

After Bernie—Party Time?



Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign has rocketed across the political landscape in this most abnormal of election seasons—an independent, self-defined democratic socialist running in the Democratic primary contest. Widely expected to fizzle out early, Sanders' campaign instead gathered momentum as the primaries progressed, revealing the gulf that separates the Democrats' corporate-driven apparatus from much of its angry working-class and youthful voting base.

Despite the mass excitement Sanders generated, and the scare he threw into the party machinery, there was never a chance that he would be allowed to get the nomination. The party elites were 99 percent convinced, after all, that he could not win the November general election—and 1 percent utterly terrified that he just might. (At this writing, in any case, with the last round of primaries ahead in May and early June, it appears that Hillary Clinton's delegate lead is large enough that the nomination won't need to be "stolen" from Sanders by means of the unelected party superdelegates.)

The significance of the Sanders movement, however, vastly transcends this particular election. For one thing, the working-class anger that he (and Donald Trump, from a reactionary, economic-nationalist direction) tapped may have killed the corporate coup known as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, although the movement must be wary of a treacherous postelection, lame-duck Congress. But well beyond that important struggle, breaking through the fundamental contradiction between the potential of Sanders' movement and the political structure within which it's currently ensnared could set the course of U.S. politics for a generation.

If capital generally prefers the Republican Party, *it equally needs the Democratic Party* and absolutely will not allow it to

become the vehicle for anything resembling “democratic socialism,” let alone the incubator of revived militant labor or social movements.

Bernie Sanders from the outset ruled out the option of an independent candidacy, and he can be expected ultimately to join the “party unity” chorus for defeating the right-wing menace. That menace is real, but the tragic truth is that the Democrats’ “unity” means channeling the “political revolution” into the cynical triangulation that shoves immigrants’ rights, the needs of working people, Black Lives Matter—and everything else that matters, too—to the back of the Clinton campaign bus, in exchange for some meaningless convention platform verbiage and empty promises.

That poses the question that thousands of activists for Sanders, and leading organizers of the impressive Labor for Bernie initiative (www.laborforbernie.org), are grappling with: how to keep the movement and its momentum alive, not just through November but beyond, as a sustained, powerful political force?

The Sanders campaign itself, of course, is not reproducible in its 2016 form. Bernie Sanders is a unique individual who’s campaigned, governed, and legislated for decades in and from an atypical and largely rural state. He will not make repeated presidential runs, and there isn’t some other prominent, long-standing, independent socialist politician to whom that torch can be passed. The question is not whether to replicate this singular fortuitous circumstance, but how to build upon it.

In this regard the collection of essays in *Empowering Third Parties*, compiled by Jonathan H. Martin, could hardly be more timely. The book doesn’t pretend to offer “the answer.” The chapters from a spectrum of contributors, some complementary and others frankly in conflict with each other, offer a range of perspectives and strategic arguments. This book is not about Sanders’ 2016 campaign itself, although there are

references to it; rather, the book's importance lies in raising and discussing the very issues that Sanders' supporters will be tackling.

Within the Sanders movement, it's entirely predictable that some forces will argue for a long-term project of taking over the Democratic Party while others will motivate the need for a sharp break and the creation of a new party independent of capital, and many will look for a strategy that combines components of work both "inside" and "outside" the Democratic machinery. Those views are all represented here, but the discussion is much richer than merely an ideological exchange, getting into the guts of what independent politics actually look like at the grassroots level.

How does electoral action really succeed? What kind of candidates, issues, and organizing tactics can make it work? What's the timeline for creating something that lasts? Does the starting point need to be at the national level of forging a new party, or in local campaigns and working upward? Where and how can the crucial social forces of labor, the African American community, and other communities of color become engines of independent politics rather than bulwarks of the Democratic establishment as they've tended to be (although not exclusively so) in the 2016 primaries?

Here I'll summarize the main arguments that emerge from these diverse contributions. The editor, Jonathan H. Martin, a professor of sociology at Framingham State University, introduces himself as an activist with "an interest in left-leaning politics my whole life, galvanized in large part by my parents' involvement in the progressive social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s." The variety of initiatives that he labels the "progressive third-party movement" is an attempt "to challenge, impact, and defeat a party system in which the Republicans and Democrats are so dominant that together they comprise what is sometimes called a 'duopoly.'" (xi)

In short, this collection makes no pretense of “neutrality” toward the U.S. two-party system. Martin’s agenda is not to celebrate the system, but to contribute to breaking it. His own view, laid out in Chapter 5, “Community Connections,” emphasizes the central importance of progressive third-party candidates’ “community connectedness” to their districts.

This, Martin’s research on Green Party and Vermont Progressive Party campaigns reveals, is a better predictor for winning candidacies than their formal programs, money, campaign organization, and other factors. He concludes that a struggle for government by and for the people “cannot succeed unless it is joined by candidates who are widely perceived to be ‘of the people.’” (109)

The point is borne out, for example, in the chapter “Lessons of the Vermont Progressive Party” by longtime Bernie Sanders ally and organizer Terry Bouricius. Charting the long march of the VPP and Sanders in particular, as he ran for Burlington mayor, U.S. Congress, and Senate before launching the current presidential primary run, Bouricius talks about confronting the “spoiler dynamic” in U.S. politics, where a progressive candidate may be labeled as the cause of a right-wing victory.

Bouricius arrives at some rather sharply worded conclusions that it’s a “fool’s errand” to saturate voters with policy details. “Thinking of voting as an act of group solidarity on behalf of one’s team, class, or political party is more fruitful. ... For example, ordinary Vermonters of seemingly different political stripes often say that the reason they come out to vote for Bernie Sanders is simply because he represents the ‘common person.’” (80)

Much of the interest to be found in particular experiences lies in the richness and nuance of local conditions, which are impossible to properly summarize here (as for example in Patrick Quinlan’s “The Rise of the Portland [Maine] Greens”).

The contributions, however, can be broadly identified by where they stand on the necessity of clearly *independent* political action.

Ramy Khalil, of Socialist Alternative and campaign manager for Kshama Sawant, leads off with "How a Socialist Won," recounting Sawant's election to Seattle City Council in 2013. The factors that went into the victory included Sawant's impressive performance as a candidate, the complacency of the longtime Democratic incumbent, the strategic role of Socialist Alternative, the support of a liberal local weekly newspaper, and the presence of a vibrant Fight for \$15 movement in the city. (Subsequently, Sawant also won a hard-fought re-election in 2015.)

If Socialist Alternative is far from shy about promoting its own importance in Seattle, the story of Richmond, California, is one of a successful broad coalition organizing against corporate power. "A Green Becomes Mayor," by Green Party organizer and former Santa Monica Mayor Mike Feinstein, discusses the 2006 election of Gayle McLaughlin in the face of massively funded resistance from Chevron Oil and its corporate allies. A cofounder of the Richmond Progressive Alliance (which currently holds a majority on city council, including McLaughlin following her two mayoral terms), McLaughlin through her activist record in Richmond since 1998 also illustrates the value of the "community connectedness" stressed by Jonathan Martin.

Theresa Amato, national campaign manager for Ralph Nader's 2000 and 2004 presidential runs, passionately argues the need to go "Beyond the 'Spoiler' Myth." Amato insists, "The tendency to denigrate and dismiss third-party candidates as spoilers is part of a larger pattern of anti-democratic, institutionalized discrimination against them and against ordinary voters and disenfranchised nonvoters." In fact, "our flawed electoral process allows for that possible 'spoiler' outcome, and it is a price we pay for open competition until

we fix the electoral system.” (117)

In fact, Amato points to a number of positive after-effects of Nader’s candidacy, suggesting that it helped draw attention to the obscene dominance of corporate campaign cash and partly inspired the Occupy movement and the Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden revelations of U.S. war crimes and the surveillance state.

Readers of *New Politics* may be already familiar with Thomas Harrison’s 2012 online piece “The Left Should Declare Its Independence from the Democrats,” adapted here as “Breaking Through by Breaking Free,” the most detailed presentation in the book calling for something new. Harrison envisions “a movement-type party filled with activists and democratically controlled by its membership,” which “should campaign systematically for its views through demonstrations, literature, speakers’ bureaus, and forums of all kinds—not just campaigns for elective office.” (226)

Such a party’s purpose would be “solely to fight for the interests of working people (including women, minorities, and LGBT people,” and it would be controlled by them. (230)

Obviously it’s necessary to critically scrutinize recent efforts to bring such a party into being, with results that have been mixed at best. Sayeed Iftekar Ahmed, in “The U.S. Greens in Presidential Elections,” points to the miniscule Green showings apart from Nader’s 2.74 percent in 2000, along with the chicken-and-egg problem of how to attract more prominent candidates and build more credible organizational infrastructure and funding capacity. He proposes that “If the Greens can build a somewhat more candidate-centered party, they may be better able to recruit more viable candidates, raise more money, and strengthen their grassroots organization.” (159)

The question of how a “more candidate-centered party” keeps

its candidates loyal and accountable to the party's core principles—which Ahmed also suggests might need to be adapted for a broader public—is left somewhat hanging.

There is, of course, the massive problem of where a new party's institutional support and funding base would come from. The labor movement, even in its weakened condition, would appear to be a prime possibility. Two relevant chapters explore this potential and its contradictions.

In “Labor Party Time? Not Yet,” Mark Dudzic and Katherine Isaac, veterans of the Labor Party (1996-2007) experience, take a close look at the party's inability to forge “a strategy to extract the labor movement from the tentacles of the two-party electoral process. An organizing dynamic took hold in which enthusiasm for developing an alternative to the Democrats peaked in the off-cycle election years and diminished as unions mobilized for yet another round of elections.” (176)

This conundrum must be only more acute today, with private-sector unionism further shrunk and with public-sector unions, heavily dependent on state funding of services under conditions of crisis-ridden state budgets and viciously reactionary legislatures, desperately struggling to keep the far right from taking over everything.

Nonetheless, drawing on what was accomplished during the party's life span, Dudzic and Isaac assert, “While this is not the time to dust off the Labor Party, it certainly is the time for working-class activists to begin the discussion of what it would take to build an independent, class-based political party.” (179)

By way of counterpoint, music theorist and Green Party member John Halle in “Don't Wait for Labor: The Necessity of Building a Left Third Party at the Grassroots,” argues that the Labor Party failed to take local electoral initiatives, some of

which could have been in coalition with the Green Party, and thereby rendered itself pretty much irrelevant. Halle draws partly on his experience in New Haven and on the example of a local labor electoral initiative in Lorain, Ohio, which showed promise. At the same time, he cites the rather ultra-left conclusion of historian Eric Chester's *True Mission* that the concept of a national labor party has always been a ploy to keep labor ensnared and subordinate to the Democrats, so it's not quite clear where this argument leads.

In a brief and somewhat perfunctory contribution, Daniel Cantor of the Working Families Party presents that organization's "fusion" strategy, which generally means running Democratic candidates on the WFP party line to "pull Democrats in a progressive direction." (205) This included supporting the distinctly non-progressive Governor Andrew Cuomo in 2010 and again in the 2014 primary against challenger Zephyr Teachout. (In 2016 the WFP has endorsed Bernie Sanders, triggering a withdrawal of funds from some of its union backers.)

In an acid comment on the WFP, Thomas Harrison points out that in the 2010 election,

a genuine progressive, Howie Hawkins, got 59,906 [votes] as a Green candidate. ... The WFP did not offer him its support, thereby demonstrating its automatic commitment to the Democrats. This commitment was again shamefully apparent in 2013 when the WFP sent in operatives to help defeat Hawkins, this time running a strong Green campaign for the Syracuse city council against a pro-developer Democratic incumbent. (214-215)

We're ultimately left with questions and conversations, not solutions. Interested observers, and above all activists in the Bernie Sanders movement, Black Lives Matter, Fight for \$15, and the immigrant rights struggle, will find plenty of thought-provoking material to ponder here.

Everyone will find parts that resonate with their experience, and also much to disagree with—which in the present state of flux in U.S. politics, and in our movements, can actually be a very good thing. After all, the Occupy movement, the Dreamers, and Black Lives Matter did not arise from a blueprint but from life. Quite possibly these movements will arrive at some creative flashes that aren't anticipated yet.