

From Medicare-for-All to “Masks-for-All”: Bernie Sanders and the incredible shrinking “political revolution”

By Genevieve Leigh
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In late July, former Democratic presidential candidate, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, along with 14 other Democratic congresspeople introduced legislation calling for the US to increase the production of masks and distribute them to all Americans at no cost. The legislation is called “Masks-for-All,” a playoff of Sanders’ former proposal of Medicare-for-All.

Yesterday, Sanders penned an op-ed in *USA Today* advertising his bill: “Coronavirus pandemic is raging out of control. Our solution: Masks for All.” In it, he declares that it is a “tragedy, and embarrassing, that the United States is practically the only major country where the COVID-19 pandemic is worsening by the day.”

He goes on to state, “If we are to have any hope of turning this economy around, opening schools safely, and preventing countless more deaths, we must first get this virus under control.” His plan to combat the pandemic is to provide masks for everyone.

A number of points should be made in relation to Sander’s proposal.

First, there is no doubt that under conditions of a raging global pandemic, every worker in the US and internationally should have access to high-quality masks, at no cost. The productive forces that are needed to carry out such a minor endeavor certainly exist within capitalist society.

Providing masks to the population is only the *most basic measure* that is required to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and save the lives of hundreds of thousands of workers and youth. As scientists and health experts have been declaring for months, combatting the pandemic requires the implementation of a whole series of measures: extensive contact tracing, the production of PPE for hospitals, and universal access to quick-response testing to name just a few.

Furthermore, essential workers must be provided with the necessary equipment and training needed in order to carry out their work safely. In any rational society (i.e. a socialist

society) non-essential workers would not be permitted back to work until the pandemic was well under control, and even then, only with the most advanced and extensive protective and preventative measures in place. Workers would have the assurance that they would have access to free high-quality care if they or a loved one did end up falling ill with the virus.

Nothing of the sort is on the agenda.

In fact, the completely decrepit character of the capitalist system is perhaps most sharply expressed in the fact that even Sanders’ most pathetic appeal for “masks for all” will more than likely not even make it into the next relief bill.

Secondly, it is notable that Sanders makes only one reference to the homicidal back-to-work campaign being carried out by Democrats and Republicans alike. He explains briefly that by one estimate, “widespread use of masks could be worth up to \$1 trillion to our economy by preventing shutdowns and getting people back to work earlier.”

This statement is revealing. It exposes the real aim of Sanders’ “masks for all” initiative: to provide a thinly veiled cover for “progressive” politicians like himself to openly support the campaign to force workers back to plants and factories, and students back to school while the pandemic rages unabated. As he says himself, “getting people back to work earlier” will “save trillions.” He leaves out, of course, that the trillions will go to further lining the pockets of the ultra-rich.

Third, Sanders makes no mention of the criminal role he himself has played in the creation of the current crisis. Sanders was an enthusiastic supporter of the bipartisan CARES Act signed by President Trump in late March, which funneled trillions of dollars to Wall Street and Corporate America. In fact, prior to voting “yes” on the \$2.2 trillion packages, Sanders took to the Senate floor to hail the bill as a boon to workers.

Once the legislation passed, the focus in the media and the

political establishment more broadly began to shift toward an aggressive campaign for a return to work.

The massive increase in fictitious capital that has been added to the Federal Reserve's balance sheet as a result of the CARES Act is, in the final analysis, a claim on real value that must be satisfied through the massive exploitation of the working class.

The US Congress is now deliberately blackmailing workers with the specter of poverty, homelessness, and starvation to force workers back into dangerous factories and workplaces.

As Sanders himself notes in his op-ed, this campaign is taking place under conditions in which the pandemic is raging out of control in the US. Sanders writes:

Coronavirus has killed 150,000 Americans. States like California, Texas and Florida are registering their highest daily death tolls ever. The economic horrors of this pandemic are also escalating, as our gross domestic product plunges by an annual rate of nearly 33% and \$600 weekly unemployment benefits expired for 30 million workers.

What Sanders describes is only the tip of the iceberg. Last week, food insecurity reached its highest reported level since May, with 30 million Americans reporting they had not had enough to eat at some point in the prior seven days. More than a third of the 44 million total US renter households who live in buildings with mortgages backed by the federal government are at risk of eviction. And the number of workers claiming continuing unemployment benefits rose from 16.1 million to a staggering 17 million for the week ending July 18.

The United States is in the midst of a health, economic, political, and social crisis on a scale never seen before, and it is escalating daily.

Under such conditions, Sanders' proposal amounts to less than a Band-Aid for a bullet wound.

Sanders' proposal could be described in many ways: "inept", "callous", "pathetic"—all would be fitting and appropriate. However, the most accurate and instructive description might instead be "predictable."

As the WSWS wrote in February 2016: "Sanders aims not to create a 'revolution,' as he asserts in his campaign speeches, but to prevent one." Sanders' calls for a "political revolution" have given way to ever further shifts to the right, abandoning even the pretense of fighting for mild liberal reforms.

After announcing that he was dropping out of the presidential race just as coronavirus cases in the US were reaching their first peak and hospitals were being overwhelmed, he **endorsed Joe Biden**, telling all of his supporters to give it their all for "his good friend Joe."

His capitulation to Biden was followed by an interview

with the Associated Press in which he slandered as "**irresponsible**" any of his supporters who failed to campaign for Biden.

In response to massive multi-racial and multi-ethnic protests against police brutality across the US and around the world, Sanders was silent. When he did finally address the situation, he called for police officers to receive a **pay raise**. He mustered only a few mildly worded tweets regarding Trump's attempt to carry out a coup that would involve the mobilization of active-duty troops to put down the protests and establish a presidential dictatorship.

Now, as class antagonisms are reaching a fever pitch, Sanders is doing everything in his power to obscure the class character of society. In the final lines of his USA Today op-ed Sanders repeats his own version of the worn-out slogan of the ruling class—that "we are all in this together":

In this unprecedented moment in American history we need to come together — government and private sector, manufacturers and workers, scientists, and ordinary citizens — to combat this horrific pandemic.

Nothing could be further from the truth. While tens of millions face hunger, homelessness, and destitution, the upper echelons of society have never had it so good. US billionaires, whose wealth increased by 80.6 percent between 2010 and 2020, are seeing another windfall, with another 20 percent increase—a rise of at least \$565 billion—since the pandemic began.

The world's richest man, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, has seen his net worth rise \$74 billion since the beginning of 2020 to an estimated \$189.3 billion.

Workers and young people have to draw the necessary lessons from the Sanders experience. It is not, at its root, a question of proving the bankruptcy of Sanders as an individual, but more fundamentally the bankruptcy of the political perspective he represents—that of reformism. The capitalist system cannot be reformed.

The current political situation within the United States and around the world is dire. The lives and livelihoods of millions of workers are at stake. The only way forward for the working class is on the basis of a genuinely revolutionary policy—not a "political revolution" to promote the Democratic Party, but a socialist revolution to overthrow capitalism.

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