%A8-democratic-%E2%80%9Cparty%E2%80%9D>; also see the reply by Barry Finger, <http://newpol.org/sanders-and-democrats-reply-jason-schulman>

[4] <https://www.senate.gov/CRSReports/crs-publish.cfm?pid=%260BL%2BR%5CC%3F%0A>

[5] David Milton, *The Politics of U.S. Labor: From the Great Depression to the New Deal* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982), especially Chapter 7, "The Great Bargain."

[6] Eric Leif Davin, "The Last Hurrah? The Defeat of the Labor Party Idea, 1934-36," in: Staughton Lynd, *We Are All Leaders: The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), pp. 117-171.

[7] Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1977) pp. 284-49, 250, 327-30, 343-47, 351-53.

[8]
<http://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/02/11/hillary-clinton-gets-backing-from-black-democrats-in-congress/>

[9] For Jackson's platform in brief see:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesse_Jackson_presidential_campaign,_1988

[10] <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jessejackson1988dnc.htm>

[11]
<http://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/268325-democratic-establishment-starts-to-gang-up-on-sanders>

[12]http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/bernie_sanders_phantom_movement_20160214. See also the Hedges, Stein three part discussion at http://www.truthdig.com/avbooth/item/video_days_of_revolt_chris_hedges_jill_stein_take_on_politics_20160216; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJYMe3lR_eI; and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVlk8Vyoplg>

[13]https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_Party_of_the_United_States#House_of_Representatives

[14] This article provides a useful overview:
<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/02/why-socialists-cant-wait-for-bernie-to-lose-213593>

[15] The party's *Peoples World* newspaper has covered the Sanders campaign quite sympathetically, but also see:
<http://peoplesworld.org/clinton-will-need-sanders-political-revolution-if-she-s-the-nominee/>

[16] <http://portside.org/2015-05-14/third-party-builders-meet-chicago-two-reports>

[17] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1J8xawahHs>

[18] <http://www.socialistalternative.org/2016/03/01/sanders-left-role-socialists/>

[19] <http://www.socialistalternative.org/2016/03/17/sanders-run-independent-november/>