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Another socialist for US president

Submitted by Zac Muddle on 27 November, 2019 - 6:29 **Author:** Howie Hawkins, Stephen Wood



Q: Tell us about your campaign for president

A: My campaign is about putting forward ecosocialist solutions to the life and death issues we face: the climate emergency, growing inequality, the new nuclear arms race. All these crises flow from the structure of the capitalist system.

My central campaign theme and program is an Ecosocialist Green New Deal. I am talking about socialising the energy, transportation, and manufacturing sectors of the economy in order to rapidly zero out greenhouse gas emissions and build 100% clean energy by 2030. During the World War 2 emergency, the US federal government took over or built a quarter of US

manufacturing capacity in order to turn industry on a dime into what they called the “Arsenal of Democracy” to defeat the Axis powers. We need to do nothing less than that now to defeat climate change.

Inequality kills. The life expectancy gap between the rich and poor counties in the US is now 20 years. So our Ecosocialist Green New Deal also calls for an Economic Bill of Rights based on the public provision of a job guarantee, a guaranteed income above poverty, affordable housing, comprehensive health care, lifelong public education, and a secure retirement.

To address the new nuclear arms race, we call for a no first use pledge and unilateral disarmament to minimum credible deterrent, and, on the basis of those tension-reducing initiatives, negotiating with the nuclear powers for complete nuclear disarmament.

My campaign is just as much about party building. That means first of all securing ballot lines, which enables Greens to run for office at every level in the next election cycle. So we have to get on the ballot and get certain results – each state has different criteria – in order to secure a ballot line. Greens have ballot lines in 21 states, so we have to petition in the other 30, counting Washington DC. Ballot access is harder in the US than almost any other electoral democracy.

I know in the UK you just need 10 signatures to stand for Parliament. In the US you need thousands to get on the ballot as an independent or new party candidate for Congress, up to over 15,000 in states like Illinois.

Q: Is the Green Party a socialist party in the US?

A: I think it is vitally important to build a third party independent of Democrats and Republicans, who are funded by and primarily represent the capitalists. That independence is our power. Inside the Democratic Party, the left disappears. Nobody knows if your vote is from a Sanders socialist or a Clinton corporatist. Everybody knows what Green vote means and the more we get, the more leverage we have in the political process going forward.

Is the Green Party an explicitly socialist party? It has been since 2016 when the national platform was amended to say the party rejects both capitalism and bureaucratic state-socialism and favours a democratic and decentralised economy that it calls ecological socialism, communalism [meaning a system based on “communes”, rather than communalism in the more common English usage, i.e. ethnic hostility], and a cooperative commonwealth. Not every Green subscribes to this change, but the majority do.

At the moment my campaign is focused on getting the Green Party nomination. I have the nomination of the Socialist Party USA and the endorsement of Solidarity for the Green nomination. I am the only candidate in the Green Party who has a nationally-scaled campaign. Seven others are running but none is raising much money, hiring staff, and campaigning across the country like I am. I am not complacent about winning the Green nomination, but I have a good chance.

I am also campaigning for a united electoral front of the independent left. I am seeking the nomination of several progressive and socialist state parties like the Peace and Freedom Party in California. We want to build solidarity across non-sectarian independent left.

The Greens are unevenly developed across the US. Many locals would definitely call themselves socialist. Some are well integrated into the labour movement and working-class communities, but in other places not so much. In New York state, Greens have been in the middle of the big movement against fracking and for clean energy. We have some leading Black Lives Matter activists who are campaigning against police brutality.

Most Greens are pissed-off former Democrats. They came to the Greens because in fighting on a particular issue – a war they opposed, an economic justice demand, an environmental struggle – they found that the Democrats were on the other side. Jill Stein, the 2012 and 2016 Green Party Presidential nominee, came to the Greens after voters in her home state of Massachusetts passed a public campaign finance law by a citizens initiative referendum but the Democratic-dominated legislature simply refused to fund it and eventually got a court order that enabled them to repeal it.

Q: What is the state of the socialist movement in the US and how do the Sanders campaign and the Democratic Socialist of America fit in?

It is much easier now to call yourself a socialist in the US. The word used to be a conversation stopper. Now it's a conversation starter.

A lot of that is due to Bernie Sanders calling himself a democratic socialist. I also think right-wing media helped by constantly calling Obama a socialist! Of course, Obama was anything but a socialist, but many who liked him thought, well, what is this really all about?

For me socialism is about ending exploitation at the point of production where extreme income inequality is generated as well as destruction of the environment. Sanders' socialism is about taxing the capitalist to fund social programs. Sanders talks about a political revolution against the billionaire class, but it has to be an economic revolution as well that takes away their political power by socialising the major means of production. Sanders plans sound very radical to a lot of people, but really his models are like European social democracy and he explicitly calls it completing the New Deal, which was liberal reforms of capitalism, not socialism.

I am talking about expropriating the billionaire class, not just taxing them. And I think Sanders does know that just taxing the rich will not be enough. He came through the youth wing of the Socialist Party.

But he apparently he thinks the people are not ready to go that far. I think that with a real movement behind him – it would need to be independent of the Democrats – then he would have more confidence to campaign for socialising big business. That's why I think its important to be building that movement now.

Sanders has been clear about the class divides in society, but the difference, I think, in our attitudes is about political power. If you leave the concentrated economic power in place, it translates into concentrated political power. Then even funding the best social measures gives the capitalists the power to resist the reforms and roll them back. What is important now is clarifying these difference within this new socialist movement.

The US left is in somewhat of a crisis because much of it is disappearing into the Democratic Party. The dissolution of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) in part was down to how some of their members were orienting to the Democrats instead of that organisation's traditional political independence from the capitalist parties.

The rapid growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) is drawing many people like this into Democratic Party campaigns. I do work with DSA members and supporters in social movements. They are backing Sanders and say they won't be supporting any alternative Democratic nominee. I don't expect DSA as a whole to get behind my campaign if Sanders loses the Democratic nomination, but individuals and perhaps some branches will.

When I stood for Governor of New York in 2018, after their preferred candidate lost the Democratic primary, some in DSA pushed to endorse me. Instead, they debated about whether they should have a debate about backing me! The vote was competitive but the proposal was defeated. DSA is now more divided on the Democratic Party than they were traditionally.

The growth of the DSA is a good thing. I think regrouping and bringing together the independent left is especially important at this juncture.

Q: How did you become a socialist?

I got my politics as a teenager in the San Francisco Bay Area in the late 1960s in the civil rights, antiwar, and radical ecology movements. The Democrats and Republicans were going slow on civil rights and supporting the escalation of the war in Vietnam. I committed then to independent working-class political action – in elections and in the movements.

The two biggest influences on me were Hal Draper's *Two Souls of Socialism*, which distinguished between democratic and authoritarian socialisms, and Murray Bookchin's many pamphlets envisioning an ecological and libertarian socialism. When the Independent Socialist Clubs led in alliance with the Black Panther Party the formation of the Peace and Freedom Party in 1968, I campaigned for the new party even though I wasn't old enough yet to vote for it.

In 1972, now at college in New England, I first met Bernie Sanders while supporting his campaigns for US Senate in the spring and for Vermont Governor in the fall as the Liberty Union candidate. Later in the 1970s when he produced a slide show about Eugene V Debs, I organised a showing in my community.

Debs got almost one million votes in 1920, and he was in prison! We believe that our independent socialist campaign can win a million votes for socialism in 2020 for the first time in 100 years.

Alliance for Workers' Liberty

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty is an organisation fighting as part of the labour movement for a socialist alternative to both capitalism and Stalinism, based on common ownership and democracy.

020 7394 8923 awl@workersliberty.org ([https://mail.google.com/mail/?](https://mail.google.com/mail/?view=cm&fs=1&tf=1&to=awl@workersliberty.org)

[view=cm&fs=1&tf=1&to=awl@workersliberty.org](https://mail.google.com/mail/?view=cm&fs=1&tf=1&to=awl@workersliberty.org))

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