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Why America's Next President Will Not Be a Socialist

By Garry Leech
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With the latest polls showing US Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders leading rival Hillary Clinton only weeks before the first two primaries in Iowa and New Hampshire, many Americans are contemplating the real possibility of having a socialist president in the White House. But even if Sanders wins the election, the United States will not have a socialist president. Why not? Because Sanders is *not* a socialist.

Sanders has often stated that he is a “democratic socialist” and, last November, he defined that term for the American people. Shortly afterwards, *Forbes Magazine* published an article that stated, “What he’s talking about, whatever the heck it is, isn’t socialism of any type or form.” And, for once, *Forbes* was right. Sanders is not a socialist in any shape or form. At least not according to the content of his public statements and campaign platform. But if Sanders is not a socialist, then what is he? He is a social democrat; which is radically different from being a democratic socialist.

It is true that Sanders is advocating going after the wealthy elites who dominate the economy by raising taxes, closing tax loopholes and placing tax havens off limits while at the same time doubling the minimum wage to help low-income earners. And it is true that he is proposing to also redistribute that wealth in the form of funding universal healthcare, tuition-free university and much-needed infrastructure projects. But none of this constitutes socialism.

Government policies that redistribute the wealth generated by the private sector in the form of social programs constitute social democracy, which is still capitalism. The fundamental pillar of capitalism is the right to private property, which means the right to establish a private business, or a corporation and to produce for the market in order to generate profits. Social democracy does not challenge the principal of private property; it leaves the fundamental pillar of capitalism intact and only seeks to redistribute some of the wealth generated by the private sector. In short, it is regulated capitalism.

In stark contrast, under socialism, there is no private sector. This is because there is no right to private property. Karl Marx argued that the right to private property ensures that a small privileged minority will dominate the economy and that the economy would inevitably serve the interests of that small minority rather than ensuring the wellbeing of everyone. Marx's call to abolish private property did not pertain to personal property or belongings; it sought to prohibit an individual from owning a business for his or her own personal gain while reducing workers to nothing more than virtual slaves forced to work under an authoritarian corporate structure. Under socialism, workers—the overwhelming majority of people—would all have a meaningful democratic voice in how their workplaces operate (i.e. determining wages, hours, benefits, production and distribution of goods, etc.). In other words, democracy would exist in both the economic and political spheres of society rather than only in the political sphere, which is the reality under capitalism. Furthermore, under democratic control, the economy would more likely be managed in a way that ensures the basic needs of everyone are met rather than prioritizing profit generation for a small minority.

This is why the Soviet Union was not socialist, nor did it reflect the philosophy of Marx in any meaningful way. It constituted some form of authoritarian state socialism in which one set of elites that control the economy (capitalist elites) are replaced with another set of elites that control the economy (political elites). In both systems, workers are effectively reduced to laborers serving the interests of the elites. In contrast, in “democratic socialism,” the workers would have a meaningful democratic voice in the economic sphere of their lives. This is not the case in a “social democracy”, where the power and privilege of capitalist elites remains firmly in place and workers remain disempowered and alienated as wage laborers.

The description of democratic socialism provided by Sanders more closely reflects the social democracy that came to prominence in the United States under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Keynesian-inspired New Deal than anything espoused by Marx. For example, as Sanders has stated, “Democratic socialism means, that in a democratic, civilized society the wealthiest people and the largest corporations must pay their fair share of taxes.” Actually, in democratic socialism, those private corporations wouldn't exist. They would be turned over to the workers to manage either as worker-owned cooperatives or as worker co-managed state

enterprises. Either way, the workers would have a democratic voice in the workplace, which would not only more fairly distribute the wealth generated, it would also redistribute power.

Furthermore, according to Sanders, “Democratic socialism, to me, means that we must create a vibrant democracy based on the principle of one person one vote.” But such a narrow view of democracy as existing only in the political sphere also would not exist in democratic socialism. The “democratic” component of “democratic socialism” pertains both to the political and economic spheres of society. As previously mentioned, workers would have a meaningful democratic voice in all aspects of their lives—their government and their workplace.

There is little doubt that the social democratic policies advocated by Sanders will redistribute some wealth to benefit poorer Americans, but they will also leave capitalism intact. And from its birth capitalism has required an imperialist global structure to ensure that corporations from wealthy nations can exploit the natural resources of the Third World to ensure our “development” at the expense of the majority of the world’s population. From the genocide of the indigenous peoples in the Americas to the enslavement of more than 12 million Africans to imperialist wars throughout the Third World to the so-called war on terror we have used violence to access the resources of others in order to ensure our privileged lifestyles.

That exploitation—and imperialism—continues today under neoliberal globalization, which has been spearheaded by the likes of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization and through regional and bilateral free trade pacts. Even during the post-World War Two Keynesian era, global inequality increased, capitalism’s onslaught against nature continued, and any people who dared to challenge the hegemony of capitalism were crushed mercilessly by the United States. Just think Iran, Guatemala, Indonesia, Vietnam, Chile, Argentina, Nicaragua and El Salvador, not to mention the countless aggressions against Cuba.

But while Sanders is by no means a socialist, the Keynesian policies that he is advocating are by far the most progressive that have been put forth by a serious presidential contender for many decades. Furthermore, his campaign has pulled the word “socialism” out of the garbage can, dusted it off and initiated a healthy debate about both capitalism and socialism in the United States. Perhaps most importantly, more than a decade into the early 21st century, it seems that we are finally starting to recognize that the Soviet Union was not an accurate representation of socialism.

Sanders’ policy proposals represent a welcome and long overdue challenge to the right-wing neoliberal rhetoric and policy agenda that has dominated US politics since the Reagan years. But not only aren’t Sanders’ policies socialist, they actually pose a threat to socialism. If elected, Sanders’ policies would likely moderate the capitalist model both domestically and globally, but they would leave intact the fundamental global injustices inherent in the capitalist system. And when those capitalist policies implemented by a self-proclaimed socialist ultimately fail to address these global injustices in any meaningful way, it will be socialism that will be discredited.

Finally, not only will the fundamental inequalities in power and wealth that are inherent to capitalism remain in place globally, they will continue within the United States. After all, under

President Sanders, Corporate America's elites will still live luxuriously on incomes of hundreds of millions of dollars a year instead of billions. Meanwhile, a full-time worker earning Sanders' proposed minimum wage will have to survive on \$30,000 a year and will remain disempowered and alienated in the workplace. Such inequality in wealth and power does not constitute democratic socialism under any definition of the term. So sure, let's elect Sanders, but let's vote for him as the capitalist that he is: a social democrat.