Thanks, Bernie!

written by Joanna Misnick | April 25, 2020



Photo: Gage Skidmore

Since Bernie Sanders suspended his presidential campaign, there has been a steady stream of articles assessing it. They range from more mainstream progressive political analysis citing his inability to compromise and soften his message, problems within the staff, etc. to some on the socialist left decrying Bernie's contesting in the Democratic Party as a breach of principle and misleadership of the working class.

This discussion will continue for a time. Meanwhile, I suggest closing your eyes and visualizing what U.S. politics, electoral and social movement, would have looked like if Bernie Sanders, democratic socialist, had not launched his campaigns for President.

At the outset of the primary season, Bernie Sanders' ratings and his substantial wins in Iowa, Nevada and New Hampshire made his nomination seemed like a surprising, but distinct, possibility. His popularity had moved other progressive candidates to adopt some form of support or lip service for Medicare for all, fixing student debt, a fair tax system which makes the billionaires pay their fair share, an end to corporate and oligarchic campaign financing, ending the immoral income gap between rich and poor, raising the minimum wage to $15, immigration and criminal justice reform, and more.

Bernie revolutionized funding for campaigns, refused to take billionaire donations or money from corporate super-PACs[i]. He raised over 10 million from millions of small donations at an average $18.50[ii] per donation. This was unprecedented in big-dollar presidential campaigning. Message received: working people are in this and will band together to finance their political message. The wealthy do not monopolize our elections. Candidates will now forever be judged on how they are financed and by whom.

Centrist alarm

The popularity of Bernie's platform alarmed corporate centrist Democratic Party leaders, who launched a campaign known as ABB – anybody but Bernie. Senator Elizabeth Warren was their first weapon – a radical progressive often allied with Sanders and a woman to appease the loss of Hillary Clinton felt so keenly among upper middle class suburban women, the sought after base of the Party. But Warren failed to attract voters away from Bernie. The back-up plan was flooding the contest with a clown car full of candidates, something for everybody, so as to take votes away from Bernie in the primaries.

And then there was Joe Biden, Obama's Vice President who had traction among the Party's Black voters that could deliver victories for a return to life before Trump, the Obama days. The appeal played on the abject fear that Donald Trump might be re-elected and the Democratic candidate had

to be someone who could vanquish him. The Democratic leadership insisted the idea that Bernie's democratic socialist program made him a long shot. That worked, and Bernie's lead was pushed back, never to return, after a stunning Biden victory in South Carolina. Other candidates dropped out one by one, sheepishly endorsing Joe Biden, knowing that there was a real issue about his diminished capacities.

Medicare for All

One attack that backfired was the constant question during the debates and in interviews about Medicare for All: Sanders was accused of not having a plan to pay for Medicare for All. Workers really love the health coverage they get from their employers and they do not want to give it up; the government should not force them.

Again and again, Bernie explained how Medicare for All would save money, be more efficient and fulfil what is a human right for all. But it never stopped – until Covid 19. The life-threatening chaos of the botched response to this pandemic has made the case for Medicare for All. With 17 million and rising suddenly unemployed, the virtues of employer furnished health care have evaporated. As one author put it; "Reality Has Endorsed Bernie Sanders." Even before the pandemic, Medicare for All enjoyed majority support in most polling.

Bernie Is Not Just Running for President

Bernie ran for President to jumpstart and focus much-needed resistance in this country to the inhumane plunder by billionaires, the oligarchs that create obscene income inequality and exploitation. He railed against corporate greed, the seizure of our government by the corporations, the destruction of anything like a humane society that cares for everyone.

He gave hope to people ground down by the extreme individualism of neoliberalism, called out the profit system as the cause of this deep inequality and urged a political revolution, a movement to take back our society. To emphasize that he was not a savior candidate, Sanders popularized the phrases 'Not Me, Us!' and 'A Movement, Not a Moment!'

He explained that even if he were elected, it would take this mass movement to bring about needed change. And it would take time, nothing overnight. This message was heard by millions of young people, anxious to fight for a vision of a just society on a planet that can sustain life.

Socialism was back in the U.S. lexicon, running ahead of capitalism in poll after poll – even if this was the socialism of post-war Europe, of catch-up with social measures in other capitalist societies our working class had been denied. The special urgency was the need to defeat the most dangerous President in the history of our country – Donald Trump had to go.

From the beginning, Sanders pledged to support the Democratic nominee and help beat Trump. The pandemic, social distancing and uncertainty about the election calendar, combined with Trump' s utter inability to lead the response or even assemble the facts at hand must have been a factor in suspending his campaign and closing the Democratic Party ranks.

A Democratic Election in the Time of Pandemic?

April 7 was primary election day for Democrats in the state of Wisconsin. The voting took place the day that a record 1,200 Covid19 deaths occurred in a 24 hour period and 97% of the US population is officially under what is imaginatively called social distancing, or lockdown. The Democratic Governor of Wisconsin tried to postpone the primary but was overruled by Republican-dominated

state legislature as well as a US Supreme Court ruling (strict partisan vote of 5 to 4) that will not allow any mail in ballots to be counted if postmarked after April 7.

The city of Milwaukee managed to open only five of its 180 polling places as poll workers, many elderly, opted not to risk it. Lines were intolerably and undemocratically long and severely dangerous.

More than 20 states and territories have yet to hold primary elections. Fifteen have already postponed them. And the Democratic Party has optimistically pushed its national nominating convention to mid-August from mid-July. In addition, social distancing severely restricts face to face campaigning, door to door neighborhood canvassing, and the mass rallies that gave the Sanders political revolution its reality and energy as a movement.

The recently-passed Congressional $2.2 trillion relief package number 3 contains a hard fought for $400 million for states to implement balloting by mail as opposed to in-person voting. But the United States is a federated system, not a federal one. And Republicans control a majority of state legislatures that have the power to accept or reject the "suggestion" of reliance on mail-in balloting. Prior to the pandemic, some Republican-controlled states had removed around one million voters from eligibility under various pretexts to damp down the Democratic voting base. Donald Trump tweeted his opposition to a national mail-in ballot because it would advantage a Democratic victory

From the beginning, Bernie Sanders has emphasized that in order to beat Trump there must be record-breaking voter turnout. This did not happen in the early primary contests; a disappointing 20 percent of young voters came out. The fight for mail-in balloting and funding to implement it continues in Congress. In the end, the pace and depth of the Covid 19 crisis and the economic collapse are decisive factors in the democratic conduct and timing of the US presidential election and its outcome.

The Cycle of Rebellion From Within

The Democratic Party leadership is adept at pushing renegade leftist nomination-seekers off a path to victory. The cycle of these attempts is about every 15 to 20 years, as social unrest rises to a pitch seeking "political": power but does not look to the near unthinkable strategy of a third political party in an anti-parliamentary system. Thus far, the ruling class has been able to contain deep divisions within the duopoly.

Eugene McCarthy's 1968 campaign, under the slogan 'Clean for Gene' reflected deep opposition to the war in Vietnam and a general radicalization against the "system." McCarthy's nomination was defeated as thousands of young people demonstrating outside the Chicago convention were attacked in a police riot.

The next defiance came in 1984-88, when the Rev. Jesse Jackson, an aide to Martin Luther King at his side when King was assassinated, twice sought the nomination. Jackson surfaced the deep anger within the working class suffering from the recession of the 1980s, stagnant wages, and unemployment – the full reality of the end of the American dream.

Jackson ran in the social democratic spirit of Martin Luther King. Broad scale support to his campaign was multiracial and working class. In 1988 he came in second to Michael Dukakis, winning 13 primaries and 7 million votes. This was probably the final offensive struggle the Black civil rights movement waged within the national Democratic Party for equality and political inclusion of an MLK trajectory.

Jackson's campaign vehicle, the Rainbow Coalition, basically disappeared after 1988. And the near

unanimous loyalty of the Black vote since to the Democratic Party is a defensive one as neoliberalism ravages large sections of Black America.

The New Socialist Movement

Unlike the previous radical rebellions in Democratic presidential politics, the Bernie candidacy inspired the growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). This organization now has some 56,000 members in 170 chapters spread all over the country. They were a boots on the ground army for Bernie, knocking on over one half million doors and making untold phone calls. Over the past several years, DSA has been studying Marxism, history of socialism, and has adopted a firm commitment to a rank and file strategy of building a working class movement from below. The group is a big tent, open to all radical points of view operating within a democratic framework.

DSA is overwhelmingly young. At the time of the last rebellion in the national Democratic Party in 1988 some were not yet born and others were in grade school[iii]. It was not surprising that many believed Bernie would win, underestimating the obstacles to his campaign not just in the corporate centrist Party leadership but the actual level of class consciousness and readiness for struggle, particularly with the acute weakening of the organized labor movement in the U.S and its inability to lead resistance as a national movement. Lesson learned.

A plurality, if not a majority, of the DSA holds a position of opposition to taking over the Democratic Party and supports an eventual building of an independent workers' party. Various tactics attempt to cope with the failure of any left force to build a durable mass working class third party in this country. Propaganda for such a party combined with abstention from elections or running strictly symbolic campaigns is not an attractive strategy for most new socialists born of the Bernie effort.

Involvement in local struggles, building coalitions with other organizations fighting for a minimum wage, against police brutality, housing for all, rent control, decarceration[iv], immigrant rights and strike support have deepened the ability of the DSA to play a role in real time in the real world. Close to 100 DSA endorsed candidates, most members of the group, have won election to become tribunes of the people. In Chicago, DSA elected six members of the City Council, the first socialists in that body for over 100 years.

The eruption of the new socialist DSA and Bernie's campaign has placed pressures on the small groups that remain from the deep decline of the 20th Century revolutionary left. Even DSA, which voted as its convention not to endorse any Democratic nominee but Bernie, has some further thinking and discussion to conduct. Everyone understands the need to rid this country and the world stage of Donald Trump, the "most dangerous President ever": as Bernie repeatedly said. (For the flavor, rent the 1990s film "The Madness of King George.") The discussion of left strategy toward that end in the time of pandemic and looming economic depression is continuing – electronically of course.

---

[i] A PAC is an organization formed to contribute funds to influence the outcome of political elections in the United States

[ii] Around £15

[iii] Equivalent to Primary school here

[iv] Campaigning against the prison system – and particularly its disproportionate impact young

Black men

This article first appeared on Socialist Resistance.