

IS CONTRIBUTION TO THE SANDERS DEBATE IN THE US

- 1.** The International Secretariat thinks that the approach of the US EC/NC to actively intervene in the Bernie Sanders campaign and launch the “Movement for Bernie” and support “Labor for Bernie” is generally correct. The initiative taken by the EC and NC has shown commendable flare and initiative in our approach to the mass movement which has developed around the Sanders campaign. This movement is historic for the US and potentially represents a point of departure for the US working class which is full of opportunities for our organisation if we seize the initiative as the US leadership has proposed.
- 2.** Naturally even the IS initially had some questions about launching the “Movement for Bernie” and examined if it raised the danger of blurring the lines between our programme and the aim of building our own organisation and a new independent workers’ party. Drawing on our experience and the best traditions of Trotskyism combined with discussion with the US EC we were convinced this was not the case. We are convinced it is correct to actively intervene in this process. Our approach is to support Sanders and at the same time to explain the differences we have with him. We believe that the comrades have done this. The assertion by the opposition in our ranks that the lines have been blurred does not hold water if we look at the leaflets and material produced by the comrades. While this or that phrase may have been expressed clumsily the strategical and tactical approach of the comrades has been generally correct.
- 3.** We believe that the comrades who support the opposition are mistaken in their approach and tend towards a static conservative approach, to effectively stand outside this important movement. The proposal to have stalls and intervene in rallies while correct is inadequate to effectively intervene in this movement. The decision to take a political and organisational initiative to try and draw a layer of those mobilised behind Sanders is also being taken to try and give an organised form to this layer who are in the main not organised.
- 4.** The debate, in the section and at the world congress, has involved valued and long-standing comrades and in the main been conducted in a comradely and fraternal manner, which we hope and urge will continue. There should be no hint of recrimination or sanctions against comrades. We recognise that a new tactic will provoke controversy and some suspicion that we are moving away from supporting a principled approach. This is not the case. Such suspicions have developed when many of the tactical turns proposed in the history of the Trotskyist movement have been discussed – for example in Spain in the 1930s.
- 5.** Comrades from the opposition may object that those events involved forces from a Socialist party unlike the capitalist Democratic Party. However, it should be remembered that did not prevent Largo Caballero from initially participating in the right-wing dictatorial regime of Primo De Rivera. He justified this on the grounds that it prevented the UGT trade union from being declared illegal. Later this same Largo Caballero moved sharply to the left and was known as the “Lenin of the Spanish revolution”. Unfortunately, the sectarian Trotskyist forces at the time refused Trotsky’s advice to intervene in the young socialists when invited to do so. As a result an historic opportunity

was lost allowing the Stalinists to gain a base and ship- wreck the Spanish revolution.

- 6.** The discussion in the US is whether or not it has been correct to adopt a bold tactical turn to intervene in a dynamic new situation. It is not about us revising our class analysis of the Democratic Party as a capitalist party. It is not about us revising our aim of fighting to build an independent workers' party in the US or the need to build a revolutionary party. It is a tactical discussion which includes the issue of how a new workers' party can develop in the next period. We understand the hostility that exists amongst a layer towards the Democratic Party because of its role and history.
- 7.** Yet we should remember the united front tactic proposed by Trotsky. This concerned approaching the Social Democrats - SPD - the party that in the civil war in the Ruhr in 1920 was responsible for the slaughter of thousands of workers. It was the same party that had voted for war credits in 1914 and whose leaders were responsible for the execution of Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Still, despite the role of the SPD, the tactic of the united front was proposed in the 1920/ period not as a tactic to prop up the SPD but precisely as a means of breaking SPD workers away from it. The hatred of the CP members towards the SPD meant that this proposal was greeted with outrage by a layer but it was still a correct tactic. The initiative the comrades have taken is not done to prop up the Democratic Party but precisely to help workers and youth break from it and draw the conclusion of the need to build a new party that defends their interests.
- 8.** In Britain in the past we worked within the Labour Party - a bourgeois workers' party. We clearly fought for our own independent programme and ideas. However, this same party in the 1960s attempted to introduce vicious anti-trade union legislation. We were compelled to give it electoral support as part of this tactic, even to some on the right of this party like Denis Healey and others who had links with the bourgeois Bilderberg group and even the CIA. Something we denounced in a public pamphlet and other material on at the time of the witch-hunt against us. This tactic was a necessary overhead for our work which was very successful and eventually allowed us to lead the Liverpool council struggle in the 1980s.
- 9.** The opposition in the US section has a schematic approach which envisages a new workers' party emerging in an almost virgin form - from the working class and the workers' movement and which in reality excludes splits and/or ruptures around the capitalist Democratic Party forming a part of this process. Engels warned in the 19th century against a dogmatic approach in relation to the US. Marx and Engels argued that one concrete step forward by the masses was worth more than a dozen programmes. Where splits to the left from capitalist parties are possible the task of Marxists is to work in such a way as to try and assist them and steer them in the right direction towards forming a new independent party of the working class. The success of such a development is not pre-ordained or inevitable.
- 10.** The emergence of new workers' parties can take different routes. The same process will not be repeated in all countries. However, the recent mass movement of fresh forces, largely from outside the Democratic Party, behind Sanders represents a possible step in this direction. Marxists have a responsibility to boldly intervene to try and assist this process and help the most advanced layers draw the right conclusions of the need for an

independent party. This is what the launch of “Movement for Bernie” is aiming to do. The EC/NC statements have been balanced – supporting Bernie and at the same time explaining our differences.

- 11.** Our tremendous victory in Seattle represented a great step forward. Kshama’s victory was a factor in pushing Sanders to stand, just as our struggle for a new workers’ party in England and Wales was a factor which resulted in some unions, such as UNITE, endorsing Corbyn in the recent Labour leadership election. We have had a very significant impact in Seattle and through it we have partly affected how the situation nationally has developed. We need to build on this. However, it does not mean that this will be repeated in the same way in each city or state or at national level. Nor will it be repeated in the same way in every country. The opposition argue that stalls and distributing material is what is necessary to intervene in this movement. However, as we have explained in our opinion this is inadequate.
- 12.** The same argumentation was used against the French turn advocated by Trotsky. It was also repeated by supporters of Ted Grant when the proposal was made for, initially, a temporary open turn in Scotland and the launching of Scottish Militant Labour. Later, in the light of experience and events, this temporary turn, was developed on an all British basis and linked with a re-appraisal of the class character of the Labour Party. The opposition in the US seem to be looking for a pure crystallisation in the formation of a new workers’ party. Yet other developments coming from around the Democratic Party are also a part of the possible perspectives for the emergence of a new independent workers’ party in the US.
- 13.** There are many historical examples illustrating how splits from some bourgeois parties developed towards the formation of new parties – some of them workers’ parties. In Chile splits from the bourgeois Christian Democracy led to the formation of the Christian Left and MAPU – part of the latter which ended up on the left of Allende’s Popular Unity alliance.
- 14.** In Greece, the former mass workers’ party – PASOK – partly found its origins in the old liberal capitalist Centre Union. PASOK, founded in 1974, rapidly developed a mass base and a radical left reformist or centrist position during its most left combative phase, attracting the support of millions which the KKE with its rigid Stalinist approach could not attract. This was a development anticipated by us at the time.
- 15.** Its leader Andreas Papandreaou was himself radicalised by his own experience and events. Fleeing from the military junta, armed with a pistol and his experiences of the struggle against the military junta including the brutal repression against the polytechnic students by the military in 1973, all served to radicalise this figure and drive him to the left.
- 16.** There are many other examples which illustrate this process. Even in Britain, where we have historically pointed to the formation of the Labour Party being based on the trade unions, the process was not of a “pure” workers party being established. The pioneers for the formation of an independent party of the trade unions battled for two decades for the realisation of this goal. The struggle did not proceed in a straight line but was full of zigzags, steps forward and sometimes steps backwards.
- 17.** Kier Hardie, the miners’ leader from Scotland and regarded as the ‘father of the Labour Party’, was originally a Liberal who tried to reform the party but concluded that this was impossible. Firstly he established the

Scottish Labour Party and then, in 1893 he founded, with others, the Independent Labour Party, which included Marxists from the social Democratic Federation and a handful of trade unionists.

- 18.** Hardie and the ILP conducted a protracted battle to break the trade unions from the Liberal Party's coat-tails. He was elected as MP by the south Wales miners in 1900. However, the South Wales miners as a whole were not free at this stage from illusions in the Liberal Party – even when they established their own political fund in 1899. In the 1890s Hardie battled at each Trades Union Congress each year for 'independent Labour Representation'. The Labour Representation Committee was formed in 1900, attended by trade union delegates and the co-operative movement and various socialist groups. The miners' union, however, abstained due to their connections with local Liberal associations. This situation lasted for almost a decade.
- 19.** In fact the LRC initially secured the affiliation of 353,000 trade unionists out of a total of 2,000,000. The 'new unions' joined but the older, skilled workers' unions remained aloof for a period. The turning point was the 1901 Taff Vale judgement which awarded heavy financial damages against the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants for alleged damage done to the Taff Vale railway company during a strike.
- 20.** By 1903, the affiliated membership of the LRC had risen to 873,000. Yet the LRC, despite being known as the "Labour Party", was still a long way from constituting a party. It didn't even have a programme and only affirmed a willingness to "cooperate with any party which, for the time being, may be engaged in promoting legislation in the direct interests of labour". Local parties despite existing in some areas, were not affiliated to the national party, because the trade union leaders feared they could pass to socialist control. There was no individual membership until 1918. This was only changed during the first world war when Arthur Henderson, originally a Liberal Party agent, as treasurer, re-organised the party.
- 21.** During this period before the Labour Party became fully independent and an established force, a relatively lengthy period of "Lib-Labery" existed. While this will not be repeated in exactly the same way today there are many lessons for how a new workers' party may eventually emerge in the US and the possible role of left Democrats in crossing over to participate in its formation.
- 22.** The development around Sanders is one step along this path. How far this develops remains to be seen and is unclear. Yet our task as Marxists is to try and take it as far as we can and intervene to assist the best layers draw the most advanced conclusions possible.
- 23.** History knows all kinds of changes – many of the most unlikely character. Often developments of a mass character unfold not conforming to how we would prefer them to be, but they are expressed in the only channel open to the masses at that time. Marxists therefore need to be extremely flexible in tactics in order intervene in events and especially mass movements where they are actually taking place and not where we would prefer them to be. If not, we will simply remain on the side- lines observing the mass movement pass us by.
- 24.** This has been the experience of the section in England and Wales in relation to the Corbyn phenomenon. This helped shed some light on how to

approach the Sanders movement. We did not fully anticipate the Corbyn developments in advance. When he stood and began to attract wider support we wished him well but did not initially think it likely he would win. Given the bourgeois character of New Labour we as a party did not join or advocate a vote for him, but in reality we supported the idea of his victory because of the consequences it would have in the party and outside it.

- 25.** However, many of our supporters and even some members registered and voted for Corbyn for the best of reasons. Following his victory the Socialist Party in England and Wales has had to orientate towards this development and intervene in it. This is despite the enormous weakness and inadequacy of the Corbyn and Momentum leadership.
- 26.** Although we did not initially anticipate these developments we were always open to them and recognised that such a turn would require us to change or modify our tactics. Since the 1990s we have called for the creation of a new workers' party. We have argued that changing the Labour Party or New Labour was not possible following the Blairite counter-revolution. However, we were open to a possible change. In *Socialism Today* in 2002 Peter Taaffe wrote: "If, however, despite our arguments, it does appear that there is possibility of success, that Labour begins to change in a socialist direction, it would be false and dogmatic for any genuine socialist or Marxist to stand apart from the process. If there is a serious shift to the left in the Labour Party we would participate in it" (*Socialism Today* September 2002 issue 68).
- 27.** These developments have resulted in a change in the Labour Party. Its class character is unsettled or unresolved at this stage. In reality it is at least two parties in one with the apparatus, officialdom, parliamentary party and the overwhelming majority of councillors in the pro-capitalist Blairista camp. The struggle between these two forces has yet to be played out although the Corbynista forces are capitulating and abdicating from conducting a struggle. This rapid turn in events has required our English and Welsh section to adopt adroit tactics and argumentation at each stage.
- 28.** In the debate in the US supporters of the opposition have argued that Corbyn is a different phenomenon because, unlike Sanders, he is from a long left socialist tradition. This, and Sanders' own history, are interesting and significant yet they do not determine our approach. As already mentioned, individuals like Andreas Papandreu evolved and changed reflecting their own experience and the pressure of the mass movement. Figures like Tony Benn in Britain or Bertinotti in Italy did not begin on the left. They evolved in that direction reflecting the objective and social situation they were operating in. It appears that at this stage Sanders is much further to the left and more combative than Corbyn. This was not determined by the history of either of them nor their personality, but objective and subjective factors.
- 29.** Does this mean we revise our analysis of the Democratic Party or that we argue that the movement should struggle to change the Democratic Party? Does this mean we stop calling for a new independent party to defend the working class? No it does not. We need to assist those aroused to action and political activity around Sanders to draw the right conclusions on these questions.
- 30.** Is there the danger that we dilute our programme, our support for a new independent party or fail to take up Sanders' political weaknesses? Yes

this danger does exist and we need to guard against it and correct any deficiencies in our material and argumentation.

- 31.** However, the opposition has not provided any evidence to show that we have not raised our criticism of Sanders' programme. We said it was wrong to run for the Democratic nomination and reiterated support for a new independent party of the working class. We have warned against and opposed his endorsing of Clinton if, as is most likely, he loses the nomination or is blocked by the Democratic machine and we have called for him to run as an independent in such a situation. If we defend our programme and ideas and maintain our criticism of the Democrats and Sanders what do we have to lose by making this turn? The real question is what opportunities will be lost if we fail to make this tactical turn.
- 32.** The conservatism expressed by the arguments of the opposition reflect a fear of being tainted by the mass movement and a desire to maintain our revolutionary purity. We need to defend our principled programme and ideas but not by being afraid to dirty our hands making tactical turns to intervene in a mass movement. This is a recipe for inaction and merely observing from the side lines. The sweep and scale of this movement compel us to actively intervene and participate in it. The only proposals from the opposition for any intervention are to attend the Sanders rallies and set up a stall to sell our material. This activity is necessary but is not sufficient if we are to actively engage in the movement.
- 33.** The ISO have accused us of echoing the position of the DSA (Democratic Socialists of America). But they are left marginalised, commentating on Bernie, supporting Jill Stein and the Greens when the real struggle of the masses is taking place at this stage in the mass rallies of Sanders like the 27,000 rally in California. Rarely in US political history have such events taken place. It is a totally sectarian approach and method. At the same time if we are not there it leaves the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which has grown quite significantly, free rein to reach the far larger forces drawn behind Sanders to divert them into the Democrats. The initiative taken by the EC to launch the "Movement for Bernie" gives us an alternative to offer to those we can reach an alternative and perspective of how to conduct a struggle to build a new party.
- 34.** It is true that a layer in the US on the left are totally opposed to the Democratic Party - as indeed we are. However, even for this layer, it is important that we try to educate them in the need to engage with the millions drawn around the Sanders campaign precisely with the aim of breaking them away from the Democratic Party and the idea that it is possible to transform it. This can be a bitter pill to swallow for a layer due to the role of the Democrats. We need to address this layer.
- 35.** This tactical turn is not without some precedent in the US. In 1988 a debate emerged in the US section and the CWI on the Jesse Jackson campaign to win the Democratic Party presidential nomination. Some of the comrades at the time, notably John Throne, went so far as to call for a vote for Jackson. A majority of the comrades and the IS at the time opposed this but argued an extremely sympathetic approach should be taken towards those attracted to his campaign. We argued that we understood those supporting Jackson but then explained his limitations and the need to break from the Democratic Party.

- 36.** The Sanders campaign has assumed a much more radical character – placing the question of socialism as an idea on the table for discussion. This means his campaign is on a higher level than the Jackson campaign. This represents a massive step forward for the US. The fact that “socialism” was the most searched word on the internet in the US in the past year illustrates this development. We are still not calling upon people to register as Democrats to vote for Sanders as this would represent a step too far. But we are correctly saying we want him to win – in the same way as we wanted Corbyn to win. We therefore also needed to take a step further than we were able to do with the Jackson campaign by launching and intervening with the “Movement for Bernie” campaign.
- 37.** How this campaign will develop will be seen in the next period. However, the IS thinks it offers us great opportunities to seize hold of the possibilities which exist today. Failure to do so would be a big mistake. When opportunities present themselves we need to take bold initiatives and to grasp them with both hands.
- 38.** The debate is extremely beneficial to clarify our approach to this issue both in the US and throughout the CWI. From it important lessons can be learnt for all sections and comrades if it is conducted in a comradely, fraternal and loyal manner. It is in that spirit that the IS is submitting this contribution to the discussion.

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