

Democratic Socialists of America launches nationwide campaign for Bernie Sanders

By Genevieve Leigh
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This past weekend, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) officially launched its nationwide campaign for Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders. The campaign kicked off with a weekend of neighborhood canvassing, registering new Democratic Party voters, phone banking, “social media hype,” tabling on college campuses throughout the country, and “picnics and parties,” according to the DSA website.

The organization has essentially been gearing up for an all-out campaign for Sanders for nearly three years, ever since his loss to Hillary Clinton in the Democratic Party primaries in 2016. The nominally socialist organization justifies its support for the Democratic Party candidate on the pretense that they are running a “critical campaign” to pull Sanders to the left.

As explained on the new “DSA for Bernie” campaign website, the perspective of the DSA is that “Bernie’s agenda will transform our society” and that his bid for president represents “a historic opportunity to bring democratic socialist politics to millions of people.”

The role of the DSA, as they present it, is to “bring together the ‘us’ that will put Bernie in the White House, and then go on to create the grassroots political pressure needed to transform our economy and politics into a true democracy, where ordinary people have everything they need to live free and flourishing lives.” Later on they add that, “a Bernie Sanders presidency is our best shot at fighting economic exploitation, racial and gender inequality, war, poverty, and climate destruction.”

There is a farcical element to the campaign. The fate of everything is placed in the hands of a single, 78-year-old man, the supposed savior of progressive politics. One wonders what becomes of this perspective if “Bernie” does not make it to the White House, to the convention, or even to the first primary.

The political perspective underlying the program and strategy of the DSA is based on three fundamental lies. First, that Sanders has anything to do with socialism. Second, that the Democratic Party can be a vehicle for left-wing politics. And lastly, that any of the fundamental problems facing the working class can be solved through reforming the capitalist system.

Bernie Sanders: Silent partner of American militarism

Sanders attracted millions of supporters in the 2016 primary—to the shock of many, including Sanders himself—by calling for a “political revolution” against the billionaire class and denouncing inequality. Despite revelations that the Democratic National Committee rigged the primary process against him, Sanders endorsed Hillary Clinton, the widely despised candidate of Wall Street and war.

Sanders has since moved steadily to the right. While nominally independent, he has been elevated to a top position in the Democratic Party. He has used his influence to give a left gloss to the right-wing policies of the Democrats. This includes his full support for the Democratic Party’s anti-Russia campaign and his silence on the Democrats’ subservience to the CIA, the unending militarist violence carried out by the Obama administration and nearly every other crime of US imperialism.

Among the most significant and telling aspects of Sanders politics is his stance on war and militarism. On the only page of the DSA-for-Bernie website dealing with politics, the DSA has a carefully written blurb under a section titled “End the Wars” which asserts that Sanders “calls for a drastic cut to military spending and the restoration of democratic accountability for US intervention across the globe.”

In fact, throughout his career Sanders has acted like a typical Democrat on war. He supported the Clinton administration’s war against Serbia in 1999 and the Bush administration’s invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, while voting against the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and the Authorization for the Use of Military Force against Iraq in 2002. Sanders criticized Obama’s bombing of Libya in 2011—mainly because he did not seek congressional authorization—but backed his bombing in Iraq and Syria in 2014.

In the 2016 primary his positions on foreign policy were virtually indistinguishable from Obama and Clinton, even at times attacking them from the right on issues like trade with China. When asked directly about his attitude to US military intervention in the “war on terror,” he declared he was for “drones, all that and more.”

Perhaps most significantly, Sanders has maintained a shameful silence on the persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

The truth is that Sanders is a longtime defender of US imperialism. His pro-imperialist record poses a significant problem for the DSA as millions of workers and youth are becoming increasingly hostile to the unending wars which have dominated their entire lives.

The most conscious elements of the DSA leadership recognize this glaring contradiction. Among the resolutions passed in relation to Sanders at the DSA convention this summer was a “Petition to Bernie Sanders for a People’s Foreign Policy Platform,” which resolves to set up an online petition “urging Bernie Sanders to commit to the following actions immediately ...”

The resolution goes on to specify that “approximately 20 hours of staff time in 2019” will be required for this project to set up the petition, publicize to chapters and general membership, and redirect possible queries to the sponsors.

Setting aside for a moment the fact that nowhere in their campaign material, on their website, in their press releases or on their social media is there any trace of criticism of Sanders’ pro-imperialist policies, only the most politically naive would believe that Sanders’ decades-long commitment to US imperialism would be altered from a petition request from the DSA—completed with only “20 hours of staff time.”

Sanders’ Democratic Party credentials: from the horse’s mouth

The entire Sanders campaign in the 2020 election is designed to leverage his popularity to promote the Democratic Party. The DSA has been brought forward to burnish his “socialist” credentials to assist Sanders in this process.

In one of his earliest campaign appearances earlier this year, in a “Town Hall” event on CNN, Sanders was asked: “Why have you decided to pursue the Democratic Party nomination despite the fact that you have consistently run as an independent or other party for the last 50 years?”

Sanders replied, “Let’s set the record straight. I am a member of the Democratic leadership of the United States Senate. I’ve been a member of the Democratic caucus in the Senate for the last 13 years and in the House for 16 years before that and won the Democratic nomination in my state. But in Vermont I have chosen to run as an independent, which goes way, way back.”

After boasting of his Democratic Party credentials, Sanders went on to explain why he has run as an independent: “You know, the truth is that more and more people are disenchanted with both the Republican and Democratic plank. And especially young people. They are registering as Independents, or not affiliated folks. And I think as somebody who was an Independent, we can bring them into the Democratic Party.”

He vowed later on in the same segment that as in 2016 when he campaigned at 40-plus rallies for Hillary Clinton, he will support whichever candidate the Democratic Party ends up nominating in 2020.

Sanders’ role could not be stated more plainly.

The DSA and the strategy of the “dirty break”

The DSA voted to back the Sanders bid for president at their summer convention, during which they officially endorsed a policy they refer to as a “dirty break” with the Democratic Party. The so-called strategy entails endorsing Democrats who claim to be socialists in order to take advantage of the Democratic Party ballot line.

The maneuver is certainly dirty but it is no break. Its real purpose is, in fact, to maintain the political credibility of the DSA among young people who are hostile to the Democrats while at the same time directing them into the Democratic Party. The DSA has no intention of breaking with the Democratic Party.

Contrary to the DSA’s assertion that the campaign for Sanders is about “bringing democratic socialist politics to millions,” the real function of his campaign is to trap millions of workers and youth within the framework of the Democratic Party.

The Democratic Party, as a result of its right-wing policies, has lost significant support among workers, and particularly among young people. Sanders’ aim, utilizing his reputation as an “independent,” is to convince them not to seek an alternative.

In a revealing section of their DSA-for-Bernie site, they admit that “many of the reforms he [Sanders] proposes do not themselves constitute socialism,” before a reassuring statement that Sanders is “our best shot” at confronting pressing issues facing workers.

What is one to make of this assertion? Sanders is not really a socialist. But Sanders is the best one can do. Therefore, socialism is neither possible, nor “our best shot” at fighting the many existential problems facing the working class.

The DSA has long described its relationship with the Democratic Party as having “one foot in and one foot out.” Think of the Democratic Party as a bear trap, and you have a good idea of how that will work out. This “strategy” is sold to youth and workers as a means of pressuring the Democratic Party to the left, while in reality serving to give the Democrats a left cover, pressuring workers and youth to support a right-wing capitalist party.

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