

Electoral activism and class struggle are two different worlds, and while it would be unfair to say that there is no overlap, it is fair to say that there is not much overlap. More importantly, electoral activism tends not to push people toward anything other than more electoral activism. Bernie failed? Try harder next time. Run local candidates. Support the Green Party.

On the other hand, people do not engage in class struggle because they hear some good ideas or because they are excited about the prospects of a politician changing things. They engage in class struggle because they can no longer continue living as they did before. When the risks of taking confrontational and militant actions are relatively low compared to the consequences of continuing life as normal, then people are pushed into class struggle.

Rather than leading to more militant and radical forms of resistance, electoral politics typically leads only to more electoral politics.

# ***ELECTORAL POLITICS ARE NOT A "GATEWAY DRUG"***



*Reprinted in August of 2016 by Sprout Distro with the hope that this text—while no means perfect—will be helpful in convincing people of the dead end of electoral politics...*

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In what should be a surprise to no one, Bernie Sanders has officially endorsed Hillary Clinton for President.

For months, various left-wing groups and periodicals proclaimed that the Sanders campaign could lead to a break with the Democrats or could lay the basis for a future struggles and organizations independent of the Democratic Party. We can now assess whether or not the situation has ripened these possibilities.

The truth is, nobody has yet proposed any practical future for the campaign volunteers that could lead to some sort of radical or militant or independent organization that could pose any real challenge to the Democratic Party or anything else. For all the talk of left-wing opportunities in the Sanders campaign, the main opportunities that have been taken are the writing of endless think pieces about opportunities and a lot of self-congratulation about the possibilities for socialism. The most concrete organizational response so far has been the People's Summit in June, which most predominantly encouraged people to support Hillary Clinton and discouraged doing anything more independent. It is true that there have been mass actions against the Trump campaign, many of which included Sanders supporters, but there is no reason to believe these would not have occurred had Sanders not run.

On the other hand, the Sanders campaign has built up a number of resources that will be valuable to Hillary Clinton. Sanders has signed up many people to register as Democrats, he has built up a ground campaign of enthusiastic young people that he will deliver to the Democratic establishment so long as they make trivial changes to the party platform, and he has signed up literally millions of people on an email list that the establishment is now salivating over.

This last point ought to give pause (though it won't) to every left-wing and radical activist who volunteered for the campaign. That is, every time some volunteer went out doorknocking or sent out a mailer or invited people to a Facebook page or convinced somebody to make a \$27 donation, and every time that led to them giving their contact information to the Sanders campaign, they were helping to create a mass contact list that will prove valuable for getting out the vote and appealing for donations for Hillary Clinton. Many self-proclaimed radicals and revolutionaries helped build the infrastructure of the Democratic Party. It might seem ungenerous to put it this way, but the truth is often ungenerous.

In other words, countless hours were spent by radicals asking people to join the “political revolution” and the fruits of those efforts will now be sold, in some form or another, to help elect a candidate entirely beholden to Wall Street and the State Department. Concentration camps and brainwashing could never be nearly so effective at mobilizing masses of people to help the status quo as the American two-party system has proven for decades. The Democratic Party has long understood that so long as they dangle the unlikely possibility of radical change and now even “revolution” and “socialism” in front of the Left, they can be assured of a cadre of followers who will volunteer their efforts in exchange for nothing more than a good feeling.

This is nothing new, in fact it is the history of the Democratic Party at least since Franklin D. Roosevelt. What is new is that the establishment can now take advantage of the widespread support for explicitly socialist ideas shown in many opinion polls since the 2008 financial crisis, in order to maintain the power of the very people

who brought us that crisis.

What is also not new—though its adherents seem to think they have made a groundbreaking discovery—is the theory behind the mobilization. While Sanders’ more moderate supporters will be content with the idea that their candidate might really make change, his more radical supporters are burdened with ideologies that tell them that change cannot come from above. Instead, they are forced to argue, the masses of people flocking to the campaign—and yes, there were masses of people who flocked—will somehow lay the basis for an independent break with the Democrats and lay the basis for future struggles. The fact that this has never happened in US history does not bother them.

Sanders campaign in many ways is a mirror image of the Upton Sinclair campaign for Governor of California in 1934, which was openly socialist and even won the Democratic Party nomination. In support of his campaign, hundreds of EPIC clubs sprung up to “End Poverty In California,” promoting Sinclair’s program to solve society’s ills by redistributing the wealth. And yet, after he lost due in part to sabotage by the Democratic Party and by Roosevelt himself, these hundreds of clubs vanished. This was in 1934, one of the highest points in the history of class struggle in the United States, and yet these efforts did not lead to a radical break with the Democratic Party or a challenge to the system—those efforts were taken up by other people. Instead, they simply vanished. All the great books on the labor upsurge of the 1930s do not even bother to tell us what happened to these clubs, so little a role did they play in the mass strikes of the era.

How could this possibly be the case? The reason is because people who flock to electoral campaigns largely are

interested primarily in electoralism. It is a safe avenue for dissent where people can talk about interesting ideas with few risks. In the meantime, people who are prepared to risk their jobs and their lives challenging the system, such as the many young people who revolted in Ferguson and Baltimore against police terror, are generally alienated from electoral politics.

Electoral activism and class struggle are two different worlds, and while it would be unfair to say that there is no overlap, it is fair to say that there is not much overlap. More importantly, electoral activism tends not to push people toward anything other than more electoral activism. Bernie failed? Try harder next time. Run local candidates. Support the Green Party. Direct actions—strike, riots, blockades, occupations—on the other hand, tend to pose complicated questions and force their organizers to deal with difficult problems such as police repression that put them even more at odds with the system.

## **A gateway to what?**

Electoral activism, in other words, is not a gateway to more militant and radical forms of resistance, any more than smoking marijuana is a gateway to heroin or cocaine, as Nancy Reagan may have argued in the past. It is primarily a gateway back into itself.

Nobody goes to jail, these days, for electoral campaigning. It is rare to lose your job over participating in an electoral campaign. It occurs, probably more in the Deep South or in workplaces where any sign of left-wing politics will make you a target as a potential troublemaker. But overall, it is actually pretty safe.

Contrast this with direct actions, which are often illegal and will get you arrested and potentially charged with serious crimes. Missing work because you are in jail is a great way to lose your job. Being known as a law breaker is not going to make it easy to get hired anywhere.

On the other hand, the skills used in electoral campaigning can be quite lucrative. Door-to-door outreach, web design, social media outreach, organizing press conferences, all of these can be used to launch a successful career in public relations or advertising or, of course, political campaign consulting. The backbone of the lower levels of the Democratic Party are built up with career minded organizers who are padding their resumes with these experiences while engaging in progressive politics. It is a very appealing lifestyle that is no threat to the status quo whatsoever. That includes the bulk of the paid staff working for the Bernie Sanders campaign, who will no doubt be an obstacle toward any effort to build independent, radical politics that might threaten Hillary Clinton.

The consequences of direct action organizing are getting arrested, prosecuted, fired, or losing your apartment. Battling this backlash is a gruelling experience in and of itself.

The consequences of electoral campaigning are launched careers and access to the media.

Direct action organizing requires subterfuge, hiding identities so that people do not get victimized, and keeping plans secret so they can be more effective at shutting things down.

Electoral campaigning involves creating attention for its own sake, creating media stars and hobnobbing with

important political figures. It is inherently glamorous, thus the appeal.

Direct action forces people to think about how to be careful but powerful, how to balance secrecy and security with having an impact.

Electoral campaigning involves getting as much attention as humanly possible for its own sake. Anything that draws attention or builds an audience is inherently valuable and worthwhile. Pointless stunts that get media coverage are highly valued and rewarded.

Mistakes in a direct action can risk people's jobs and physical security.

Mistakes in an electoral campaign are usually overcome by the news cycle and the campaign continues until the election, and then again with the next electoral campaign.

Direct action draws in people who are courageous, committed and self-sacrificing.

Electoral campaigns draw in people who want to use the campaign to launch and sustain their careers.

In short, these two forms of political action are worlds apart from each other. The lessons and experiences and organizational forms for one are not particularly well-suited to the other. People who are experienced mostly in electoral campaigning are often a disaster when it comes to direct action, and have no clue why their basic assumptions are so out of line with more militant tactics. All they know is grandstanding and bullshitting and they assume that will get them through any problem, regardless of the consequences to other people's lives.

People do not engage in class struggle because they hear some good ideas or because they are excited about the prospects of a politician changing things. They engage in class struggle because they can no longer continue living as they did before. When the risks of taking confrontational and militant actions are relatively low compared to the consequences of continuing life as normal, then people are pushed into class struggle.

Taking risky action as a group with other people in your class, seeing the possibility that these struggles can succeed and that these newfound comrades can defend themselves against the expected repression—this is what creates revolutionary class consciousness and organization. Electoral activity can accomplish nothing like this. It simply does not require the challenges or reinforce the sense of mutual solidarity like more militant forms of resistance.

## **The graveyard of social movements**

People who believe that the Bernie Sanders campaign, and more importantly its supporters, will lead to anything like a “political revolution” simply do not believe that the Democratic Party is the graveyard of social movements.

Obviously, there are many less radical supporters of the campaign who have never believed this. The problem is the growing enthusiasm among many radicals and revolutionaries who in fact did once believe this but no longer seem to.

An actual political revolution will destroy the Democratic Party. The faint of heart will squirm from such a statement, but it is inconceivable that US capitalism could be challenged without the end of one of its historic pillars.

If the Bernie Sanders campaign helped to launch a new Left in the US that is going to be radical, independent and militant, then the Democratic Party is no longer the graveyard, rather it is the incubator, of social movements.

But these two things are mutually exclusive. Just because a left-liberal Democrat attaches the word “socialism” to their campaign does not change this dynamic one bit. Rather, it reinforces the dynamic, which has a long history of examples and, literally, zero counter-examples. “It’s different this time,” they say once again, repeating the rallying cry of opportunists past. But for the Postmodern Left, there is no such thing as history or at least there is nothing that we can learn from it. Rather, there are simply a series of new phenomena with completely new characteristics from which we can never learn or apply any lessons of the past. It is so exciting, until it ends, then another exciting new thing will need to be chased for a while, with a theory concocted to justify the chase, so we all feel like we are doing something.

Bhaskar Sunkara of *Jacobin* magazine has most recently expressed this thinking in an article in the *Washington Post* which hailed the “Sanders Democrat” and the potential they hold:

This all points to the emergence of a “Sanders Democrat,” a group that is disproportionately young and calling for massive redistributions of wealth and power. Even if Sanders fades in the coming months, this group is poised to continue a long struggle inside and outside the Democratic Party. It’s bad news for current Democratic leaders, but it’s good news for those on the radical left who have been struggling in isolation, with little social base for their politics, for decades.

The Sanders Democrat might not be ready to storm the barricades with us yet, but this is a sound starting point that

would be inconceivable 10 years ago. After all, if we can't win a majority for social-democratic politics in this country, we have no chance of winning a majority for anything more radical than that.

First off, if we go back slightly further than 10 years ago, perhaps 16, we will find the campaign for Ralph Nader. This campaign was in fact independent of the Democratic Party, substantially better on imperialism and specifically Palestine, and had the support of millions of people. In other words, we have covered this ground before, fairly recently in fact. Rather than deal with the fact that it did not produce what Sunkara and others hope for out of Sanders, history has been rewritten and we are told that no such thing has happened in decades. We are retreading the same ground with Sanders, except his campaign is less independent and less radical, and yet we are supposed to expect even greater things from it, apparently. The only way such conclusions are possible are by blinding oneself to reality and pretending that recent history did not happen.

Second, the Sanders Democrat is not a problem for the Democratic Party establishment. Rather, it is a solution to a problem—how to get disillusioned young people to mobilize support for a neoliberal party. Answer: slap the label “socialist” on one wing of the party, let them fight over the program and suddenly they feel engaged.

Sunkara is attempting to fit the square peg of social democracy into the round hole of resistance against capitalism. In fact, there are millions of working class people who are completely disillusioned by the US political system and do not vote at all. Furthermore, this idea that the Left has to create a social democratic majority is at the root of much of its current impasse.

There did not need to be a social democratic majority in Ferguson or Baltimore or elsewhere in order for the recent urban rebellions to occur there, or after the Trayvon Martin verdict, or in Cincinnati in 2001, or in Los Angeles in 1992. These events are completely forgotten by this thesis, which seeks a social democratic majority as an end in itself and not because it actually has anything to do with genuine revolts, which are often repressed by social democrats seeking to gain favor with the ruling class. This is the social base for the Left that Sunkara so desires, which has been fighting for survival consistently for decades, but which somehow has no role in his analysis. Better we chase after flashy efforts to reform the Democratic Party than working-class people fighting for their lives.

In fact, the people who made these revolts are disproportionately young, African-American and often poor. In other words, they are among the least likely people to vote and specifically among the least likely to vote for Bernie Sanders. Yet, somehow, it is the young social democrat leaning toward the Democratic Party that is the future for independent political organizing, not the young Black man in prison for actually revolting. There are many reasons why this conclusion is drawn, but certainly among them is the reality that many Leftists cannot relate to this experience nor can they offer anything to people risking their lives and livelihoods to challenge state repression, but they feel very comfortable having a conversation about socialism over a cup of coffee at a locally owned coffee shop in Brooklyn.

The courageous rebels, not the Sanders Democrats, have created real headaches for the Democratic Party establishment. They have gotten cops fired and prosecuted, destroyed political careers and pose real problems for big

city Democratic Party Mayors like Rahm Emanuel and Ed Lee. Yet, somehow, the Sanders Democrat is praised for their ability to pose a challenge to the status quo while the Ferguson rebel sits in prison, largely forgotten.

This is not class politics, this is grad student politics. Electoral politics are ready made for highly educated left-wing experts who can tell you what Bernie Sanders should and should not do, why he won or lost this or that state, but have no idea what to do in the face of state repression.

### **“Social movements are great but...”**

There is a layer of Leftists for whom the “electoral campaign as social movement” thesis is so ingrained and accepted that nobody ever bothers to give examples. Currently, many left-wing activists in the Bernie Sanders campaign see the campaign as a launching pad for social struggles. A recent article by the left-wing writer Corey Robin in *Jacobin* lays this out:

The Left loves social movements. I do, too. But social movements don't happen in a political vacuum; they're not immune to the mood and medium of electoral politics. There's nothing quite like a presidential campaign for taking pots and kettles long simmering on the Left's back burner and bringing them to a furious boil.

One really has to wonder which election he is talking about? Is he even familiar with, say, US history, where the exact opposite dynamic has consistently played out? It is far more often the other way around, that candidates and campaigns are forced to respond to issues forced onto the political agenda by social upheaval. The issue of police violence, and the recent urban rebellions around it, are precisely a case in point. It is the courageous acts of young

people in Ferguson and Baltimore that have forced Bernie Sander to take on this issue, not the other way around. Not by a long shot.

It is inexplicable that Robin would even consider it to be the other way around. In fact, at election time, as experienced political people suddenly become enamored of opinion polls and campaign rallies, they start saying things like this. “Social movements are great, but...” There really is no “but” about it and it is a mystery how this thinking becomes so commonplace in even numbered years in the US.

In fact, elections pull committed radicals to the right. This is inherent to electoral campaigning. The focus on broad popularity and popular media attention—not to mention making excuses for every bad poll so as to keep up morale in the face of bad news for Bernie—is an inherently conservatising force. People who become absorbed in these campaigns spend their political lives focused on these issues which at best have nothing to do with helping ordinary people fight the system and at worst have everything to do with charlatanry, showmanship and bluster. Learning to explain to Bernie Sanders’s supporters why it is ok that he lost the South because there are not as many Black voters in upcoming states is not a radicalizing experience, except perhaps to those on the listening end of these conversations, who quickly find out who they can trust and who they should not.

Socialist Alternative, probably the largest socialist group supporting Sanders, recently proposed that he run a “safe state” campaign after Clinton cinches the nomination in July. This would mean Sanders running as an independent, but not running in the states that are actually competitive

between Clinton and Trump (or whoever), only running in the states where one side or the other are clearly expected to win.

This is not independent politics. This is pretending to play at independent politics because it feels good to be involved in an election. This is rallying the forces who do not like the Democrats, but just aren't really up for a moderately difficult fight and don't really want to hurt Hillary Clinton too much. This is precisely the strategy that has seen the US Green Party collapse into so little, because they are so unwilling to challenge the Democrats. This is what elections do to the Left. It defangs them as they slouch toward empty posturing so they can avoid doing anything that is too unpopular. It is like taking a direct action to shut down a freeway while nobody is driving on it, so you don't have to worry about the consequences.

On the other hand, it is unlikely that the young rebels who throw rocks at the police in Baltimore are really all that worried about whether they are hurting Hillary Clinton's chances of winning in Florida. In fact, every inner city revolt makes life that much more difficult for Democrats, and that is precisely why this movement is so powerful.

## **A hope for our future?**

Paul LeBlanc, a veteran US socialist and an author of several books on Lenin, has been among the many who have heralded the future of the Sanders phenomenon:

[Sanders supporters] are the hope of our future—particularly those who do not despair, who do not give up and who continue to struggle for the various interrelated goals that are part of the socialist agenda.

This is a lofty rhetoric for a group of people who, as a group, have done little more than say who they plan to vote for and, in some cases, attended a speech by Sanders. Many on the Left see in Sanders's supporters a mirror-image of themselves, maybe younger and less experienced, and cannot consider that maybe what they see in the mirror might not be up to the task of overthrowing the entire current social order. Instead, they assume, we just need more of the same.

There is an entirely distinct group of people we might put our hope in, and that is the young rebels who rose up against the police shooting and beating them in the streets. Many of them are now picking up their lives after having been arrested and even prosecuted, and are probably not sitting around thinking about how all these nice people who are attracted by the Sanders campaign are the hope for our future. They are probably not pontificating on how the Sanders Democrat is the future of the Left, and they are probably not day-dreaming about how Sanders supporters are going to play some critical role in stopping police terrorism against Black people. Rather, they tend to be completely alienated from electoral politics, and are more likely focused on recovering from the last battle in preparation for the next one.

Perhaps they should listen to the Left on the electoral strategy? Not by a long shot. The Left ought to be listening to them instead.