

Old SDSers, New DSAers, and Trump vs. Biden

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In a recent letter a group of old SDSers hoped to engage some young critics of the Democratic Party and Joe Biden. Those critics actually ought to be mightily commended for many of their analyses, insights, actions, intuitions, and feelings.

For example, the critics are correct that Biden is a tribune of power and wealth and of the current socio-economic system, not a friend of the poor, the disenfranchised, those doing rote and tedious work, those reviled and repressed by police, those living under occupations and bombs, those suffering the many diseases of our times.

The critics are also correct that Biden, Obama, the Clintons, and the establishment Democratic Party power brokers reject fundamental and even just substantial change and that many feared Sanders reducing their influence more than they feared Trump retaining the Presidency. Masters of war. Masters of impoverishment. Misanthropes of morality.

They are correct that U.S. elections don't question underlying social and economic relations, and that the electoral college makes a mockery of democracy.

They are correct that even when rhetorically caring and humane, Democratic Party elites, like all the many TV ads now celebrating frontline workers to try to sell automobiles, are ultimately about business as usual.

The critics are also correct that as bad as Covid-19 is, multi-dimensional ecological collapse via global warming as well as death by starvation, inequality, and militarism are even greater threats to human survival. The young militant's leadership on global warming and their observations that Biden and his overseers offer far, far less than we all ecologically need are also correct.

The critics would also be right if they pointed out that many old SDSers haven't been very visibly active in a very long time, save for periodically supporting some Democratic candidate and that Old SDSers haven't offered much inspiring vision and haven't fully followed through on delivering a world worthy of young people's on-going habitation.

Hell, the Biden critics would also be right to point out that Boomers writ large overwhelmingly exited “our generation” writ radical, and at a crucial historical moment became anything but Sanders supporters. They could reasonably ask those of us still radical why we didn’t do better reaching our own peers and how we could think we ever really knew much less that we still know how to reach out and organize? They could also reasonably wonder how come the old SDSers had barely a word to say about young leftists’ merits or about older leftists’ failings.

The young left has also been right that while Sanders didn’t voice all their desires and didn’t legitimate all their feelings, his was a brilliant campaign, program, and project that deserved their whole-hearted support. And they have been right to assert that the program, beliefs, and commitments of both DSA and the Green Party are monumentally superior to those of the mainstream Democratic Party.

Like the letter signers, I was in SDS and the broader left of the sixties but I don’t write this reply to the old SDSers based on my past membership. Like many of them, I have remained active since, in a myriad of ways, but I don’t write this based on that, either. Like many of them, I have been and remain a militant advocate of fundamentally changing the racial, sexual, gender, political, economic, and ecological contours of contemporary life, right down to the roots, and I do hope that maybe that will weigh just a little bit positively on what follows, especially since what follows seeks to be heard not by old-timers like myself, but by young people looking around at crushing chaos and escalating pain and trying to find an effective path forward.

I write this seeing that because of their above views and many more besides young militants are the hope of the future. And because I want more than anything that they should have the room to pursue their own better world successfully.

But there is another dimension to address, because for all the many points that young radicals are rightly pursuing, one widely held stance many of them share is understandable but appears to me, as it did to the old SDSers, nonetheless ill-conceived.

And it isn’t that the young left are speaking from privilege because many aren’t in jail, or in detention camps, or looking up at drones, or starving...that is no more legitimate a criticism now than when my generation’s then elders, fifty years ago, threw such charges at us as we fought for civil rights and Black Power, for Women’s Liberation, for the Vietnamese, for the poor, dispossessed, shackled, and sickened in all lands. We old-timers should remember how we reacted hearing from older leftists - who did have insights worth hearing - that our form of militance was sometimes suicidal, that our analyses were sometimes misguided, that our anger and beliefs were sometimes the folly of immaturity? We wrote them off and didn’t look for the nuggets of wisdom they did indeed have to offer. And now, here we go again, except this time we are the old-timers undercutting our own chance to contribute usefully.

Here is the thing, young militants. I believe you are wrong about just one set of interrelated beliefs. And while in confused times like these that is a remarkably small debit, the problem is that that one set of interrelated beliefs matters a whole lot.

Trump winning in 2020 would not be less than a world historic disaster for all else you believe, feel, and think. Biden winning would be vastly better (albeit, of course, abysmally short of) all else you believe, feel, and think. Not voting or voting other than for Biden against Trump, at least in swing states, would not somehow strategically do more to uproot the two party system, to defend Democracy, to expand equity, to reverse racism, or to slay sexism, than would beating Trump while simultaneously working on all those and many other agendas as well. And finally, your choices in these regards do matter. Not only might the election hinge on fewer votes than you can swing, but

who is better informed to talk successfully with working class Trump voters from 2016?

You have acknowledged Sanders' intelligence, commitment, and courage. How comes it then that you so easily dismiss his choosing to keep fighting for his whole program, which is in large degree your current program, but also, and as part of that, to fight for Trump's defeat via Biden's election?

You believe in fundamental change. Me too. I have spent a lifetime trying to give it wings rooted in clarity. You passionately hate those who purvey business as usual over the bodies of countless corpses and uncountable diminished souls. Me too. "Hey hey LBJ?, how many kids did you kill today?"

You feel that supporting Biden against Trump is signing on to preserving the existing abominable system with, at most, some modest mitigating policies. And that feels to you like a direct route to being what you oppose. And I understand that feeling too. And to an extent, I think you are right. Slip sliding into being what we hate, or contributing to others doing so, is not only possible, it is oftentimes rather likely - unless we are very clear in our motives and actions.

But the good news is that the needed clarity is easily in everyone's reach. Why not advocate voting for Biden in swing states where doing so could matter to beating Trump, on the undeniable grounds that Trump winning again also involves a slip slide - into hellish days well beyond those already endured, if not worse still. Do it not based on Biden's non-existent merits but because Trump winning would accelerate the race to destroy the environment that sustains organized human life, maybe even reaching irreversible tipping points, with mounting and hideous catastrophes along the way primarily among the poor abroad and at home. Why not do it because Trump winning would increase the risk of terminal nuclear war, which is transparent, and because his winning would pack the judiciary with young ultra-right justices who, for at least a generation, would persevere to block any even mildly progressive legislation. And why not do it because Trump winning would mean further gutting the remaining structures of popular participation reducing democracy beneath even its current abysmal state. Of course this litany of reasons could go on, but let me just add why elderly passions are high, even as leftists who oppose supporting Biden and leftists who advocate supporting Biden in swing states agree on so much else.

As old as sixties SDSers are, we have elders too. And I hear them tell me how the Nazi plague engulfed Germany and ravaged the world in large part because the huge German Communist party refused to join with others to stop Hitler because they saw those others as "social fascists" and, they felt, Hitler wasn't really all that bad a guy. And so when I and others my age hear them say they came into the world seeing that mistake wreak havoc, and they now fear leaving the world seeing that same mistake wreak havoc again, it adds to my sense of urgency. Do we really want to risk that for our kids, for the planet, for humanity, because we see Biden as bad to the bone and feel Trump isn't really all that bad a guy?

So the SDS-ers' point is, it is indeed possible to urge voting for Biden, and to do so in swing states, and to simultaneously retain radical commitments, beliefs, and integrity because we want to prevent the obvious known ills of Trumpism, not to mention the extrapolated even greater ills of resurgent fascism. It is possible to do it and not become what we hate. And not only will our doing it not contribute to solidifying existing social relations and not contribute to entrenching existing obstacles to change, it will help prevent those two dynamics and prepare for fighting on. Isn't that what Sanders is doing? And if he can do it, can't his supporters, and even people to his left also do it - without an iota of compromise, without an iota of hypocrisy?

But yes, I know some who reject voting for Biden will have followed this line of reasoning to this point but then decided that Sanders is selling out. He seemed good, great even, but he has shown

himself a horrible shill for the mainstream power brokers.

I will admit I don't know how to address those of you taking that path. Those decrying Sanders, and no doubt jettisoning the views of Chomsky, Ehrenreich and so many folks we have previously appreciated and perhaps even learned from, indeed perhaps even learned the views that we now think require us to reject voting for Biden - for example that the two parties are two wings of one corporate party.

But we know that Sanders, Chomsky, Ehrenreich and other such advocates of Biden over Trump — hell, of the nearest lamppost over Trump, if need be — including the old SDSers, are not dumb. We know their position isn't due to their being unable to draw logical conclusions. But we also can't shake nor should we shake that we feel it is transparently obvious that Biden favors system maintenance. For sure, he does, but the question is, does that recognition mean we can legitimately conclude that anyone smart and informed who favors voting for Biden must also be for system maintenance? That anyone who says we can be radical, revolutionary, and true to our values and aspirations, and simultaneously so realize the necessity to beat Trump that we advocate voting Biden - must want system maintenance? That people wanting Biden to beat Trump and willing to help in that task must actually like Biden's beliefs and motives? That they must have sold out? Is it warranted for us to decide Sanders is a sellout, and so too for so many others?

Or, if we call those we disagree with our enemies rather than considering that they might be just as radical, just as revolutionary as they always were, and might differ from us because they see something we are missing, wouldn't that be doing that which we would ordinarily ridicule and decry — being leftists who accuse everyone who disagrees with us of being an enemy of change despite the fully visible contrary evidence of their words and deeds?

So if this debate has to happen — and I have seen it surging up online already — can we all, on every side, at the very least, agree to remove the personal denigrations, and agree to stick to the issues, so that the issues might be resolved and we might in the end agree on what is true and what is not true - on what is doable and what is not doable — and thus on where we can usefully act and where our actions, or lack thereof, may do irreparable harm even against our intentions.

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