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USA

Whither the "Political Revolution"?

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This is an extraordinary time as we could be at a turning point in American political life. Bernie Sanders is receiving mass support for the message of Occupy — the 99% versus the 1%. He has used his candidacy to popularize key radical demands: \$15 and a union, an end to mass incarceration, universal healthcare, free public higher education, legalizing millions of immigrants, a carbon tax and banning fracking, to name a few.

Even if articulating these ideas within a social democratic framework, Sanders is impacting millions who were unfamiliar with or had dismissed them as impossible.

Sanders says there is a billionaire class who benefit from the status quo, and we need to take them on. Emphasizing that antagonism is an important part of the campaign, and presents a class perspective that we haven't seen expressed in any mass electoral effort in the United States since Eugene Debs.

A new generation is forming its political identity — large numbers of youth, the majority of whom belong to the working class or a collapsing "middle class," have been shaped by the Sanders phenomenon in ways that will last long after this election. They are open to socialist ideas, and many have gained experience in organizing.

The contradiction at the heart of this process, of course, is that while Sanders' success has revealed that there is a mass base for a left party, he would not have reached this vast audience if he hadn't run in the Democratic primary.

It is an open question as to whether millions learn through their experience that the Democratic Party is a roadblock to fundamental change that must be removed or split, or whether they end up being sucked into fruitless efforts to transform a rightward-moving, neoliberal party.

Despite reams of strategic advice to "reform the Democrats" from those who learned nothing from their failure to "realign" the party in the 1960s — when the labor and social movements were much stronger, and the racist Dixiecrats were leaving — as well as various Sanders supporters hoping to build a "party-within-the-party" as either a longterm project or a tactic with a split perspective, I think it's unlikely that many young people who put so much energy into the Sanders campaign will be interested in a Democratic reform effort. Already 43% of voters don't identify as either Republican or Democrat, and this is particularly true of Millennials.

The Convention and Beyond

Sanders' conflict with Clinton and the Democratic National Committee has become more contentious. The Sanders campaign is looking to a contested convention. We don't know how explosive that may become, but there is a likelihood of mass demonstrations both inside and outside the convention hall.

Sanders' plan to press for strong progressive planks in the party platform (though that document usually goes unread and ignored) has potential value.

If delegates get progressive platform language which Clinton ignores, that would help expose Democratic hypocrisy; or if their attempts fail, that could deepen the fissure between the party establishment and its progressive base.

Either outcome could further the eventual possibility of an independent left party. The fissure that's been created between the Democratic base, along with independents, and the Democrats' neoliberal leadership will fester and at some unpredictable time may lead to a split.

However, while Sanders is serious about a "political revolution" that lasts beyond his campaign, encourages social movements, and was a member of Labor Party Advocates, he is not a movement organizer. The question for us, broadly defined, is how to help this movement flourish after this electoral cycle.

There are multiple signs that the Sanders movement, which from the beginning has been more than a one-off electoral campaign, is not going to fold as did most of the Rainbow Coalition or deteriorate into another version of Democracy for America, MoveOn, or Progressive Democrats of America.

One effort, the June National Peoples Summit, has a goal of beginning to assemble a "force" out of the Sanders campaign and other social movements which will "seek to bring together activists committed to a different kind of agenda: a People's Agenda that can enhance and expand issue campaigns and hold elected officials accountable to popular demands for justice, equality and freedom."

The Summit includes sessions such as "Building Independent Political Power" and "Down-Ballot Political Revolutionaries: Electing People from the Movement to Public Office."

An exemplary local example is the Franklin County, MA Bernie group, mostly independents, some self-identifying as socialists. Dave Cohen, a long time UE union leader, explains, "We have a good core group. We will begin contacting the 2500 names we have in Franklin County who were on the Bernie list, recruiting them to join our organization."

Dave lays out a basic plan: "Its purpose is to implement Bernie's program at a county level â€" it will have a short platform or statement of principles consistent with Bernie's. It will endorse or work for only such candidates as meet a high standard: they support our principles, are committed to moving people to action, and have integrity. We hope to build a model that can be shared with others; we may later enter into coalition with other groups, or plug into a national post-Bernie structure; but our initial focus is on Franklin County â€" but always putting local issues in a larger context consistent with our principles (e.g. how military budget affects local resources)."

New Openings

A new period has opened where there will be a lot of partial breaks from the Democratic Party, first in local and then in statewide races. It will occur bit by bit and ambiguously as we already see with efforts like the Richmond Progressive Alliance, Chicago's United Working Families, and Vermont's Progressive Party, and Rights & Democracy, a group formed recently as a response to Sanders' campaign.

For example, the Vermont Progressive Party is fielding 30 candidates in the 2016 election, the most in its history, most of them running on both Progressive and Democratic ballot lines.

Inevitably, most Sanderistas will support individual Berniecrats who run on progressive or radical platforms, have no loyalty to the Democratic leadership, yet run within Democratic primaries. In partisan races this will involve "primarying" neoliberal Democrats.

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In reality, many election districts are basically one-party districts where a left party can compete without facing marginalization as a "spoiler." Predominantly nonpartisan local elections are less problematic as independents are not as hampered by the dynamics of the two-party system.

This is not a time for routinist passivity. In my opinion, these developments require Marxists to rethink our preconceptions about how we might contribute to breaking the stranglehold of the two-party system.

While the "political revolutionaries" doing these campaigns will be skeptical or disgusted with the two-party system, they will not for the most part share our strategic rejection of the Democratic Party.

I think that we should evaluate and work with promising efforts, while being clear that we believe that trying to realign the Democratic Party is a dead end, that we are partisans of creating an independent, mass working-class party.

Yes, we should argue against lesser evilism, and concretize that by promoting a protest vote for Jill Stein (perhaps even resulting in securing ballot lines for future elections). However, it would be self-isolating to break off working relations with people advocating a "vote against Trump."

This election is extraordinary in that while many people will be voting against Trump, our potential base will not be working or enthusiastically voting for the "lesser evil" neoliberal with the worst unfavorable ratings of any Democratic nominee in modern times.

We have an opportunity to work with the militant minority of Sanders supporters who are in motion, moving left, and becoming increasingly hostile to the Democratic Party. We should encourage them to keep their committees going to work on local issues like \$15 minimum wage, universal healthcare, racial and climate justice, etc., anticipating a rise in social movement organizing, along with these movements recognizing the need for a political expression.

In this process we can recruit the best of them to socialist organization, as socialist groups working with the Sanders campaign are already doing. However, I think it's important that we recruit people to a perspective of advocating for steps that would open up a broader terrain of struggle for a party of our own.

While recognizing the reality of the left's limited capacity to affect events, in this new more favorable situation we should be doing everything possible, against the odds, to open the road to an independent party of the 99%.

Labor for Bernie

The Labor for Bernie network is an all-volunteer independent, grassroots rank-and-file-based network that has already had a big impact on the broader labor movement. The network includes thousands of elected officers, shop stewards, organizers and rank-and-file members.

It has tapped into the widespread disgust with bureaucrat-driven, transactional, business-as-usual politics, insisting that our unions should only endorse candidates that actually support union values. Pushing back against premature and top-down endorsements by union officials, Labor for Bernie has organized to demand broad membership debate and discussion about the candidates and their stands on the key issues.

While the bulk of the labor bureaucracy is joined at the hip with the Clinton and neoliberal Democratic leadership, the

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dynamism of the Sanders campaign and Labor for Bernie's organizing, has fostered cracks in labor's slavish alignment with the Democratic Party establishment.

Seven national unions endorsed Sanders (Amalgamated Transit Union, American Postal Workers Union, Communication Workers of America, International Longshore and Warehouse Union, National Nurses Union, National Union of Health Workers, and United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America â€” UE), and many locals have endorsed Sanders in defiance of their Internationals' endorsement of Clinton.

From the beginning Labor for Bernie was intended to last past the 2016 elections, with the perspective of creating new grassroots political structures in the labor movement â€” perhaps even a new party â€” capable of continuing the "political revolution" in contests for elected office in tens of thousands of municipal and state level races. Already we are seeing more local unions running candidates.

The last attempt at organizing a labor party during the brief mid-1990s labor movement upsurge was, according to former Labor Party national organizer Mark Dudzic, "premised on the understanding that you cannot have a party of labor that does not have at the table a substantial portion of the actually-existing labor movement. The Labor Party had to start with the assurance that it wouldn't play spoiler politics and that it would focus on building the critical mass necessary for serious electoral intervention."

As the 1990s attempt at labor's revitalization foundered, so did prospects for moving the labor movement away from its lockstep relationship with the Democratic Party.

While many unions and labor activists have had it with "politics as usual," labor is not yet ready to disengage from the political entanglements in a two-party, winner-takes-all system. This is just the beginning of the messy differentiation within the unions; endorsements for Sanders reflect fissures that mark a step forward.

Building a movement for a party of our own is inextricably linked to the project of transforming and revitalizing key sections of the labor movement. The activity of the labor militants brought together around the Sanders campaign can play a key role in the interrelated tasks of promoting independent working-class politics and putting the movement back in the labor movement.