

Beyond Bernie: Still Not With Her

June 29, 2016



Since the June 7 California primary, the historic upheaval that coalesced around Bernie Sanders' campaign has continued to defy the demands of the political establishment, but has also increasingly turned into a search for the way forward. After a powerful, yearlong mass campaign over the hostile terrain of a rigged primary, our political revolution is at a crossroads.

The post-California period began with a revolt, following the AP's preemptive anointment of Clinton. In the hours and days after this corporate media assault and the initial ballot results, there was a wave of angry social media reaffirming Sandernistas' rejection of the establishment's demands for capitulation. Elizabeth Warren's full-throated endorsement of Clinton came shortly thereafter, and hundreds of thousands of people un-liked her Facebook page and otherwise registered their disgust online. The petition that Movement4Bernie and I launched two months ago, calling for Sanders to run independent or Green, caught on fire. It tripled its number of signatures in just a few days time, at an initial rate of 1,000 people an hour, and now has over 115,000 total.

A huge debate is unfolding among millions of Bernie's backers, providing an enormous opportunity for the left to raise the need for a political alternative to the Democratic Party. That's why Movement4Bernie and Socialist Alternative are organizing a series of forums in dozens of cities across the country titled "Beyond Bernie: We Need a Party for the 99%." These forums will both mobilize for the largest possible protests at the Democratic National Convention and create space for a broad-based debate on the way forward for the political revolution. My message at the events will be clear: If Bernie refuses to break from the Democratic Party, our movement should back Jill Stein as the strongest left alternative in the presidential election and use 2016 to prepare the ground for building a new movement-based political alternative.

Unfortunately, Bernie's livestream speech a week after California pointed in a different direction. While Bernie refused to formally concede and reaffirmed his intention to continue the political revolution into the Democratic National Convention, he also sent the message that he was beginning to retire his campaign. His plan to contest the nomination in Philadelphia was left aside, while he took further steps toward Hillary in saying he looked forward to working with her to change the Democratic Party.

It was one part political revolution, one part concession, and five parts Democratic Party reform. Speeches by Bernie since then have further developed this changed approach. This has helped kick off a process that, no doubt, has some Sandernistas beginning to second-guess their commitment to not support Wall Street's favored candidate, Hillary Clinton.

But the rebellion is far from subdued. A Bloomberg Politics poll on June 14 showed that barely half of Sanders supporters are prepared to vote for Hillary.

While the Bloomberg poll left out Green Party candidate Jill Stein – the clear standard bearer for our political revolution going forward in this election – the latest poll that does include Stein shows support for her has increased to 7% nationally. While still an early reading that does not yet reflect the huge coming pressures to support “the lesser-evil” Clinton, it does show potential. It’s clear that despite a large majority of people still being unaware of Stein’s campaign and politics, there’s a real opportunity to win a strong left vote, numbering in the millions, to continue our political revolution.

Jill Stein’s platform has a great many similarities to Sanders’. She’s calling for Medicare for all, a \$15 minimum wage nationally, a rapid transition to renewable energy, and an end to mass incarceration. In some ways she goes further than Bernie, calling, for example, to cancel student debt altogether – which is absolutely correct – rather than merely reducing it. Her campaign and the Green Party also have political weaknesses, and I don’t agree with them about everything, but there can be no doubt that Stein deserves the strongest possible support from Sandernistas. If a large section of our movement is able to resist the growing pressure to fall into line behind Clinton, and instead put its energies into Stein’s campaign, it will spur the development of a much bigger fight back and lay the groundwork for building a new party of the 99%.

But while the recent polls show that a great many Sanders supporters aren’t ready to drink the Clinton Kool-Aid, they also hint at the largely unanswered questions many hold at present: whether to support Stein, to hold their noses and vote corporate Clinton, or to protest instead by voting right-wing “anti-establishment” with either libertarian Johnson or billionaire bigot Donald Trump. Johnson is at 9%, which gives a sense of where things could go if the left fails to build for Stein. This spread also illustrates something that my organization, Socialist Alternative, has been saying since long before this year’s race got underway: if we want to defeat the right we cannot do so by supporting corporate, neoliberal Democratic politicians. Until we build an organized left alternative, the political void will be up for grabs, and the establishment will move again to re-insert itself.

Dozens of high-profile messengers, including a long parade of left luminaries, will each in different ways make the case for a lesser-evil vote for Clinton in the coming weeks and months.

While these arguments will increasingly have a big effect, the genie has come out of the bottle, and even the corporate establishment is beginning to recognize that U.S. politics are not going to go back to the way they were.

But nothing is automatic. The right wing can also potentially strengthen itself out of this mass anger, just as the Tea Party built itself out of the fury at the Wall Street bailouts, while the left largely made excuses for Obama. For the left to win the things Bernie Sanders has demanded and we have fought for, we will need build a powerful mass movement based on our political independence from the two parties of neoliberalism.

To succeed at this we’ll need to confront and answer the genuine fears people have about not voting for Clinton to stop Trump. We should recognize we’ll be running up against decades of propaganda which has attacked independent politics and asserted that progressives must “vote blue, no matter what.” We need to sympathetically explain the case for supporting the strongest vote for Jill Stein; the case for a new mass party of the 99%; and why voting for Clinton undermines our political revolution. But we should not exaggerate or damage our own arguments, by saying things like “Clinton is worse than Trump,” or that there is “no difference,” or that it “doesn’t matter” if Trump wins. We have to genuinely and politically take on lesser evilism, by addressing the strategic questions about what’s really necessary to defeat the right. We won’t win over everyone right now. But our goal is to bring as many people with us as possible to not capitulate to the Democratic Party in November. The discussions with those we don’t convince will continue next year as they experience (most likely) Hillary Clinton in office.

As I explained recently in *Jacobin*, collapsing our movement behind a neoliberal Democratic politician like Hillary Clinton would sabotage the political revolution, abandon the incredible momentum and energy we have built over the past year, and in the end would help right-wing populists to gain strength. It would effectively throw more fuel on the fire, because it is the genuine anger of middle and working class people at bipartisan and blatantly pro-corporate policies that has helped created the basis, in a distorted way, for Donald Trump in the first place. We need to present a clear pro-worker alternative. The most important task will be building powerful mass movements of working people and youth to fight boldly for our interests and against the disastrous system of capitalism. Occupy Wall Street, the Fight for 15, and Black Lives matter, all show what is possible, only we need to take the fight to a higher level and on a much greater scale.

But we cannot ignore the presidential race in a presidential election year. Concretely, the continuation of the political revolution after Sanders means supporting Jill Stein.

The People's Summit

The stated purpose of The People's Summit last weekend was a mass discussion about the way forward. The event brought together an estimated 3,500 people in Chicago. The enormous potential to build a powerful movement was clear, with so many coming together eagerly looking for how to continue the political revolution.

Unfortunately, the answers to the key questions facing Sandernistas were not on offer: discussion of who to vote for in November was shockingly kept off the agenda, Jill Stein was denied a chance to speak, concrete strategies were not put forward (except to support "down ballot" Bernie Democrats), no organizational forms were proposed, and audience participation (by "the people") was excluded.

At the Summit's first session, Juan Gonzalez of Democracy Now! opened by telling a cautionary tale of 1968, when some activists refused to vote for establishment Democrat Hubert Humphrey, ending with a warning not to repeat the "mistakes of the past" (translation: not voting Democratic). These comments were later repeated and fleshed out for Monday's Democracy Now! audience.

Of course the balking at demands to vote for Humphrey, especially by young people, had everything to do with a (correct) rejection of a Democratic Party administration that had just escalated the horrors of the Vietnam War. And what Gonzalez left out of his political parable was the broader outcome of the anti-establishment movement's refusal to support the Democratic Party's candidate that year. Republican Richard Nixon, under enormous pressure from that same revolt of youth and working people that was refusing to back down, was forced to concede more gains to the 99% than virtually any other president in U.S. history (with the exception of FDR's concessions to the labor and socialist movements with the New Deal). These included the creation of major public programs for environmental protection (the Environmental Protection Agency), for workplace safety (the Occupational Safety and Health Act), and for racial and gender equality (Affirmative Action). It also resulted in, for the first time in U.S. history, a war being stopped by a protest movement, including a powerful revolt of the soldiers themselves.

None of this was because these policies in any way matched the conservative Nixon's politics - they reflected instead the establishment's need to stave off a deeper radicalization and upheaval driven by that same militant movement.

Had activists instead fallen in line and poured their energies into making a lesser-evil case for Humphrey, the brakes would have been put on the struggle, it would have been demobilized and demoralized. The apologetics for Humphrey, Johnson, and the Democratic Party would have become

the theme of 1968, instead of revolution. Fortunately, what did happen was a powerful, ongoing, anti-establishment revolt that not only forced massive concessions from Nixon, but also later led to the outright defeat of a sitting president, again for the first time in U.S. history.

Bernie Sanders' supporters are witnessing the beginnings of a spectacle of lesser evilism that will play out in multiple acts, over multiple weeks, in the time remaining before the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia. While paying lip service to the "political revolution," its underlying intent is the exact opposite - to charm, sway, and bully Sandernistas to finally support Clinton.

There was a reason, of course, why this was done indirectly in Chicago. When Frances Fox Piven (co-chair of Democratic Socialists of America), in the "Democratic Socialism" workshop where I spoke, disagreed with my call for Sanders to run independent or on the Green Party ticket with Jill Stein, she also openly said that she would be voting for Clinton. There were boos from the crowd - a very large number of Sanders supporters are still angrily rejecting such appeals. The slow wooing of Sandernistas is the whole point of this carefully controlled dance.

For my workshop, I was warned in advance not to talk about third party politics. But I did it anyway, for which I was admonished multiple times by the chair of my session. Meanwhile, no Bernie Or Bust representative of any stripe was allowed on the main stage.

We did hear some discordant notes. National Nurses United Executive Director, RoseAnn DeMoro, blasted the Democratic establishment in the first session on Friday night. The day before on Democracy Now! she had gone even further, wondering aloud whether the Democratic Party could be reformed: "We saw the manipulation in the DNC of this election. We saw the horrendous campaign obstacles that we had to confront. It was a real eye-opener for the nurses, in particular, because they were across the country on the Sanders campaign, and they were, at first, quite stunned by the level of corruption, but eventually understood that you have to change things at a systemic level. So when Senator Sanders says that we have to transform the Democratic Party, we all kind of turn and look at each other and wonder, 'With Wall Street's money so invested in that party, is that possible any longer?'"

DeMoro raised the issue on the minds of many Sanders supporters. She's absolutely right to pose the question, but it also urgently needs answering, because Sandernistas will increasingly be on the receiving end of some very bad advice, from people they thought they could trust.

The Next Five Months

If we take real stock of the situation, we have to recognize that Bernie said all along he was going to support the nominee of the Democratic Party. This was a fundamental contradiction built into his campaign when he launched it. When he chose to fight a political revolution against the billionaire class from within a party controlled by that same billionaire class, he also signaled his intent to support Wall Street's candidate if he wasn't able to defeat her in the rigged primary.

But leaving Bernie aside, a lot has been learned by Sandernistas along the way this last year.

An important minority, having experienced both the successes and limits of the Sanders primary campaign, now sees clearly the corporate and corrupt character of the Democratic Party. They've witnessed a seemingly endless series of undemocratic events over the past months, as well as the exposure of a number of prominent "left" Democrats.

Not least of which was the recent example provided by Elizabeth Warren.

It says a great deal about both Warren and the Democratic Party, in which she is the most high-

profile “left” politician, that she never endorsed Bernie and has now enthusiastically endorsed Hillary. It would not be a stretch to say that had Warren endorsed and campaigned for Sanders, it could well have been the difference needed to defeat Clinton in the primary. But she did not.

It says a great deal about the whole of the Democratic Party leadership – which claims that its key priority is to defeat Trump – that it has fiercely backed Clinton in spite of the fact that the polls have shown Sanders to be the far stronger candidate in every matchup.

Because of course the problem is much larger than just Warren, Clinton, or Debbie Wasserman Schultz. At the heart of the matter is a political party that is thoroughly undemocratic and corrupt to its very core – one that answers to Wall Street, not working people. It’s the second most pro-capitalist party in the world, after the Republican Party.

If we are to break the stranglehold of corporate politics and stop the economic and environmental disaster they are creating, ordinary people will need to build a new mass party of our own – a party of the 99%. This is not optional. We will never win what we’re fighting for without our own political organization that fights with us, rather than against us. Had it not been for the backing of my organization, I would never have been elected and re-elected as a socialist in Seattle, because the Democratic Party has opposed me at every stage.

The next five months present a historic opportunity to build on what we’ve started and take a huge step in organizing the progressive forces prepared to take the next step. We simply can’t afford to waste that.

We can’t only fight against Clinton and Trump, we also have to be clear about what we are fighting for.

We need a party that, like Bernie, rejects all corporate cash and corporate influence. That fights alongside our movements. A party with genuine democratic structures; with a binding party platform; and with a bold, fighting, socialist program basing itself on solidarity and needs of the 99%. That stands for working people, youth, the LGBTQ community, people of color, women, the poor, and all the oppressed.

Such a party would need an active mass membership holding its elected leaders accountable, and with the ability to democratically recall them. It should include the participation of other smaller parties like the Green Party and Socialist Alternative, who could affiliate and make the case for their own politics inside it, while also helping to build it.

It is precisely these sorts of mass working class political parties that helped lead to real gains for ordinary people where they have existed. Bernie has often referred to how programs like socialized medicine, free higher education, and paid parental leave have been implemented in virtually every other major country. This is true, but they did not just materialize out of thin air or because of cultural peculiarities. They were won, in large part, because the working class rejected the “leadership” of big business and organized their own political parties. No genuine gains happen for working people under the rotten system of capitalism without an almighty battle – and for that our organized political independence will be vital.

With Bernie stepping out of the race, and likely endorsing Clinton, it will be up to us to continue the political revolution and to stand up against both Clintonism and Trumpism.

I hope you can attend our Beyond Bernie meetings, and get involved in the ongoing struggle. And if you haven’t already, please sign our petition calling on Bernie to run all the way, and share it widely.

Lastly, the Democratic National Convention at the end of July will be pivotal for our movement. This will be a huge organizing opportunity, if we use it effectively, to stand up en masse against the Democratic Party leadership and build support for Jill Stein. Organizing a huge turnout in Philadelphia, ideally with big walkouts from the DNC itself, can be a powerful act in driving our movement forward.

See you in Philly.