

Bernie Sanders silent on Assange, vocal in promoting nationalism at Michigan rally

By Tom Hall
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At a campaign rally Saturday in Warren, Michigan, Bernie Sanders maintained his silence on the arrest of Julian Assange. To date, Sanders has not issued a single statement on Assange since the former WikiLeaks editor was dragged from the Ecuadorean embassy by British police on Thursday. The Trump administration is seeking his illegal transfer to the United States, where he faces imprisonment, torture or even execution.

World Socialist Web Site reporter Andre Damon, together with this reporter, asked Sanders as he was leaving the suburban Detroit rally venue whether he supported the arrest and imprisonment of Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning. We received no reply.

Sanders' silence demonstrates his support for the rendition of Assange. In the days since the arrest, both the Democrats and Republicans have erupted in celebration. For the entire ruling class, the silencing of Assange has been a top priority. Politicians and military officials have for years called for Assange to be captured and killed in retaliation for his journalistic exposures of the crimes of American imperialism.

Sanders has long supported the Democrats' anti-Russia campaign, at the center of which is the slander that WikiLeaks collaborated with the Russian government and the Trump election campaign to publish leaked material damaging to Hillary Clinton's presidential bid.

"Trump doesn't understand what Russia has done, not only to our elections, but through cyber-attacks against all parts of our infrastructure," Sanders said last July, adding, "We have got to make sure that Russia does not interfere, not only in our elections, but in other aspects of our lives."

In October 2015, Sanders also came out in support of prosecution for whistleblower Edward Snowden, who

revealed illegal spying on a massive scale by the American intelligence agencies. "He did break the law, and I think there should be a penalty to that," Sanders said, adding cynically that his sentence should be "lenient."

Sanders enters the crowded Democratic primary race as one of the presumptive frontrunners, as the *Los Angeles Times* and other newspapers have recently acknowledged. In the polls, Sanders leads all other candidates with the possible exception of Joe Biden, who has not officially announced and whose chances may have already been torpedoed by a #MeToo-style campaign against him. Sanders has also raised more money to date than any other candidate, mostly from small donations.

However, the comparatively small turnout at Saturday's rally suggests much reduced enthusiasm from workers and young people since his 2016 campaign. Only a few hundred people, mostly drawn from middle-class layers, attended the rally, which was held in a small parking lot at Macomb County Community College.

This is a far cry from 2016, when thousands of people turned out to hear Sanders speak at rallies throughout the country, and in the Midwest in particular, attracted by Sanders' self-professed "democratic socialism." The widespread support he received reflected deep opposition to social inequality and poverty, especially in economically devastated former industrial areas.

There was evident frustration among Sanders' own campaign volunteers over his failure to defend Julian Assange, indicating the fragile character of his popular support. "This is one of a few things he's done that have disappointed me," one campaigner told this reporter.

Amit Barua, an IT worker and the Sanders campaign's precinct organizer for Sterling Heights, said Sanders' silence "says a lot," adding, "Sanders isn't concerned about Assange because he is a part of the government." He added that he thought the ruling class was afraid of Assange because "they are afraid of what happens when people revolt."

Sanders acknowledged at Saturday's rally that Trump had won the Midwestern states in the general election that he (Sanders) had carried in the primaries, adding that his 2020 campaign would ensure "that mistake won't be repeated."

In reality, a major factor behind Trump's victory in these states was Sanders' own support for Hillary Clinton, widely hated by workers for her pro-war policies and ties to Wall Street. Within the narrow framework of the American political system, this left workers with no way to register their opposition to war and inequality except to abstain or vote for the right-wing populist Trump.

Since then, Sanders has repeatedly declared his willingness to support Trump's protectionist and trade war measures, which are closely connected politically to Trump's attack on immigration and his promotion of extreme-right forces. On Saturday, Sanders called out Trump for not going far enough on this score.

Seeking to attack Trump from the right and outdo the president's appeal to chauvinism and xenophobia, the Vermont senator declared: "The NAFTA treaty that Trump renegotiated with Mexico will still allow companies like General Motors to send our jobs to Mexico. So today, I challenge Donald Trump: For once in your life, keep your campaign promises. Go back to the drawing board on NAFTA. Do not send this treaty to Congress unless it includes strong and swift enforcement mechanisms to raise the wages of workers and to prevent corporations from outsourcing American jobs to Mexico." Sanders added that corporations which move production overseas should not expect to receive federal contracts.

This nationalist appeal in Warren follows his remarks in Iowa last week, when Sanders declared his opposition to open borders, stating, "You open the borders, there's a lot of poverty in this world, and you're gonna have people from all over the world. And I don't think that this is something that you can do at this point. Can't do it."

Sanders was praised by the American neo-Nazi leader Richard Spencer for these remarks.

In Warren, Sanders made only vague, perfunctory remarks on immigration, calling for "comprehensive immigration reform" and an unspecified "path to citizenship" for undocumented immigrants.

His support for nationalism is bound up with his support for the AFL-CIO, the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the rest of the official trade unions, which have promoted nationalism for decades as part of their effort to sabotage workers' struggles against plant closures and layoffs. Speaking before Sanders at the rally, an ex-bureaucrat in the Teamsters union and the UAW pledged support for Sanders from these corrupt organizations, declaring, "Labor will be behind Bernie."

Sanders, no doubt, chose Michigan as the site for these remarks because of the recently announced GM plant closures, to which the UAW and its Canadian counterpart, Unifor, have responded with anti-Mexican chauvinism. The UAW, which has been exposed in an ongoing federal investigation for taking millions in bribes from Fiat Chrysler in return for forcing through pro-company contracts, is determined to prevent American workers from developing a joint struggle with Mexican autoworkers, who recently went on strike in Matamoros.

Sanders' silent support for the persecution of Assange and his promotion of nationalism arise from his pro-capitalist, pro-imperialist political orientation. These right-wing positions demonstrate that his real aim is not, as he claims, to lead a "political revolution" against the "billionaire class," but to misdirect, disorient and suppress opposition among workers and young people by channeling it behind the corporate-controlled, pro-war Democratic Party.

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