

The right-wing political record of Bernie Sanders

Tom Hall



[dropcap]W[/dropcap>hen Bernie Sanders, the nominally independent “socialist” senator from Vermont, announced last month that he would seek the Democratic Party nomination, the *World Socialist Web Site* [commented](#) that this marked “a new stage in one of the longest-running political frauds in American history.” This characterization is completely born out by a review of Sanders’ political biography, which spans over four decades.

Born in Brooklyn to middle-class Jewish parents in 1941, Sanders came of age in a solidly liberal milieu during the heyday of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. His

older brother Larry helped campaign for Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson as a member of the Young Democrats in the 1950s, and it was he who Sanders says gave him his earliest political education.

Sanders first became politically active after transferring to the University of Chicago in his second year of college. There, he became involved in the student radicalism then emerging, becoming a leader of the campus chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and leading a sit-in outside the university president's office in 1962. The next year he worked on the re-election campaign of a Democratic city councilman in Chicago, and graduated with a degree in political science in 1964.

However, his career in bourgeois politics began in earnest in Vermont in the 1970s, when Sanders became one of the leading spokesman for the Liberty Union Party. The party was founded in 1971 by Bill Meyer, who in 1958 had been the first Democrat elected to the House of Representatives from Vermont since the Civil War, serving one term. After being defeated for reelection by a Republican, he had fallen out of favor, failing three times to win the Democratic nomination for US Senator, most recently in 1970. He formed the Liberty Union Party the following year as an antiwar formation to the left of the state Democratic Party, attempting to capitalize on the protest movement of the middle class that was then at its height.

The party, although tiny and politically amorphous, found a certain response in 1970s Vermont. The state was changing significantly, with an influx of new residents, most from New York City and other east coast metropolitan centers, attracted by the prospect [of] escaping the tensions of the cities for life in a rural area only a short distance away. Sanders was himself part of this "hippie invasion," as some called it: shortly after graduating from the University of Chicago, he bought a summer home in Middlesex, a small town in Central

Vermont, before leaving Brooklyn for Vermont entirely in the tumultuous year 1968. "I liked nature, I wanted to live in the country," he later explained. "I had absolutely no intention of becoming involved in politics."

The Liberty Union Party, like countless other middle-class organizations, had no coherent political program or perspective outside of a vague commitment to social reform, which it was pleased to call "socialism." As the *Boston Globe* put it in 1976, "there were nearly as many opinions as there were [party members]." Its political "accomplishments," aside from attracting enough votes to qualify for major party status, consisted of symbolic fig leaves from local government, such as the holding of hearings on utility rate increases and placing items on the agenda of various town hall meetings asking the state to consider nationalizing the state's electric utilities.

Whatever Sanders may say or whatever may be said about him by other voices, the man remains a liberaloid, and a self professed anti-communist at that. That is definitely NOT the kind of person to rely on to push back against the empire of war and greed.—Eds

In the end, the party collapsed in the mid-70s, a victim of the demise of the anti-war movement, which had a broad demoralizing effect on the middle class radical milieu. Sanders, speaking to the *Globe* shortly after leaving the party, expressed both the ennui and political narrowness of this outlook:

"'I have done as much as I can,' said Sanders, who volunteered

that he is an admirer of Fidel Castro. 'My feeling is that I had remained we'd have gotten just as many votes. But if I can't see growth ...' His voice trails off and he shrugs.'"

Sanders ran for public office again in 1981, this time as an independent, for mayor of Burlington, the largest city in Vermont with around 37,000 residents at the time. This time, he jettisoned his former association with the "socialist" politics of the Liberty Union Party in order to avoid antagonizing the city's business interests.

Although he continued to be routinely described in the press as an "avowed socialist," he did not portray himself as such during the campaign, preferring instead the more amorphous term "radical," and his opponent, Democratic incumbent Gordon Pacquette, declined to make an issue of it. "I've stayed away from calling myself a socialist because I did not want to spend half my life explaining that I did not believe in the Soviet Union or in concentration camps," Sanders explained at the time.

Sanders was so successful in achieving a measure of establishment respectability that he even received the endorsement of the Burlington police union, which supported Reagan in the 1980 elections. "He seemed to have some new ideas for some of this city's old problems, like juvenile delinquency," union president Joseph Crepeau explained.

After winning the race by a mere 10 votes, Sanders set to work reassuring the city's business community. "I'm not going to war with the city's financial and business community and I know that there is little I can do from City Hall to accomplish my dreams for society," Sanders proclaimed. As the *New York Times* observed, "Sanders undertook ambitious downtown revitalization projects and courted evil capitalist entities known as 'businesses.' He balanced budgets. His administration sued the local cable franchise and won reduced rates for customers. He drew a minor-league baseball team to

town, the Vermont Reds (named for the Cincinnati Reds, not the Commies).”

Sanders also won praise for his auditing of the city’s pension plan for the first time in three decades, and initiated a \$100 million redevelopment project of the city’s waterfront, opposed by tenants’ organizations in the surrounding neighborhood, funded by a combination of federal grants and private investors.

At the same time as he was wooing Burlington business with his fiscal responsibility, enabling him to win three additional two year terms as mayor, Sanders shored up his credentials among petty bourgeois radicals with largely symbolic measures. He traveled to the Soviet Union and Cuba on good-will trips, invited members of the Irish Republican Army to City Hall, and spoke out in favor of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. He pursued sister-city status for Burlington with a coastal town in Nicaragua and the Soviet city of Yaroslavl.

When Burlington business interests and radical posturing came into conflict, Sanders came down unhesitatingly on the side his bread was buttered on. One former supporter, in a recent letter to socialistworker.org, describes how Central American solidarity activists picketed the General Electric factory in Burlington that manufactured machineguns used in military helicopters against peasant guerrillas: “I vividly remember Bernie standing arms-folded alongside the right-wing union officials from the factory and the Burlington Police Department as we were being arrested. He falsely insinuated that we were ‘anti-worker,’ and he refused to have any serious political dialogue with us activists.”

In 1990 Sanders ran for the House of Representatives, defeating an incumbent Republican and a Democrat in a three-way race. During congressional deliberations over authorizing the first Gulf War, Sanders declared his support for sanctions, diplomatic pressure and even the use of US forces

to “pressure” Iraq into submission, while stopping, along with most congressional Democrats, just short of voting for the actual war. This caveat was dropped in 1993, when Sanders voted for US intervention in Somalia. Sanders then voted for the NATO air war against Serbia in 1999.

This embrace of “human rights” imperialism was part of a worldwide phenomenon among layers formerly associated with the student and middle class radicalism of the 1960s and early 1970s. Especially following the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989-1991, these layers moved rapidly towards an accommodation with imperialism.

The NATO interventions in the Balkans in particular were a turning point in this respect, beginning with the bombing of Serb positions in Bosnia, the dispatch of UN peacekeeping troops, and then the 1999 war over Kosovo. The German Green Party, which carried out savage austerity measures as part of the “Red Green” coalition at the end of the decade, threw its support for German participation in the NATO war against Serbia, the first foreign deployment of the German army since the end of World War II, under the guise of “human rights.” Sanders followed a similar path. (His older brother Larry, who emigrated to Great Britain, ran as a candidate of the British Greens in the 2015 parliamentary elections).

Sanders voted in 2001 for the Authorization for the Use of Military Force, the congressional resolution that was the basis of George Bush’s invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and the launching of the “war on terror,” and which is still cited by Barack Obama as the legal justification for drone-missile assassinations in Pakistan, Yemen and other countries. He regularly voted for military appropriations bills, required to fund the ongoing war in Iraq Sanders claimed to oppose.

In the sphere of world trade, Sanders masks a strident chauvinism with “human rights” rhetoric, particularly with respect to China. In 1992 he co-sponsored a bill, first

proposed by Nancy Pelosi, and later vetoed by George H.W. Bush, attempting to restrict the trade status of China due to its human rights record. As always, the supreme “human right” was the right of American corporations to scour the globe in source of profit; one of the benchmarks that China would have been required to meet was to provide “United States exporters fair access to Chinese markets, including lowering tariffs, removing nontariff barriers, and increasing the purchase of United States goods and services.”

Sanders’ stance on immigration is entirely in line with right-wing efforts to scapegoat millions of impoverished and exploited Hispanic workers for the falling living standards of American working class. He has repeatedly introduced bills in Congress calling for the suspension of the federal visa program under the guise of protecting American jobs. For his efforts, he has earned the admiration of noted anti-immigrant racist and talk show host Lou Dobbs, who called him “one of the few straight talkers in Congress.”

On the massive NSA spying first revealed by Edward Snowden, Sanders has staked out a position virtually indistinguishable from the public position of Barack Obama, “welcoming” the opportunity to “discuss” government spying while demanding that Snowden be punished for revealing it. “The information disclosed by Edward Snowden has been extremely important,” Sanders said in early 2014. “On the other hand, there is no debate that Mr. Snowden violated an oath and committed a crime,” for which he called only for a “lenient” sentence. Last July, Sanders co-sponsored the Obama-supported USA FREEDOM Act in the Senate, which would [regularize NSA spying](#) under the guise of regulating it.

For some 25 years, the only thing distinguishing Sanders from garden-variety liberal Democrats in the House and Senate was the “independent” label he espoused. One survey of his voting record in the House in the 1990s noted that he was more Catholic than the Pope: he voted more consistently with the

Democratic caucus than the Democratic leader in the House at the time, Richard Gephardt.

The decision by Sanders to seek the Democratic Party nomination for president is the culmination of a protracted process over four decades, during which Sanders, despite never formally belonging to the Democratic Party, never ventured beyond what passes for the party's "left" flank, using the term "socialist" only to suggest an illusory difference with his (infrequent) Democratic Party challengers.

His role in the campaign will be to use his reputation as a politician of the "left" to disguise the ever more right-wing orientation of the Democratic Party: its abandonment of even a nominal commitment to social reform, its embrace of war, assassination, mass surveillance and an increasingly dictatorial role for the American imperialist state, both internationally and at home.

SOURCE: WSWS.ORG

SELECT COMMENTS

- [Martin Jukovsky](#) • [a day ago](#)

I rarely quote at length from pseudo-left web sites, but the following should be of interest. It's a letter to the International Socialist Organization's *Socialist Worker* as part of a discussion on whether to support Bernie Sanders's campaign. This radical, Jay Moore, crossed paths politically with Sanders many times in Vermont.

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A booster for U.S. imperialism

I HAVE lived and been an activist in Vermont for the past 30 years, during which time I closely followed Bernie Sanders' political career that has led him from Burlington mayor to U.S. congressman to U.S. senator to presidential candidate.

Over those years, I have had a number of direct encounters with him. I can tell you from my experience that Bernie is (1) a very rude human being (which makes it hard to understand how he has been a successful politician) and (2) has never been part of the social-change movements here in Vermont, and has often been at odds with us, particularly when it concerned wars and other international issues—most recently, the savage Israeli attack on Gaza.

My first experience with Bernie came shortly after he was elected mayor, and I moved to Burlington partly on that basis. It came while I was participating in a Central American solidarity action at a General Electric Gatling Gun factory in the early 1980s in support of peasants in El Salvador and Nicaragua against whom the machine guns mounted on helicopters were being used.

One would have expected, and I certainly did at the time, that Bernie—back then, much more of an “avowed socialist” than he is today—would have supported our civil disobedience protests to rid the “Peoples Republic of Burlington” from this odious human rights blot. Burlington had a sister city in Nicaragua.

But Bernie did not. Instead, I vividly remember Bernie standing arms-folded alongside the right-wing union officials from the factory and the Burlington Police Department as we were being arrested. He falsely

insinuated that we were “anti-worker,” and he refused to have any serious political dialogue with us activists. Bernie next made cozy with the cops and their union, who endorsed him in his future mayoral elections.

To my knowledge, Bernie has never spoken out against U.S. imperialism, calling it for what it is—namely, the foundation of upper-class profits and middle-class privileges in the belly of the beast. Down through the years as a politician, he has waffled at best on opposing U.S. wars against the developing world and other people who are deviating from what our rulers want. To his credit, Bernie did vote against the Iraq wars (though this was not a particularly courageous stand to take given how many other members of Congress did the same), but he has not consistently voted against the military funding legislation that made these wars possible.

Moreover, back in 1999, he was an enthusiastic supporter of Bill Clinton’s bombing campaign against Yugoslavia. At that time, I was a member of a group of angry and upset peace activists, including Dave Dellinger, who held a sit-in at Bernie’s Burlington office and were arrested after Bernie refused to speak with us. At that same time, one of Bernie’s Washington staff, the labor historian and activist Jeremy Brecher, wrote a stinging open letter explaining why he could not continue to work for and represent a politician who would take that kind of pro-war position.

In the last couple of years, a huge battle has taken place in Burlington and surrounding towns over the Pentagon’s plan to station the new F-35 warplane boondoggle at the Burlington Airport. A large and diverse movement came together to oppose it, based on everything from the noise level for those who have to live under its takeoff to its contribution to militarism

and global warming. Did Bernie stand with the people's movement? No, he has supported the F-35 to the hilt, standing instead with the area's military types.

Last fall, when members of Code Pink and Occupy confronted him about his failure to oppose Israel's attack on the Gaza civilian population, Bernie took an evasive liberal position, criticizing the Palestinians who were resisting as much or more than the Zionists. He then called the police on us.

Yes, I will freely admit that Bernie can talk a good line about economic inequities and the need to redress them. He's definitely on the mark there. An Occupier can agree. While never much of an environmentalist, he has even added a bit about global warming to the end of his standard populist stump speech. (When I knew him as Burlington's mayor, he was all in favor of letting developers take over the public lands on Burlington waterfront—which fortunately was stopped due to actions by Green activists with whom he could never get along.) However, is that enough?

In my view, we need to be clear—especially if we are socialists—about the strong linkages between what capitalism does overseas and here at home, and we need to stand firmly in solidarity with all of those people who are opposing U.S. imperialism and call for no more military spending that is being used to kill and repress them. *I will certainly not waste my vote on a politician who does not take that stand.*

As importantly, we need to be building revolutionary movements to take power away from the ruling class, not campaigning for politicians who invariably let us down with their promises of reforms.

Jay Moore, Marshfield, Vermont



▪ [Elliott Vernon](#) • [a day ago](#)

I recall a recent radio interview in which Bernie himself said, in substance, that his purpose in running for the Democratic nomination was to provoke a “conversation” about progressive issues and nudge Hillary to the left. In other words, his job is to compel Hillary to pay more lip service to socially progressive ideas. That’s it. Buff up the liberal image a little bit.



[лидия](#) • [a day ago](#)

As David Swanson puts it, Sanders is PEP – that is “Populist Except for Palestine” and also “Populist Except for Pentagon”.

” I did not believe in the Soviet Union or in concentration camps,” – the typical “progressive” anti-communist, of course.

Concentration camps had been invented by the UK, and first used “against their own people” by Finnish rightists.



▪ [M Green](#) • [10 hours ago](#)

Bernie Sanders is a genuine socialist, *American style*. In the United States, a politician qualifies as a

socialist if he is genuinely dedicated to sharing the imperial spoils with elements of the working class; such is Sanders. Even a devout servant of finance capital like Barack Obama may in the hearts and minds of the neocons count as a “socialist” for merely mouthing insincere redistributive suggestions to keep so many faithful fools obedient to the faith.

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