

New York Times falsifies history to claim Sanders is “transforming” the Democratic Party

By Eric London and Tom Mackaman
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On Thursday, Michael Kazin, a historian at Georgetown University, published a comment in the *New York Times* titled “Bernie Sanders Has Already Won.” The article argues that “even in defeat,” Sanders will be achieving “a different kind of victory, one few actual presidents ever have: transforming the ideology and program of a major party.”

Kazin is the son of renowned essayist and literary critic Alfred Kazin (1915–1998) and the author of numerous books on the labor movement in the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as a gushing biography of three-time Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan titled “A Godly Hero.” He is a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and is presently authoring a history of the Democratic Party.

Kazin’s article appears after a week in which the *Times* published numerous worried commentaries bemoaning the growing popular interest in socialism. Whether Kazin is aware of it or not, the *Times* is using him to accomplish a distinctly political aim: convincing an increasingly radical population that they must not break from the Democratic Party.

To accomplish this goal, Kazin presents a false, hagiographic version of the history of the Democratic Party. He puts forward three historical examples of politicians who he alleges have “transformed” the Democratic Party into a left-wing party, even after having failed to win the presidency. In reality, these examples show exactly the opposite of what Kazin attempts to prove and expose the bankruptcy of all efforts to push this capitalist party to the left.

Kazin’s first example is the worst. He writes, “In 1896, William Jennings Bryan, running as a Democrat against William McKinley, traveled the nation denouncing ‘the money power’ and defending the rights of labor. Despite his loss that year, and in two subsequent races, his party embraced the pro-regulation, antimonopoly, pro-union stand of this eloquent politician called ‘the Great Commoner.’ The resulting policies did much to elect Woodrow Wilson to the White House twice (with Bryan as his secretary of state from 1913 to 1915) and Franklin Roosevelt four times.”

As a preliminary matter, this argument explodes the whole premise of Kazin’s main claim. Even if his presentation of Bryan were true (and it isn’t), how can Bryan’s impact on the Democratic Party be considered progressive if it resulted in the

election of Woodrow Wilson, the archetype “progressive” imperialist who drove the US into World War One, passed the Espionage Act, and arrested hundreds of revolutionaries and immigrants in the infamous Palmer Raids?

After winning re-election in 1916 on the basis of the slogan “he kept us out of war,” Wilson deployed hundreds of thousands of US troops in what he called the “war to save democracy.” He censored the left-wing press and jailed Socialist Party leader Eugene Debs for opposing the war after the latter proclaimed the war was the fault of “the two old capitalist parties—the Republican Party and the Democratic Party—the political twins of the master class.” This is Kazin and the *Times*’ nightmarish vision of a Democratic Party that has been ideologically “transformed.”

As for William Jennings Bryan, the former Nebraska congressman was a self-proclaimed enemy of socialism who emerged in the 1890s as a representative of the right-wing of a rural movement of small and middle farmers who were organizing into the powerful Farmers Alliance.

There is some truth to the comparison between Bryan and Sanders, but it is not a flattering link, as Kazin asserts.

While the more radical sections of this movement advocated an independent party in alliance with the urban working class, Bryan, like Sanders today, advocated “fusionism,” i.e., opposing the independence of the radical movement by tethering it to the Democratic Party. “Fusionism” culminated in Bryan’s acceptance of the Democratic Party’s nomination for president in 1896. In the general election in which urban workers and radical farmers largely abstained, Bryan was crushed by William McKinley, the embodiment of the “Gilded Age,” who ruthlessly suppressed the class struggle and deregulated big business.

Bryan, like Sanders, was not responsible for the growing radicalism—he attained national prominence because he was a demagogue capable of responding to the growth of radicalism among workers and farmers and urging this movement to “pressure” the Democratic Party to adopt progressive policies.

Bryan, also like Sanders, was part of an effort to revitalize the Democratic Party, which was utterly discredited in the eyes of the laboring masses of the 1890s by the second Grover Cleveland administration (1893–1897). Indifferent to the massive suffering in the Great Depression of the 1890s, Cleveland not only disregarded the peaceful march of Coxey’s Army for relief of the poor, but

had its leader, Jacob Coxey, arrested. His administration's most notable achievement was deploying the United States Army against the American Railway Union in the Pullman Strike of 1894, and jailing its leader, Eugene Debs.

In many ways, Sanders plays the same role of revitalizing a modern Democratic Party that is hated for the policies of the Obama administration, hated by millions of workers for bailing out the banks, waging permanent war and launching attacks on democratic rights and living standards.

Kazin dishonestly claims Bryan moved American politics to the left. In fact, the Democrats' destruction of Populism in the South was a disaster that gave Republicans control of the White House for 20 years and led to a wave of reaction across the country. As C. Vann Woodward long ago established, the collapse of the agrarian movement led to the deaths of thousands of blacks and the imposition of Jim Crow segregation. "Fusion" at the Democratic and Peoples' Party conventions in 1896 was followed within weeks by the Supreme Court's approval of the "separate but equal" doctrine in the *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. The separation of workers by race, and the ghastly racist violence deployed to achieve this end, were the central features of Democratic Party rule in the South until the 1960s.

Far from advancing the cause of left-wing politics, William Jennings Bryan was the mechanism through which the ruling class disarmed the radical agrarian movement and fanned religious backwardness and nationalism. Bryan was a revivalist who served as lead counsel defending anti-evolutionist laws in the 1925 Tennessee Scopes Monkey Trial during which he famously argued that human beings are not mammals. His chief role was to block the growth of socialism.

Bryan did not "transform" the Democratic Party, he preserved it and thereby inaugurated decades of political reaction. In Kazin's presentation, there is a strong undercurrent of Stalinist apologetics for nationalism and popular front politics. It should be remembered that Stalinist William Z. Foster titled his 1937 memoirs on his time in the Communist Party USA "From Bryan to Stalin."

The second and third examples from Kazin's article—1972 Democratic nominee George McGovern and 1984 and 1988 primary candidate Jesse Jackson—are also revealing.

Kazin refers to the McGovern campaign as an "attempt to persuade voters who detested the war in Vietnam to unseat Richard Nixon" and Jackson as "vigorously preaching the same gospel of national health insurance, jobs for all and higher taxes on the rich."

In reality, McGovern's campaign was an attempt by the Democratic Party to dissolve mass anti-war sentiment and urban rebellion by turning it into the Democratic Party. This was a conscious response to the disaster of the 1968 Chicago convention at which the Democratic National Committee sent police to brutally suppress anti-war demonstrators.

The McGovern campaign did not represent a transformation of the Democratic Party to the "left," but rather marked the initiation of an effort to eliminate the influence of the labor movement from the nomination process through the McGovern-Fraser Commission, which strengthened the role of the affluent middle

class through the elevation of racial and gender politics. The elimination of any influence of the working class on the nomination process, even through the conservative labor bureaucracy, paved the way for the nomination of right-wing Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter in 1976.

While Jesse Jackson's campaign acquired more of a popular base in the working class, this only served to contain anger over the Democratic Party's acquiescence to the Reagan administration's ruthless cuts to social programs, corporate regulations and taxes for the rich. Jackson loyally endorsed Democratic nominees Walter Mondale in 1984 and Michael Dukakis in 1988. Both candidates proceeded to lose the general election to Reagan without adopting any of the reformist elements of Jackson's campaign. For the next 30 years, the Democratic Party would nominate a candidate more right-wing than the last: Bill Clinton, Al Gore, John Kerry, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

The Democratic Party is one the oldest capitalist political party in the world. Its crimes include the defense of slavery, the exclusion of Japanese and Chinese immigrants, Jim Crow segregation, the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the launching of the Korean and Vietnam wars, support for "tough on crime" legislation, welfare reform, support for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and the Wall Street bailouts.

Kazin and the *New York Times* are desperate to avoid a situation where the growing interest in socialism results in the development of a movement in the working class that is independent of the Democratic Party. Sanders and his backers in the Democratic Socialists of America serve this critical role of suppressing the growth of opposition and maintaining the two-party system. For this reason, Sanders and fellow "democratic socialist" Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have called for supporting whichever Democrat wins the nomination, as though a Bloomberg or Biden presidency would advance the cause of socialism!

The lessons of history show the stranglehold of the Democratic Party on popular opposition is the death knell of social movements. Those genuinely interested in socialism must fight for revolutionary politics independent from and in opposition to the Democratic Party and unleash the tremendous strength of the working class on a world scale.

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