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The Bernie Sanders Illusion

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Bernie Sanders, the Senator from Vermont, a former member of the Young People's Socialist League and self-described "democratic socialist," is running to be the Democratic Party candidate for U.S. president. Sanders' candidacy has generated enthusiasm among liberals and leftists in an otherwise bleak political landscape dominated by the likes of Hillary Clinton (right-wing Democrat), Jeb Bush (right-wing Republican) and Donald Trump (right-wing demagogue billionaire). Could it be possible that this one man could do the unthinkable, and get Americans to rally behind an anti-corporate and progressive political agenda and return the United States to the pro-labor capitalist welfare state of the Roosevelt and pre-Vietnam era?

Not likely. For one thing the political odds are stacked against him. As Sam Dolgoff pointed out in his classic essay "The Labor Party Illusion," the electoral system has always been rigged in favor of big business and capitalism. Even before the Supreme Court Citizens United decision (2009) and the massive Gerrymandering that occurred in the wake of the Republican sweep of 2010, elections have always been bought and representation has never been proportional and evenly distributed. The electoral system has been created to

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make sure that the majority does not rule. Sanders will face an uphill battle both within the Democrat Party and in the general election that will follow.

On the other hand, should a miracle happen and we have our first “socialist” president, Sanders will be blocked by the same forces that prevented Barack Obama from accomplishing anything beyond a bailout for the capitalists when they need it. There will be no socialist party that will be taking their places in the next Congress but the same army of corporate hacks in both parties that will prevent Sanders from implementing even the mildest reforms. Not to mention that Sanders himself has a spotty voting record in his past. Although Sanders did vote against giving George Bush the green light to invade Iraq, he voted in favor of Clinton’s “humanitarian war” in former Yugoslavia, the invasion of Afghanistan, the F-35 war plane program, giving military aid to Israel to make sure it did not run out of artillery shells it rained on Gaza, and Obama’s drone assassination program. Sanders is a member in good standing of the military-industrial complex, although “he doth protest too much.”

Nor would it make much difference if there were a left-wing party swept into office with Sanders. We have seen recently what happened with Syriza in Greece. When faced with the prospect of forced austerity in favor of European bankers, Syriza held a referendum of the Greek people. The people voted overwhelmingly to reject the austerity plan. When the bankers were unimpressed and doubled-down on their demands, Syriza agreed to them, ignoring the referendum results.

Apologists for Syriza on the left blame the bankers for ignoring the referendum results and staging a “coup.” If there was a coup it was not the bankers, but Syriza who staged it. Syriza had made no preparations for the likelihood that the bankers would ignore the voters. To do this would have required that the Greek people be ready to take over industry and agricul-

ture themselves, and toss out the capitalists. This goes beyond the capabilities of politicians, even socialist ones. Syriza had no choice and their election to power was an empty victory.

Many on the left will no doubt agree that Sanders can lead us nowhere, but will insist on voting for him anyway. What can it hurt?

Admittedly the act of voting itself will not hurt. An extra few minutes out of the day, does not really hurt. It could be seen as a protest vote, like voting for Mickey Mouse. The real problem is the many who will spend inordinate amounts of time and money on the Sanders campaign that could better be used to build unions and grass-roots movements that could make a real difference. The choice is yours.