

Senator Sanders and the Impossibility of Reviving Democratic Party Liberalism

By [Charles Andrews](#) (Posted Dec 09, 2014)

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Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont released [a 12-step economic agenda](#) on December 1, 2014. Cyber Monday at the start of the holiday commercial frenzy is not the best time to capture public attention, but Sanders probably has a strict timeline as he decides whether to run for president.

The goals of Sanders' agenda are worthy. Here are his topics with our brief summary of his proposed implementation:

1. Rebuilding Our Roads — enact a \$1 trillion set of construction projects for transport, water cleanup, and schools
2. Reversing Climate Change — no specific measures
3. Creating Jobs — financial assistance to expand worked-owned cooperatives
4. Protecting Unions — a law to enforce union recognition when a majority of employees sign a card
5. Raising the Wage — raise minimum wage to an unspecified living wage
6. Pay Equity (for women) — unspecified law
7. Making Trade Work for Workers — unspecified change of incentives and taxes to make U.S. corporations produce here not abroad
8. Cutting College Costs — unspecified measures
9. Breaking Up Big Banks — break up the six largest Wall Street firms
10. Bringing Health Care to All — Medicare for All
11. Ending Poverty — expand Social Security, Medicare coverage, and Medicaid
12. Stopping Tax Dodging Corporations — raise rates and close loopholes on corporations and executives

The program echoes classic Democratic Party liberalism from the middle 1930s to the middle 1970s (modernized so it addresses environmental issues and corporate outsourcing to cheap-wage countries). In essence, the agenda says, federal spending on broad programs, taxation of corporations and the rich, and other legislation should guarantee working people a job and a secure life — within capitalism.

Some flaws in Sanders' agenda could be corrected without changing its essence. There is no need to dwell on them. The basic problem is that the old Democratic Party liberalism is no longer possible.

The party was beholden to corporate capital just as it is today, but it was assigned a different role. Its job was to engage with surging mass movements and channel their demands toward palatable reforms. The New Deal and its watered-down and overtly anti-communist successor, Truman's Fair Deal, conceded just enough to restore acceptance of the existing order. The capitalists' worry was that workers might take action for socialism, or form a labor party based on trade unions such as Britain had, or push for the wider political space of a European-style parliamentary system. Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s put through his Great Society programs to tamp down the fiery protests of Black working people in dozens of cities.

New Deal liberalism was both possible and necessary. Possible because capitalism, still in its phase of industrial growth, could make concessions to the working class without derailing investment. Necessary because factories required a big industrial workforce. The drive to accumulate profits and the central place of industrial workers in accumulation gave them the clout to fight for good wages and win.

Since 1973 the processes of investment have run into basic problems, more fundamental than the worst cyclical depression. Capitalists no longer need tens of millions of workers to expand forefront sectors. Capitalist prosperity with a minimal share of it for most if not all workers has disappeared (see this writer's forthcoming book, [*The Hollow Colossus*](#)). The median real wage has stagnated and declined for 41 years, and there has not been a major economic reform of benefit to working people in all that time.

The economic change flipped the role of the Democratic Party. Now it engages in a kind of dance with the Republican Party as they both dismantle one public obstacle after another standing in the way of increased exploitation of workers. President Carter was a transition figure. Clinton presided over the birth of NAFTA and the WTO as well as enacting welfare "reform." Obama managed the response to the depression of 2008 entirely as a rescue of capital, and his Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) set health care on a privatized course to become an individually purchased commodity.

The U.S. working class faces a new reality. On one hand, the boundaries of reform struggle have shrunk; on the other hand, people become more open to socialism and more aware, uncomfortably for now, of the imperative of revolutionary change.

Most of the twelve steps in Senator Sanders' economic agenda are material for good agitation. Why shouldn't "the United States join the rest of the industrialized world" with "a Medicare-

for-all, single-payer system”? The question is, to what end is such agitation devoted? Here, Sanders’ timid politics are revealed.

One problem underlies his public musing over the last few months whether to run for president as an independent or a Democrat. Ralph Nader’s presidential campaign in 2000 stirred real enthusiasm. Nader [filled a 10,000-seat coliseum](#) in Portland, Oregon, and the rally was a paid ticket event. Nader tapped a national wave of enthusiasm — until the two sanctioned political parties and the mass media launched the electoral equivalent of nuclear war. Nader’s program was less cohesive in some ways than Sanders’ agenda, but Nader openly challenged corporate capitalist domination of parties and elections. His presidential run was a glorious achievement. Unfortunately, Nader walked away from the momentum instead of launching a permanent mass organization.

Sanders calls himself an Independent in the Senate, but he caucuses with the Democrats. If he runs for president, he will enter some Democratic primary contests and then run as an independent, or perhaps as an independent from the outset. Whatever his decision, he will not build a mass movement and lasting organization. In effect, his candidacy says, here is a fine agenda, but I do not challenge capitalism even though that is the only way one could implement it. Sanders peddles the illusion that the Democratic Party could return to its old liberalism. After all, in the unlikely event that Sanders became president, he would ask Democratic members of Congress to legislate his agenda. Ha!

Another problem is that Sanders glosses over class reality. He begins with an appeal to fight “the long-term deterioration of the middle class.” Complementary to this, his poverty plank, number eleven of the dozen steps in his agenda, characterizes the poor as seniors and children.

He has a separate item about raising the minimum wage for the working poor. By his terminology and rhetorical structure, Sanders evades the fact that capitalism divides society into two classes, capitalists and workers. The working class includes those who still earn a modestly prosperous wage or salary, the growing portion who work at sh-t jobs for miserable pay and practically no benefits, and the vast ranks of people for whom the capitalist economy has only the most precarious temporary and on-call hours, or no job at all.

Sanders, in a polite rebuke to a Red-baiting congressman, said, “I bet I’m the only socialist he knows.” But Sanders quickly reclassifies himself from socialist to “the social-democratic tradition” of countries like Sweden, conceding too that they are “no utopia” ([“Sanders Socialist Successes,”](#) April 22, 2009). The European social democrats of yesteryear boasted that they would make capitalism deliver prosperity for all. Sanders rarely mentions capitalism, and he never speaks of replacing it by socialism.

Our choice inexorably becomes either a socialist society of no rich and no poor or an ever more vicious capitalism. The Democratic Party adapts itself to the latter. The Merriam-Webster definition of “anachronism” could be the caption under a portrait photo of Sanders: “a person or a thing that seems to belong to the past and not to fit in the present.”
