

The International Socialist Organization, Bernie Sanders and the Democratic Party

By Tom Hall and Barry Grey
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An article on the Iowa caucuses published on the International Socialist Organization's *Socialist Worker* web site, titled "Iowa's Radical Message," takes forward that organization's efforts to promote illusions in the Democratic Party through the campaign of self-described "democratic socialist" Bernie Sanders.

The basic line of the article is that Democratic presidential candidate Sanders is a genuine progressive and even socialist, that the Democratic Party is somehow less beholden to the American capitalist class than the Republicans, and that working people and youth should seek to push both Sanders and the Democratic Party as a whole to the left by applying pressure from below.

A hallmark of the ISO, as with all the other organizations that comprise the anti-Marxist pseudo-left, is a rejection of any class analysis of political developments, political parties or individual political figures. This leaves the ISO free, behind the smokescreen of nebulous terms such as "left" and "progressive," to promote various left-talking bourgeois candidates and parties.

This is all the more urgent for the ruling elite under conditions of mass alienation from both major parties of big business and a profound crisis of legitimacy of the entire political establishment. This process has found a reflection in the popular support for Sanders, which has taken the political and media establishment, including Sanders himself, by surprise.

The Sanders campaign, which has focused on social inequality and Wall Street criminality, is not an expression of the rising militancy and political radicalization among workers and youth. Rather, it is the response of the American ruling class to the leftward shift in political consciousness within broad sections of the population. Its aim is to corral this development, channel it behind the Democratic Party and render it politically harmless.

Hence the importance for the ruling class of fostering popular illusions in Sanders and thereby reviving flagging illusions in the Democratic Party. This is the role of the ISO.

Authors Danny Katch and Alan Maass begin right off the

bat by lending credibility to Sanders' unwarranted claim to be a socialist, writing in the first paragraph that "the winner of the first primary contest for the Democratic presidential nomination was the socialist from Vermont." They conclude their article on the same note, referring to Sanders as "a democratic socialist candidate."

This theme is developed further, and his anti-establishment rhetoric, including his talk of "political revolution," is palmed off as the real thing. This is despite the fact that the Vermont senator has for decades caucused with the Democratic Party in Congress and supported every Democratic administration.

The authors themselves point to the absence in Sanders' program of any far-reaching reform proposals, let alone socialist demands. They acknowledge that Sanders' "radical talk of socialism and revolution" is used "to describe far-from-revolutionary political positions that more closely resemble the Democratic Party's liberal past." They continue: "And that's not to mention issues like foreign policy, where he is indistinguishable from conventional mainstream Democrats and even a few moderate Republicans." This is the ISO's euphemistic way of saying Sanders fully supports American imperialism and its bloody wars of aggression.

But this does not prevent the authors, talking out of both sides of their mouths, from writing that the Sanders campaign "represents hope for the opposite" to "the kind of compromising," represented by Hillary Clinton, "that the [Democratic] party's base is fed up with."

At another point they vouch for Sanders' so-called "political revolution," which boils down to expanding the Democratic Party's electoral base. They write that in the coming weeks, many Sanders supporters "will be bolstered in their conviction that a system designed to favor a rotten and unequal status quo truly does need the 'political revolution' Sanders is calling for."

The ISO's characterization of Clinton as a "compromiser" is indicative of its efforts to downplay the reactionary character of this party of Wall Street, the Pentagon and the

CIA. The multimillionaire former secretary of state played a leading role in organizing the wars in Syria and Libya and supported the program of drone assassinations. As a member of Obama's cabinet, she helped implement the administration's domestic policies of austerity and repression. The labeling of her as merely a "compromiser," rather than a representative of a criminal ruling class, reflects the attitude of the ISO to the Democratic Party as a whole.

At another point, the authors hail Sanders' announcement last spring of a presidential bid as a "clear and welcome sign of the discontent with the two-party status quo in general—and the *triangulating, neoliberalized Democratic Party* in particular..." [emphasis added]. The problem, in other words, is not the Democratic Party as such, but only its more recent incarnation.

The ISO's use of vague, non-class, non-Marxist terminology to conceal its own class position emerges at another point when the authors, seeking to cover in advance for the line-up of Democratic figures whom they promote behind Clinton, write that "plenty of well-known progressive voices" will take part in attacks by the party establishment against Sanders. They do not attempt to square their designation "progressive" with support for the "neoliberalized" party establishment.

Toward the end of the article, the authors reiterate the ISO's tactical quibble with Sanders—the fact that he is running as a Democrat rather than an independent or third-party candidate. They write: "And, unfortunately, Sanders has made it clear from the beginning of his campaign that if he does lose the nomination, that's just what he'll do—support the Democratic nominee, rather than turning his campaign into an independent run or supporting a genuine left-wing candidate like the Green Party's Jill Stein."

The implication is that Sanders has made an unfortunate mistake by deciding to run for the Democratic Party nomination, as though this decision has nothing to do with his class position or the essential character of his so-called "political revolution."

Then there is the phrase "genuine left-wing candidate," which is devoid of any objective content. In fact, the Green Party is a bourgeois party that draws most of its support from more privileged layers of the middle class and is hostile to the interests of the working class. Jill Stein's counterparts internationally have fully supported the policies of war, austerity and repression carried out by the governments of Europe, and are currently involved in whipping up a racist witch-hunt against refugees and Muslims across the continent.

Even if Sanders had decided to run as an independent, it

would not have fundamentally altered the character of his campaign. The American ruling class has vast experience in conjuring up so-called "independent" and "third party" campaigns to serve as lightning rods for popular discontent and preempt an independent political movement of the working class—from the Populist Party at the end of the 19th century to the "Progressive Party" campaign of Henry Wallace in 1948.

The basic point of the entire presentation of the Sanders campaign by the ISO is to encourage illusions that popular pressure can shift Sanders and the Democratic Party to the left—that somehow, this right-wing capitalist party can serve as a vehicle for securing the needs and interests of working people.

Eight years ago, the ISO, along with the entire pseudo-left, became ardent cheerleaders for the presidential campaign of Barack Obama. The ISO hailed his election as a "transformative" event that would end decades of political reaction and open up a new period of progressive social reform in America. When Obama began breaking his campaign promises with lightning speed while continuing and intensifying the reactionary policies of his predecessor, the ISO adopted the line that popular pressure from below could free him from the influence of the right wing and allow him to follow his supposedly natural inclinations toward progressive reform.

This, of course, was proven by the experience of millions to be a political fraud. But, like the rest of the pseudo-left fraternity, the ISO never makes an accounting of its past. Utilizing the same cynical *modus operandi*, it has now embarked on a campaign to promote similar illusions in Sanders, for the same reactionary ends.

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