

The political role of the Bernie Sanders campaign

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Tuesday's landslide victory for Bernie Sanders in the Democratic New Hampshire primary has intensified the crisis of the Hillary Clinton campaign and raised the possibility of Sanders pulling ahead in the Democratic Party primary process as a whole.

The details of Tuesday's vote provide more evidence of the widespread support for the Sanders campaign, particularly among younger and lower-income voters. According to exit polls, Sanders was backed by 83 percent of voters under 30, by 67 percent of those with no college degree, and by 72 percent of voters with incomes under \$30,000 a year. A third of voters said that income inequality was the most important issue in the election, and these backed Sanders by 71 percent. The only demographics that went to Clinton were voters over the age of 65 (54 percent) and voters with incomes over \$200,000 (53 percent).

One further statistic points to the essential political role of the Sanders campaign: Forty percent of voters in the Democratic primary identified themselves as "independent/undeclared" (that is, not registered as a Democrat), and these backed Sanders by 72 percent. The Vermont senator has repeatedly said the principal aim of his "political revolution" is to bring voters back into the fold of the Democratic Party.

The growing support for Sanders is an initial political reflection of deep tensions in the United States, which have been artificially suppressed for decades, as social inequality rose to levels not seen since before the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Particularly since the 2008 financial crash, the American ruling class has engaged in a restructuring of class relations that has seen trillions funneled to the banks while the vast majority of the population faced falling wages, attacks on health care and pensions, mass unemployment and rising indebtedness. Young people, who back Sanders by a wide margin, have known nothing but economic crisis, war and attacks on democratic rights.

An eighteen-year-old new voter would have been four years old when the "war on terror" began and 11 at the onset of the global financial crisis.

The growth in support for Sanders is a delayed reaction to these objective conditions. In a country where socialist ideas have been suppressed for decades, it turns out that millions of people have essentially, if as yet vaguely defined, anti-capitalist views. The politics of identity, based on race, gender, sexual preference—the obsession of upper-middle class layers—has very little broader impact, as revealed in the failure of Clinton to win over women voters by trumpeting her bid to become the first female president (along with claims that Sanders backers are sexist).

However, to say that the support for Sanders is an expression of deep social anger is very different from saying that the Sanders campaign itself articulates and represents this anger. Sanders does not speak for the working class, but for a section of the ruling class and political establishment that views the growth of social opposition with fear and is seeking some way of containing it. The ruling class sees as the greatest danger the emergence of an independent movement of the working class that challenges its economic and political power. Sanders' task is to block such a development by channeling popular opposition back behind the Democratic Party.

Anyone who is under the illusion that Sanders is not completely conscious of his assigned role should study his Tuesday night victory speech. Hailing an increase in voter turnout in the primary, Sanders declared, "That is what will happen all over this country. Let us never forget, Democrats and progressives win when voter turnout is high." He added that it was necessary to "remember—and this is a message not just to our opponents, *but to those who support me as well*—that we need to come together in a few months and unite this party" behind whomever is nominated (emphasis added).

Sanders is seeking to “bring new people into the political process” to strengthen the credibility of the Democratic Party, which has suffered severely under Obama, the supposed “candidate of change.” In 2012, Obama became the first president since Franklin D. Roosevelt to be reelected with fewer votes in his second election than in his first. This was due to a sharp fall in voter turnout, which the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time was an expression of “an electorate that is disillusioned and increasingly alienated from the entire two-party political system.”

In terms of his actual program, the most essential issue is not Sanders’ promises of a \$15 minimum wage and free tuition at public colleges and universities—which President Sanders would quickly drop because they would cut into corporate profits—but his support for imperialist war. Throughout the campaign, Sanders has said very little about foreign policy, but what he has said is aimed at assuring the ruling class and the military that he poses no danger.

In Sanders’ speech Tuesday night, perhaps the loudest applause from the audience came when he referred to his vote against the Iraq war in 2003. However, this was followed immediately with the pledge that “we must, and will destroy ISIS”—that is, prosecute the war in Iraq and Syria.

These comments are made as the Obama administration, whose foreign policy Sanders has repeatedly defended, is preparing an enormous escalation of the war in Syria, aimed above all at the removal of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The conflict in Syria threatens to spark war with nuclear-armed Russia, the target of relentless threats by the US and the European powers, including a vast militarization of Eastern Europe.

Sanders opposes none of this. If he were called upon by the ruling class, he would use his “progressive” credentials to buttress support for war. Those “feeling the Bern” today would experience bombs tomorrow. Sanders would justify breaking his empty promises of social reform by pointing to the financial requirements of war.

The Vermont senator’s political affiliation is not a secondary question. He is fulfilling a task that has been assigned to political figures—functioning either within the Democratic Party or nominally outside of it—many times before. This has included the presidential campaigns of William Jennings Bryan in the early 20th century (as the “populist” candidate of the Democratic Party), Robert La Follette in the 1920s (for the Farmer-Labor Party, which later became a wing of the Democratic Party), and

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s former vice president Henry Wallace in 1948 (for the Progressive Party, backed by the Stalinist Communist Party). More modern examples include the likes of Jesse Jackson and Dennis Kucinich within the Democratic Party, as well as the various Green Party campaigns directed at pressuring the Democratic Party from the outside.

Sanders aims not to create a “revolution,” as he asserts in his campaign speeches, but to prevent one. If he is elected, he will rapidly and brazenly repudiate all of his promises. His actions will mirror those of Syriza in Greece (elected on the basis of opposition to austerity in January 2015, now implementing an even more brutal austerity program dictated by the banks) and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK (the “left” Labour Party leader elected last year, who played the essential role in facilitating the Conservative government’s decision to take the country into war against Syria).

Organizations that argue that Sanders, under pressure, can be pushed to the left are themselves moving to the right, utilizing his campaign as another mechanism for integrating themselves into the capitalist state.

There are many signs that class tensions in the United States are beginning to erupt to the surface, from the militant opposition of autoworkers to last year’s sellout contracts, to the sickouts of teachers and students in Detroit and the mass anger over the poisoning of Flint, Michigan residents by lead-contaminated water. The conspiracies of the ruling class to expand war abroad will come into conflict with the deep antiwar sentiment that exists in the American working class.

However, a political path forward for the working class can be forged only through a struggle to establish its political independence on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. This requires an uncompromising exposure of the politics of Sanders and all those who, in the name of “getting close to the masses,” adapt to him and cover up his role.

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