

A Socialist FAQ on Bernie Sanders and the Left

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The following introduction is by the editors of SocialistWorker.org where this FAQ was originally published.

Bernie Sanders kicked off his campaign for the Democratic Party presidential nomination with a large and enthusiastic rally in Burlington, Vermont, on May 26.

Sanders' candidacy has prompted discussion and debate among a left shaped by recent struggles such as Occupy Wall Street, the Chicago teachers strike, Fight for 15, Black Lives Matter and the climate justice movement. Many radicals, publications and organizations either support Sanders' Democratic Party run outright or believe his campaign can be used to build the infrastructure for a stronger left. By contrast, SocialistWorker.org has argued Sanders' campaign will serve to corral and co-opt the emerging left into supporting the Democratic Party—and make it harder, not easier, to build an independent, left-wing alternative.

Here, Ashley Smith and Alan Maass respond to some of the questions and disagreements posed by SocialistWorker.org readers during the course of the discussion so far.

Q. There may be problems with Bernie Sanders, but he is also putting forward ideas and proposals that socialists agree with. Isn't it being a "purist" to object to participation in the Sanders campaign?

A. Socialists who criticize the Sanders campaign aren't just being "purists."

We do support many of Sanders' proposals for reform, like free higher education, the breakup of the mega-banks, a green jobs program to promote alternative energy and stop climate change, and measures to challenge corporate domination of the political system. We also disagree with Sanders' support for apartheid Israel and his failure to consistently challenge U.S. imperialism, his weak position on the issue of racist police violence, and his support for restrictions on immigrant rights.

But the question for us isn't mostly about the "purity" of Sanders' political positions. The crux of our objection is Sanders' decision to run for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, and to promise in advance that he will endorse the mainstream Democrat who will all but certainly defeat him. This decision is the culmination of Sanders' increasingly close and collaborative relationship with the Democrats, despite the fact that he promotes radical political ideas, labels himself an independent in the U.S. Senate and calls himself a democratic socialist.

Socialist Worker and its publisher, the International Socialist Organization, have supported independent candidates in the past, even when we had political disagreements. We supported Ralph Nader's independent presidential campaigns, for example, while maintaining our criticisms of some positions he took and calling on him to change them. The most important point was Nader's determination to run a campaign that was independent of the Democratic Party, with the aim of building an alternative to the two-party system.

This independence is precisely what Sanders is abandoning by running for the Democratic presidential nomination and pledging to support the eventual Democratic nominee.

The biggest problem is Sanders' relationship to the Democratic Party. It poses as the "party of the people," but it is, in fact, a capitalist party, funded and controlled by Corporate America and the political elite. The party establishment tolerates liberals and even radicals in their midst, so long as they don't represent a significant threat. The liberal and progressive faces of the party are, in fact, immensely valuable in winning support from the voting base of the Democrats among the working class and the oppressed.

The real fear of party leaders isn't that someone like Sanders will raise uncomfortably progressive ideas within the party primaries, but that a threat could arise outside their ranks and build a socialist, labor or Green Party that would challenge the two-party system.

Q. Isn't running in the Democratic Party the only realistic way for Sanders to win?

A. The opposite is the case. Sanders has no chance of winning the Democratic Party's presidential nomination.

As he readily admits, the two-party system has been rigged by corporate power to exclude any real challenge to its agenda—and that includes the Democratic Party. Elections are a big business, where corporations sell brands (a.k.a. candidates) to consumers (a.k.a. voters).

This reality led two professors from Princeton and Northwestern Universities to declare in a recent study that the U.S. is not actually a democracy, but an oligarchy: "[E]conomic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence."

Despite the liberal rhetoric we'll hear even from the most conventional of Democratic candidates, Hillary Clinton, this applies to the Democratic Party primaries, too. Clinton is aiming to raise close to \$2.5 billion for her campaign. With that kind of war chest, she can hire an Astroturf army to give the appearance of grassroots support, dominate the media, and keep the political agenda on her terms. Sanders hopes to raise around 2 percent of Clinton's haul: \$50 million. Even with a larger and far more enthusiastic core of volunteers, he is entering the battle with a squirt gun against Clinton's howitzer.

Even if, by some miracle, Sanders can threaten Clinton's status as the presumptive nominee—she is, after all, a terrible candidate with a pile of skeletons in her closet—he still has very little chance of being nominated. As a look at the history of the Democrats—especially during the tumultuous period of the 1960s and '70s—shows, the party's corporate backers have plenty of tricks up their sleeve to maintain their power.

Sanders' run inside the Democratic Party is not only doomed to lose the party's presidential nomination. It represents a capitulation to the two-party status quo and capitalist domination of elections. Sanders rejected a campaign outside the Democrats because of the very real obstacles to

getting on the ballot as an independent, the lack of nationwide left infrastructure to support such a run—but most of all because he didn't want to be accused of being "spoiler" who might win votes away from the Democratic candidate.

As Ralph Nader said repeatedly during his campaigns, you can't spoil a spoiled system. It has to be changed instead. And you can't do that by participating in one of the two capitalist parties that dominates the system. Yes, there are huge obstacles to building a left-wing, independent alternative. But Sanders' decision to jump into the Democratic Party presidential race is a guarantee of losing.

Q. But can't Sanders at least articulate our issues and pull the Democrats to the left?

A. Sanders will, indeed, talk about progressive policies and proposals that the Democratic Party's base overwhelmingly supports, but that get short shrift in the mainstream political discussion. To his credit, Sanders doesn't back away from his identification as a "socialist." If the media bother to cover his campaign, that at least will be a breath of fresh air.

But beyond this, there is little reason to hope that Sanders' campaign can pull either the Democrats or mainstream politics to the left.

It's worth pointing out that even mainstream Democrats speak out of the liberal side of their mouths during party primaries. In reaction to the Baltimore Rebellion, for example, Hillary Clinton criticized the New Jim Crow and called for an end to mass incarceration—a more radical position than Sanders adopted, in fact. Of course, Clinton will do nothing of the sort if she does become president. She is following the time-honored pattern of Democrats: Talk left during the primary campaign to win votes from the base, before "turning to the center" in the general election.

There is a reason why the Democratic Party establishment isn't angry, but relieved that Sanders is running for the party's presidential nomination. For one thing, his campaign has come along with a promise that he won't be an independent, third party candidate in November. But beyond this, the Democrats face a legitimacy problem with their base—and Sanders could help them rebuild some support.

Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign was built around creating hope and expectations after eight long years of George Bush in the White House. But very quickly, "hope" has turned into "nope."

In many respects, Obama has continued the policies of Bush's second term. He bailed out Wall Street and the banks, but not homeowners facing foreclosure; he expanded the war in Afghanistan; he junked his promises to labor; he presided over the largest number of deportations in history; and he did nothing for African Americans even as racist police brutality and mass incarceration intensified.

And Obama's most significant "reform"—the Affordable Care Act—has been a huge disappointment for millions of people who hoped the government would finally step in and fix the health care crisis. The long-awaited regulations imposed on insurance companies, such as the ban on rejecting patients with "pre-existing conditions," were far outweighed by the mandate for the uninsured to buy the overpriced, defective products of the insurers, thus pumping up the industry's bottom line.

As a result of all this, the Democrats went from control of both houses of Congress at the start of Obama's first term to control of none after two successive big wins for Republicans in midterm elections. Both mainstream parties are suffering a downward spiral in popularity. A new Pew Research Center poll found that the congressional Democratic leadership's dismal 33 percent approval rating was only outdone by the Republican leadership's woeful 22 percent rating.

The underwhelming “news” that Hillary Clinton would run again for the nomination has done nothing to revitalize the appeal of the Democrats, despite her conversion to what journalist Matt Taibbi rightly called “fake populism.” Her record speaks for itself, and the party’s supporters know it, by and large.

So the Democrats desperately need their liberal champions like Elizabeth Warren, Bill de Blasio and now Bernie Sanders to give Democratic voters a reason to turn out and cast a ballot for a party that has disappointed them at every turn.

This is why Hillary Clinton welcomed Sanders into the race. She doesn’t fear him as a serious rival, but she knows he can help her campaign and the party in general to continue its masquerade as the “party of the people.” When Sanders does raise issues the left cares about, Clinton will be able to say, “Yes, you’re right, Bernie, but I have a realistic plan, instead of just talking about them.”

This is the problem with welcoming a Sanders campaign because it will “articulate our issues”—it will do so in the service of building support for the Democratic Party, which is committed to the exact opposite.

If the media do report on the substance of what Sanders talks about, it will be a nice change of pace to hear, for example, an unqualified defense of Social Security and a national health care system. But the ultimate beneficiaries will be not the left, but Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party.

Q. WHAT’S THE harm of participating in formations like People for Bernie to meet other radicals and progressives drawn to the Sanders campaign, with the aim of building the infrastructure of a new left?

A. This is the implication of the position put forward by the group Socialist Alternative, which has welcomed the Sanders presidential campaign, while calling on him to “run all the way to November 2016 as an independent”—as if Sanders hasn’t ruled out exactly this.

The appeal of the Socialist Alternative argument is the contention that socialists can engage with people attracted to Sanders’ progressive politics and win them to building a broader left after he loses. But the Sanders campaign is not a movement—it is an electoral campaign run within the Democratic Party. The aim of such campaigns is not to generate discussion and collaboration among the left, but generate votes and support for the candidate. And that candidate is already on the record promising to urge a vote for whoever the Democrats nominate.

This is not the first time radicals have hoped that participation in an outsider, liberal presidential primary campaign could aid the left.

In the 1980s, Jesse Jackson’s campaigns for the Democratic presidential nomination even produced an organization—the National Rainbow Coalition—that some activists hoped might break from the Democratic Party if Jackson lost the nomination. But Jackson himself remained loyal to the party, and the Rainbow Coalition never took on a life beyond the orbit of Democratic Party politics.

Some of the radicals whose hopes were dashed by Jackson returned to independent politics, though with nothing to show for the energy they had expended on the Jackson campaign. But there were others who were drawn permanently out of independent politics and into the Democratic Party.

That’s the “harm.”

A similar dynamic took place in the 2000s with Dennis Kucinich’s failed campaign in the presidential primaries. Kucinich energized a section of the antiwar movement, but he himself was explicit about

his intention to co-opt activists. "My job in this election is to bring them in, and I will do that," he admitted. He continued, "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 didn't win that much support in the 2004 primaries, but what he did, he delivered to the pro-war candidate John Kerry. Once he lost, Kucinich abandoned criticism of the party's nominee, declaring, "Unless we have a firm and unshakeable resolve for John Kerry, we will have no opportunity to take America in a new direction."

Sanders promises to do exactly the same when he loses. He has pledged to support whatever mainstream Democrat wins the nomination, but that is no surprise—he has done the same in every presidential election since the 1980s, including when Ralph Nader was running the strongest left-wing third party campaigns since the middle of the 20th century.

Sanders will argue for the left to "have a firm and unshakeable resolve" for whoever the lesser evil turns out to be, and vote for them against the greater-evil Republican. Instead of his campaign aiding the development of the infrastructure of a new left that is better prepared to struggle for fundamental change, he will bolster the Democratic Party's infrastructure of co-optation.

Q. ARE YOU saying that the left should abstain from voting and elections?

A. MARXISTS have always argued that we need to help build the class struggle on every possible front, from the economic to the political and ideological. If we leave any battleground uncontested, the capitalist class will fill the vacuum and hijack the workers movement. That means participating in elections wherever possible—but on the basis of principled independence from the two-party system.

Because of the hegemony of lesser-evilmism on the U.S. left, there have been very few working-class challenges to the two capitalist parties. In the early years of the twentieth century, there was just such a challenge led by the man Sanders calls his hero: Eugene V. Debs of the Socialist Party. In stark contrast to Sanders today, Debs proclaimed in the opening speech of his 1904 presidential campaign:

The Republican and Democratic Parties, or, to be more exact, the Republican-Democratic Party, represent the capitalist class in the class struggle. They are the political wings of the capitalist system and such differences as arise between them relate to spoils and not to principles. With either of those parties in power, one thing is always certain, and that is that the capitalist class is in the saddle and the working class under the saddle.

There are no independent challenges to the two-party system on this scale today. But the left has experienced some successes that Socialist Worker and the ISO have been proud to support.

We participated in Ralph Nader's early 2000s presidential campaigns, which gave a political shape to the then-growing global justice movement. In the past few years, there was Socialist Alternative candidate Kshama Sawant's election to the Seattle City Council. Last November, the New York state Green Party ticket of Howie Hawkins and Brian Jonesran against incumbent Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo and scored the best statewide vote total for an independent candidate in generations.

We have a long way to go to build an ongoing national alternative, but such campaigns are a valuable starting point—in challenging the two-party system and opening the space to begin building such an alternative. Thus, we don't have to abstain from the 2016 elections, including the presidential vote. There will certainly be challengers to the two capitalist parties among the Greens,

socialists and radicals, and building on these alternatives will be important for the struggles to come.

Q. Won't your opposition to the Sanders campaign leave you on the sidelines, unable to relate to people who attracted to the effort?

A. Socialists have a chance to engage with Sanders' supporters in many ways, without supporting or in any way building illusions in his campaign for the Democratic Party presidential nomination.

We can be in discussions with Sanders supporters about all the questions that his campaign puts on the table—about what socialism is and is not, the class nature of political parties, and what strategy the left should follow in elections. This will be an important process for developing a stronger left that is capable of debating, while still collaborating in struggle.

We should organize discussions of the left about Sanders campaign, its strategy of participating in the Democratic Party, and how this can help or hinder the building of a left alternative.

And, of course, politics won't consist only of elections for the next 18 months until November 2016. We should also reach out to those attracted to the Sanders campaign to participate in the class and social movements emerging across the country. The widespread political and social discontent in the U.S. has been given voice by a variety of struggles, including Black Lives Matter, Fight for 15, the climate justice movement and the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction campaign against Israeli apartheid. The course of these struggles will contribute significantly to the development of a new challenge to the two capitalist parties.

When Sanders has clearly lost the nomination by early next year, it will be important to urge his supporters—against the proclamations of the candidate—not to back the eventual nominee as a lesser evil. We can use the words of Sanders' hero from a century ago. "I'd rather vote for something [I want and not get it," said Eugene Debs, "than vote [for something I don't want,] and get it."

We can say this much for the Sanders campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination: Its launching has crystallized the terms of a longstanding debate on the U.S. left about democracy, elections and the Democratic Party. The discussion that has already taken place has been valuable and clarifying—and there is more to come.