

The Democratic debate: A right-wing party unmasked

By Patrick Martin
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The two days of debates among Democratic presidential candidates held in Detroit, the second round in the 2020 campaign, gave a striking demonstration of the right-wing character of this corporate-controlled party.

Despite an effort on the first night by Senator Bernie Sanders and Senator Elizabeth Warren to give the Democrats a “left” face, with nonstop demagoguery over health care for all and rhetorical assaults on corporate America, the real nature of the Democratic Party came out very clearly on the second night.

One candidate after another assailed their rivals on the stage, denouncing one or another past action or position, invariably of a right-wing character. The candidate attacked would then respond by citing some even worse offense committed by the would-be critic.

Typical was an exchange midway through the Wednesday night session between Senator Cory Booker and former Vice President Joe Biden. Booker berated Biden for his sponsorship of a series of law-and-order bills in the 1980s and 1990s that have contributed to the vastly increased incarceration rate among African-Americans and Hispanics.

Biden’s response was not to defend his record, or express regret for the outcome of the legal changes he helped engineer, but to attack Booker for his own law-and-order tactics during his years as mayor of Newark, New Jersey, when he brought in a right-wing police chief and embarked on a program of “stop and frisk” (directed against working class and particularly minority youth), and “zero tolerance” (demanding prison sentences for even minor offenses).

Given the right-wing records of all of the candidates, there was plenty of ammunition to go around.

At one point, the purportedly most “left” of the ten candidates on the stage Wednesday night, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, came under fire for his response to the police murder of Eric Garner, who died in a

chokehold by policeman Daniel Pantaleo in 2015, as several rivals denounced him because Pantaleo is still employed by the New York Police Department. The same issue was raised by protesters inside the Fox Theatre who began chanting “Fire Pantaleo.”

Later, demonstrators interrupted the former Vice President with chants of “3 million deportations,” the number of people deported under the Obama administration.

At another point, during a discussion of race and criminal justice, Representative Tulsi Gabbard gave a detailed exposition of the record of Senator Kamala Harris during her eight years as California state attorney general—clearly prepared in advance—indicting her for covering up misconduct by prosecutors, opposing DNA testing for a Death Row prisoner who was later exonerated, and a general hostility to elementary democratic principles.

Former Vice President Biden, a fixture in American politics for nearly half a century, was the most vulnerable to such attacks, which invariably took the form of attempts to appeal to popular left-wing sentiment. Biden was criticized for his vote for the war in Iraq, for his long record as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee in pushing law-and-order legislation, for the Obama administration’s record of mass deportations, and for his recent assurances to wealthy campaign donors that “nothing fundamental would change” for them in a Biden administration.

The efforts to talk “left” reached absurd proportions. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand denounced any health care plan based on private insurance, embraced the Green New Deal, attacked de Blasio over the Garner killing, and sought to add a large dose of feminism to the mix. One would not know, to listen to her radical-sounding rhetoric, that she is a former tobacco industry lawyer and was a Blue Dog Democratic congresswoman (the party’s most

right-wing faction), before being appointed to succeed Hillary Clinton in the Senate.

On both nights of the debate, the issue of health care was the first issue raised and took up the lion's share of the discussion. This was a deliberate decision by CNN, which broadcast the event, undoubtedly in consultation with the Democratic Party establishment and Wall Street interests, which sought to push the discussion on this issue sharply to the right. The candidates who advocate "Medicare for All"—Sanders and Warren on Tuesday night, Harris, Gillibrand and de Blasio on Wednesday night—were attacked for allegedly advocating making private insurance illegal.

On Tuesday night, at least half a dozen rivals attacked Sanders and Warren, who occupied the center of the stage because of their standing the polls (ranked among the top four, along with Biden and Harris). These attacks were entirely from the right, with claims that working people love their private insurance (hatred of insurance companies is near-universal), that unions have negotiated generous health care benefits that meet workers' needs (news to most union members), and suggestions that open opposition to the profit-based health insurance system would lead to electoral disaster.

On Wednesday, Biden followed the same line of attack, echoed by Senator Michael Bennet. He defended Obamacare, portraying it as a giant step towards universal coverage rather than what it is in reality, a boondoggle for the insurance companies at the expense of working people. And he attacked the "Medicare for All" plans as both too costly and potentially provoking a political backlash.

There was not a single question on poverty, on the decline in living standards for working people, on the opioid crisis, on the crisis in public education. There was not a hint that the United States is in the midst of a significant political crisis, with a president openly defying constitutional norms and moving toward the establishment of an authoritarian regime.

Trump's fascist diatribes against four Democratic congresswomen and against the city of Baltimore went unmentioned, even though the debate was held in Detroit, and the Fox Theatre is located in the 13th Congressional District, represented by Rashida Tlaib, one of the four Democrats targeted by Trump.

Nor did any of the 20 candidates, on either night, seek to raise these issues in any serious way.

The question on the economy gave Biden the opportunity to boast of his role in organizing the bailout

of the auto industry in 2009 and the onslaught on the jobs, wages and working conditions of autoworkers that followed. He claimed to have helped "save GM and Chrysler" and to have "worked to help get Detroit out of bankruptcy," boasting of his endorsement by the current mayor, Mike Duggan.

The first night of the debate, in addition to the exchanges on health care, saw nearly every candidate echoing President Trump in advocating economic nationalism and voicing anti-China chauvinism.

Sanders claimed that Detroit was rebounding economically, then added, "Detroit was nearly destroyed because of awful trade policy which allowed corporations to throw workers in this community out on the streets as they moved to low-wage countries."

Warren denounced the multinational corporations because "They have no loyalty to America. They have no patriotism. If they can save a nickel by moving a job to Mexico, they'll do it in a heartbeat."

Sanders then boasted that he was the only member of Congress who voted against NAFTA and against Permanent Normalized Trade Relations with China, and echoed Warren: "Elizabeth is absolutely right. If anybody here thinks that corporate America gives one damn about the average American worker, you're mistaken. If they can save five cents by going to China, Mexico, or Vietnam, or anyplace else, that's exactly what they will do."

There was an obvious question posed by the anti-corporate demagoguery of Warren and Sanders. They correctly characterized rampant criminality on Wall Street, in the insurance companies, in the pharmaceutical industry, in the fossil fuel industry—areas that comprise a substantial section of the American economy. But they propose to leave the criminals in charge of the crime scene: neither Democrat proposes the slightest inroads against capitalist property relations. The word nationalization never comes up, and as for "socialism," Sanders has made it clear that this means nothing more to him than warmed-over New Deal liberalism.

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