

Political lessons of the Sanders campaign

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With his speech to supporters on Thursday night, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders began the process of drawing to a close his campaign for the Democratic Party presidential nomination. Sanders has yet to formally endorse the presumptive candidate, Hillary Clinton. But he told his supporters that the “major political task” over the next five months would be to defeat Donald Trump and he left no doubt that he would be working closely with Clinton to this end.

When Sanders announced his candidacy in May of 2015, he issued a call for a “political revolution to transform our country economically, politically, socially and environmentally.” On the basis of denunciations of the “billionaire class” and a focus on the issue of social inequality, Sanders received far more support than either he or the Democratic Party leadership had anticipated. In the course of the Democratic primaries, the self-described “democratic socialist” won some 12 million votes, piling up large majorities among lower-income voters and particularly among young people.

The growth of anti-capitalist sentiment revealed in the support for Sanders frightened the ruling class. The affinity of broad sections of American workers and youth for socialism, combined with widespread hatred for Clinton—seen by millions as a war-monger, Wall Street lackey and pillar of the status quo—produced a major political crisis for the Clinton campaign, nearly derailing her planned coronation.

Now, however, as he prepares to make a formal endorsement of Clinton, Sanders is forced to clarify the precise content that always laid behind his vaguely defined “political revolution.” Thursday’s speech was the clearest elaboration of the political strategy that has guided Sanders’ campaign from the beginning. “Real change,” he declared, “never comes from the top down... It always occurs from the bottom up... That’s what the political revolution we helped to start is all about.”

The aim of this “bottom up” revolution, he continued, must be to defeat Trump, ensure that the Democratic National Convention “passes the most progressive

platform in history,” develop a “50-state strategy” so that Democrats win throughout the country and flood the Democratic Party with Sanders supporters.

In other words, the “political revolution” in the end amounts to seeking to transform the Democratic Party, the oldest capitalist party in the world, into a party for progressive change and social equality. “I am looking forward to working with Secretary Clinton to transform the Democratic Party so that it becomes a party of working people and young people, and not just wealthy campaign contributors,” he told his supporters. This task, he said, will last generations—“a long and arduous process of transforming America.”

The idea that Sanders is promoting, that his campaign marks the beginning of a shift of the Democratic Party to the left, is a fraud. Nothing exposes this more clearly than the candidate he is preparing to support.

Clinton is among the most widely despised candidates of a major party in US history, the personification of corruption and nepotism. Not only is she a mainstay of the Democratic Party establishment, she, along with her ex-president husband, have for decades played a leading role in shifting the Democrats ever further to the right. Both Clintons were prominent members of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), formed in 1985 to appeal to sections of the Republican Party on the basis of pro-market and pro-war policies. This was part of an effort to completely separate the Democratic Party from the policies of social reform with which it had been associated since the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal.

Bill Clinton served as a chairman of the DLC prior to his election in 1992. As US president, he oversaw the abolition of welfare, an end to the Glass-Steagall banking regulations, the expansion of charter schools, law-and-order attacks on democratic rights, sanctions and bombings against Iraq and the war against Serbia. Hillary Clinton was a prominent leader of the DLC throughout her term as a senator from New York, which she used to deepen her ties to both Wall Street and the

military-intelligence apparatus (including through her vocal support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq).

As secretary of state under Obama, Clinton positioned herself on the right wing of the Democratic Party foreign policy establishment, calling for a “no-fly” zone in Syria and more aggressive measures against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, actions that could quickly lead to war between the US and Russia. She is directly responsible for the destruction of Libya and the overall disaster in the Middle East that has produced the greatest refugee crisis since the Second World War.

Yet Clinton is to be Sanders’ ally in transforming the Democratic Party into a “party of working people and young people!”

The Sanders campaign in many respects mirrors those of previous “left” and “insurgent” Democratic Party candidates and political figures, including Jesse Jackson, Dennis Kucinich, Al Sharpton, Howard Dean and even Barack Obama himself—the “transformative” candidate of “hope and change” whose election in 2008 supposedly inaugurated a sea-change in American politics. The results of these previous proposals to perform political alchemy on the Democratic Party are self-evident.

Sanders, however, is seeking to carry out the job of channeling opposition into the Democratic Party under far more explosive conditions. The growth of social inequality and the deterioration of the conditions of life for workers and young people—particularly in the nearly eight years since the financial meltdown of 2008—have produced an enormous level of social and political discontent.

With Sanders making his exit, the Democratic Party and the media are moving quickly to suppress the class issues that motivated his supporters by promoting even more aggressively the politics of race, gender and sexual orientation. This is to be combined with appeals to sections of the Republican Party and the military concerned about the implications for US imperialism of a Trump presidency to join forces behind Clinton.

The objective factors that underlie the support for Sanders, however, will not go away. The two-party system in the United States is beginning to break apart. There are clear signs of a resurgence of class struggle in the US and internationally, and these are only a pale indication of what is to come. Whoever wins in November, new and far more bloody wars are being planned, intersecting with and intensifying the economic crisis and the breakdown of democratic forms of rule in the United States and internationally.

It is necessary to assimilate the experience of the Sanders campaign and draw the appropriate political conclusions in order to prepare for what lies ahead. It is not so much a question of Sanders himself—he is, in the end, a dime-a-dozen bourgeois politician—but a whole type of pragmatic politics that hopes for a solution to the crisis confronting the working class without a direct challenge to the capitalist system.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) anticipated the trajectory of the Sanders campaign because we based ourselves on a scientific, historically grounded, Marxist analysis that proceeds not from what political tendencies or individuals say about themselves, but from their history and program and the class interests they represent.

The only way forward for the working class is on the basis of a genuinely revolutionary policy—not a “political revolution” to promote the Democratic Party, but a socialist revolution to overthrow the capitalist system. The Socialist Equality Party is spearheading the organization of the working class independently of all parties and factions of the ruling class, on the basis of a socialist program to fight for workers’ power and public ownership of the corporations and banks under the democratic control of the working people, in the United States and internationally.

It is to build a socialist political leadership in the working class that the SEP and its candidates, Jerry White and Niles Niemuth, are running in the presidential election. We call on all workers and young people to support our campaign and make the decision to join the Socialist Equality Party.

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