

Bernie Out of the Closet: Sanders' Longstanding Deal with the Democrats

Paul Street, CounterPunch | Jul 21, 2015

I am glad that the left intellectual and activist Chris Hedges does not support the Bernie Sanders campaign for the Democratic Party presidential nomination. As Hedges explained in a recent interview on the Ralph Nader Radio Hour, Sanders' candidacy lends undeserved credibility to the thoroughly corporatized Democratic Party. Sanders has pledged that he will support the corporatist military hawk Hillary Clinton in the 2016 general presidential election. Sanders stirs up legitimate progressive energy and popular anger and then "funnels it back into a dead political system," Hedges observes. Sanders fails to confront the American Empire and military state, and, Hedges adds, has unforgivably "abandoned the Palestinians and given carte blanche to Israel."

I agree on all scores. Hedges' reasoning is consistent with my own recent writings on interviews on the Sanders presidential sensation. I do, however, want to raise one quibble with Hedges on Sanders' history – a difference that makes Hedges' case against Sanders even stronger. "I don't understand," Hedges told Nader: "He [Sanders] fought the Democratic establishment in Vermont his entire career. Now he has sold out to it."

Sanders' 1990 Deal with the Dems

Sanders did not "f[i]ght the Democratic establishment in Vermont his entire career." As the left University of Vermont philosopher [Will Miller noted in a 1999 essay](#) recounting left peace activists' occupation of then U.S. Congressman Bernie Sanders' Burlington, Vermont office to protest Sanders' support of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and the ongoing U.S. War on Iraq, Sanders sold out to the corporate and war Democrats as early as 1990.

Between 1981 and 1988, it is true, Sanders "presented himself to the left outside of Vermont as the leader of the third party movement, vanquishing the two major parties in every Mayoral election." But in 1988, Sanders got a lesson on the perils of third party politics when he ran for federal office. In the election for Vermont's seat in the House of Representatives, the independent Sanders and Democrat Paul Poirer divided the majority vote and the contest went to a Republican. Sanders responded by drifting right and cutting a deal with the Vermont Democrats: the party would permit no serious candidate to run against him while he blocked serious third party formation in Vermont and adopted positions in line with the national corporate war Democrats. Miller's up-close account merits lengthy quotation:

"Bernie – out of office for the first time in eight years – went to the Kennedy School at Harvard for six months and came back with a new relationship with the state's Democrats. The Vermont Democratic Party leadership has allowed no authorized candidate to run against Bernie in 1990 (or since) and in return, Bernie has repeatedly blocked third party building. His closet party, the Democrats, are very worried about a left 3rd party forming in Vermont. In the last two elections, Sanders has prevented Progressives in his machine from running against Howard Dean, our conservative Democratic Governor who was ahead of Gingrich in the attack on welfare."

“The unauthorized Democratic candidate in 1990, Delores Sandoval, an African American faculty member at the University of Vermont, was amazed that the official party treated her as a nonperson and Bernie kept outflanking her to her right. She opposed the Gulf build-up, Bernie supported it. She supported decriminalization of drug use and Bernie defended the war on drugs, and so on...”

“After being safely elected in November of 1990, Bernie continued to support the buildup while seeking membership in the Democratic Congressional Caucus – with the enthusiastic support of the Vermont Democratic Party leadership. But, the national Democratic Party blew him off, so he finally voted against the war and returned home – and as the war began – belatedly claimed to be the leader of the anti-war movement in Vermont.”

“Since 1991 the Democrats have given Bernie membership in their Congressional Caucus. Reciprocally, Bernie has become an ardent imperialist. Sanders endorsed Clinton in 1992 and 1996. In 1992 he described Clinton as the ‘lesser of evils,’ (a justification he used to denounce when he was what the local press called an ‘avowed socialist’). By 1996 he gave Clinton an unqualified endorsement. He has been a consistent ‘Friend of Bill’s’ from since 1992. One student I know worked on the Clinton Campaign in 1996 and all across Vermont, Bernie was on the stage with the rest of the Vermont Democratic Party Leadership, while the unauthorized Democratic candidate for his Congressional seat was kept out in the audience.”

During the 1990s, the not-so “independent” Congressman Sanders voted for and/or otherwise supported:

- * Economic sanctions that killed more than a million Iraqi civilians
- * Every U.S. bombing of Iraq from 1992 on
- * The sending of U.S. military units to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to threaten Iraq because “we cannot tolerate aggression”
- * The objectively racist and mass-incarcerationist Federal Crime bill.
- * Every US intervention since elected to Congress–Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Liberia, Zaire (Congo), Albania, Sudan, Afghanistan and Yugoslavia.

Many of Sanders’ liberal fans might be surprised to learn that he voted for a National Rifle Association (NRA)-supported bill to restrict lawsuits against gun manufacturers and against the Brady Bill.

The “leftist” Congressman Sanders liked to send out mailings to veterans that supported the US having “the strongest military in the world” and praised soldiers as sacrificing “for the freedom of Americans.” Sanders repeatedly failed to invite antiwar veterans’ groups to his many veterans events in the state.

By Miller’s account, the “independent” and “leftist” Congressman Sanders’ political trajectory stood well to the right of Black House Democrats like Maxine Waters and Ron Dellums, “who moved continuously to their left during their Congressional careers.” Sanders, by contrast, “got where he is now by a lurch to the right. He promises working people, the aged, the poor, and the ‘vanishing middle class’ that he will defend them while he repeatedly blocks the building of the anti-capitalist political movement and party that might actually make such promises legitimate.” When a Vermont leftist questioned Representative Sanders in public about his failure to help

build a left-progressive alternative to the capitalist party duopoly, Sanders said he was now too busy with his Congressional work to worry about such things.

“The Citizenry Moaned Audibly”

Miller’s essay appeared after he and fourteen other peace activists were arrested for “trespassing” in Sanders’ Burlington office. Seeking to control the public relations damage, Sanders hijacked a regularly scheduled town meeting in Burlington to advance his position on behalf of Bill Clinton’s criminal war on Serbia. By Miller’s observation:

“A general town meeting had already been scheduled for the following Monday, so he turned it to a ‘town meeting on Kosovo.’ Apparently, Bernie Sanders had forgotten what a Town Meeting is... Sanders as the self-appointed moderator/boss opened the evening with naked self-justification: ‘It is a very complex situation’... followed by the ritual of demonization of Milosevic – a technique he has perfected over the last eight years on Saddam Hussein of Iraq. Then he presented the false dilemma that the only alternative to bombing is doing nothing. Sanders said his situation was the same as that of Joschka Fischer’s of the Green Party, Germany’s Foreign Minister, who has outraged his Green Party membership by supporting the bombing his coalition government is carrying out as part of NATO. “

“Back in Vermont the assembled citizenry moaned audibly.”

After the 9/11 attacks, “Bomber Bernie” (as Burlington peace activists dubbed Sanders) voted for the initial 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Terrorists that has been cited as the legal justification for U.S. military interventions and endless U.S. “global war on terror” – including the invasion of Iraq (which Sanders opposed along with most Democrats in Congress in 2002 and 2003). He voted for a non-binding resolution expressing support for troops at the outset of the invasion of Iraq. In March 2006, he opposed efforts to bring articles of impeachment against the open arch-war criminal George W. Bush since “the Republicans control the House and the Senate.”

Senator Sanders as a de facto Dem

When Sanders decided to make a bid for an open U.S. Senate seat in 2005, his longstanding service to the corporate Democrats won him the critical endorsement of Senator Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. Schumer’s backing meant that no Democrat running against Sanders could receive financial help from the party. Sanders was also supported by Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nevada) and Democratic National Committee Chair and Chairman and former Vermont Governor Howard Dean, who described Sanders as an “ally who votes with the Democrats ninety eight percent of the time.” Then-U.S. Senator Barack Obama campaigned for Sanders in Vermont.

As when he was in the U.S. House, Senatorial candidate Sanders made a curious deal with the Vermont Democratic Party: he agreed to be listed on their primary ballot but to decline the nomination should he win, which he did.

The “independent” Sanders has enjoyed a special agreement with the Democratic leadership in the U.S. Senate. He votes with the Democrats on all procedural matters in exchange for the committee seats and seniority that would be available to him as a Democrat. (He can break this rule in some exceptional cases if Democratic Senate Whip Dick Durbin agrees, but the request is

rarely made.) Sanders is free to vote as he wishes on policy matters, but he has almost always voted with the Democrats.

Consistent with this party loyalty, Sanders refuses to seriously or substantively criticize his “good friend” and Democratic presidential primary “rival” Mrs. Clinton – a militantly corporatist and militarist right-wing Democrat. Sanders has backed Obama’s numerous murderous military actions and provocations around the world, from Libya, Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Iraq to China, Ukraine, and Russia. Sanders has said repeatedly that he will not be a third-party “spoiler” in the general election and thus will direct his primary delegates and voters to line up behind Hillary, Inc. in 2016. In his presidential campaign speeches, Sanders has been unwilling to mention the corporatized Democratic Party as part of the nation’s oligarchy problem. Presidential candidate John Edwards fulminated consistently against “corporate Democrats as well as corporate Republicans” when he ran in the Iowa Caucus eight years ago. Sanders, by contrast, focuses almost completely on corporate Republicans.

“But he’s a socialist,” many leftists exult. I’ve heard a number of Sanders speeches since he announced his presidential candidacy. He does not call himself a socialist. He does not call for socialism. He does not criticize or even refer to capitalism or the profit system, the underlying political-economic regime that is wired for the endless upward distribution of wealth and power and the ruination of livable ecology. Sanders rails against “the billionaire class,” against economic inequality, against the Republicans, against FOX News, against the Citizens United decision, and especially against those terrible Koch brothers. He’s running as a strident populist Democrat. In that regard, he’s not really all that different from Dennis Kucinich in 2003-04, Jesse Jackson in the 1980s and even Edwards in 2007-08, all of whom struck strong populist chords in efforts to reach the Democratic Party’s “progressive base.”

Out of the Democrats’ Closet

None of this is a departure from Sanders’ earlier career since 1989. As the shaggy-haired Mayor of progressive Burlington during the Reagan years, Sanders may have been a Sandinista-supporting left politico willing to challenge the two party duopoly. But Bernie cleaned up his too-radical act after his 1988 defeat. He went to “liberal” Harvard’s imperialist Kennedy school and came back to work in tandem with the corporate and militaristic Democrats under the guise of an “independent” and third party political identity. He’s been on the not all-that-left wing of the dismal dollar Dems ever since.

It’s all very different than the story Sanders tells campus town progressives on the campaign trail. According to that narrative, he has joined with the Democrats only this year and because of his pragmatic calculation that third party candidates cannot succeed under the U.S. party and electoral system. In reality, however, the Democrats have been Sanders’ “closet party” (Miller) for the last fifteen years. He’s really just coming out of the closet now for the presidential race, in a Clinton-welcomed effort to help give the Democrats a much-needed fake-populist makeover for the 2016 elections. The great Socialist Party presidential candidate Eugene Debs (whose poster hangs in Sanders’ Senate office) would not be impressed.

Paul Street’s latest book is [They Rule: The 1% v. Democracy](#) (Paradigm, 2014)

Copied 9/19/2016 from:

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/07/21/bernie-out-of-the-closet-sanders-longstanding-deal-with-the-democrats/>
(Highlights, footnotes and minor edits may have been added, but only to add clarification)