

Bernie Sanders and US presidential campaign: An Extraordinary Moment

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THE 2016 ELECTION is turning into an extraordinary campaign in a moment of accelerating crisis in the United States and globally. The massive economic insecurities facing working-class America, the horrific situation confronting African-American communities, and capital's blind march toward ecological destruction are forcing themselves onto the agenda — and are dramatically reflected in Bernie Sanders' Iowa dead heat and smashing New Hampshire victory. At this writing, he's polling nationally within two percentage points of Hillary Clinton.

In the end, the one sure prediction about the 2016 election is that the power of corporate capital will not be touched. That's the nature of what's called "bourgeois democracy." But almost everything else is up for grabs.

What's happening to this society can be seen most intensely in the case of Flint, Michigan, where manic cost-cutting and eliminating democracy led to the poisoning of the city's water supply and its population. What was a local story is now, of course, a leading national and international news headline. The health costs are incalculable, and the funds needed for basic repair of pipes destroyed by corrosive river water vastly exceed the state's capacity. [1])

This is the kind of thing that's been happening to Native American communities for generations, and to many rural areas with the advent of fracking that puts poisons into the water supplies. But aside from a brief mention in a Democratic candidates' debate, the poisoning of Flint — and other tragedies resulting from cutting and privatizing essential services for working and poor people — are at most marginal to the electoral season.

At the same time, heroin addiction and its fatal consequences are sweeping large sections of small town and rural white America — a byproduct of despair and a consequence of a catastrophically failed "war on drugs" that has already devastated U.S. inner cities and much of Mexico and Central America.

Bernie Sanders is the one candidate who denounces the power of "the billionaire class" and intends to do something about it. The youth and working class energy that fuels his campaign illustrates the profound appeal of his program of single-payer health care, expanded social security, tuition-free public universities, a \$15 minimum wage and "political revolution" against Wall Street and "too big to exist" banks.

America is not in the midst of a mass popular turn to the right. There's a polarization evidenced on the right by heightened white racism and nativism, and yet a willingness among millions to support

an avowed democratic socialist. The Democratic party establishment, however, is 99% convinced that the socialist Sanders is not electable — and one percent utterly terrified that he just might be, in view of what might emerge from the Republican rat pack.

To what lengths the Democratic leadership might go in the effort to head Sanders off will be tested in the coming primaries. His candidacy presents itself as essential to the Democratic campaign by bringing in young and working class folks who are notably tepid in their enthusiasm for Clinton. Those prospects for “unity” might be damaged if the party goes deep into its bag of dirty tricks to sideline Sanders — by race-baiting, redbaiting or relying on unelected super-delegates to seal the Clinton nomination.

Whatever the sound and fury emanating from the nomination process, corporate America, the banks, Wall Street and the hedge funds can be sure that the Democratic Party remains in safe hands. They prospered under Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, as they did under George W. Bush in between, and the heated rhetoric of a political campaign won’t change the reality that, as Sanders has pithily put it, “it’s Wall Street that regulates Congress.”

Republican Agendas

The Republican Party presents a weird picture. It remains the preferential option for most of corporate America. For at least the short and medium term, its control of the U.S. House of Representatives remains ensured by the combined effects of district gerrymandering and state voter suppression laws. The Senate, tilted as it is toward small, rural and conservative states, is likely also to retain a Republican edge. But to maintain its usefulness to the U.S. ruling class as a national governing party, the GOP needs a leadership to maintain the tenuous cohesion of a party pulling in three partly disparate directions.

First of course there’s the “mainstream” traditional agenda of big business: cut corporate taxes and social services, smash what’s left of union power, protect the insurance and pharmaceutical industries, stuff the military with every possible weapons system, privatize social security if they can get away with it. It’s represented by those candidates media-certified as “moderate.”

Second is the social reactionary thrust of the religious right — seeking to restore the mythical “Christian nation” that America never was, eliminate abortion and LGBT rights, etc. — as represented by Ted Cruz and Ben Carson. These two components have been mainstays of Republican power for decades.

A third trend, after being mostly closeted, has come to the fore in the sordid spectacle that is Donald Trump. This is a thrust toward a U.S. counterpart of the National Front in France, not particularly religious but overtly anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, aggressively nationalist and white-supremacist — sentiments that have coagulated around white Americans’ resentment and insecurity. Does Trump believe most of his own babble? Probably not, but that doesn’t matter.

The relatively new public prominence of this kind of ugly politics has caused many well-meaning people to freak out over the “fascist Trump menace.” This overlooks three essential facts: (i) Trump himself is not an organizer or political leader; (ii) in substance, most of the other Republican candidates are even worse; and (iii) the Republican leadership cannot allow him to become the party nominee without sacrificing the party’s 2016 election campaign and risking the international credibility of the United States.

The three Republican agenda components aren’t inherently incompatible. Indeed they strongly

overlap, especially when it comes to targeting those at the bottom of capitalist society's heap. Meld them successfully, and you can have a serious rightwing powerhouse. But the trick is that the second and third — the religious right and semi-fascist nativism — need to remain subordinated to the first, the profit-driven "establishment" corporate agenda. Otherwise, a party like the National Front has its uses (as it does in France) but can't be trusted to take real control of government.

If an actual Trump nomination seems unthinkable for the party and for U.S. imperialism — and he's not going to the convention with the numbers of committed delegates for a first-ballot majority — it's also problematic that the vicious and creepy Ted Cruz has strong appeal to the religious-right base but limited reach beyond it. After Iowa and New Hampshire, the definitive "establishment" candidate had yet to emerge.

A narrative constructed by centrist pundits, seeking to dismiss both the Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump campaigns, calls them symmetrical expressions of "populist revolt." Even leaving aside Sanders' long record of activism, governance as Burlington mayor and legislative advocacy in the U.S. Congress and Senate — compared with Trump's career as celebrity windbag — the comparison is absurd.

Bernie Sanders' response to the crisis of working-class Americans is an appeal to people's instincts of social solidarity and hopeful cooperative spirit. That's the meaning of his "democratic socialism" and his call for expanded economic rights. Trump's appeal is to the worst instincts of scapegoating "Others" — in the form of Muslims, Mexicans or "political correctness." (With "enemies" who are powerful, like Vladimir Putin, Trump claims he can make brilliant deals.) Both sets of human instincts certainly exist, but there is no "symmetry" in seeking to tap them.

Contours of Crisis and Resistance

The story of Flint is now well known. While environmental racism and class bias are ubiquitous, there are few cases as spectacular and ruinous as the poisoning of a city that's 52% African American and hard-hit by industrial decline. In 2014, a state-appointed "Emergency Manager" ordered the city to switch its water supply from the clean and safe Detroit system to the Flint River, without the anti-corrosive chemical protection that Detroit provided.

When filthy water immediately began pouring from Flint residents' taps, citizens' complaints were arrogantly dismissed, although a local GM plant was allowed to switch back to the Detroit system when the Flint River water was fouling its car engines. Coverup, malfeasance and public lies by the state Department of Environmental Quality and Governor Rick Snyder's office prevailed until Michigan ACLU investigative reporter Curt Guyette and Virginia Tech University researchers performed tests that showed shockingly high lead levels, ten or even 100 times higher than federal standards allow. The extent of permanent health damage to children will take years to measure.

Almost unbelievably, the emergency manager who presided over the catastrophe in Flint, an administrator named Darnell Earley, has not gone underground or into a well-deserved prison cell but went on to be appointed the EM of Detroit Public Schools. Under state control many Detroit schools have been turned over to a new entity called the Educational Achievement Authority, a disastrous failure, while DPS schools themselves are mold and vermin-infested, poorly heated and horrendously overcrowded with class sizes around 45-50.

Teachers have carried out a wave of independent sick-outs, tacitly supported although not organized by their union which has only recently emerged from a period of internal turmoil. Importantly, there is massive community sympathy for the teachers and overwhelming anger toward the Emergency

Manager and Governor Snyder, with demands mounting to force Snyder's resignation. [2])

Snyder, of course, is the vicious and cynical representative of a vicious and cynical system. The fact that he's so discredited gives important space to the Detroit teachers and other insurgent movements. The same can be said of the powerful upsurge in Chicago against Democratic "Mayor One Percent" Rahm Emanuel, who's up to his eyeballs in the coverup of murderous police brutality.

Across the country the activities of Black Lives Matter, protests around crushing student debts as well as institutional racism and sexual harassment on college campuses, and the growing fight for a \$15 hourly minimum wage have become sufficiently powerful that they can't be written off.

Beyond the Election

The real-life daily disasters ripping through this society are driving an unusual political campaign, with results not easily predictable.

But if 2016 eventually proves to be a "watershed" year, it will be the result of newly rising movements, beyond the election, putting the heat on the corporate powers that have put a chokehold on politics and society. Among other burning questions: Can Black Lives Matter sustain its inspirational and mobilizing power? Can the movements around climate change link that emergency to the fights for environmental justice in Flint and beyond?

And where will the youth and labor support for Bernie Sanders ultimately turn? Might it continue in a new and perhaps independent political form? Will those forces then be able to build the necessary alliances with African American, Latino and immigrant forces? Can a new social alliance develop that can offer serious solutions for working class folks who are attracted to the demagogic and lying promises of Donald Trump?

A real breakthrough in politics depends on the answers and, to some extent, how the U.S. left responds to the challenges they present.

Readers interested in an alternative to the parties of corporate capital may look at the presidential campaign website of Dr. Jill Stein [3].

Labor for Bernie [4] will hold a national meeting April 1, just before the opening session the Labor Notes conference in Chicago. Conference registration information is online at www.labornotes.org/conference.

The Editors, *Against the Current*

P.S.

* "An Extraordinary Moment". *Against the Current* 181, March/April 2016:
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4577>

Footnotes

[1] See ESSF (article 37023), [USA, pollution & inequalities – A Michigan City Poisoned: Governor’s Apology Can’t Get the Lead Out](#) and (article 37315), [USA: The lead poison water crisis in Flint, Michigan](#).

[2] On the background see <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4458>, and on recent developments (article 4570), [A Very Merry Christmas, Hanukah, Eid Mubarak - A Happy New Year](#).

[3] www.jill2016.com

[4] www.laborforbernie.org