

Further Reflections on the Sanders Campaign

May 26, 2015



As proponents of independent political action, we believe that the Democratic Party is a deathtrap for progressives and that history has demonstrated time and again that progressive movements immersed in the DP are stripped of their potential political power. Nevertheless, we cannot judge the potential of the Sanders' movement solely by our attitude towards the Democratic Party, any more than we can evaluate the Democratic Party by the enormous potential contribution an unshackled Sanders movement may yet contribute to fundamental political change.

The totality with which socialists have traditionally viewed the Democratic Party has been this. The agenda of the Democratic Party is determined by its corporate financiers. It is they who keep the party competitive, who write and prioritize legislation and it is they who provide lucrative post-electoral revolving door employment opportunities for faithful party standard bearers. The two parties provide a full spectrum career subculture, designed to incentivize, entice and indoctrinate candidates and office holders to ruling class perspectives. Its base, organized as voting blocks, has no membership privileges.

Indeed, the two parties are not private, voluntary organizations sustained by membership fees, but political utilities of the ruling class, which, like other public utilities, are internally regulated by the state and protected from outside competition by upstart third parties through a dense network of legal encumbrances to market entry. Because the DP is sustained and disciplined by the mobilization of outside capitalist wealth, the voting blocs aligned to the Democrats cannot compete for influence on this terrain. Their power is limited primarily to the threat of abstention from electoral participation.

As socialists we compromise the content of our politics – which revolve around the working class and its natural allies and the independent role they must play in remaking society — by supporting candidates irrevocably tied to the apparatus of the status quo. That they – the DPs voting base – have, for a variety of outmoded historical reasons, remained tied to a “company union” party, providing nominal representation while committed to the wellbeing of capitalist accumulation, cannot determine our attitude toward that party. No more than say, working class and minority backing for imperialist wars and interventions can establish our attitude towards such conflicts. This is not a sectarian insistence on retention of ideological purity, but a substantive reflection arising from our understanding of how the political process preserves capitalism, an insight that defines and distinguishes us as socialists.

Militant opposition to the power structure cannot flourish in the party of the power structure or on a purely ideological basis without a party of its own. It is obvious that even under the most propitious of circumstances the trade union movement and its allies are not going to transition from a capitalist

party to a highly sophisticated socialist ideology in one lurch. What we aspire towards instead is an independent framework in which socialists can be a loyal—or if not loyal, at least a tolerated—opposition, a framework conducive to exposing the dynamic that governs a capitalist world view as detrimental to the interests of the oppressed and exploited. And this urgently requires a fracturing away of the Democratic Party mass base.

If, in the past, the Democratic Party could parade itself as a lesser evil and appeal to its base on that level, on the defining issue of our time – austerity – this is simply no longer the case. The industrial deregulation momentum begun under the Carter administration came to full fruition under Clinton. Deregulation was extended to the financial sector, supplementing workplace exploitation with ever more robust commercial exploitation. Welfare was effectively eliminated; union power decimated. Trade agreements which offshore jobs, enhance profit margins, and place additional corporate restrictions over democratic mandates have and are being systematically imposed as hallmark Democratic templates. And a balanced budget fetish has replaced social spending as the bragging point of successful Democratic governance in woeful indifference to the depth of the 2000 recession it so mightily exacerbated and to the tepid recovery from the Great Recession to which it so miserably contributed.

Austerity fundamentalism has overhauled the Democratic Party. It is its organizing principle. The entire difference between the two parties on this issue now boils down to this. The Democrats demand we ingest the same dose of poison in three gulps that the Republicans would have us swallow in one.

This means that the Democratic Party is vulnerable. As an austerity-first party, its traditional role as the political agency through which the ruling class implements its programs and through which – by presenting itself as a progressive alternative – it can continue to placate its base and coopt its opponents has lost its allure.

But if Democratic lesser-evilism with respect to austerity no longer has feet, what are we to make of Sanders' bid for nomination? How do we assess his abandonment of independent politics? History is not devoid of lessons. But lessons are contingent on context. To repeat the arguments of 1968 and 1972, when a mass social insurgency existed exterior to the Democratic Party, and where support for liberal politicians in a bourgeois party could only manage to set back the momentum of independent politics, seems now bizarrely inapt. The Kennedy and McGovern campaigns reconsolidated key voting blocs whose loyalties were wavering under the deafening sound of street thunder. To invoke this argument today against Sanders, in the glaring absence of mass alternative poles of political attraction, suggests little more than a sectarian incantation for preserving the cadre in the remote hope that this inspired few may yet ignite a political fuse.

For those who make this argument it is perpetually a Peace and Freedom Party moment. But, if the Sanders campaign catches momentum by challenging austerity and reviving rank-and-file activism by placing that challenge at the center of his insurgency, he may yet just spark a Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party moment. If so, the Sanders movement will, as did its historical precedent, ultimately face a defining dilemma: capitulate to the Democratic Party establishment behind some face saving blandishments or break away and chart an independent course.

Sanders himself is far from the perfect candidate, and a less than inspiring “socialist” leader for this struggle. By entering the fray as a Democrat, he seemingly repudiated and renounced precisely that aspect of his career that was most attractive – his singular independence from either of the two parties of capitalism.

Even his public statements are far from encouraging as they suggest that he aspires to play a Fannie

Lou Hamer role, but will not rule out being the future Bayard Rustin to his own movement.

Yet, consider this. His chief economist, Stephanie Kelton, is an advocate of the most far ranging challenge to austerity on the horizon. She advocates a guaranteed basic income; federal jobs for anyone on demand at a living wage and the pre-distribution of resources – consistent for instance, with a federally funded bank account for each child. She is a consistent champion of single payer. Her heterodox economic co-thinkers and associates have demanded the financial sector be reined in and bankers jailed. And she has consistently argued that government surpluses are actively destructive and balancing the budget is generally pernicious. If these proposals were implemented, the fight for 15 would be comprehensively transcended. Wages would be set at the federal level as private employers would have to bid workers away from decent paying federal jobs.

This is not your friendly, respectable Keynesianism. It is not Krugman and not Stiglitz. It is a rejection of all prevailing economic orthodoxies. It is a powerful anti-poverty program based on full employment, not piecemeal remediation. And it is one that offers a level of plebian economic security – and therefore a breakdown of social discipline based on want – that could only instill the fear of god into the ruling class. It will be a lightning rod for all the forces of reaction, from the Democratic mainstream no less than from the Republican right.

If the Sanders campaign is competently run, Hillary Clinton and the DP establishment will be confronting an incipient rank-and-file mutiny demanding the complete overhaul and repudiation of what the party currently stands for. An increasingly politically conscious grassroots movement motivated by a militant and credible anti-austerity message heralds the development in the foreseeable future of “split” situation in the Democratic Party when these demands are blocked, watered down, frustrated or compromised with, as they invariably must.

As socialists, we should welcome that split and assist from the outside in hastening the conditions under which that split may become more likely. We believe that only by joining forces with those outside the Democratic Party on an independent basis can the Sanders movement make a lasting contribution to the development of an oppositional current in American politics.

This does not mean approaching the Sanders’ rank-and-file movement in a spirit of opprobrium. Even less, does it require us to calumniate the movement as “sheep” and its leader as a “sheep dog” for its immediate failure to adopt our independent perspective. The Sanders movement, or key sections of it, will only find its path to independent politics through struggle, a struggle we should enthusiastically embrace. People are won to ideas not by the logic of the ideas themselves, but by the creation of a political force that generates the need for an organized alternative that can make those ideas effective.

The Sanders constituency needs to convince itself that the Democratic Party cannot be that alternative, because the DP cannot and will not reform itself into the antithesis of what the ruling class requires it to be.

We can assist them in reaching this understanding. We can address the Sanders movement by emphasizing our support for their struggle against austerity and indicate our willingness to work on issues they raise. We can organize joint forums, debates and meetings to discuss the way forward for progressive and radical politics. But in so doing, we should take the opportunity accorded by these gatherings to emphasize our conviction that the DP orientation, based on analysis born of historical experience, is a dead end and to impart the sense of an alternative direction to the Sanders’ activists.

But engaging with the Sanders campaign cannot mean joining the Democratic Party or participating in its primary struggles. As independent socialists, radicals and progressive activists,, we best assist the Sanders movement by relentlessly attacking the existing Democratic Party, its commitments to austerity and its pervasive hostility to the grassroots it ever more anachronistically claims to defend. We need to keep our focus on the duplicity of Clinton and hold Sanders' feet to the flames if he wavers or weakens his stance against the Party establishment. That is, we are most useful as allies of the DP insurgency when, from the outside, we urge it to be relentless in its confrontation with entrenched power and emphasize the unbridgeable gulf that exists between the Party they seek to attain and the DP as it actually exists.

The position that the Sanders movement articulates - of opposition to the prevailing austerity orthodoxy in current disregard for the task of breaking with the Democrats - is at length self-defeating and cannot be sustained. Once an anti-austerity movement coalesces around Sanders, the movement will rapidly assume a half-in, half-out posture towards the DP as it tries to expand its base in the teeth of fierce bipartisan resistance. If Sanders, for opportunistic and career considerations, abandons the anti-austerity movement to reconcile himself with the party royalists, he will also have abandoned a newly seasoned coterie of left-moving liberals and progressives. Or, if, as we believe, the DP establishment defeats the Sanders' campaign for nomination and he can't or won't run as an independent or feels constrained by Democratic Party rules that prohibit him in advance from harming the DP, the movement will be faced with the MFDP dilemma: reconcile with Hillary Clinton, on the basis of minimal face-saving concessions; or refuse to backtrack to the DP, and adhere instead to its progressive principles. If so, it can bring a wealth of experience in organizing and coordinating a large scale, national electoral operation in service to independent campaigns that are already in full swing, most likely the Green Party.

We should, in short, see our role as contributing to the radical resolution of the pull between the Democratic Party and the fallout possibilities of an emerging

anti-austerity movement in favor of the latter. Radicals should encourage it to struggle into the primaries and beyond, into the fall elections and after, in the Democratic Party through the primaries and — when that fails — out, preferably with Sanders, but, if need be, without.

*Barry Finger is a member of the editorial board of *New Politics*.