

Politics of the New Abnormal - Trump, Sanders, the presidential campaign and the Left in the US

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Contents

- [Blood and Cynicism](#)
- [What Future for Sanders' \(...\)](#)

IN THIS STRANGEST of U.S. election seasons, the capitalist class appears to have partially lost control — temporarily at least — of its trusted political parties. The Bernie Sanders insurgency, which was expected to fizzle out by now, has instead gained strength as the Democratic primaries proceed. The outpouring of support for Sanders' message reveals the chasm separating that party's institutional elites from its voting base that's been brutally affected by the capitalist crisis and neoliberal politics.

After New York, conventional punditry is announcing that the nomination race is “over.” But for Sanders' activist supporters the fight remains very much on, as they organize to carry “the political revolution” all the way to Philadelphia, both inside and on the streets outside the Democratic convention — and beyond. This is a movement about issues that vastly transcend one primary season.

The leading Republican candidate, a billionaire driven by ego more than ideology, is running as a maverick pseudo-populist anti-immigrant racist and economic nationalist. The prospect of a Donald Trump nomination, let alone possible presidency, embarrasses the U.S. political establishment and drives global capital into near panic.

The main GOP challenger Ted Cruz, formerly a far-right fringe figure, has become the hope of the Republican “party establishment” and rightwing media, especially in the wake of the Wisconsin primary. The mainstream re-imaging of Cruz is a startling phenomenon in itself. His economic program, calling for not only a “flat tax” but returning to the gold standard, would be a formula to produce a massive global Depression — and the Republican leadership knows all this, even as they've turned toward him in their desperate “Never Trump” effort.

Although his most extreme proposals would never be enacted, the sudden mainstreaming of a character like Cruz is a rather spectacular manifestation of a new political abnormal. While some on the left are focusing on Trump as a supposedly “fascist” threat, the reality is that Cruz is a far more serious and ideological rightwing menace, posing as a “small-government constitutional conservative.” The magnitude of that lie is revealed in his pledge to “instruct the Justice Department to investigate Planned Parenthood and prosecute criminal violations” — i.e. to pursue a political witch hunt characteristic of Richard Nixon's Watergate White House.

But does the Republican spectacle signal a sharp turn to the right in the American electorate?

Hardly. The popular energy and enthusiasm has poured into the campaign of the avowed democratic socialist Sanders, although the Democratic delegate count remains securely in the hands of Hillary Clinton, the dead-centrist candidate of Wall Street and finance capital — especially when her super-delegate institutional support is factored in.

The African-American vote — based on “pragmatic” calculations explored by Malik Miah in this issue — has been her security blanket, especially in the South where Black people’s rights and lives are under severe attacks from rightwing state legislatures. She’s also the predetermined favorite of much of the entrenched labor leadership, despite serious dissent within the membership of many unions.

Clinton, however, inspires hardly anyone. Her hegemony over the party machine is based mainly on seniority, the party’s inertia and the near-absence of leadership on its left-liberal wing, a vacuum that the political independent Sanders has effectively filled.

Blood and Cynicism

Many issues that deserve attention remain entirely ignored. For example, there’s plenty of jabber about who knows how to destroy ISIS, but the made-in-USA human rights catastrophe in Honduras won’t be an election issue. That includes the fact that Hillary Clinton’s hands are dripping with the blood of Berta Cáceres, the indigenous and environmental leader who was gunned down on March 3, and many other activists murdered since the 2009 military coup.

That coup, blessed and endorsed by the Obama administration during Clinton’s Secretary of State tenure, returned this Central American country to the rule of death squads, drug gangs and multinational corporations. Thousands of its young people have fled through Mexico to the U.S. border, where they’ve been interned and deported — frequently to be killed on their return to Honduras [\[1\]](#).

While the sideshow over Clinton’s private email server occupies acres of media coverage, the murder of Cáceres was one or two days’ third-tier news and Clinton’s responsibility for the Honduran tragedy unmentioned by anyone (Bernie Sanders included), certainly not by the Republicans. It will not be discussed as the Democrats celebrate “coming together” following the primaries.

Clinton is actually a rather vulnerable and far from exciting candidate, at a time when the party’s young and working class voting base is hurting, angry and eager for real change. Her election in November is not certain but probable, primarily due to the fact of her being — barring some unpredictable implosion or an unexpected outcome of the Republican convention — the only solidly “reliable” bourgeois politician in the presidential field. Her general election campaign can be expected to swing well to the right as she cynically seeks mainstream Republican votes.

Even if the Republican leadership should manage to dump Trump, and either elevate Cruz or pull an emergency relief-pitcher candidate from the bullpen at their Cleveland convention, the resulting internal explosion would likely doom them in November 2016.

None of this means that the Republican Party is “finished” as some superficial pundits proclaim. It will retain control of the rigged-and-gerrymandered House of Representatives; it will still hold a small majority or large minority in the Senate; it controls the bulk of state houses, where the most brutal anti-choice, voter suppression and reactionary economic and social policies are running amok. Above all, the capitalist ruling class needs the Republican Party and will not let it die, whatever

spectacular tea-smoking dysfunction it may present at a given moment.

What Future for Sanders' Movement?

For those of us on the socialist left, the biggest issue is what will come from the passion and commitment of millions of voters and tens of thousands of activists who are feeling the Bern. It's clear that there's a powerful desire and commitment among grassroots organizers to keep the movement going not just through, but beyond, the Democratic convention and November election.

The April 1 meeting of Labor for Bernie [2] at the *Labor Notes* conference, for example, was a lively event where a couple hundred participants discussed both short-term election tactics and longer-range strategic perspectives.

Breaking through the fundamental contradiction between the potential of this movement, and the political structure within which it's currently ensnared, could set the course of U.S. politics for a generation. If as we've stated capital needs the Republican Party, it equally needs the Democratic Party and absolutely will not allow it to become the vehicle for anything resembling "democratic socialism," let alone the incubator of revived militant labor or social movements.

We'd be more than thrilled to see Bernie Sanders' campaign carry forward as an independent candidacy. Sanders himself from the beginning ruled out that option, and we anticipate that he will likely join the "party unity" chorus for defeating the rightwing menace.

That menace is real, but the tragic truth is that the Democrats' "unity" means channeling the "political revolution" into the cynical triangulation that shoves the needs of working people, immigrant rights, Black Lives Matter — and everything else that matters too — to the back of the Clinton campaign bus, in exchange for some meaningless convention platform verbiage and empty promises.

So-called "free trade" is one intensely heated issue where it's important for the Sanders movement not to be strait-jacketed by the Democrats. Indeed, one of the most important political fights looming beyond 2016 is whether tens of millions of white working class folks gravitate to the reactionary, racist economic nationalism of Donald Trump or can be won to a new progressive, pro-labor and emancipatory politics. The Democratic Party, a political instrument that answers to the demands of corporate power, never can or will incubate that kind of program.

If there's one concrete positive result from the primary season — with high working-class voter turnouts for both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump — it's been widespread popular revulsion against the cancer of global "free trade" agreements.

While Trump demagogically and falsely proclaims that "America has stopped winning" because "our trade negotiators are incompetent," Sanders has correctly pointed out that the real problem is how these deals are secretly (and quite competently) worked out by and for multinational corporations. Sanders could be stronger in emphasizing how this kind of "free trade" hurts workers and destroys health, safety and environmental standards in all countries, but the basic point has come through.

It will be very difficult this year — impossible, we dare hope — for the Obama White House and "bipartisan" Congressional leadership to ram through the appalling Trans Pacific Partnership. (Beware the treachery of a post-election lame-duck session.) In any case, the kind of grassroots pressure that finally compelled the Obama administration to reject the ecocidal Keystone XL Pipeline project will be needed to stop the TPP from being enacted — if not in the final days of the current

administration, then the early phase of the next one.

Is there a way forward? What Sanders has accomplished, astonishingly — yet tellingly, coming from outside the Democratic apparatus — is to show how his version of a socialist message inspires people who are experiencing the sharp end of the stick of neoliberal capitalism. Many thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of them may decide for themselves that they're socialists too, and begin drawing the appropriate conclusions.

That poses the most profound opportunity and challenge for the organized socialist movement in the United States, as poorly organized and fragmented as our forces have been for many decades now. How the U.S. socialist left responds and reorganizes itself will be the focus of many strategic discussions way beyond the 2016 elections, and far beyond the scope of the present editorial — but *Against the Current* certainly intends to participate in the process.

Socialism entails much more than saving social security and making billionaires pay taxes. It requires a political and social revolution to change the fundamental structures of production and property, and to get at the roots of racial oppression and patriarchy. That's a set of questions for a necessary extensive discussion that will unfold way beyond the election cycle.

Right here and now, the urgent necessity for the army of Sanders supporters must be not to give up the fight. The results of the primaries and the delegate count are important, but not decisive in shaping the future. Don't take the dead-end corporate politics of Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party as "the best we can do."

If there's a local, union or citywide campaign organization that can stay together as a formation for social justice struggles, so much the better. Have a good look at Jill Stein's campaign (www.jill2016.com) and the Green Party. Stay on message against the TPP. Defend our immigrant communities against raids, deportations and anti-Muslim bigotry. Build support for Black Lives Matter and the struggle to protect voting rights against voter suppression laws.

Mass action can get results, whether it's at home in the progress of the Fight for \$15 campaign — or abroad, where street protests forced out the prime minister of Iceland over the Panama Papers revelations of offshore accounts and monstrous tax evasion by the global one-tenth of one percent. And could there be any clearer demonstration of the rigged system that Bernie Sanders is talking about?

The "normal" pattern of the U.S. political cycle is that election years derail social movements, draining their energies into whatever looks like the lesser evil. Perhaps this most abnormal of elections will prove to be an exception.

The Editors, *Against the Current*

P.S.

* "Politics of the New Abnormal". *Against the Current* n° 182, May/June 2016:
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/4638>

Footnotes

[1] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/20/minors-honduras-killed_n_5694986.html

[2] www.laborforbernie.org