

The Leninist Moment of the Sanders Presidential Campaign

By [Charles Andrews](#) (Posted Dec 25, 2015)

The revelation of how election campaigns work and the fierce battle over Bernie Sanders' access to the Democratic National Committee (DNC) database constitute a Leninist moment, even if for a very non-Leninist democratic socialist.

The storm occurred within the confines of the presidential election, nowhere near the boundary of revolution. Yet it was indeed a Leninist moment because 1) a major segment of the ruling class was unable to rule in the customary way, 2) the Sanders campaign was given an opportunity to turn the course of events dramatically toward the people, something Lenin always sought to do, and 3) the object of the controversy, a database of citizens maintained by the DNC, exposed the sham of bourgeois democracy for all to see.

Each political campaign keeps track of its own supporters, the issues that concern them and others, who will probably vote and who will not — correct? In the case of presidential campaigns, no. The Democratic National Committee maintains a central database on the population for *all* the candidates. The DNC and the candidates put data in, and they draw data from the pool.

We can thank the lawsuit that the Sanders campaign filed in its clash with the DNC for a hint of the information gathered about us: “demographic and geographic data for registered voters (such as name, address and jurisdiction); email addresses; voter registration status; telephone numbers; vote history; commercially acquired consumer data; ethnicity information; political party preference or affiliation, if any; candidate preference data, if any; and other key analytic metrics selected by the DNC” ([Bernie 2016, Inc. v. DNC Services Corporation](#), U.S. District Court, para. 6).

Especially interesting is the attorneys' mention of “commercially acquired consumer data.” If you thought Facebook and Google were the kings of profiling people, the DNC ranks as at least a prince. We do not know the extent of the consumer data it purchases. The information might be product categories derived from credit card charges, mortgage or rental status, websites you look at, and so on. We do know that it is much more than notes on what you told a campaign staffer.

On one hand, candidates are more effective marketers to the electorate when they draw upon a broad database. On the other hand, the information is in the hands of the DNC, not the candidate. DNC computers even hold the lists that candidates build and use when people volunteer to telephone, canvass, or put up signs, as well as analytical summaries prepared by staff.

Clintonistas Attempt to Execute the Populist

The DNC is not neutral among candidates. The tilt toward Hillary Clinton and against challengers like Bernie Sanders is blatant, from scheduling a few debates that minimize Sanders' exposure to selecting Debbie Wasserman Schultz, who was [national co-chair of Hillary's 2008 presidential campaign](#), to be the chairperson of the DNC.

If Bernie Sanders thought that the Clinton camp would play by the rules, he found out on Dec. 18, 2015 how wrong he was. The DNC contracts the work of maintaining its database to a private firm, NGP VAN. On his resume, CEO [Stuart Trevelyan](#) states that he worked in the data headquarters of the 1992 Clinton-Gore campaign and then had a post in Clinton's White House Office of Legislative Affairs.

In the fateful week in December, NGP VAN posted a system update. Someone on Sanders' campaign staff noticed that he could look at certain files that are supposed to be private to the Clinton campaign. Sanders says it was not the first time NGP VAN had botched its system in this manner. Did Clinton staff also view Sanders' private files? Neither we nor Sanders knows.

The Sanders campaign admits that three staffers opened Clinton files during the forty or so minutes that passed before NGP VAN corrected its blunder. Although the DNC later charged that the staffers downloaded and saved files, they apparently did not. Instead, they copied information into folders on their section of DNC computers, from which in the rapid course of events they were deleted.

The DNC leaped at the opening. Violating its contract with the campaigns, specifically the clause that requires ten days to resolve an issue, the committee dealt an immediate, deadly blow to Sanders by shutting down all access to his own files! His organizers could not look up the phone number of a single volunteer.

Until this moment, Bernie Sanders had been an obedient player in the two-party game. He had told party leaders that his campaign is a necessity to re-attract people to the Democratic Party, people who went for Obama's "Change You Can Believe In," people who watched [giant banks receive bailouts](#) in the financial crash of 2008 while [autoworkers' pensions were sliced to a pittance](#), people who heard an early Obama statement in favor of single-payer healthcare and then saw health reform turn into the oppressive [Affordable Care Act](#). Sanders is an independent by formal status but a Democrat in substance — an old-fashioned one. He denounces the billionaire class and advocates economic benefits for those he sometimes calls working families, other times the middle class. He would tax the rich and break up big banks, but he has not proposed to nationalize any corporate property, let alone replace capitalist accumulation with socialist prosperity for all. [Sanders wants to repeat the Democratic days of FDR and the New Deal. It cannot be done.](#)

No matter how loyal Sanders is to capitalist rule, he cannot and will not surrender his own rights and dignity. Within hours of the DNC shutdown, his attorneys filed suit for immediate restoration of access to his DNC databases.

A Crisis and an Opening

The ruling class stumbled into a crisis, unable to carry on in the old way. That is [one of Lenin's three conditions](#) for a fundamental turn of social direction. Debbie Wasserman Schultz leveled wildly exaggerated charges against Sanders' staff, and another DNC official posted [obviously edited "logs"](#) of computer access as evidence for a mendacious case. Yet the disarray was apparent. [David Axelrod](#), the strategist who put Barack Obama in the White House, said via Twitter: "[H]arsh penalty v. @BernieSanders looks like @DNC is putting finger on scale." Within hours thousands of people sent emails of protest to the committee. The DNC caved overnight and restored access. (Sanders' litigation for monetary damages remains active.)

It was a Leninist moment for Sanders. For almost a year, he has straddled between popular outreach with a genuine program — something so unknown these days that Sanders calls it a "political revolution" — and business as usual. The DNC database is vital because the campaigns treat people as consumers, like individuals who choose between Coke and Pepsi or occasionally Starbucks. The Clinton machine seized an opportunity to eliminate a competitor, much as Amazon chokes small book publishers and diaper vendors.

Crisis offers opportunity. Sanders could have executed a stunning transformation, turning his campaign into a genuine mass movement. He has drawn the largest turnout at rallies and attracted more than 2.3 million individuals to donate an average of \$25. He could take the momentum and go independent. He could launch a mass organization with instant heft, creating an instrument of popular democracy.

Sanders' most astute, militant supporters saw the opening. The executive director of the [National Nurses United](#) trade union, [RoseAnn DeMoro](#), who chaired an aspiring [Labor Party](#) national convention in 1998, said, "If he doesn't get access to his voter list, what choice does he have? If the process in the Democratic party is this rigged, how can he be loyal? We are at a rupture here in democracy and the Democratic party. It's a strategy for demobilization, but what it's going to do is have exactly the opposite effect. They have misstepped so severely with the populist base that they could lose this base forever."

This is dialectics, Leninist thinking for a non-Leninist candidate. Bernie Sanders was shown the unlocked door of a historic situation. As of this writing, he has not opened it. That is no reason to be complacent with disdain for the travesty of U.S. democracy. The Clinton-DNC overlords made a serious error. They forgot about the people entirely, consumed with zeal to wrap up a presidential nomination for the anointed establishment choice. The database incident could not be predicted, but such outbreaks are inevitable. Let us ponder how to get ready for them.

Charles Andrews is the author of [The Hollow Colossus](#), which analyzes new contradictions between capitalist accumulation and humanity's productive powers.
