

# A Political Revolution for the U.S. Left

By Ethan Young

The U.S. Left is in the process of emerging from decades of decline. It entered the Obama years in terrible shape: politically incoherent, cut off from its historical continuity, and organizationally and socially fragmented. Yet in the last years there have been signs of awakening, and in the past few months a new progressive insurgency has appeared, piercing public consciousness in a way not seen in generations.

The most distinctive form this insurgency takes is the Bernie Sanders campaign for the Democratic Party nomination for president in 2016. Sanders is the first self-proclaimed socialist to win a national audience since Eugene V. Debs ran as the Socialist Party's presidential candidate in the early 20th century, and the size of his base is arguably greater than that of any socialist leader in U.S. history.

This is primarily a political movement with social overtones—in particular, its embrace by students and young people, mainly white, who are responding to an anti-austerity message presented clearly, forcefully and repeatedly. The racial composition is significant because African American and Latino constituencies, in most cases, comprise the most left-leaning sectors of the electorate and of the working class nationally.

Social movements have also appeared (or re-appeared) in response to social issues stimulated by neoliberalism, and by the rise of the nativist, religious, and armed far Right. Black Lives Matter is a network of young Black activists responding to an epidemic of deadly racist police violence. Fight for \$15 is a labor-initiated campaign of mostly non-union, low-wage workers demanding a higher minimum wage.

DREAMers demand an end to deportation and mass imprisonment of immigrants without papers. There are many more.

## **Social Movements and their Repression**

The current political moment will be discussed in further detail below, but first some particularities about U.S. social movements must be understood before we can make sense of the concept of a “U.S. Left.” Repeated attempts to introduce a social democratic or labor party that could eclipse the Democratic/Republican duopoly have never succeeded. From 1900 to 1946, the political Left was largely embodied in two parties: Socialist and Communist. Both of these parties fell to the background during the years of the New Deal and World War II. After the war, the purge of leftists from government, unions and civil service marginalized both the SP and the CP. From that time on, the majority of those identifying with socialism were either former party members or never-affiliated independents. Higher education was the only public arena where a few could express support for socialism without severe ostracism.

The U.S. state, the FBI in particular, spent millions to spy on and disrupt left social movements. This was logical, since that area in society was the most unpredictable, and the hardest for the insular, conformist culture of capitalism to comprehend. Nevertheless, such movements had a tendency to spring into action and threaten the status quo, generally considered impregnable during the national economy's Golden Age. In every case, some of those in the movements engaging in protest and street action turned

to organized political action, and began to shift the direction of national and local politics. Many turned to Marxist study and cadre groups of various persuasions, in the absence of a central political organization for the broader Left after the 1969 collapse of SDS, the largest radical student group in the nation's history.

With limited contributions from marginal political parties and unions, in a stable economy, and coming out of a period of intense repression in the 1950s, social movements achieved astonishing results during the Johnson and Nixon administrations. The civil rights movement eliminated *de jure* racial segregation and discrimination, and broke through the violent abrogation of voting rights for African Americans in the South. The women's movement broke through society-wide restrictions on gender equality. Legal breakthroughs have marked the years since, leading to the Right directly attacking the goals and gains of social movements, as a central pillar of their strategy.

The dramatic turn in public opinion against the Vietnam War changed politics to an unprecedented extent. By the early 1970s the mood had shifted from unquestioning acceptance of militarism and imperial crusades, to outright hostility towards the pro-war stances of both parties. This largely arose from the student movement's efforts to oppose the war under Johnson and Nixon, which sparked the broader peace movement and provided hundreds of thousands of activists.

These movements were constantly subjected to state repression, from infiltration to imprisonment to murder. Internal tensions also contributed to their inability to cohere politically. Subsequent events that indicated mass opposition to neoliberalism—the Jesse Jackson campaigns of 1984 and 1988, the *altermondialiste* Battle of Seattle at the WTO in 1999, Occupy Wall Street—all emerged with little or no backing or direction from any traditional form of the political Left.

## From Bush to Obama

The fragmentation of the Left mirrored the increasing fragmentation of society under neoliberalism, to an extent. The gulfs between the intellectual sector of the Left, the political Left, and the social movements had debilitating effects on all three. In the academy, cultural studies diverted the discussion of the ideas generated by social movements into apolitical hairsplitting. This phenomenon, generated by the increased precariousness of careers in higher education (“publish or perish”) continues to influence discussions in social movements and the political Left.

The Left's prospects grew even dimmer in 2000. Rightist influence in the judicial branch of government forced through an otherwise illegitimate seating of George W. Bush as president. This was simultaneously an abrogation of electoral democracy; an effective coup d'état by one party and one governmental branch, upending the separation of powers; and another in a series of capitulations made by the Democratic Party to the rightward-moving private sector and the Pentagon.

This was almost immediately followed by the attacks of September 11, 2001, which led to a wave of xenophobia and militarist jingoism that still holds sway in large popular segments. The most dangerous result was the PATRIOT Act, which eased restrictions on domestic repression and military intervention. This in turn was followed by the misbegotten Iraq war. The inability of mass protest to head off the invasion essentially broke the peace movement.

The Obama election and re-election (2008 and 2012), then, came as a surprise for supporters and opponents alike. Obama was a center-leftist, running on his opposition to the Iraq war and mild criticism of neoliberalism. This distinction from his rival Hillary Clinton was minor compared to the unexpected success of an African

American candidate in a period of relative ebb in Black social movement activity. The role of race in the formation of capital in the U.S. is fundamental, and the idea of a Black president was virtually unthinkable until the 1980s. Obama's rise highlighted the rise of a Black political class in cities and states which had consolidated since the Jackson campaigns. It also flagged the growing non-white demographic, poised to outnumber whites in a matter of decades.

Obama's critics on the Left decried his incrementalism and his continuation of the Bush administration's role in the Mideast. But Obama was no neoconservative, and he kept a critical stance toward extremely powerful sectors, including oil, pharmaceuticals, private insurance, the gun lobby, and pro-Likud hawks. On some occasions these criticisms were backed by action—for example, he took on the Religious Right—and overall this yielded space for more left, anti-neoliberal political motion at the Democratic Party's electoral base.

### **Bernie Sanders' Campaign**

This manifested in the whirlwind rise of the Bernie Sanders campaign. In some ways this was as unprecedented and as unexpected as Obama's ascent. Sanders has always been an anomaly in U.S. politics. His views since his early years of activism as a student in the early 60s were consistently New Left: socialist but not pro-Soviet, and framed by the social movements he encountered. Like many others, he moved towards electoral politics, but saw the Democratic Party as a quagmire. He saw the efforts of socialist electoral campaigns: the largest at the time, the Socialist Workers Party, was concerned with spreading their Trotskyist program rather than winning.

Sanders' pragmatism chafed at this approach. He moved to Vermont, a rural, mostly white New England state where many East Coast lib-

erals and radicals were migrating. He worked in local third-party efforts, and won election after election as an independent—as mayor of Burlington, congressional representative, and finally senator from Vermont—the only elected independent in the U.S. Senate. His successes were based on careful coalition-building and keeping campaign promises. Throughout, he never backtracked on his identification with socialism.

The anti-neoliberal wing of the Democrats and Occupy veterans originally stumped for Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren. When it became clear that Warren would not run, attention turned to Sanders. He was viewed as a risky choice, both for his socialism and for his independence from the Democrats. Progressive Democrats of America, a rump group active in several states, convinced Sanders to run for the Democratic nomination against the assumed frontrunner Hillary Clinton. Online activists from Occupy began consolidating data for a Sanders campaign.

No one in the Democratic Party had high expectations for the Sanders campaign. Left critics urged Sanders to run as an independent or Green candidate. He made clear that all his hopes rested on winning a following for an anti-neoliberal platform. To avoid the stigma of splitting the Democratic vote and ensuring a Republican victory, Sanders pledged to support whomever won the party's nominated candidate if he lost the primaries or was squeezed out in the national convention. (Ralph Nader's run as a Green in 2000 may or may not have led to a tie vote between George W. Bush and Al Gore, and still sits badly with Democratic leftists. Donald Trump made a similar pledge to the Republicans, then took it back when his lead was challenged by another rightist demagogue, Rafael "Ted" Cruz.)

Sanders' straightforward attacks on Wall Street, big money in politics, and racism won

approval first with aging leftists, and then, unexpectedly, with Millennials. The word spread through sharing and networking on social media, rather than through unions and nongovernmental organizations with large “get out the vote” operations. This led to the largest influx of small donations to an electoral campaign in history. The Democratic Party leadership was completely taken off guard—to the initial delight of the Republicans—until they realized that a socialist was drawing the biggest crowds of any candidate.

### **The “Political Revolution”**

The most significant feature of the campaign is the agreement between Sanders and his volunteers that only a coordinated mass political movement (a “political revolution”) could enable a president elected by any margin to effectively oppose the “billionaire class.” Moreover, he may prove unable to win the nomination. An organized, politically coherent Left, inside and outside the party duopoly, is the first order of business, whether the centrist Clinton or one of the far right Republican contenders wins the election in November.

Part of the emerging, reconstructed Left will likely take the form of an anti-neoliberal “Sanders Democrats” wing of the Democratic Party.

This could directly challenge party centrists in every state, and change the direction of policy battles in Congress and in state and city governments. It would also further challenge the view on the Left that holds to a purist stance of permanently attacking the Democrats as a class enemy. This tendency, which sees the formation of a third party as always the immediate priority in electoral politics, claims that its opponents are careerists or naive liberals. However, the most widely held view among independent leftists is an “inside/outside” strategy, favoring independent candidates where the power of the party machine excludes progressive reformers. Some die-hards of the other camp have been swayed by the upsurge for Sanders.

Sanders’ campaign promotes policies that run counter to neoliberalism and anti-government conservatism, but despite the socialist banner he flies, they don’t undermine capitalism per se. Sanders is more feared for his emphasis on mass mobilization—strengthening democracy under attack by the private sector and quasi-fascist elements. His campaign has made the word “socialist” acceptable in ways that it never was heretofore in the U.S. Now the tiny socialist movement has a chance to crawl out of the rubble and join a new generation, fueled by disgust for the capitalist system and a growing determination to replace it with something just, sustainable, and beautiful.

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