

Bernie Sanders pits US workers against immigrants in Vox interview

By Tom Hall
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The campaign of Bernie Sanders, the self-described “socialist” senator running for the Democratic presidential nomination, continues to attract widespread support. Many workers, youth and students, deeply alienated from establishment politics, are intrigued by the prospect of a socialist candidate.

As Sanders has climbed in the polls, however, the pro-capitalist and nationalist content of his politics has become increasingly clear. An interview with Sanders released Tuesday by former *Washington Post* writer Ezra Klein for the Vox web site is particularly revealing in this regard.

About halfway through the interview, Klein asks Sanders about his attitude towards immigration. “You said being a democratic socialist means a more international view,” Klein says. “I think if you take global poverty that seriously, it leads you to conclusions that in the US are considered out of political bounds. Things like sharply raising the level of immigration we permit, even up to a level of open borders.”

At this point, Sanders abruptly cuts off Klein, saying, “Open borders? No, that’s a Koch brothers proposal.” “Really?” Klein responds, apparently taken aback. “Of course,” Sanders replies. “That’s a right-wing proposal, which says essentially there is no United States... It would make everybody in America poorer.”

Sanders continues: “You’re doing away with the concept of a nation state, and I don’t think there’s any country in the world that believes in that... What right-wing people in this country would love is an open border policy. Bring in all kinds of people, work for \$2 or \$3 an hour. That would be great for them... You think we should open the borders and bring in a lot of low-wage workers, or do you think maybe we should try to get jobs for those [American] kids?”

Sanders is here referring to Charles and David Koch, the Republican billionaires who have pledged to spend nearly a billion dollars in the 2016 election cycle to promote right-wing candidates. In characterizing an open immigration policy as a “Koch brothers proposal,” Sanders is apparently alluding to their support for limited immigration “reform” of the kind that passed through the Senate in 2013, combining limited avenues for citizenship for current undocumented immigrants with a draconian militarization of the US-Mexico border.

Sanders’ own position more closely aligns with the Republican right than even that of the Koch brothers. Wisconsin Governor and Republican presidential candidate Scott Walker, whose claim to fame is forcing through reactionary anti-worker legislation over mass opposition in 2011, echoed Sanders’ argument virtually word-for-word on the Glenn Beck Program in April, declaring: “The next president and the next Congress need to make decisions about a legal immigration system that’s based on, first and foremost, protecting American workers and American wages.”

Sanders’ argument that open borders would “make everybody in America poorer” takes for granted the enforced division between American and immigrant workers and the super-exploitation of the latter. It also implicitly accepts as permanent the continued monopolization of wealth in the US by a tiny financial aristocracy. The expropriation of this parasitic social layer would, in and of itself, provide substantial resources to raise the wages and living standards of all workers in the US, native-born and immigrant alike.

Sanders has called for a “political revolution” against the “billionaire class.” But his chauvinist position on immigration not only demonstrates his opposition to the unification of the working class, it also underscores

his refusal to propose any measures that seriously challenge social inequality. That is because to do so requires championing an attack on entrenched wealth and capitalist private ownership of the banks, corporations and natural resources.

Sanders opposes any such struggle. Hence, his claim that allowing workers of all nations to come to the United States and live and work with full citizenship and democratic rights—a basic principle of genuine socialism—would “make everybody in America poorer.”

By promoting economic nationalism and protectionism, Sanders implicitly argues in favor of American workers lining up behind “their” bosses and government against workers of other countries. So much for his supposed hostility to the American “billionaire class!”

While Democratic politicians, along with their agents in the trade union bureaucracy, have long utilized the supposed threat of foreign labor to whip up nationalist sentiment within the working class, Sanders takes this position to its logical conclusion, openly promoting the sanctity of the American nation state.

The implications of this position are profoundly reactionary. Sanders’ insinuation that open borders would lead to the dissolution of the United States is an argument whose logic leads to fascistic conclusions. Sanders is not a fascist, but his suggestion that immigrants pose a threat to the American nation state recalls the type of arguments and slogans utilized in Germany during the Nazi period. These included the notion of “*überfremdung*”—the inundation of the Fatherland by foreign, non-Aryan elements.

Sanders’ wording cannot be dismissed as a gaff. On the contrary, it conforms to his political record. In 2007 and 2009, he co-sponsored bills with Republican Congressman Chuck Grassley that would have restricted the federal visa program, citing the need to protect American jobs. He has opposed trade deals with China on the grounds of protecting American jobs and “sovereignty,” and denounced transnational corporations for making profits overseas instead of at home, which he portrays as tantamount to treason.

The democratic right of workers to live and work wherever they choose is a basic principle of genuine socialism. It is bound up with opposition to nationalism, which is the essential ideology of the

bourgeoisie, and promotion of internationalism, i.e., the recognition of the fundamental identity of interests of all workers, regardless of nationality, race, ethnicity, religion or gender, and the struggle to unite workers across national borders against their common exploiters, the capitalists of all countries.

Genuine socialism strives for the dismantling of the nation-state system, which is rooted in capitalist private ownership of the means of production, and which, like private ownership, collides at every point with the progressive and rational development of man’s productive forces. The contradiction today between the global economy and the nation-state system is the breeding ground for conflicts between the major powers that threaten mankind with a nuclear Third World War. Only the mobilization of the international working class against imperialist war based on the fight for world socialism can prevent such a catastrophe.

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