

The Sanders Campaign and the Democratic “Party”

May 27, 2015



I appreciate the nonsectarian tone of the piece on Bernie Sanders’ presidential campaign by my longtime fellow *New Politics* editorial board member and friend Barry Finger. I think he has a better, more sophisticated understanding of the peculiarities of the Democratic Party (DP) and the U.S. electoral system than do many on the radical left that refuse to support any DP candidate regardless of that candidate’s personal political platform. However, I think that Barry still suffers from certain misunderstandings regarding just how different the big two U.S. political parties are from political parties that exist anywhere else in the world, and this means there are defects in his suggestions as to how left-wing socialists should relate to the Sanders campaign.

Barry writes:

“The totality with which socialists have traditionally viewed the Democratic Party has been this. The agenda of the Democratic Party is determined by its corporate financiers. It is they who keep the party competitive, who write and prioritize legislation and it is they who provide lucrative post-electoral revolving door employment opportunities for faithful party standard bearers. The two parties provide a full spectrum career subculture, designed to incentivize, entice and indoctrinate candidates and office holders to ruling class perspectives. Its base, organized as voting blocks, has no membership privileges.

“Indeed, the two parties are not private, voluntary organizations sustained by membership fees, but political utilities of the ruling class, which, like other public utilities, are internally regulated by the state and protected from outside competition by upstart third parties through a dense network of legal encumbrances to market entry. Because the DP is sustained and disciplined by the mobilization of outside capitalist wealth, the voting blocs aligned to the Democrats cannot compete for influence on this terrain. Their power is limited primarily to the threat of abstention from electoral participation.”

Much of this is true. Regardless of their origins, today the Democrats and Republicans aren’t real, “European-style” political parties, and haven’t been for decades. The political machines with their party bosses that used to control who could run for office on which party label are overwhelmingly a thing of the past. They are state-run ballot lines, whose “membership” consists of registered voters rather than dues-payers. It is the state, not the party, which controls who can register as a Democrat or a Republican (or any other party, including the Green Party).

Barry seems to understand this. But his analysis goes awry when he says that the *entire* DP is “sustained and disciplined by the mobilization of outside capitalist wealth.” Were this true, it’s unlikely that Bernie Sanders—with his radical platform and his promise to take no money from “the

billionaire class"—would be able to run for president in the Democratic primary in the first place. Barry seems to think that every single elected Democrat is taking cash from "outside capitalist wealth." But this is not the case. What corporate Political Action Committee would be fool enough to provide campaign funds to John Conyers, to Keith Ellison, to Barbara Lee? Obviously most elected Democrats represent the ruling class. But some do not — precisely because the DP, like the Republican Party (RP), is now a state-run ballot line rather than a real political party. (This change in the structure of the DP and RP didn't happen all at once but its evolution has been steady at least since the 1930s.)

Barry seems to recognize that parties which can't control who is "in" the party or who runs on the party ballot line aren't real parties. But he doesn't draw what to me is the obvious conclusion: when genuine left-liberals or radical leftists win office on the DP ballot line, the DP is *not* simply a "political utility of the ruling class." It *would be* if the neoliberal, bourgeois leadership of the DP could impose parliamentary discipline on the leftmost elected Democrats, but there really is very little that they can do. In fact, it's impossible to get thrown out of the DP or RP once one is elected on those lines. At most, one can get kicked off of Congressional committees for disloyalty. (People can get kicked out of DP or RP clubs — but as those have no real power over what the elected officials do, they don't really count.)

So contrary to what Barry and others might think, the DP *can't* always and everywhere be a "company union" party — because it's not a party. There are, if you will, Democrats who represent the ruling class and Democrats who (imperfectly — they're very rarely revolutionaries) represent the working class. I see nothing class-collaborationist in opposing the former and (critically) supporting the latter. Yes, ruling class politicians *usually* win Democratic primaries simply because they raise more campaign funds, have name recognition, and are incumbents, etc. — but not always. (Only the DP fundraising committees are pure shells for corporate America — but left-liberals and leftists running as Democrats aren't *required* to take any money from those committees.)

It's an unfortunate fact that class-struggle politics in the electoral arena has become far more complex in the United States than it is anywhere else in the world. I agree with most American socialists that a labor party based on the unions should've been formed at least by 1948, when 35% of the U.S. workforce was unionized, and the United Auto Workers in particular was a real power in the country. But Walter Reuther didn't do what he should've done, and today we are where we are. With organized labor at its lowest ebb ever, it's hard to believe that a mass independent workers' party — which would require union support — is forthcoming in the near future. I genuinely wish it was otherwise.

So, given our extremely restrictive electoral system as well as the state-run-ballot-line status of our "parties," and given that the electoral realignment of the 1930s has still not yet been totally overturned, when leftists run for office, they're often (not always) going to have to do so as dissident, disloyal Democrats in partisan elections — at least if they intend to *win* the offices they're running for. Barring massive changes in campaign finance laws, at the very least, there will never be enough such Democrats to realize Michael Harrington's old dream of turning the whole Democratic Party into a Social Democratic Party — but it doesn't follow that running for office as a Democrat necessarily turns one into a lackey of the ruling class.

Contrary to the "Bernie Sanders as sheepdog for Hillary Clinton" argument, there's hardly anyone at all to "sheepdog" — no quasi-mass movement for a left-wing third party. If there was, my judgement of Sanders running in a Democratic primary would be quite different. Barry seems to agree with me. And I very much like his invoking of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) in 1964. I certainly would have been on the side of Fannie Lou Hamer and her comrades against Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Bayard Rustin, et al. But it's important to note that Hamer never

stopped being a registered Democrat - even as she never compromised her radicalism, particularly her militant opposition to the Vietnam War - and the MFDP did succeed, by 1968, in replacing the segregationist "regular" Mississippi Democratic Party. So an "MFDP moment," should it happen, might not end up being what Barry thinks it would be.

Of course, one must acknowledge that Ted Kennedy in 1980, Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988, Dennis Kucinich in 2004, John Edwards in 2008 - all of them ended up endorsing the corporate-funded victor in their respective Democratic presidential primaries. And they *should not have done so*. But it's important to realize that they *weren't required by party laws to do so in the first place*. Most have forgotten this, but Jerry Brown did *not* endorse Bill Clinton in 1992. More recently, look at Ron Paul. He very openly *didn't* support John McCain in 2008 or Mitt Romney in 2012; he supported minor right-wing party presidential candidates. And yet he remained an elected Republican. Look at the Seattle Democratic officials that have endorsed Kshama Sawant's re-election campaign. Such a thing is simply not possible anywhere else in the world - try to imagine Canadian Liberals endorsing New Democratic Party candidates for office! - and it further proves that our "parties" aren't real parties because they lack party discipline.

Sanders has already said he would endorse Hillary Clinton if he loses to her in the 2016 Democratic presidential primary. But Sanders, as explained above, isn't *required* to do this. Contrary to what Barry believes, there are no "Democratic Party rules that prohibit him in advance from harming the DP." So, socialists should pressure Sanders to "pull a Ron Paul" - at the very least he should *not* encourage his voters to support Clinton - and if he refuses, we socialists should criticize him. But the only way we can effectively apply such pressure is if we are active in his presidential campaign. Pressure from the outside, I suspect, simply won't work. By all means, let's relentlessly attack Hillary Clinton and her ilk who dominate the DP. One can do this just as easily as a registered Democrat rather than a registered Green or independent. No one can silence you, just like Fannie Lou Hamer couldn't be silenced. (By the way, I've voted for more Greens than Democrats over the past several years - despite being a registered Democrat - but I can't claim that my votes have been, in practice, anything more than protest votes, given that the Greens never win in New York City.)

Yes, we must, as Barry says, "hold Sanders' feet to the flames if he wavers or weakens his stance against the Party establishment." But to do this *effectively* we have to *actively support him*, not abstain from his campaign. Both the "critical" and "support" in "critical support" are very important in this case should Sanders begin to capitulate under the pressure of the ruling class. It's also the only way to get those already involved in Sanders' campaign-most of whom know nothing of Marxism or the organized socialist left- to take us seriously. Criticism - even constructive criticism - of "the DP orientation" is likely to fall on deaf ears if we aren't working with such people to get Sanders elected, however distant a prospect that may seem.

Barry argues that "If the Sanders campaign is competently run, Hillary Clinton and the DP establishment will be confronting an incipient rank-and-file mutiny demanding the complete overhaul and repudiation of what the party currently stands for. An increasingly politically conscious grassroots movement motivated by a militant and credible anti-austerity message heralds the development in the foreseeable future of 'split' situation in the Democratic Party when these demands are blocked, watered down, frustrated or compromised with, as they invariably must."

I hope this split occurs - as I said earlier, I am skeptical. But if it's in fact possible, we need to be *in* the Sanders campaign to help make it happen - and, as our friend and lifetime class-warrior-unionist Steve Early has said, we need to get the unions to support Sanders and not Clinton (either in the primary or the general election - Clinton is not even a lesser evil!). And we'll need the leftmost elected Democrats - the ones who support social-democratic reform and don't take corporate cash - to "jump ship" to this potential new party - which means critically supporting them as well. (I see

this as no worse than voting for the reformist workers' party wing of a popular front - which revolutionaries certainly did in the past - and the DP today is more like a popular front unto itself than a genuine political party.)

Yes, this is all very messy stuff, and I wish we Marxists could simply stand outside Democratic Party politics entirely and convince the toiling masses to "break with the elephant, break with the ass, build a party of the working class." But decades of revolutionary socialists doing precisely this has been no more successful than the attempt in the 1970s by the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee - predecessor of today's Democratic Socialists of America (yes, I'm a member) - to realign the whole of the DP into a social democratic party. The Sanders campaign represents the best opportunity to build a much larger socialist movement - and, yes, possibly a split from the DP which results in an independent leftist party - that I've seen in my lifetime. But being a sympathetic outside critic does not strike me as a viable way to make that movement, or party, a reality. Yes, most elected Democrats are ruling class politicians; yes, the DP was once *the* party (a real party) of white supremacy in the U.S.; hence any involvement in DP primaries involves "dirty hands" to some extent. But, to paraphrase a French philosopher, "it is easy to have clean hands if you have no hands." Better dirty hands than no hands.

**Jason Schulman is Adjunct Assistant Professor of Political Science at Lehman College, CUNY and Senior Lecturer at St. Francis College. He is on the editorial board of New Politics and his articles have appeared in Jacobin, Logos, Democratic Left, and New Political Science. He edited Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and is the author of Neoliberal Labour Governments and the Union Response: The Politics of the End of Labourism (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).*

Image: (Image: flickr / cc / DonkeyHotey)