

# The 2016 Debate in the US Organization on “Safe States”

by Philip and Stephan  
November 20, 2017

As Tony Saunio wrote in his article on Sanders on April 1, 2016, we needed to deal with real fears of a significant layer:

*The real fear of a big layer that standing independently could 'split the anti-Trump vote' could be answered, if there was a real threat of the racist Trump winning by Bernie standing in most states, but not in the tightly fought swing states. This would allow him to fight in the large majority of other states and forge together the forces for a new party.*

*Standing as an independent and using this campaign to lay the basis for building a new party would ensure that a weapon is forged for the US working people to use in the struggles that will erupt under either a Clinton or Republican administration and future elections to the House of Representatives and Senate two years later.*  
[http://www.socialistworld.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=7527](http://www.socialistworld.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7527)

Along these lines SA and #Movement4Bernie launched a petition in April 2016 calling on Sanders to “Run Through November as an Independent - Organize a New Party for the 99%.” (see full text <https://web.archive.org/web/20160414114818/http://www.movement4bernie.org/run-all-the-way>). This petition went on to gain 125,000 signatures. Accompanying the petition text was a prominent statement from Kshama which politically argued for why people should sign. The article had a section titled “Splitting the Vote?” which said:

*Unfortunately, alongside Clinton’s supporters, Sanders himself has argued that an independent runs risks splitting the progressive vote and allowing a Republican victory. Especially with Trump as the GOP frontrunner, this fear is understandable (though given the mass hatred of The Donald it’s far from clear he could win a three-way race with Clinton and Sanders).*

*If electing a Republican is really Bernie’s main concern, there is no reason he could not at least run in the 40+ states where it’s absolutely clear the Democratic or Republican candidate will win, while not putting his name on the 5-10 closely contested “swing states.” This could still*

*allow for a historic campaign **if linked to building a new party for the 99% and laying the foundation for an ongoing mass political movement to run hundreds of left candidates for all levels of government, independent of corporate cash.** (emphasis in the original)*

<https://www.socialistalternative.org/2016/04/17/kshama-sawant-petitioning-bernie-run-independent/>

This position was again highlighted in an important speech by Kshama to a rally of several thousand left-wing Sanders supporters in New York City on April 16, 2016 shortly before the New York State Democratic Primary, which was a critical battle in the primary campaign. Towards the end of her speech Kshama said:

*I want to be able to vote for Bernie Sanders in the general election, when it really counts. When tens of millions of people are paying attention.*

*And if he’s blocked by the Democratic Establishment, he should run all the way as an Independent or Green. Let’s be clear - this undemocratic primary and this undemocratic party is a prison for the 99%.*

*Let’s break out of this prison!!*

*I launched a petition this week calling on Bernie to do just that. You can sign it at [movement4bernie.org](http://movement4bernie.org).*

*I agree we need to stop the right-wing - Donald Trump or Ted Cruz, or whichever right-wing Republican ends up on the ballot. But we will never stop them with corporate politics.*

*We can’t stop them by silencing our movement, holding our noses, and voting for Clinton - a candidate of Wall Street, Walmart, and warmongering.*

*If we do not have our candidate running through November then Trump and the Republicans will have a monopoly over the anti-establishment vote - why should we allow them!*

*I understand some would argue that if Bernie ran as an independent in the general election it runs the risk of tipping the election to the the Republicans. But there is absolutely no reason*

*that Bernie cannot run on the ballot in the 40 or more states that are not so-called “swing states.”*

*Trump will not be winning my state of Washington - I can promise you that. Nor will he win here in New York. There is no reason Bernie cannot run all the way. This could be a historic campaign to lay the foundation for a new party and ongoing mass political movement.*

*Let us together build a revolution that can really take our country out of the hands of billionaires and into the hands of working people.*  
<https://web.tresorit.com/l#oM3bgDpiRuAk83zDyNWLqg>

You can also watch Kshama’s speech to get a feel for the reaction of the crowd and the impact our various arguments made here:

<https://www.facebook.com/SocialistNYC/videos/vb.151332011571244/984209901616780/?type=2&theater>

To get a sense of the consciousness and concerns of left-wing Sanders supporters at this time, and the impact our line of argument had on a significant minority of Sanders supporters comrades should also watch the episode of “Redacted Tonight,” a left-wing political show, that featured Kshama and our petition calling on Sanders to run in the general

election. It was viewed 53,000 times on YouTube and was the biggest single factor in spreading our petition:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UR3xEsIx2k>

In April some NC members raised criticisms about this line of argument around “safe states.” George MFB, a NC member, submitted a document outlining his objections.

The EC agreed that Philip and Stephan would draft a response to George’s document to prepare for a political discussion on the NC. On April 21, 2016 Philip and Stephan circulated to the EC an initial draft (see below) for political discussion and further amendments from EC comrades.

The IS letter from April 22, 2016, which is now being circulated to the IEC, was responding to Philip and Stephan’s April 21 draft “Why We Urge Bernie Sanders to Run at Least in the 40+ ‘Safe States’”, re-printed below. After more discussion the EC published a statement in Members Bulletin 77 on May 23, 2016. MB 77 also includes the criticisms from George. You can find MB 77 here:

<https://web.tresorit.com/l#KuaRKXddApddnwsRiLrS5Q>

-----  
*The IS letter on April 22, 2016 responds to this initial draft, circulated on April 21, 2016, by Philip and Stephan for political discussion and further amendments from EC comrades.*

## **Why We Urge Bernie Sanders to Run at Least in the 40+ “Safe States”**

Bernie Sanders campaign is facing serious obstacles in the Democratic primaries. What we argued from the beginning is becoming more and more visible: the contradiction between Sanders program of significant improvements for the working class and his decision to run within the Wall Street owned Democratic Party is unbridgeable.

Sooner than later, likely with more of a painful awakening than a smooth transition, this contradiction has to be resolved: either Sanders accepts his defeat and asks his supporters to reduce their aspiration from a rebellion against corporate politics to a temporary shift of Clinton's rhetoric to the left, or this emerging movement for a

“political revolution against the billionaire class” frees itself from the constraints of a billionaires party.

We recently launched a petition to urge Sanders to run all the way through November as an independent and to organize a new party of the 99% (see <http://movement4bernie.org/run-all-the-way>). This has gotten an excellent response, with over 9,000 people signing within days!

We would prefer if the consciousness of the working class and the balance of power between the classes would allow us to urge Sanders to run as an independent nationwide in all 50 states as part of building a new mass working class political party. However, the question facing us is

how under the prevailing conditions and consciousness can we gain the maximum support for steps in this direction? How can we push Sanders to step outside the prison of the Democratic Party and run independently, or free his supporters from his restrictions? It is much easier for Sanders supporters to listen to our advise if we take their concerns into account.

The argument made by Sanders against running independent of the Democrats in the general election is that this would weaken Clinton's vote and hand over the presidency to Donald Trump. Sanders gets a big echo for this position, even with many left-wing people who oppose Clinton. There is a strong fear among the vast majority of left-wing workers and youth of a Trump (or Cruz) presidency.

We should have no hesitation acknowledging this a legitimate fear. We recognize that on many important issues - such as abortion, immigration, LGBTQ rights, the environment, union rights, etc - there are real differences between Trump or Cruz and Hillary Clinton, with the right-wing Republicans adopting a more reactionary position. For socialists, however, this is secondary to the much more important task of developing an independent party of the working class, or at least steps in that direction. While we want to see the most right-wing parties checked, the decisive task is to raise the level of organization and consciousness of workers and the oppressed which a broad left party would develop significantly.

Therefore we propose to Sanders - and more importantly to his supporters to open up a debate - that he should run independently in November independent of the Democrats, for example together with Jill Stein on the Green Party ticket, at least in the 40+ states where the Democrats are most vulnerable, where they can not hide behind the lesser evil argument. These are the "safe states" that will be won by clear margins either for the Democrats or the Republicans.

This would be a campaign to build a new party for working people and fights for the best possible vote in November to register support for such a project. This is not a proposal for a Sanders campaign to win the presidency in 2016. Unfortunately, that is not in the cards and thinking workers and activists understand after the experience within the primaries, the establishment media, and the super PACs, that an independent Sanders run would not be able to win the election but would be a campaign to build a new party.

A significant vote for Sanders - which we believe could possibly register up to 10% of the vote - would be a tremendous encouragement to run candidates all over the

country, independent of corporate cash and independent of the Democratic Party. Given the current consciousness and the balance of forces, from the standpoint of Marxist realism, this is what is objectively possible and not much more. And let us be clear, such a development would be an absolute earthquake completely shaking up politics as usual in the world's dominant imperialist power.

This proposal to Sanders and his supporters does not mean that we think Sanders should advocate for a vote for Hillary Clinton in the swing states. We will acknowledge with sympathy that the biggest part of the more conscious layers of our class will vote for Clinton out of fear of the right wing. We will still patiently explain the decisive need to build a new party of, for and by the 99% in all 50 states. Our members should either write in Sanders or vote for the most significant left candidate on the ballot in their states, including in "swing states."

We will obviously still argue for our full program. We will patiently argue what a difference it will make, even if Trump would win the presidency (which is highly unlikely), to have a mass party of working people to fight back against attacks from both right-wing Republicans and Wall Street owned Democrats. However, our chance that people will listen to these arguments is much higher if we take their concerns about Trump seriously from the start. Our key task is to win a new layer moving into political action around Sanders to leave the framework of the Democrats, despite Sanders arguments, with concrete proposals that correspond to the current situation and tasks given the actual state of the Sanders movement.

### **Debates on the Left about a "Safe States Strategy" and Lesser Evilism**

The US left unfortunately has a very rigid, inflexible approach to the tactic of a "safe state strategy" and other tactical questions regarding how to address the mood towards lesser evilism while working to break people away from the Democratic Party.

This rigid approach arises for good reasons and from the best of intentions of not wanting to make any concession to the hated Democratic Party. Given the relative weakness of the US left and the terrible role of the Democratic Party, for small radical groups it has been essential to start with taking a firm stand against the Democratic Party and for the political independence of the working class. Drawing a clear line for independent class-based politics is an fundamental starting point for socialists. Without such a understanding there is no compass, no strategic framework within which to work out the best tactics. This leads to approaching each

question in an pragmatic and empirical fashion, as has been the bane of the US left and workers movement.

However, once we have established a clear strategic line the second task is to move the mass of the working class over this line. This requires an active intervention, reaching out and getting involved in actual developments and debates which hold potential for winning new forces to independent politics, regardless of their limitations or confused starting point. The Marxist method is not to declare our conclusions and wait until the working class comes to us. Instead, the method of Marxism has always been to help our class to understand and to act to change the world based on the living experience and needs of the actual class struggle.

Socialist Alternative's position is absolutely clear: again and again movements have been co-opted and destroyed by the Democratic Party. Furthermore, the argument for a "safe state strategy" was used by the Green Party leadership in 2004 as part of their effort to avoid supporting Ralph Nader and running the strongest possible left challenge to the Democrats.

When Ralph Nader ran in 2000 to offer a left challenge to the two party system, Socialist Alternative was very quick to recognize its potential and was the first socialist organization in the US to support Nader. This required discussion and debate within Socialist Alternative. But we came to the conclusion that by boldly supporting Nader's campaign we could explain to a broader layer of radicalizing workers and youth attracted to Nader the need for a new left party of, by and for working people. Unlike others on the left who supported Nader uncritically, we adopted a critical approach, arguing for a vote for Nader from an independent socialist standpoint, linking support for Nader to our wider program, and working to recruit people to Socialist Alternative.

The vast majority of the revolutionary left in the US was incapable of coming to terms with how to deal with Nader's middle class left-populist campaign, and therefore opposed Nader with abstract denunciations and calls for independent socialist or working class politics. The ISO initially attacked Nader's candidacy as "the lesser of three evils" along the lines that elections can not change society, Nader was not a socialist, and attacking various programmatic weaknesses of Nader. Only mid-way through the campaign did the ISO reverse its position and support Nader, but this time largely in an uncritical, opportunist fashion.

In 2004 the lesser evil mood was much stronger than the 2000 election which came against the background of eight years of Bill Clinton's neo-liberal policies and the eruption of the radical anti-globalization movement. After

four years of George W. Bush there was a massive pressure to support the Democratic candidate, John Kerry, in order to defeat Bush. This was particularly intense given years of liberal and left-wing attacks on Nader and the Greens for allowing Bush to win in 2000 (never mind that Gore actually won the popular vote, the Supreme Court stole the election in Florida, and that the big business policies of Clinton and the Democrats opened the door to support for Bush as well as Nader).

In 2004 Socialist Alternative was again the first socialist organization to support Nader. We boldly campaigned for a Nader vote, challenging the rotten approach of the vast majority of the left (including many who had supported Nader in 2000) which had succumbed to the Democrats. However, we very consciously adopted a sympathetic approach of stressing our solidarity with all those who wanted to kick out the Republicans, and recognized that there were many issues where Bush was more right-wing than Kerry. However we argued what was key was to build mass movements to fight Bush and that supporting Kerry would decisively undermine the anti-war movement. We also argued that the Democrats were not an effective way to fight Bush given their record of voting for many of Bush's policies.

Again the vast majority of the far left was politically lost. Some revolutionary organizations like Freedom Road Socialist Organization went so far as to call for a vote for John Kerry. The ISO prevaricated, initially holding off on supporting Nader, but eventually supporting Nader. Others maintained their abstract position from 2000 of denouncing Nader.

Far more important was the approach of the Green Party, which was the key electoral force on the left to mount a presidential campaign in 2004. The Greens leadership were absolutely against running Nader as the strongest possible left challenge to the Democrats and Republicans. This was in reaction to the intense attacks they had suffered in 2000 and in its aftermath, and a bending to the huge pressure to support John Kerry. They worked to take the Green Party out of the equation by formally running a very low profile Green, David Cobb, under the cover that Cobb would use the campaign to build the Green Party as opposed to Nader who was not a member of the Greens. They also argued strongly for a "safe state strategy," in contrast with Nader, who insisted he wanted to run across the country.

However, does this mean that the "safe state strategy" is wrong on principle in all circumstances? If Nader had said "I understand the huge desire to get rid of George W. Bush. For me the most important thing is begin building a political alternative to the Republicans and the Wall Street Democrats who have enabled Bush. However, I will

not run in the small number of highly contested states, but will instead focus on getting as many votes as possible in the more than 40 states where the Democrats can not hide behind the lesser evil argument” would Nader have gotten more or less votes, more or less weight in debates within labor and the broader left?

These are hypothetical questions, and we can debate the answer. However, it is a discussion about the smartest tactic, not about principles. The fact that the Green Party leaders in 2004 abused the tool of a “safe state strategy” does not force us to take it out of our toolbox for future battles for left politics.

While it was not widely discussed in the organization at the time, the CWI IS raised with the US EC that they did not think we should oppose Nader utilizing a “safe states strategy” on principle and that such a tactic may be necessary at times. We did not end up discussing the safe state issue much in the organization in 2004 because it was secondary to the far larger issue of siding with Nader and the left-wing of the Green Party against the backsliding of the Green Party leadership.

### **Propaganda against Lesser Evilism and Breaking the Masses from the Democrats**

A small socialist organization largely limited to propaganda (explaining our program to a limited number of people) needs to emphasize within its ranks and to its small periphery the fundamental position that the working class needs its own political party and we will not support the Democrats or Republicans. However, when this question begins to be discussed beyond the narrow confines of propaganda, when we are engaged in a serious dialogue with activists working within broader masses, in unions or within the Sanders camp, the question is posed differently. It is clear that the starting point for many of the best people supporting Sanders is: “I agree with you, I hate Hillary Clinton, but we have to stop Trump. That's more important than other things.”

How can we move from this first concern of the broader layer of people around us towards the strategic goal of taking steps in the direction of a workers' party? The task is not to deny lesser evilism, but to find the concrete slogans and tactics that can assist leftward moving elements to find a path out of the trap of supporting the Democratic Party and towards independent working class politics.

Sanders has said he will not run as an independent because he does not want to be a “spoiler,” i.e. help tip the election towards the Republicans. We do not agree with Sanders on this. But why not call on Sanders: if your concern is not helping the Republicans, why not at least

run in the general election independent of the Democratic Party in the 40 or more states where either the Republicans or Democrats will clearly win by large margins? This removes the concern that a Sanders campaign would help elect a Republican and puts Sanders on the spot, showing there is an alternative to Sanders claim that he has no choice but to endorse Clinton to stop the Republicans.

Put differently, it is demand on Sanders to take action in the interests of the working class in the 40+ safe states where his concern of not helping the Republicans absolutely does not apply. This is a united front offer which if Sanders accepted would represent a major step forward. If Sanders refuses this offer, it will help his best supporters to see that Sanders does not need to support Clinton and that they should join with us in fighting to build a political alternative to the Democratic Party.

It is clear that Sanders does not intend to take any such step. Our focus is on winning the best Sanders supporters to our position. This is a sizable audience, with various polls showing between 20 and 35% of Sanders voters say they will not support Clinton in the general election.

To effectively reach this audience, to give them political confidence to actually follow through on this and not just leave it as a temporary opinion poll, and to arm them with arguments to take up with those around them, we need to take into account their consciousness and the mood of the majority of Sanders voters who are planning on backing Clinton in the general election.

And here we also need to recognize that the fear of Trump is not just Sanders, but is strong among the vast majority of Sanders voters. Even many of the minority that says they will not vote for Clinton shares this fear and will likely end up falling back in line with Clinton if the race is tight and there is not a strong left campaign to help them overcome the pressure to support Clinton.

For us to effectively put demand Sanders run independently it is therefore necessary here and now to take into account the strong desire to stop the threat of Trump and the right. That's why we recognize their concerns by accepting Sanders would not run in the minority of battleground states while demanding Sanders run independently in at least the 40 or more “safe states,” but.

Whether Sanders plans to do this or not is not the point. It offers a clear path for left-wing Sanders supporters to see an alternative to the claim that they must rally behind Clinton to stop Trump. The easier it is for them to follow our advise, the harder it is for the Democrats to pressure them into backing Clinton.

Obviously, we will also continue to stress the importance of organizing protests against Trump and building mass movements. We will continue to make larger points about not allowing Trump to be the anti-establishment candidate in November, the need to break out of the two party system, and the general need to build an independent party of the working class.

However, these arguments will get more attention if we can start with a simple tool to get the ears of Bernie's left-wing supporters. Turning the "spoiler" question around by asking why shouldn't Sanders run at least in the 40+ "safe states," helps us to develop all these arguments with Sanders' supporters.

Further, this demand puts the maximum pressure on Sanders to take a step towards building a political alternative to the Democratic Party. If Sanders did run as an independent candidate only in the 40+ safe states it would represent a massive step forward and break in the situation. Under the current conditions it would be concretely a far stronger position than Sanders not running independently in any states, which is concrete alternative. If Sanders does not stand it will leave Jill Stein of the Greens as the strongest left candidate, resulting in the left having a qualitative weaker impact in the general election (though she could still receive a much better result than the last time).

An independent Sanders run, even if only in 40 states, would be a truly enormous development which would be widely discussed and debated throughout US society. Sanders would have a chance of winning 5 to 10 million votes, surpassing Nader's 3 million votes in 2000. This would provide a powerful basis to bring together a new political party of the left in all 50 states of the country. It would also give a huge stimulus to more candidates to run independent of the Democrats in local, state and federal elections.

### **A Question of Tactics Not Principles**

When Kshama Sawant ran in 2013 we picked the easiest target: Richard Conlin, a long-standing establishment Democrat who was politically vulnerable for a number of reasons, especially that he was the only Seattle councilmember to vote against a popular paid sick leave ordinance. We were able to show the strength for independent politics with the highest possible vote by picking our fight, and we picked it well.

Many of the other Democratic incumbents on the Seattle City Council were politically just as bad as Conlin and also deserved to be challenged. But the fact remains that Kshama would have received a lower vote running against them and would not have been elected. There can be no

doubt that by tactically choosing our battle by targeting the weakest Democrat to run against, and not the strongest, independent politics and the socialist movement made a huge breakthrough by electing the first socialist to the Seattle City Council in 100 years.

If we had not had the tactical audacity and flexibility to launch "Democrats for Sawant" in 2013 it is safe to say Kshama would not have been elected and the forces of independent left politics would have failed to make a breakthrough.

Further, once on the City Council Kshama had to adopt a skilful approach of seeking collaboration and joint initiatives with left Democrats in Seattle, without hiding our political differences and working under our own independent banner. If Kshama had not done so, it would have played into the hands of the Democratic Party who wanted to isolate us from the majority of left-wing workers who still have not decisively broken from the Democrats. If we had adopted a rigid approach Kshama would have not been re-elected in 2015, which was another key victory for independent politics.

In the case of the 2016 presidential election, it is also a tactical question for Sanders to pick which battles to focus on. The 40+ "safe states" are the states where Sanders would get the strongest vote and the Democrats are more vulnerable to a left challenge, and it would signal that he is not ignorant of progressives fears about a Trump presidency.

Is there a realistic possibility that Sanders will do that? It's highly unlikely. Is there a realistic possibility that we can help to move thousands of Sandernistas beyond Sanders limitations, for example those who signed our petition? Absolutely.

But we will need to arm this layers with a clear message to stand against the likely tidal wave of lesser evilism around them. And the crux of the lesser evilism is that it is not just made up, but it has a powerful impact. In discussions with the ones and twos, we can explain lesser evilism. In mass work our task goes beyond explanations, but has to include providing an active leadership by involving broader layers in concrete steps which break lesser evilism in practice by building an alternative.

Our "safe states" proposal can give those activists a tool to defend and spread their position against a torrent of media frenzy about "uniting" against Trump - that means providing real leadership in helping to free them from the political domination of the Democrats and building towards a real force of working people.

To succeed in building a mass political alternative to the Democrats, the left will need to combine firm principles with flexible tactics to overcome lesser evilism. A rigid, inflexible position towards lesser evil moods among workers will only lead to unnecessary delays and setbacks in building a mass alternative.

For example, while Nader in 2000 received the highest vote of any independent left presidential candidate since the 1920s, he made tactical mistakes which created some unnecessary difficulties in building further support for independence from the Democrats. In 2000 Nader adopted an overly rigid position on the Democrats by failing to take into account the lesser evil mood against Bush and the Republicans. Nader incorrectly argued there was no difference between Bush and Gore. This was ruthlessly exploited by the liberal left to attack Nader after Bush took office and carried out an aggressive right-wing agenda.

Nader also made a serious mistake in not intervening in Florida to help organize mass protests against Bush's theft of the election, which he partly justified on the basis it would make no difference whether Bush or Gore won. This underlines the importance of any future left force having the tactical adroitness to navigate the inevitable challenges presented by lesser evil moods among sections of workers and oppressed groups while remaining politically firm on the need to build independently of the Democratic party.

In practice, those left groups like the ISO who have not engaged in the Sanders' campaign because they oppose the Democratic Party have assisted those forces who support reforming the Democratic Party to more easily lead the fresh layers drawn into Sanders campaign. This is basically a sectarian approach, cutting the advanced layers off from intervening in real struggles of the broader masses.

The same relationship applies to the issue of lesser evilism and the "safe states" tactic. If we deny the real lesser evil mood that exists in our class and refuse to take into account the strong fear of a Trump presidency, as unfortunately most of the far left does, what is the concrete result? A weaker independent left challenge and a strengthening of lesser evilism! A effective tactic that takes into account this mood will mobilize larger numbers behind the call for a left alternative to the Democrats and make it harder for the Democratic Party to stampede Sanders voters into supporting Clinton on a lesser evil basis.

An alternative to the NC voting on the entire document above is just voting on a short resolution drafted below (but the longer document would be circulated as a discussion document from Philip and Stephan for comrades to consider):

The National Committee agrees with the Executive Committee's position of calling on Bernie Sanders to run as an independent at least in the 40 or more "safe states" where either the Republicans or Democrats will clearly win by large margins. We should use this proposal boldly for example in future petitions and leaflets. This demand puts the maximum pressure on Sanders to take a step towards building a political alternative to the Democratic Party and helps to show Sanders' supporters that we take their fears about Donald Trump and the right wing seriously. It helps us to reduce the obstacle of lesser evilism and instead focus the debate on how to begin building a new political party for working people, rather than being trapped inside the Democratic Party and supporting Hillary Clinton as necessary to defeat the Republicans.

-----