

United States: It's OK to be angry about Bernie Sanders' new book

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Bernie Sanders' newest book, "[It's OK to be Angry About Capitalism](#)," was clearly written by Sanders, whose voice reverberates loudly in print from beginning to end. The curious title led many to speculate about the book's content.

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Many readers likely hoped it would include a tell-all about the inner workings of the Biden administration from the perspective of the powerful Senator-chairman of the Budget Committee. Other readers certainly expected that Bernie would distill his experience during a time of political-economic crisis, and perhaps conclude with a way forward for progressives to escape the current political-social impasse.

Neither goal was reached in the book, though he certainly made attempts. Ultimately the book's wishy-washy title foreshadows an even larger political problem: any real solution.

The Bernie experience has taught us that the Democratic Party is not a member-run organization but ruled by rich insiders who make or break rules as they see fit.

Bernie describes in detail a brutal attempt to work inside the Democratic Party to push it left, from the one person most capable of executing this strategy. In this political war Bernie describes a bloodbath orchestrated by the Democratic Party leadership against his progressive vision.

But the book fails to acknowledge the depth of the massacre, as Bernie pushes the reader to soldier onto the same political battlefield already strewn with corpses. One victim of this lopsided victory—a future historian may conclude—could be Bernie's political legacy.

A surprisingly empty ending

For nearly 300 pages Bernie's tirade is meant to agitate us into action, and after following him

through an exhausting maze of mostly-familiar topics the reader finds at the end they've been led into an ambush—our goal is to reform the Democratic Party.

One of the final sections is titled “Transforming a party of the elite Into a party of the people,” where he dismisses the possibility of escaping the two-party system in one paragraph:

Here’s the reality that we live with now: Today, we have a strongly entrenched and well-funded two-party system. Could that change in the foreseeable future? Maybe. But not tomorrow. That means that, if we are going to bring about the kind of change this country desperately needs, if we are going to protect American democracy in this volatile moment, we need to completely transform the Democratic Party—from the bottom up.

Bernie proposes that the impossible be done by a series of inter-party reforms, such as:

- Transform the Democratic National Committee from a corporate-dominated fundraising apparatus into a source of support for grassroots activism and working-class struggles.
- Make certain that primaries are open, fair, and well run.
- Democratize the nominating processes.

These and the other proposals have absolutely no chance of passing, and every reader will know it immediately, since the Bernie experience has taught us that the Democratic Party is not a member-run organization but ruled by rich insiders who make or break rules as they see fit.

The lead villains in Bernie’s story are Republicans, though the people who torpedo Bernie’s progressive plans are Biden, Chuck Schumer, and Nancy Pelosi.

Knowing all this, Bernie offers no real path to achieve his reform policies. Perhaps they are meant for the insiders to adopt? But more realistically, their proper place is the trash can. Also garbage-worthy are the concluding “demands” Bernie places on the Democrats, such as “Democrats must embrace the working class,” and even more unrealistic:

The Democratic Party must be more than just a well-funded, consultant driven, ad-producing election machine. It needs to be a movement party that stands, unequivocally, with the working families of our country and addresses the most challenging issues facing our nation and the world.

This bomb of rhetoric won’t detonate for most readers after spending 290 pages preparing for something explosive. If Bernie’s concluding fizzle was revealed at the beginning most readers wouldn’t make it to the second chapter, deciding instead to find a book that treats working-class politics seriously.

Are Democrats still haunted by the ghost of FDR?

Throughout the book Bernie frequently revisits Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who Bernie suggests is a tonic that cures all political ailments. Every time Bernie writes about a seemingly-unrealistic demand, he immediately chimes in about FDR. Bernie suggests repeatedly that Democrats need only to re-visit the FDR ethos in order to clean their house:

Democrats have to learn the lesson that Roosevelt taught. Have the honesty to acknowledge the suffering that working people are experiencing. Have the courage to take on the special interests in order to improve their lives.

Today's Democrats have certainly "learned the lesson that Roosevelt taught," and have chosen to follow different mentors, such as Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. The party has lurched to the right for decades to the point now that it's completely dominated by billionaires, and stands shoulder to shoulder with the Republicans against the legacy of FDR's New Deal.

Bernie surely knows this, which likely explains why to this day he remains an "independent."

Even Bernie's most enthusiastic bros will find the conclusion demoralizing. Yet it's a fitting final chapter of a book that matches the trajectory of Sanders' political career, where years of agitation has channeled immense energy—especially since 2016—into the jaws of a Wall Street-dominated Democratic Party.

There will not be another Bernie Sanders, for reasons both obvious and complicated. Ironically Bernie's book proves that even if he—or a new FDR— were now president, the existing Democrats would successfully undermine the project. His book explains in depth how his supposedly powerful position as Chairman of the Budget Committee amounted to very little when he confronted the combined weight of the party.

Hopeless ending aside, the most interesting parts of the book are when Bernie discusses in depth how he diverted the enthusiasm of his 2020 campaign into the moribund campaign of Joe Biden, who Bernie defends in his book, yet again, as a "good friend."

Guiding the "movement" into Biden's lion den

Bernie writes at length about how and why his campaign resonated with young people, workers and minorities. You can feel Bernie's happiness in these chapters as he escorts us down memory lane.

Things then start to get dark. He explains how his campaign was torpedoed by the combined weight of the Democratic Party, where before Super Tuesday several candidates collectively dropped out and endorsed Joe Biden. But oddly, this brief mention seems to include no hard feelings, and the reader is apparently meant to shrug off the nuclear attack as if it were an aberration, instead of a different version of his defeat in 2016 at the hand of the Democrats.

Bernie's story goes further sideways after he drops out of the race and seeks to merge his campaign with Biden's. Bernie explains that he and Biden agreed on creating a "task force" consisting of nominees put forth by both campaigns, with the consensus outcome to act as the backbone of Biden's new campaign platform.

Photo: "Bernie acknowledges that he abandoned the campaign for Medicare For All—and other progressive demands—without a single consultation with supporters. The 'movement' that was supposedly the purpose of his campaign rapidly shrunk from 'us' to 'me.'" A Sanders march and rally in Pittsburgh, 2016. Photo by Mark Dixon

After the task force haggling Bernie mentions that the end result—the platform that would enable Bernie to vigorously campaign for Biden—would not include Medicare For All, or a billionaire tax, no marijuana legalization, or student debt forgiveness or free public college.

Biden did agree to lowering the age of Medicare to 60, to be “aggressive” to fight climate change by creating a Civilian Climate Corps, and to end private prisons.

It’s interesting that Bernie acknowledges that he abandoned the campaign for Medicare For All—and other progressive demands—without a single consultation with supporters. The “movement” that was supposedly the purpose of his campaign rapidly shrunk from “us” to “me.”

Bernie then brags that Biden’s new platform spilled over to the Democratic National Convention, resulting in “the most progressive platform in the history of the Democratic Party,” even though Bernie acknowledges that the platform was a watered down version of Biden’s watered down platform, and there was no guarantee that the platform would actually be pursued by Biden if elected.

This might have been the height of Bernie’s delusions about the Democrats, since the following chapters tread further downhill, documenting the frustrations of Bernie as the above ideas are ignored or betrayed.

Bernie as chair of the Senate Budget Committee: Where big ideas go to die

When the Democrats allowed Bernie to be appointed chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, there was a feeling of hope and excitement about the Biden administration. With the committee set to craft the American Rescue Plan in response to COVID-19 and then “Build Back Better,” it became clear that Bernie was catapulted into a very powerful position, reinforcing illusions about Biden being the second coming of FDR.

The chapters where Bernie discusses his role as Budget Committee chair are interesting for several reasons, though especially for the major betrayals from Democrats and Bernie’s ultra-meek response to them.

His actual feelings seem buried between the lines, which is probably the book’s worst feature, and maybe Bernie’s biggest weakness as a politician: he excels at calling out bad corporate behavior and eviscerating Republicans, but when similar evils are deployed by Democrats, Bernie’s truth-telling devolves into minimizing, and degrades further into excuse-making and finally into testifying on behalf of the perpetrators.

For example, every time the Democratic party leadership refuses to implement “their” platform by providing a ridiculous excuse, Bernie dismisses the betrayal as a difference of opinion. The book is replete with lines such as “unfortunately my view did not prevail” and “unfortunately the Democratic leadership refused to embrace this strategy.”

Photo: “One might conclude that Bernie suffers from a medical condition preventing him from distinguishing friend from foe.” Sanders (left) speaks while Democratic Senate leader Chuck Schumer (right) looks on.

The lead villains in Bernie’s story are Republicans, though the people who torpedo Bernie’s progressive plans are Biden, Chuck Schumer, and Nancy Pelosi—all of whom come off quite well in the book, even likable. They’re just normal people with different opinions, after all.

Bernie accepts the party line by placing much blame on just two senators—Democrats Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema—but Bernie describes the actions of their many accomplices and minimizes their crimes.

One key accomplice is Senator Mark Warner, who undermines Bernie at a key moment. How does Bernie respond? “I like Senator Warner and consider him a friend.” One might conclude that Bernie suffers from a medical condition preventing him from distinguishing friend from foe.

Accepting nonsense explanations

Bernie goes on to list all the progressive proposals that got dropped—with his objection—from the America Rescue Plan and later Build Back Better (eventually renamed the Inflation Reduction Act). Some of them include: a \$15 minimum wage; erasure of student debt; paid family and medical leave; free or cheap free preschool and child care; \$600 a week unemployment; \$300 a month child tax credit; expansion of Medicare; free community college; repeal of Trump’s tax breaks for the rich; repairing public housing and expanding affordable housing; money for homelessness; etc., etc.

At one critical moment of the American Rescue Plan, Bernie writes:

Senator Schumer wanted to postpone a debate over these [progressive] issues. He said we needed to address the emergency first. While I understood that argument, I was fearful that this could be our one opportunity to achieve the long-neglected changes our country needed. I worried that whatever was left out of the first reconciliation bill might not make it into future legislation ... sadly, my fears turned out to be justified.

Bernie worried, yes, but he ultimately went along with the party without blasting the betrayal publicly, while even portraying Schumer as an honest actor at this pivotal moment rather than the real-life villain he obviously is.

At another critical moment, leading Democrats tell Bernie his progressive vision must be abandoned because a Republican became governor of Virginia, which “panicked” the Democrats into wanting to pass “anything.” Shockingly, Bernie accepts this ridiculous excuse, saying “we lost our leverage,” though it’s unclear who the “we” is that Bernie refers to.

Later Bernie claims he was tricked into voting for the infrastructure bill that was separated from the Build Back Better Reconciliation Act in an effort to destroy the latter. In explaining his vote for the infrastructure bill Bernie says:

I voted for it. It was a reasonably good piece of legislation. But I voted for it with the absolute belief that Democratic leadership in the House and the Senate would not send the infrastructure bill to the president’s desk without passing the Build Back Better Reconciliation Act. That’s what Speaker Pelosi said. That’s what Majority Leader Schumer said. That’s what President Biden said.

This paragraph is remarkable for several reasons. That Bernie could be so gullible to fall for such a simple trick is doubtful. And after mildly calling out Pelosi, Schumer and Biden for this betrayal, not one follow-up sentence is mentioned, as if it were just one odd episode disconnected from the many others in his book.

In this way Bernie seems childishly naive in his book, as he documents his stumbling from one betrayal into another, and eventually concluding that this den of thieves must transform itself into an organization of the working class.

Because Bernie and the Left no longer seem like anti-establishment options, the far-right is having an uncontested field day.

Eventually Bernie gives a post-mortem of the progressive bills that were destroyed under his watch. While he gives some blame to Sinema and Manchin, he also says, correctly, that it was the super-rich who used their money and influence to destroy the bills, who did so with such ease that Bernie says it was “like shooting fish in a barrel.”

But does this mean the whole project was doomed to failure? Are the Democrats too corrupt? Is Bernie’s movement powerless? And what about the broader labor movement who were not called on to take part in this fight? Many Bernie supporters were relegated to sitting back and watching the fruits of their labor rot on the ground, as Bernie suggests that his experience was inevitable.

Baby steps can kill social movements

After admitting defeat Bernie, attempts a salvage operation, where he calls the neutered Inflation Reduction Act “Building Back a Little Better.” He says “I reluctantly voted for the bill” because the “pluses outweighed the minuses.”

This logic of baby steps can be useful in politics, but in this case it minimizes the fact that Bernie’s one step forward came after one hundred steps backwards. Whether something is “a step in the right direction” depends on what was at stake, and what could have been achieved if a different strategy was adopted.

At stake here was the health of the broader labor movement, which had invested too many eggs in Bernie’s basket. Movement energy from the massive Trump protests and Black Lives Matter had been funneled into Bernie’s campaign, resulting in nothing.

In many ways the Biden Administration was a successful counter-revolution against the Left, and during this process Bernie signed off on Biden’s project, going so far as to say recently that if Biden runs for president, Bernie would stand down. Ultimately Bernie’s book describes a crushing defeat for working people.

What Bernie’s book leaves out

After describing his gory experience as budget chairman, the book switches course, going into lengthy examinations of the health care industry, the economy, education, the labor movement, inequality, the media, and a myriad of other issues, such as artificial intelligence and “the future of work.”

There are many sound ideas in these chapters, though they all have the feel of missed opportunity more than inspiring vision: Bernie was our one chance, many of his readers will reason, so why spend so much time reminding us of his graveyard of ideas?

One cannot fault a book for not addressing every issue. But Bernie's book is such a sprawling expanse of topics that it's fair to criticize him for ignoring certain elephant-sized issues of U.S. politics, especially given the Fed-triggered economic crisis we've entered.

Bernie's book was finished before the new bank crack-up, but he was well aware a crisis was imminent, because the Federal Reserve had started its recession-producing interest rate hikes. Presumably this is why Sanders voted against the re-nomination of Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell, though he's been mostly silent about the pending recession that has the ability to tank 75 percent of the ideas in his book.

Protest movements all over Europe are targeting the inflation crisis and austerity while the U.S. Left is neutered by its attachment to Democrats—an attachment that Bernie helped cement.

The recession was an open secret among the establishment. [Last June](#) Elizabeth Warren grilled Jerome Powell over his intention to cause a recession that would “drive the economy over a cliff” and put “millions of people out of work.” Senator John N. Kennedy has also been more outspoken than Bernie on this all-important issue.

Bernie certainly knew that the Fed-triggered recession would prevent many of the policies in his book—especially the need for full employment and a jobs program. A stated goal of the [Fed's current policy](#) is to increase unemployment in order to “fix the overheated job market,” ultimately to give employers more leverage to lower wages (a tactic that the Carter-Reagan Fed pioneered).

Bernie could have rallied the labor movement to give advance warning of this recession, without which the corporate offensive will resemble a “shock and awe” campaign that aims to implement austerity on all levels—wages, pensions, social security, medicare and social programs of all kinds.

However there is one austerity-proof department that becomes more dangerous in times of economic crisis—war.

Bernie's wars vs. Bernie's socialism

Bernie's book briefly mentions that the military budget is too large, but it's an afterthought. Left unsaid was the most basic, exceptional fact about the United States: it is the world's only military-economic superpower, which oversees a global empire fueled by war.

The most dangerous conflict currently is Ukraine, which goes unmentioned in Bernie's book. In voting for the Ukraine war budget while remaining an uncritical supporter of NATO, Bernie has made it harder to build a principled anti-imperial movement.

Bernie's pro-war stance has been [a problem for decades](#), though it is sometimes dismissed by supporters as an irony of his otherwise progressive politics. But this political contradiction has deeper implications: Bernie wants to have his cake and eat it too—he wants socialism and imperialism at once, as if the “yes” votes he gives for war don't act as vetoes to the social programs he also wants funded.

Other big issues missing from Bernie's book are the housing crisis—working people cannot afford rent in any city in the country—and the topic of immigration, which was a critical issue that Biden ran on against Trump.

Bernie's legacy in doubt

Near the end of Bernie's book, a section is titled "Taking on Uber capitalism." Unsurprisingly, Bernie wants us to believe that U.S. capitalism can be tamed and made into the supposed purring kitten of the Scandinavian countries, if only an FDR figure emerged as a lion tamer. There is no political vehicle to drive us from A to B except to wait around for FDR's second coming.

If Bernie's political career ends soon—with this book being among his last testaments—the whole project should be examined closely. Bernie spent decades planting seeds and patiently watering, and the moment his project bore real fruit, it went unpicked, shriveling and then rotting on the vine: The power went unused, the people un-mobilized—shot "like fish in a barrel."

The failure of this project has led directly to political demoralization at a time of increasing social-economic crisis. Protest movements all over Europe are targeting the inflation crisis and austerity while the U.S. Left is neutered by its attachment to Democrats—an attachment that Bernie helped cement.

Because Bernie and the Left no longer seem like anti-establishment options, the far-right is having an uncontested field day. To the apolitical they appear like the only social force opposing war and the Federal Reserve. Bernie and the Squad have thus gift-wrapped the far-right powerful issues to organize around at a time of a spiraling economic crisis.

When leaders become shackles

The evolution of Bernie's politics—and the Left's over-attachment to it—require immediate examination and course correction. Too many leftists have a nostalgic glow about Bernie that stifles discussion and prevents movement. We are paralyzed at a moment that requires action.

Other radicals have used Bernie's brand as a cover for their reformist, non-radical politics. Jacobin magazine, for example, recently published an [effusive review](#) of Bernie's book, with the ending section titled "A legacy that will continue." But the Left cannot afford the continuation of this legacy.

Bernie's book makes it very clear: There is no anti-capitalist alternative to the Democrats. But Bernie's truism will be interpreted by many as "there is no hope," since with the Democrats at the helm no real action will be taken to promote and protect the working class or the climate in a time of crisis.

Taking immediate steps toward political independence must be an urgent priority. The labor movement cannot remain handcuffed to the Democrats at a time of inflation and recession.

Real political hope can only be found within the labor and socialist movement, but only when the movement offers a strategic, anti-capitalist vision complete with a pathway. Taking immediate steps toward political independence must be an urgent priority. The labor movement cannot remain handcuffed to the Democrats at a time of inflation and recession, where the establishment is taking active steps to usher forth the next anti-worker phase of repressive capitalism.

Steps toward political independence require mobilizing the working class against Republicans and Democrats alike at this critical moment, since there is a bipartisan consensus emerging around bailouts for bankers and austerity for everyone else.

May 1 is International Workers Day, where across the world enormous demonstrations will take place to make pro-worker demands. Such demonstrations across the United States are long overdue, and May Day would be a perfect occasion for the U.S. working class to announce its independence, in the form of giant protests against the bi-partisan attack on working people.

review by Shamus Cooke

P.S.

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