

The Problem with Bernie Sanders



The upcoming presidential contest was shaping up to be one of the most underwhelming in electoral history. An heir to the Bush dynasty, real estate magnate Jeb, looked like the safest bet to become the Republican presidential nominee, and challenge the anointed frontrunner from the Democrats' leading dynasty, corporate drone Hilary Clinton.

Few people on the left or even among liberals could manage any excitement or conviction about getting "Ready for Hillary Clinton," the former Walmart board member, regardless of the populist veneer she is trying to put forward as her campaign gets underway.

Thus, for many, the decision of Vermont independent Sen. Bernie Sanders to challenge Clinton for the Democratic nomination offers an alternative. For example, *Jacobin* magazine's founding editor Bhaskar Sunkara argued, "Sanders' candidacy could strengthen the left in the long run. The tensions among Democrats are serious and raise the possibility for the realignment of progressive forces on a totally different basis."

Sunkara joined more than 50 activists, mainly from the Occupy Wall Street movement, in forming People for Sanders. Their founding statement says, "[W]e support Bernie Sanders in his bid to become the presidential nominee of the Democratic Party. We stand firmly behind Senator Sanders as the strongest progressive possibility in the race right now. His commitment

to our values is one of longstanding commitment. Sanders is the bold alternative."

But in running for the Democratic presidential nomination as the liberal outsider with almost no chance of winning, Sanders isn't very "bold"—no more so than the fizzled campaigns of Dennis Kucinich in past presidential election years. And by steering liberal and left supporters into a Democratic Party whose policies and politics he claims to disagree with, Sanders—no matter how critical he might be of Hillary Clinton—is acting as the opposite of an "alternative."

SANDERS HAS positioned himself as a hero of America's downtrodden workers. He doesn't run from the label "socialist," but instead embraces it in his condemnations of corporate greed. He even has a portrait of the great Socialist Party leader Eugene V. Debs hanging in his office.

Certainly Sanders will bring all sorts of issues to the Democratic primaries that Clinton would prefer to tiptoe around or avoid altogether. He has promised to call attention to inequality in the U.S., the corporate hijacking of American politics and the imminent crisis of climate change.

With refreshing bluntness, he told George Stephanopoulos on ABC News' *This Week*, "We need a political revolution in this country involving millions of people who are prepared to stand up and say "Enough is enough," and I want to help lead that effort."

But if Sanders really wanted to participate in mobilizing millions to resist the status quo in U.S. politics, he had other options to launching himself into the circus of a Democratic presidential campaign as the designated marginal renegade. And he rejected them.

For one, he could have set a very different example, with a

far greater chance of success, if he ran for governor in Vermont against the Democratic Party's incumbent Peter Shumlin, who has betrayed promises to implement a single-payer health care system, create green, union jobs and much more.

Faced with a budget crisis, Shumlin and the state's Democrats refused to raise taxes on the rich to fulfill their promises. Instead, they imposed cuts in social services, education, and environmental programs, and laid off scores of state workers. Shumlin even went so far as to call for the banning of teachers' right to strike.

Sanders is Vermont's most popular politician. With the backing of the Progressive Party, he could have run for governor as an independent and easily defeated both the Democratic and Republican nominees, and never faced the accusation of being a spoiler that is inevitably thrown at any third-party challenger.

A victory for a truly independent campaign by Sanders would have been even bigger than Kshama Sawant's election to the Seattle City Council as an open socialist. In so doing, Sanders could have built momentum for a national third party alternative to represent workers and the oppressed.

If Sanders had his heart set on national politics, he could have run for president like Ralph Nader as an independent, opposing both capitalist parties, the Democrats and Republicans. He would have been appealing for a protest vote, rather than any real chance to win, but Sanders rejected this possibility out of hand for a different reason. "No matter what I do," Sanders said in January, "I will not be a spoiler. I will not play that role in helping to elect some right-wing Republican as president of the United States."

In other words, Sanders refused to consider an independent presidential campaign not because he had little chance of winning, but because he didn't want to compete for vote with

the Democrats' eventual nominee. There's no reason to believe he will be a "bold alternative" at the end of his doomed campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination.

In jumping into the Democratic Party primaries, Sanders appointed a quintessential corporate party insider, Ted Devine, to be his campaign manager. Devine has worked for a series of Democratic presidential campaigns, stretching back to Walter Mondale and running through to John Kerry.

THE DEMOCRATIC establishment can breathe a collective sigh of relief. It doesn't, in fact, fear liberal Democrats like Kucinich or Sanders, but third-party challenges like Nader's that have the prospect of breaking their stranglehold on votes from workers and the oppressed, as several local and statewide campaigns have shown over the last few years.

Hillary Clinton certainly doesn't regard Sanders as a threat. She knows that the election business follows the golden rule: Whoever has more gold, wins. Clinton is expected to amass a war chest of more than \$1 billion, mostly from Wall Street and Corporate America, to pay for advertising, an army of paid staff and Astroturf support. This will overwhelm Sanders' fundraising goal of \$50 million and his underdeveloped volunteer infrastructure.

In fact, Clinton regards Sanders as an asset to her campaign. He will bring enthusiasm and attention to Democratic primaries that promised to be lackluster at best. He will also help her frame the election on populist terms that have widespread support. That benefits the Democrats and undermines the Republicans, who have little to say about inequality, except that they like it.

As liberal writer Paul Waldman wrote in the *Washington Post*:

Bernie Sanders isn't going to pull her to the left because she

was already moving that way. She's talking about issues like inequality and criminal justice reform in terms that she might not have used 10 or 20 years ago...Talking about them in more liberal terms isn't just good for her in the primaries, it's good for her in the general elections.

No wonder Clinton celebrated Sander's entry into the race. "I agree with Bernie," she wrote on Twitter. "Focus must be on helping America's middle class. GOP would hold them back. I welcome him to the race."

You can expect that Clinton will agree with Sanders during the campaign, rearticulating some of his themes in a "more realistic" fashion and occasionally chiding him for taking things too far. Sanders can be counted on to concentrate most of his fire on the Republicans, the Koch brothers and their reactionary positions, as he has been doing for years.

Sanders admitted the truth in what was perhaps a Freudian slip: "If I decide to run, I'm not running against Hillary Clinton. I'm running for a declining middle class."

At this stage, Clinton is the overwhelming favorite to emerge as the Democratic nominee. If she stumbles in some irreversible way, the corporate establishment that controls the Democratic Party will come up with another more mainstream candidate, like Obama in 2008. Either way, the eventual Democratic presidential nominee will toe the capitalist line.

However much he disagrees with that candidate, Sanders will agitate for trade unionists and social movement activists to vote for the lesser of two evils. The result is that he will help corral people on the left from taking any steps toward building a genuine alternative to the two-party status quo.

Thus, Sanders will follow the well-trodden path of other liberals like Kucinich. In the 2004 Democratic primaries, Kucinich excoriated Kerry and other candidates for voting for George W. Bush's wars, implementing neoliberal trade

agreements like NAFTA, and supporting the racist death penalty.

But Kucinich was very conscious of keeping the left and liberals from building a third party. At one point during the campaign, he said: "The Democratic Party created third parties by running to the middle. What I'm trying to do is to go back to the big tent so that everyone who felt alienated could come back through my candidacy."

Kucinich thus became the bait on the hook for the Democrats to catch their liberal base. After he lost the primaries, he called on his supporters to support the very candidate he had roundly criticized.

Sanders' campaign will serve the same function. He is *already* serving that function by luring people on the left, like the Occupy activists who launched People for Bernie, into a Democratic Party campaign when they might have concentrated their energies on politics outside the Democrats.

This is especially ironic when you remember that the Occupy Wall Street encampments were attacked and cleared on orders from Democratic Party mayors—many of them known for being liberals—from Boston to Chicago to Portland to Oakland.

SANDERS' DECISION to jump into Democratic Party presidential politics represents a decisive break from the man he calls his hero: Eugene V. Debs. Debs spent his whole life building the Socialist Party as an alternative to the two capitalist parties. Year in and year out, he insisted that "[t]he differences between the Republican and Democratic Parties involve no issue, no principle in which the working class have any interest."

Debs understood that his call for working class people to break with the two capitalist parties meant supporting a

political alternative that might not win—but he believed this was a necessary challenge to a two-party system that offered nothing to workers. "I'd rather vote for something I want and not get it," Debs once wrote, "than vote for something I don't want and get it."

Sanders' retreat is based on a liberal strategy of attempting to transform the Democratic Party from within that has failed for generations. Instead of shifting the Democrats to the left, the leftists who join the Democrats get dragged to the right. Sanders himself is, in many ways, a prime example of this process.

Back in the 1980s, as mayor of Burlington—the largest city in Vermont, known back then as "the People's Republic"—Sanders did genuinely challenge the two-party system. He went so far as to build solidarity with the left-wing Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua at a time when Republicans and Democrats were supporting the Reagan administration's dirty wars in Central America.

In the 1990s, however, Sanders set his sites on higher office—not by building an alternative party, but by running as an independent who maintained a collaborative relationship with the Democrats.

Once ensconced in Washington as a member of the House and Senate, he abandoned his principled opposition to the two-party system. As Vermont Democrat Howard Dean—a former candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination himself—stated, "He is basically a liberal Democrat, and he is a Democrat at that—he runs as an Independent because he doesn't like the structure and money that gets involved...The bottom line is that Bernie Sanders votes with the Democrats 98 percent of the time."

Since he made his arrangement with the Democrats, Sanders has uncritically supported them in Vermont elections. As a result,

when his ally, Gov. Peter Shumlin, declared war on state workers, Sanders didn't even issue a statement in opposition. His silence led many in Vermont to ask: "Where's Bernie?"

Nationally, Sanders supported Barack Obama in both of the last two elections, despite the president's betrayal of his progressive promises and his record of continuity with many Bush policies, from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to the bailout of Wall Street.

And the Democrats have rewarded Sanders. They instructed their Vermont candidates not to oppose him and sent corporate lackeys like Sens. Charles Schumer and Barbara Boxer to campaign for him. Even worse, Sanders accepted a \$10,000 donation from Hillary Clinton's Hillpac back in 2006, during his first run for Senate.

Sanders, the supposed independent, was a bitter opponent of third-party challenges Ralph Nader's campaigns against Al Gore and John Kerry. In 2004, he announced, "Not only am I going to vote for John Kerry, I am going to run around this country and do everything I can to dissuade people from voting for Ralph Nader...I am going to do everything I can, while I have differences with John Kerry, to make sure that he is elected."

WITH HIS slide into becoming a Democrat in everything but name, Sanders became less and less radical on a host of issues, including cherished ones like class inequality. For example, Sanders rightly denounces the minimum wage as a "starvation wage," but he doesn't support the low-wage workers' movement demand for \$15 now. Instead, he proposes a more "realistic" increase to \$15 "over a period of years, not tomorrow."

Sanders has similarly moderate positions on many social issues. While he boasts a good voting record on the rights of oppressed groups, it doesn't stand out among most other

liberal Democrats.

In fact, on the decisive issue today of racist police brutality, Hillary Clinton is actually posturing to Sanders' left. She has raised questions about the drug war and ending mass incarceration—though, of course, largely to cover her complicity with Bill Clinton's vast expansion of both. By contrast, in a recent CNN interview, Sanders, after expressing sympathy for cops' supposedly "difficult job," managed to call only for jobs and community policing.

His foreign policy positions are to the right of many liberal Democrats. Sanders voted in favor of George W. Bush's original Authorization for Use of Military Force resolution that gave the administration a green light to launch the war on Afghanistan. While he did vote against Bush's invasion of Iraq, he repeatedly supported funding resolutions for both U.S. occupations. He is also a Zionist who supports Israel consistently, even after its recent escalations of the slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza.

Sanders' backing of U.S. imperialism compromises his support for workers' rights. For example, Sanders supports the basing of the new F-35 warplane at Burlington's airport, despite the fact that the fighter-bomber's ear-shattering noise made scores of working class housing unsafe for habitation.

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LIKE MANY leftists before him, the Democratic Party has co-opted and changed Bernie Sanders, using him to help hinder the development of a genuine alternative to the capitalist parties.

His campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination will be, at best, a re-run of Jesse Jackson's primary runs in 1984 and 1988. Jackson's campaigns galvanized an entire section of the left, channeled it toward the Democratic Party and directed its remnants to vote for a succession of

corporate candidates like Walter Mondale and Michael Dukakis.

Based on his experience as Dennis Kucinich's former press secretary, David Swanson has drawn the conclusion that the left should not support Sanders. "The best place to put our resources is into uncorrupted, principle, policy-driven, nonviolent, creative activism—including activism needed to create fair, open, verifiable elections," Swanson wrote.

He's right. As the great socialist historian Howard Zinn argued, "The really critical thing isn't who is sitting in the White House, but who is *sitting in*—in the streets, in the cafeterias, in the halls of government, in the factories. Who is protesting, who is occupying offices and demonstrating—those are the things that determine what happens."

The recent uprising in Baltimore proves this. Without that revolt, the Baltimore state's attorney would never have charged the six cops who killed Freddie Gray. Without more struggle, they will certainly not be convicted.

At the same time, the left shouldn't abandon the electoral arena to the two capitalist parties. If we do, we create a vacuum that the Democrats will fill, co-opting movement activists, demobilizing unions and social movements, and redirecting their precious time, money and energy into electing candidates who then betray workers and the oppressed.

We need to win the new left born out of Occupy, public-sector union struggles and the Black Lives Matter movement to breaking with the Democratic Party and building an electoral alternative as a complement to struggle from below. Bernie Sanders' campaign inside the Democratic Party is an obstacle to that project.

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