Should DSA Endorse Bernie Sanders? A Debate

written by Ella Mahony, Dan La Botz | March 4, 2019

*Well, it's happened: Senator Bernie Sanders has declared his candidacy for the 2020 Presidential nomination of the Democratic Party. Seeing a historic opportunity, DSA's National Political Committee has established an expedited endorsement process. Now DSA chapters all over the country are debating the question, exploring what such a decision would have on the growing socialist movement. Below are two contrasting views on the question: Should DSA Endorse Bernie Right Now?*

Ella Mahony: Yes!

Bernie Sanders has announced his run for the presidency of the United States in the midst of a decades-long assault from above on the international, multi-racial working class.

A ruthless campaign of upward redistribution of wealth has resulted in the top 1 percent of the United States owning 40 percent of U.S. wealth; the top 1 percent of the world's population owning half the world's wealth; and the bottom half of the world's population owning the same amount as the world's richest eight people.

Unions in the United States have gone from wielding the power of 30% of workers to less than 11% today. The vast majority of workers here have no protection against the authoritarian setup of the American workplace and can be put out onto the street at any time, for no reason. Our immigration enforcement system additionally works as the most terrifying and effective union-busting tool bosses have.

Meanwhile, the political reforms and social progress won in the twentieth century are becoming increasingly unstable. Abortion rights seem ready to be wiped off the map. The voting rights won in the Civil Rights Movement are under constant attack. Affirmative action is likely just as threatened as *Roe v Wade* under the new Supreme Court. The social rights that seemed ascendant in the Obama era now appear profoundly vulnerable.

At the same time, the vehicles for the working class to arrest these setbacks and get back on the offensive have almost completely broken down.

The mass parties that emerged in the twentieth century and collectively engaged hundreds of millions of people to fight to better their conditions, have all but collapsed. Some, like PASOK in Greece or the French Socialist Party, have been completely wiped off the electoral map after betraying their programs and imposing austerity on their own base.

Others, like the Workers Party in Brazil, are still fighting but have been deeply weakened. And the flash of revival we saw in the Middle East with the Arab Spring has been thoroughly, violently, and autocratically repressed.

This has generated a deep crisis of representation for working people across the world. In most countries, there is no meaningful political force speaking to workers' needs, saying that their misery is not their own fault, and laying out a plan to win an alternative. There are very few forces that can credibly say, "We can protect your reproductive rights. We can protect LGBTQ rights. We can protect your civil rights."

And this is the context in which the far Right is winning, both by breaking through into popular sectors by being the only ones talking about people's pain and not blaming it on them, and because a large number of people have given up on change and their abstention allows the Right's relatively minoritarian coalitions to have a disproportionate impact.

In addition, the Right uses the power it has accumulated in the state, such as the Supreme Court, the military, and enforcement apparatuses to ram through their proposals.

In the United States, the problem is compounded because we've never had a mass workers' or socialist party. People here have very few reference points for what political representation of working-class people really means.

That said, we are at the beginning of a process that might reverse this deep defeat. And the Sanders campaign will be a key vehicle for socialists to further that process.

The ideological stranglehold of neoliberalism has been broken. The financial crisis and the movements it catalyzed destroyed the idea that capitalism and the rapid growth of profits at the top could generate any gains for ordinary people. And these movements created a new consensus about who was hurt by the status quo—the 99%—and who benefits—the 1%.

But there was still a profound malaise in the country because even though people were convinced that the status quo was wrong, they couldn't perceive a viable alternative or a path to reach it.

What constituted the organized Left was forever on the defensive, mobilizing in silos against the worst excesses of the ruling class, such as the Iraq War or the post-recession bank bailouts. Sometimes we won; more often, we lost. More significantly, we couldn't get on the offensive in a way that allowed us to change the rules of the game instead of just reacting to individual attacks.

That's why Bernie Sanders's campaign in 2016 was so important. It offered a positive program, one ambitious enough that people could actually get excited about it. He offered a blueprint for a different United States.

And in so doing, helped reverse-engineer working-class aspirations from within a howling vacuum of union disorganization and movement setbacks. This is very hard to do in a country where unlivable wages, mass displacement from urban areas, and means-testing in our few public programs keep many of us, particularly the poor, from staying in one place to build relationships and organization and to see one another through the lens of solidarity, not resentment.

Now, the teachers' movement, thanks to a years-long effort from below to transform educators' unions, has taken advantage of those raised expectations to demonstrate what the diverse working class can do when it sets a goal and unites to achieve it. And by not just fighting for their own wages, but for nurses in every school, for the end of racist police searches of their students, for sanctuary schools, they have demonstrated that labor is not only for itself. It is not a special interest

or only for older white men. They've shown that labor is for humanity.

The combination of the Sanders campaign and the teachers' strike wave has made our job as socialists so much easier. Now, we can go into our campuses or workplaces and find people willing to identify not just as union activists or as socially conscious but as democratic socialists.

Via these simple demands such as Medicare for All or the Green New Deal, we can help people to see beyond their workplace or their industry to the political sphere. We can move people to seeing themselves as political subjects: in other words, not as someone that things are done to, but as someone who can have a say in their own destiny.

It is our duty to take full advantage of this moment and run out the radicalizing processes happening in the formal political sphere, in labor, and in society as far as they can go.

Whatever the details of his program may mean to us, to the rest of the world, the Bernie Sanders campaign will be a referendum on socialist politics in the United States. It is a litmus test about whether a left program can be a viable project in this country.

If we fail, if we cannot win the 13 million Bernie votes of 2016 and go beyond them, this unique historical window will close. The name Bernie Sanders will be used like Ralph Nader's: as an invocation of why left-wing politics are fundamentally unsuited to Americans.

By participating in the Bernie movement, we can multiply our forces, meet and build relationships with people who can run as socialist candidates at every level, plug into Labor For Bernie work to overcome the separation between labor and socialists, and transform DSA into something rooted in neighborhoods and workplaces of all kinds.

Finally, the divisions it will generate between Bernie and the Democratic establishment will be very useful as a popular education tool about why the differences between the Left and the center matter.

But, of course, the challenges ahead are immense. There is a chance that Bernie Sanders might actually become president of the United States. Wild, right?

We know how capital mobilizes when the Left gets into power. Especially if the Left makes the mistake of confusing formal power with real power.

Sanders himself posed this problem in the CBS interview where he announced his run for president. "We have a corrupt political system in which billionaires can contribute unlimited sums of money. That's the power of the top 1% and the billionaire class," he said. "So somebody could come before you and say 'Look, I wanna do A and I wanna do B' … but at the end of the day, the only way that real change takes place is when millions of people stand up, fight back."

Sanders is talking about the elite opposition that even moderate politicians encounter when they want to implement reforms. Because capitalists have so much power over our economy and politics, they can hold our system hostage until politicians do what they want.

One tool they have for this is the capital strike. Just as workers can strike, so can capitalists. They can take their immense investment power and put it somewhere else. If they don't want President Sanders and his allies to implement a Green New Deal, or if they simply believe that the United States is no longer a favorable investment climate because of it, they can take their money elsewhere and crash our economy in the process. Millions of people will be hurt and could blame socialists for their misery.

This is the primary reason why leftist politicians and parties have, once in office, reversed their programs or even imposed the Right's policies.

The only way we can fight back against this class warfare from above, and save our democratic socialist program, is through a movement of millions in the streets, shutting down key production points and reproductive sectors like education, and disciplining politicians who cave to the billionaires' pressure.

That might make you think that this is the wrong time for Bernie Sanders to be running at all. It doesn't feel as if we're strong enough now to weather that battle.

There are two things I would say to this. First, Bernie Sanders is the only candidate who can beat Donald Trump (or another Trump-esque) figure in 2020. Four more years of a Trump presidency might guarantee permanent defeat for the working class. A Sanders campaign is urgent in this moment.

Second, as students of Marx we know that we socialists do not get to choose the historical circumstances in which we organize. Marx wrote in 1852, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already." Already, in a shockingly short span of time, organizers have taken advantage of the political environment since 2016 to build a powerful strike wave from practically nothing.

Bernie Sanders is running for president, and he might actually win. What we can do—what we must do—is use the organizing opportunity of the Sanders campaign to reach millions of people when they are most open to politics—and socialist politics particularly! We have to convert them into committed fighters for the democratic socialist program, and make sure they don't recede into pessimism or inactivity after the presidential election is over.

We can do that through an independent DSA campaign for Bernie Sanders that focuses on converting the electoral energy of 2020 into durable social movement and labor organization.

In Bernie Sanders' launch video, he features a news clip hailing a wage hike at Disney as a "victory for Bernie Sanders." A voiceover from Bernie corrects the record: "It's a victory for *all of us*." That is the attitude we must take up as well. Our "north star" is not one person. It is, instead, this historic opportunity to build the confidence and ability of the working class to collectively win its own liberation.

Ella Mahony has been a member of DSA's National Political Committee since 2017.

Dan La Botz: No

Sanders 2016 revived the progressive left and turned DSA into the largest socialist organization in America in seventy years. Flooded with young people angry at the Democratic Party, DSA became a radical, activist organization projecting the need for a total socialist transformation of America. Sanders 2020 will not have the same effect. Bernie will not appear to be much different than other progressive Democrats and his campaign threatens to lead DSA deep into the Democratic Party.

Sanders 2020 poses the question of political subordination to a capitalist party or political independence. And, though it may not seem so at first, it poses the historic question of reform and revolution. Yes, we may recruit thousands more, but to what kind of an organization will we be recruiting them? An adjunct of the Democratic Party or an independent socialist organization rooted

in the social and labor movements?

Bernie Sanders' 2016 campaign for the Democratic Party nomination had a tremendously positive effect on American politics in general and on the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA) in particular. Disappointed by Barack Obama and disgusted by Hillary Clinton, millions rallied to Bernie's progressive platform. Many others identified not only with Bernie's program but also found his socialism attractive. Some had never voted, never supported a Democratic candidate before, other had voted or Obama and been burned. When Bernie lost the nomination, largely because of the Democratic Party's unfair practices, thousands turned in anger *from* the Democratic Party to DSA.

We should remember that what has made DSA so exciting in 2016 and up until today has in large measure been that initial *anger* at Clinton and at the Democratic National Committee. The Bernie Bump folks, the ten or twenty thousand members who joined in 2016, were really angry. Anger at the Democrats gave the new DSA its edge, breaking with the organization's long subservience to liberal Democrats.

Then, with Donald Trump's inauguration, DSA grew by another twenty thousand members or so, flooded with people afraid of what the new racist, misogynist, authoritarian president might do. Fear was countered by the hope that DSA might be able to help stop Trump, and that led to support for progressive Democrats. DSA even ran its own candidates, mostly in the Democratic Party, but often now running as open socialists.

This is where we are now, in a moment of tension between immersion in the Democratic Party and the possibility of mass social movements and independent socialist campaigns. We are divided between reformist opportunities and revolutionary aspirations. Bernie 2020 raises the question of whether or not DSA will turn back to its position of subordination to the Democratic Party or go forward to build the radical social movements and eventually an independent, working-class, socialist political party.

Bernie 2020 will not be like 2016.

What attracted people to Bernie in 2016 was that he had been a political *independent.* He appeared—as did Trump on the right—as *a break* with the corrupt and corporate-controlled Republican and Democratic parties. But Sanders is no longer—if he ever was—really an independent. He has spent the last two years largely campaigning for Democrats and preparing for a 2020 campaign in the Democratic Party. Sanders is today the leading progressive *in* the Democratic Party, *not* an independent. And, as we all know, he is not really a socialist. He is a New Deal liberal.

Socialism means the democratic socialization of the banks and corporations, of industry and agriculture, of the media and culture. Historically this idea has presumed the creation of a working-class party, the destruction of the capitalist state, and the creation of a new more democratic government, the nationalization, municipalization, or the cooperativization of the economy, the democratic elaboration of a national economic plan, and within that plan widespread community control and workers' power in the workplace. This is *not* Bernie.

Bernie has often said that he looks back to Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" for his political model. In fact, FDR's New Deal of the 1930s–and more important the economic expansion of World War II—*established the social compact that saved capitalism.* Then, updated in the 1960s by Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society," it stabilized an increasingly crisis-ridden capitalism for another couple of decades until the Great Recession of 2008. The New Deal and Great Society, of course, were made possible by America's global economic, political, and military dominance and hegemony by imperialism. The New Deal's social Keynesianism morphed into

military Keynesianism, which underlay much of American prosperity. That is the essential fact of the original New Deal.

There was also the all-important New Deal Coalition that saved the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party's role in American society—as the lesser of two evils—is to periodically reform the political and economic system just enough so that it can incorporate and absorb those who begin to turn away from capitalism. When the Great Depression led to the left-led working class upheaval of the 1930s, FRD's New Deal Coalition made concessions to labor that brought the new industrial unions, as well as the old craft unions, into the Democratic Party. And those movements died there.

FRD's New Deal Coalition provided the model for successive generations of Democratic Party leaders. In the 1960s and 1970s the African American Civil Rights Movement threatened to move in an independent direction, but Democrats John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B . Johnson succeeded in passing reforms that kept black people in the Democratic Party and brought some of them into leading positions in government and the corporations. The radical Women's Liberation movement of the 1970s similarly won significant reforms that were limited and compromised by subordination to the Democrats. The Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement also died in the Democratic Party.

The Great Recession of 2008 created new dissident and restive elements in our society—from Occupy Wall Street to #BlackLives Matter to #MeToo—and the question for the ruling elites became how to keep those elements from turning their social movements into new political forces, into a new political party of the left? This is not a conspiracy but it is the party's functional role. The Democratic Party offers social movements a potential way to win immediate reforms, but at the cost of strengthening the system and also becoming part of it. And, it should be noted, the Democratic Party often fails to deliver the very reforms it promised, as happened with labor law reform, immigration reform, and environmental reform from Jimmy Carter, to Clinton, to Obama.

Today Sanders and the Democrats threaten to once again corral the rising radical opposition to the system. He has called for very progressive reforms–$15 minimum wage, health care for all, free public higher education—but, as he has repeated, he opposes the nationalization and socialization of the banks and corporations. He is about making capitalism more humane—that is his great attraction. But he is not about ending capitalism, which is our overriding necessity today if we want to prevent environmental catastrophe, end imperialism and foreign regime-change wars, and win justice for working people and the oppressed.

Sanders has become a supporter of DSA member Alexandria Ocasio Cortez's campaign for a "Green New Deal." Like the historic New Deal, it appears to be predicated upon massive government intervention to reform the capitalist system in the face of catastrophic climate chnge. While we absolutely need to find away to stop global warming, the Green New Deal proposal suggests it can be done within the framework of capitalism. Contemporary capitalism, driven by profit and completely intertwined with the carbon energy systems of coal and oil, is highly unlikely to be able to undertake the total economic transformation that is necessary to prevent a climate catastrophe. And neither Sanders nor AOC propose such a total transformation. Politically, AOC's Green New Deal movement will serve to capture and incorporate the independent environmental movement into a Democratic Party strategy.

DSA leaders have also linked the Bernie campaign to the West Virginia teachers' strikes, as if a Democratic Party reform campaign had the same thrust and destination as a radical worker strike movement organized from below. Though Bernie gives his support to the unions and the teachers strikes, in the long run, these two phenomena are diametrically opposed. One is about workers' power with the potential to destroy capitalism and the other about reforming and thereby

strengthening the capitalist system, which cannot exist without labor exploitation. If the teachers' strikes should through reform-minded union leaders—or perhaps through DSA members—become linked to Bernie, we would watch the movement be captured and neutralized by the Democratic Party. This would be a practically literal reenactment of part of FDR's New Deal.

Moments such as these always create the mirage that we socialists could somehow significantly influence or capture the Democratic Party. The idea is more than a hundred years old, has been tried as many times without success. The Republican and Democratic parties—even in the age of Trump and Bernie—remain controlled by leading bankers and corporate executives, with strong ties to media moguls, to the military top brass, and with every other elite element of the society. Progressives—many of whom are actually neoliberals—may be able to win office, but they will be forced by the party's structure and its corporate owners to govern for those who rule.

Those who would have us endorse Bernie have to explain how, after Bernie loses to someone like the liberal Sherrod Brown or Kamala Harris, they will be able to keep DSA members from either flowing into their campaigns for president or becoming disillusioned, embittered, and cynical following Bernie's second defeat. Should we not be saying to our members now that a Bernie Sanders campaign very likely leads to a campaign by Kamala Harris or Sherrod Brown, and that that in turn leads DSA back to its 1980s strategy of trying to capture the Democrats?

Yes, if we throw ourselves into the Bernie 2020 campaign, we may be able to recruit more members, perhaps thousands. We have to ask ourselves, however, what sort of an organization will we be recruiting them to? The Bernie 2020 campaign will have a profound influence on DSA, emphasizing political work over building the social movements. We will find that we have created an organizational culture dominated by illusions of influencing or capturing the Democratic Party, rather than developing strategies for the destruction of the two-party system and the overthrow of capitalism. We will find that we have not only mobilized the organization for a campaign but have also transformed it for the future into a social democratic organization.

We in DSA should be building the rank-and-file labor movements, building the social movements against racism, sexism, and homophobia. We should also be running *independent* and socialist candidates at the local level and even for Congress. Many of our members may want to work for Bernie, let them. But as an organization, this time we should not. Supporting Bernie 2020 means jeopardizing our future as an organization angry at the Democratic Party, furious at the two-party system, and hating capitalism and imperialism. Let's keep our hope, but let's also keep our anger.

Dan La Botz is a member of the Central Brooklyn Branch of the New York City Chapter of DSA and involved in various working groups and national committees. He worked on the Bernie 2016 campaign while remaining registered as a Green Party voter.

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