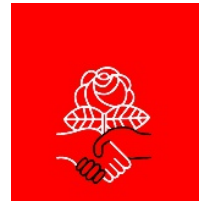


THE SANDERS CAMPAIGN AND THE REVIVAL OF SOCIALISM IN THE UNITED STATES



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The austerity politics of both the Right and the moderate Left that have curtailed labor rights, deregulated finance and cut social welfare programs have forced the costs of the global economic crisis on ordinary people rather than the irresponsible corporate elites who caused it. But grassroots resistance to austerity has spread across the globe with Podemos in Spain, Syriza and Popular Unity in Greece, and Jeremy Corbyn's successful Labour Party leadership bid in the United Kingdom representing the most recent electoral expressions of this new Left. And now in the United States, the most anti-socialist of capitalist societies, an explicit democratic socialist, Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) has emerged as the major challenger to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination.

While Sanders is not running a radical socialist campaign for public or worker ownership of major firms, he is campaigning on behalf of the 99 percent against the one percent. His platform calls for the strengthening of union power and labor rights; a massive public jobs program to rebuild U.S. infrastructure; truly universal health care ("Medicare for All"); and publicly funded child care and free higher education. These social programs would be funded by forcing the rich and corporations to pay higher taxes. Sanders has focused laser-like attention on unbridled corporate power as the reason why the United States has the most inequality of any advanced capitalist society.

When the media asks Sanders about his democratic socialist identity, he invariably refers to Scandinavian social democracy as his model. These societies are by no means fully socialist; but the reforms won by strong socialist and labor movements have made them far more just than our own. Sanders's socialist analysis and vision underpins his argument that the economy should serve the needs of the people and be governed not by corporate oligarchs, but by democratic means. Sanders himself has never taken campaign funds from corporate political action committees (PACs), and his major institutional donors have always been unions. In contrast, the neoliberal Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton's main Senate campaign contributors are PACs representing major Wall Street financial institutions and banks.

Will the United States Vote for a Socialist?

In a country where polls say that only 31 percent of adults have a favorable view of socialism, how can Sanders draw massive crowds in all regions of the country and be within striking distance of Hillary Clinton in early polls in both New Hampshire and Iowa? The public increasingly realizes that 90 percent of the income gains from the past five years of economic recovery have gone to the top one percent of income earners. In a recent Pew Research Center poll, 77 percent of respondents (including 53 percent of Republicans) agreed "that there is too much

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power in the hands of a few rich people and corporations.” Further, in a fall 2011 Pew poll, 49 percent of 18–29 year olds in the United States held a favorable view of socialism while only 47 percent had a favorable view of capitalism. Younger Americans frequently associate capitalism with inequality and a stagnant labor market. They envision a more egalitarian and just society; they believe in the promise of democratic socialism.

The United States does have a rich socialist history, but it is largely hidden from the public. Socialists and Communists helped build the civil rights movement and also played a major role in organizing industrial unions in the 1930s. Martin Luther King Jr. was a self-identified democratic socialist, as were Socialist Party members Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph, the two key organizers of the 1963 “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.” On the eve of World War I, the Socialist Party of Eugene V. Debs ranked as comparable in size and influence to many of the young socialist parties of Europe. Not only did Debs receive six percent of the vote for president in 1912, that same year members of the Socialist Party held 1,200 public offices in 340 cities, including 79 mayors in 24 states. Brutally repressed by the federal government for opposing World War I and then during McCarthyite Cold War hysteria, socialists never regained comparable influence; but as organizers and thinkers they have always played a significant role in mass social movements.

Structural biases in the U.S. electoral system in favor of a two party system make it difficult for socialists to win office as third-party candidates. On the other hand, the open primary system in the United States means that candidates with very diverse political bases can run on the Republican or Democratic ballot line. Sanders possesses a unique ability to reach working people with a left-wing populist message that identifies the class warfare waged by corporate elites against working people as the cause of rampant inequality and stagnant living standards. But the real challenge for the Sanders campaign,

both nationally and locally, remains: broadening its racial and class composition. So far, the base of the Sanders campaign is mostly white, college-educated, self-defined progressives; but 35 percent of Democratic primary voters are black and Latino.

A Lesson from the Rainbow Coalition

The Sanders campaign should draw lessons from both the successes and failures of the 1988 Jesse Jackson primary campaign. Despite winning 8 million votes from white progressives, trade unionists and activists of color, the Jackson campaign yielded no democratic national Rainbow Coalition organization to continue its work. This time, activists must use their work for Sanders to build local, multiracial coalitions that will live on well after the campaign.

As the erosion of the social welfare reforms and labor rights gains of the post-World War II era demonstrates, without greater democratic control over the economy, corporations will always work to erode the power of working people. It is clear that none of the visionary reforms Sanders advocates can be won without increasing socialism’s legitimacy within U.S. politics. It is not enough to build Sanders’ campaign for the short-term. We must also strive to develop a strong democratic socialist movement that can articulate a vision of a truly democratic society well into the future. Sanders has called for a political revolution. That revolution won’t occur through one electoral campaign. Democratic Socialists of America, the United States’ largest socialist organization, seeks to build the kind of organization necessary to build socialist political power and fight for radical change. We hope you will join us.



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