

Sanders town hall in DC promotes illusions in the Democrats and trade unions

By Tom Hall
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On Monday, Senator Bernie Sanders hosted a town hall meeting at the US Capitol, “Inequality in America: The Rise of Oligarchy and Collapse of the Middle Class.” The event was livestreamed on Sanders’ Facebook page to an audience estimated at nearly two million people.

The meeting was headed by a four-person panel chaired by Sanders himself, and also included Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, documentary filmmaker Michael Moore, and Derrick Hamilton, a black professor of urban policy at The New School in New York City. The four were also joined at different points of the broadcast by Catherine Flowers, the founder of the Alabama Center for Rural Enterprise, Cindy Estrada, a vice president of the United Auto Workers, and Gordon Lafer, a political science professor from the University of Oregon.

The first half of the program was devoted to a depiction of social conditions in the United States, including pre-taped interviews with workers of all races, gender and ages. These segments, combined with the description of rural poverty in Alabama by Flowers, contained informative, and at times, even moving descriptions of the horrors of daily life for the poor in the United States.

However, the assembled panelists offered no solution to the social crisis. They did not propose any serious measures to address the skyrocketing social inequality and domination of American society by the super-rich. Rather, the purpose of this material was to offer pretended sympathy for the poor from the Democratic Party and to promote the Democrats in the 2018 elections. Sanders’ panel set as their task the bolstering of illusions in the Democrats as a party which is capable of representing the interests of working people.

This task is complicated by the fact that the

Democrats, as a party of Wall Street and the military, are directly responsible for the social conditions which were portrayed in the first half of the event. Barack Obama, the overwhelming favorite of Wall Street donors in 2008 and 2012, bailed out the banks in 2008 and spearheaded the restructuring of the auto industry in 2009, slashing pay for new hires in half, with the support of the UAW. The outcome of his two terms in office was unprecedented levels of social inequality, unending imperialist war, and the substantial erosion of democratic rights and the growth of the unrestricted activities of the federal spy agencies.

Since the Democratic debacle in the 2016 election, the Democrats have shifted even further to the right, attacking domestic political opposition to capitalist austerity, police violence and war as the product of Russian agents. The Democratic leadership has welcomed a flood of ex-military officers and ex-spies as candidates for Congress in 2018. At the same time, Democrats have promised to retain most of the corporate tax cuts enacted last year by Trump and the Republicans.

Michael Moore, who was in general the crassest and most provocative of the panelists, came closest to admitting the truth at two different points in the discussion. Moore noted that the three billionaires, Warren Buffett, Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates, who own as much wealth as the poorest half of America, “tread water on our side of the political fence,” i.e., they generally support the Democratic Party. Moore later recounted an exchange with Jamie Dimon, CEO of JPMorgan Chase, in which the banker objected to Moore’s portrayal of Wall Street in the documentary, *Capitalism: a Love Story*, noting that he and other billionaires had poured money into Obama’s presidential campaign.

Nevertheless, Moore ended his contributions at the town hall with enthusiastic predictions of a Democratic “tsunami” and encouraging the audience to become involved in Democratic Party politics. Moore went so far as to blame decades of declining living standards on the workers who voted “for the rich man candidates,” i.e., Ronald Reagan and other Republicans.

Moore and Hamilton, in particular, sought to bury the fundamental class issues by elevating questions of race and gender to the forefront. Hamilton, a relative unknown compared to his three co-panelists, was obviously brought onto the panel for this purpose, and ended his remarks with a call for paying reparations to black people for slavery. However, Moore sought to outdo his counterpart, at one point, declaring that the political struggle against Trump and his alleged political supporters among “white workers” should be waged by appealing to women, minorities and young people, because they combined to account for the “70 percent” of the population.

The presence of Estrada on the panel discussion deserves special attention. Estrada is widely hated among autoworkers for her role in enforcing the UAW’s concessions contract in 2015 against a rebellion by the rank and file. Since then, Estrada has been implicated in the FBI’s investigation into bribery and kickbacks given to UAW officials by the American auto companies. There are few figures within the American trade union bureaucracy who personify more directly the character of the trade unions as a corrupt, management-controlled industrial police force.

Yet Sanders and company promoted Estrada as a genuine representative of the American working class. They bemoaned the fall in union membership over the past 30 years and blamed this for the fall in workers’ wages, but ignored the fact that Estrada and her colleagues have participated in wage cuts and plant closures for decades, and profited handsomely from it, with the assets and salaries controlled by the bureaucracy having exploded over that same period.

They also whitewashed the role played by the teachers’ unions in West Virginia, with Moore declaring that the unions achieved a great victory which “brought down the state apparatus.” In fact, the unions collaborated with Republican Governor Jim Justice to wind down the strike as quickly as possible, and their first attempt to enforce a sell-out deal sparked

a rebellion by the teachers. It was this rebellion which genuinely threatened the “state apparatus” because the teachers had temporarily escaped the control of the unions and threatened to expand their struggle into a broader movement of the working class as a whole.

The unions later were barely able to ram through a second sellout deal, without allowing teachers to vote on it or give them time to consider it, which funds a modest 5 percent pay increase through significant cuts to social spending and does nothing to address the teachers’ main demand of funding for their health insurance program.

The emphasis that Sanders’ panel placed on promoting the trade unions reflects particular fears within the Democratic Party that the struggle in West Virginia, and subsequent calls for strike action by teachers in Oklahoma, Arizona, and elsewhere, have largely bypassed or threatened to escape the control of the trade unions. The fact that teachers were able to organize on social media to resist the unions’ attempts to shut down their strike also demonstrates that the real focus of the Democrats’ campaign for censorship of social media, supposedly to limit Russian infiltration, is in fact directed against domestic opposition within the American working class.

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