Sanders for President: a Political Phenomenon that Challenges all Preconceptions

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Last night more than 100,000 people attended 3,500 meetings in all 50 states and the District of Columbia to watch a video-cast of Bernie Sanders and to begin to organize his on-the-ground campaign. Some of the meetings in various parts of the country had as many as 200 people in attendance. The meeting I attended in Crown Heights, Brooklyn was attended by 25 people, most in their 20s, with background working for social justice NGOs, in media, and in the arts, as well as a few graduate students.

These are young idealist people who are attracted to Sanders because he calls for a "political revolution" against the billionaires, and because they believe in public health care for all, free higher education, and improving the lives of working people. By and large, those in attendance had no interest in the Democratic Party and a few suggested it would have been better had Sanders run as an independent. The organizer of the meeting suggested that we could build a mass movement and take-over the Democratic Party, but nobody in the meeting seemed particularly to think that possible or to care.

What has become clear from the Sanders' rallies and meeting is that no one is supporting Sanders because he's the "lesser evil." After all, that's Hillary Clinton. People back Sanders as a protest against economic inequality and against the power of money in politics. Sanders is the Occupy Movement's political expression. Not so much a Democratic Party candidate as the voice of the underdogs.

A Marginal Candidate

When in late April Bernie Sanders, the independent Senator from Vermont who had long called himself a socialist, announced that he would run for president in the Democratic Party primary no one had any idea what the response would be. After all, Sanders is Senator from the small state of Vermont with a population of just 625,000 (only Wyoming has fewer inhabitants), a state which is virtually all white (95.2%), and whose largest city of Burlington (of which Sanders had been mayor) is only a small town with a population of 44,000.

Sanders name was well known only in his own state and in neighboring New Hampshire. If he had any national reputation, it was chiefly because he was a strange bird: the only independent in

Congress and the only national public official who called himself a socialist. Only progressives knew him for his pro-labor voting record. What would happen if such a marginal figure ran for president?

Huge Spirited Crowds

The response to Sanders candidacy has been nothing short of phenomenal. After rallies of hundreds or a few thousand in his home state, Sanders hit the road. In the historically liberal city of Madison, Wisconsin on July 1 some 10,000 people turned out to hear Sanders decry the billionaires and call for greater economic equality. Perhaps that was to be expected in a city where 100,000 had occupied the state capitol building to oppose Republican Scott Walker's anti-union legislation back in 2011. After all, Sanders was speaking there to Democrats, union members, and University of Wisconsin professors and students. And the Sanders rally of about 8,000 in Portland, Maine could be attributed to local support for a New England candidate.

Would Sanders be able to rally support in Republican red states of middle America as well? Well that question was answered on July 18 Sanders attracted a crowd of 11,000 in Phoenix, Arizona and then again on July 19 when 8,000 people showed up for a rally in Dallas, Texas. The groundswell continued on July 26 when 4,000 turned out in the smaller city of New Orleans, Louisiana. Everywhere the Sanders' crowds have been exuberant By comparison, Hillary Clinton's largest rally so far attracted 5,500 people to park in New York in June.

Why have such phenomenal crowds appeared to hear a man who appeared to be such a marginal candidate? There are several reasons. First, many agree with Sanders fundamental message, that banks and corporations have taken over the political system and made it serve their interests. These people are supporting Sanders as a protest against the corporate agenda of both the Republican and the Democratic parties.

When Sanders typically asks his audiences, "Why are we living in a society in which for the last 40 years the middle class in this country has been disappearing and almost all of the wealth and income are going to the people on top?" They nod yes, thinking themselves, "Why are we?" The answer he suggests is the corporate dominance of America and the beating down of the labor movement and the living standards of working people.

Second, many Democrats deeply resent the idea that almost automatically Hillary Clinton would become the party's candidate without any political alternatives being presented. Progressives in the Democratic Party wanted not another neoliberal Democrat, but someone who raised their issues of jobs, wages, health care, and education. When Senator Elizabeth Warren declined to run, Sanders stepped in and became the champion of all those to the left of Clinton.

Labor for Bernie

Since then, not only has he drawn large crowds, but he has also done surprisingly well in other ways. While not as popular in the polls as Hillary Clinton, he has good approval ratings compared to other candidates in both major parties, and they are rising. He also has a strong rank-and-file labor following, Labor for Bernie, with some 5,000 rank-and-file members and local leaders supporting him as well as the small Vermont and South Carolina AFL-CIO councils.

Larry Cohen, past president of the Communications Workers of America and now a volunteer working on the Sanders' campaign says, "Our strong and growing grassroots movement shows that Bernie shares our values and beliefs. Workers are fed up with business as usual. This campaign is about putting a stop to the corporate assault on our kids, our country and working families!"

When the leaders of the American Federation of Teachers—whose president Randi Weingarten

hopes to become Secretary of Education—endorsed Clinton without holding local meetings to consult the members, hundreds of angry teachers rebelled and signed up with Labor for Bernie. There has been such a reaction that the AFL-CIO leadership has decided to postpone its endorsement, which will give Sanders an opportunity to seek greater labor backing.

In terms of fundraising, Bernie is not nearly as strong as his opponents, but the favored candidates' campaigns and Sanders' are hardly comparable. Clinton and Republicans such as Jeb Bush have the backing of big financial donors—banks, corporations, and the 1% of the very wealthy, while Sanders has received mainly small donations from individual donors. In the first quarter Republican Jeb Bush has raised $103 million, Clinton $47.5 million, while Sanders has remarkably raised $15 million in first quarter of 2015.

Sanders and Black Lives Matters

Sanders initially failed to speak out strongly in favor of the Black Lives Matter movement and blundered when confronted with black protesters as the Netroots Nation conference in Phoenix, Arizona. In his earliest statements he had tried to be for both cops and black people, an untenable position. The black movement, continuing police killings like that in Cincinnati recently, and, one could say, reality itself, have forced Sanders to move toward the black movement.

In fact, Sanders has an outstanding record as an opponent of racism and an advocate of civil rights dating back to his participation in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the1960s. In recent campaign appearances he is reasserting his opposition to racism and police violence. Speaking in New Orleans he told the crowd, "Black lives do matter, and we must value black lives."

The problem is that Sanders emphasis on economic equality for all failed to take into account the issues of racism, discrimination, exclusion, and violence that faced some. His program does not mention African Americans. He did not put black issues at the center of his politics. But he is changing.

In a talk at a reception organized by leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership conference, one of the historic civil rights organizations, one could see the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement on Sanders as he said, "Anybody who saw the recent Sandra Bland tape understands that tragically, racism is alive and well in America," referring to a black woman who was found dead in a cell in a Texas jail. When an African-American woman gets yanked out of her car, when we all know that would not have happened to a middle-class white woman, we know we need some serious change in criminal justice in this country."

Speaking to SCLC conference as a whole, Sanders talked about "the need to simultaneously address the structural and institutional racism which exists in this country, while at the same time we vigorously attack the grotesque level of income and wealth inequality which is making the very rich much richer while everyone else – especially the African-American community and working-class whites – are becoming poorer." The SCLC speech—which is well worth reading—showed the depth of Sanders' knowledge and commitment to black Americans' fight for racial justice. These recent speeches and comments show that in reaction to criticism, he has begun to make a shift, moving black issues toward the center, though, as sympathetic critics have pointed out, he and his organization still have a way to go.

Sanders the Organizer

Vermont labor organizers friends of mine talk not only about Sanders as a supporter of labor, but as

a man who used his office to help unions and workers to organize, for example, by calling a meeting with unions to encourage unity and struggle for improved conditions in his home state. One sees this aspect of Sanders now in this campaign. Speaking with Katie Couric on Yahoo News, Sanders called for students to march on Washington:

"My view is that the only we can bring about an agenda that works for working families is if millions of people are actively involved in the political process. If a million young people march on Washington they to the Republican leadership, we know what's going on, and you better vote to deal with student debt. You better vote to make public universities and colleges tuition free, that's when it will happen.

"We're already seeing that with the minimum wage. Do you know why the minimum wage is going up around the country? Because workers are going out into the street, so we need a political revolution, in my view, where people begin to stand up and fight and take on the big money interests. If we don't have that, no president, not the best president in the world will ever be able to accomplish anything."

If Sanders supporters want to really build a new social movement for both economic and racial justice, they will have to find a way to bring the Black Lives Matter movement and the rank-and-file labor movement together and to keep them together beyond Sanders campaign. Such a connection between the labor movement and the black and Latinos movements is the historic aspiration of the best of the socialist left.

Sanders Foreign Policy: A Big Problem

For those of us radicals on the left, Sanders greatest weakness is his foreign policy. While it is true that Sanders voted against war to "liberate" Kuwait (the first Iraq war) and voted again against the Iraq war resolution of 2002, on the other hand, he supported President Bill Clinton's airstrikes on Kosovo and the war on Afghanistan in 2001 and voted that same year for the Authorization for the Use of Military Force against terrorists, the law used today by President Obama to attack ISIS in various countries. In 2003 he voted for a bill that gave President George W. Bush support in Iraq and in the war on terror. Sanders has voted for the military appropriations bills about as often as he had voted against them. In the Middle East he leans toward Israel against Palestine, though not without reservations.

What this record makes clear is that Sanders has no consistent and principled position against U.S. imperialism. While his program calls for reductions in military spending, he does not call for dismantling the hundreds of U.S. bases around the world, for ending the war on terror, for stopping the use of drones, and so on. Sanders' program makes no mention of the military.

While he calls himself a socialist, Sanders' foreign policy and military policy remain in line with corporate capitalism, militarism, and imperialism. The central issue for those concerned about world peace is the Middle East region (from Algeria to Afghanistan)—and in that region his position in support of Israel, rather than with the Palestinian underdogs, places him on the wrong side. Sanders is not an aggressive hawk like Hillary Clinton, but he is no dove of peace and no ambassador for internationalism. Despite these crucial foreign and military policy failings, Sanders' campaign poses a challenge to the left.

The Socialist Left and Sanders

The Sanders campaign has posed a serious challenge to the thinking of the far left in the United States. Over the years, a variety of socialist groups have pursued different strategies to build a

radical political party in the United States. Some left groups, particularly the Communist Party, the Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism and Maoist groups such as the Freedom Road Socialist Organization have historically worked in the Democratic Party and see no problem with that. They have hoped to build a peoples' movement both within and without the party. They may have supported Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition in the 1980s or Dennis Kucinch in the 2000s, but these groups can generally be called upon in the end to support the Democrat's nominee against the Republicans, rejecting candidates like Ralph Nader and parties like the Greens. While they are both boosting Bernie now, the CP and the CCDS are likely to go on to support Hillary—or who ever is the Democratic Party candidate—in the national election.

The Democratic Socialists of America, originally founded as an organizing committee by Michael Harrington in 1973, had as its strategic objective the "realignment" of the Democratic Party. Socialists, Harrington argued in his book *Socialism*, would drive the Dixiecrats and the corrupt big city machines out of the Democratic Party, leaving the labor unions as the dominant bloc and revealing that the Democrats were in reality a labor party. The DSA working with officials of the United Auto Workers and the International Association of Machinists pursued Harrington's realignment strategy up to the end of the twentieth century when it was clear that though the Dixiecrats and most big city machines had withered away, the corporations not the unions had taken over the Democratic Party. In recent elections, DSA did not endorse Barack Obama and very likely will not endorse Clinton. Younger DSA members no longer see realignment of the Democratic Party as the way forward.

Some other socialist groups, including old-line Debsian socialists such as the Socialist Party USA and various Trotskyist groups, have generally been opposed on principle to any work in the Democratic Party, arguing that the Democrats are the party of the banks and corporations and that working people needed their own party. The Debsians called for the building of a Socialist Party. Other socialists of this ilk have historically argued that the AFL-CIO and other unions should give up lesser-evilism, "break with the Democratic Party," and form a labor party.

In 1996 it seemed that after decades of arguing for the "break with the Democrats" the dream was being fulfilled when Tony Mazzocchi, a leader of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, brought together the United Mine Workers, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, the American Federation of Government Employees, the California nurses and hundreds of locals from various unions to found the Labor Party. The problem was that while those unions wanted to form a party, they didn't want to run candidates who might take votes away from the Democratic Party, so for several years there was an ongoing fight between the union leaders and small socialist groups over the issue of elections, paralyzing the party. The party suspended operations in 2007, though by then there were only a few functioning local chapters.

The Labor Party experiment having failed, some activists went on to join the Green Party that had been formed in 1984 as a federation of several state Green Parties. Between its founding and the 2000 election the Greens evolved from simply an environmental party to a party that was concerned with the environmental as well as economic, social, and racial justice issues. The Green Party's influence peaked in 2000 with the controversial campaign of consumer activist Ralph Nader who won 2.7 percent of the vote—leading him to be accused of having been a "spoiler" who had taken votes from Democratic candidate Al Gore, allowing George W. Bush to win the election. Howie Hawkins, a socialist, ran as the Green Party candidate for New York Governor in 2014 winning 5 percent of the vote. Sanders has for the moment overshadowed Jill Stein, the Green Party's presidential candidate for 2016; but as she says, "I'll actually be on the ballot in November."

Of all the far left groups, the International Socialist Organization had been the most critical of and hostile to the Sanders campaign—and for all the right reasons: his caucusing with Democrats, his

foreign policy, and above all the belief that Sanders will be an obstacle to building an independent left movement and political alternative. The issue is whether these principled objections should keep us from working closely with Sanders' supporters, while at the same time maintaining our own political independence.

Where Does Sanders Fit?

For Sanders campaign doesn't fit neatly into the historic categories of the far left. Sanders is virtually the only person in national politics who calls himself a democratic socialist and who advocates the kind of social democratic policies—free health and education, strong unions, a comprehensive social safety net—such as existed in Scandinavian nations for decades. The debate over socialism in America, which began with the Tea Party attack on Obama's Affordable Care Act, has with Sanders' campaign become part of a broader national conversation. In a nation once dominated by anti-Communism, red-baiting, and the common jeer at leftists "Go back to Russia!," socialism is now on the table if not yet on the agenda.

As far as the Democratic Party question, his entire political career Sanders has been an independent—though he caucused with the Democrats–never a Democrat until now, and never argued for a strategy of realigning the Democratic Party. This is quite different, for example, than the careers and strategy of people like Jesse Jackson and Dennis Kucinich who systematically worked to reform the Democrats. Sanders has never suggested that the Democrats could be reformed and is not now.

And Sanders' supporters aren't fundamentally lesser-evilists. They support Sanders precisely because he appears to be the alternative to the lesser evil of the Democratic Party leaders' choice of Clinton. On the other hand, Sanders has promised to support Hillary Clinton if she is nominated, thus thrusting his supporters into the arms of the corporate-controlled Democratic Party that they resent and reject.

Given the Republican alternatives of a rightwing union-buster like Scott Walker or a racist like Donald Trump, most of Bernie Sanders followers today will probably cast a vote for Hillary Clinton in the general election. They will not be doing this because Bernie has tricked them and rounded them up for Hillary, but because they fear the Republican reactionaries. They will do that simply because they all along intended to vote to stop Scott Walker or some other anti-working class, racist, or anti-women's rights Republican from winning.

Where Do We Fit?

Okay, that is lesser-evilism of a sort. But many will be looking for a way to build a political alternative when the primary campaign is over. So, some on the far left—in groups like Socialist Alternative and Solidarity—have decided that they will work among Sanders supporters, while still declining to either become Democrats or to endorse him. What can such groups—I myself am a member of Solidarity—do in and around such a campaign? We can bring into the campaign all of the issues—environmental, women's, LBGTQ, black—on which we are working. We can bring our point of view that while the Bernie Sanders campaign represents a fundamentally progressive development, but that taking the movement into Hillary's campaign would be a mistake. Most important, we can argue that out of the campaign we must build a movement that becomes part of a new era of social struggle in America.

Some Sanders supporters, once money and the media have made Clinton the Democrats' nominee, may come out of this experience so disgusted with the Democrats that they vote for the Green Party's candidate Jill Stein or go on in the future to organize the working class alternative that the

far left has dreamed of. Or is it possible to think that Sanders, now 73 years old and with nothing to lose, might attempt to launch an independent campaign—hard to do under the 50 different state electoral laws—or perhaps endorse or join with Stein of the Greens. Who knows? We can only hope.

What the Sanders campaign may accomplish is to popularize a program of social democratic reforms, to deepen the discussion about socialism, to bring together labor, black, female, and LGBTQ activists into a movement with enough cohesion, energy, dynamism, and excitement to continue to build something after the election. The Sanders campaign could contribute to the launching of a new period of social movements and upheavals with a higher level of political consciousness and if it does that, it will be a great contribution.

So, while remaining a registered Green and planning to work for Jill Stein in the election, I plan to work with the Sanders campaign in the primary period, hoping–like other Sanders supporters–that out of this experience we can build a new, stronger, left in America.