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Vermont elects America's first socialist senator

An anarchist analysis of Bernie Sanders victory

Anarcho

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Amidst the Democratic mid-term election victories on November 8th, an independent won the Senate race in Vermont. What is significant is that he is a self-proclaimed socialist and so the first socialist senator in US history. The previous best result in a Senate race by a socialist was in 1930 when Emil Seidel won 6% of the vote.

Bernie Sanders is an unapologetic socialist and proud of it and has won eight consecutive elections to the US House of Representatives after being elected mayor of Burlington in 1981. However, do not get your hopes up too much as his vision of socialism is, well, simply reformed capitalism. According to Sanders, "Twenty years ago when people here thought about socialism they were thinking about the Soviet Union, about Albania. Now they think about Scandinavia. In Vermont people understand I'm talking about democratic socialism."

Sanders says his electoral success reflects the widespread discontent with rising inequality, deepening poverty and the lack

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of affordable healthcare. “People realise there is a lot to be learned from the democratic socialist models in northern Europe,” he said. “The untold story here is the degree to which the middle class is shrinking and the gap between rich and poor is widening. It is a disgrace that the US has the highest rate of childhood poverty of any industrialised country on earth. Iraq is important, but it’s not the only issue.”

Somewhat ironically, the head of a free-market Vermont think-tank, the Ethan Allen Institute, said that “Bernie Sanders is an unreconstructed 1930s socialist and proud of it. He’s a skilful demagogue who casts every issue in that framework, a master practitioner of class warfare.” Yes, of course. To practice over 30 years of class war by the capitalist class and its political lackeys is just the normal way of things but to point this fact out means you are “a master practitioner of class warfare.” What a strange world the ideologues of capitalism inhabit!

As much as it is nice to see that some Americans are recognising that things need not be as they are. It is sad, though, that the best on offer is simply a reformed capitalism which, while better to survive in, is hardly the best we can hope for. Equally, the history of social democratic parties in office hardly supports Sanders’ rationale for standing: “I tried to make the government work for working people, and not just for corporations, and on that basis I was elected to Congress.” Anarchists need no reminding of the anti-working class policies implemented by this and previous Labour governments.

There is understandably great unease in all capitalist societies. The task for anarchists is to encourage people to solve their own problems themselves, by their own self-organisation, direct action and solidarity, and that relying on politicians to act for you is part of the problem. By that struggle people will realise that another world is possible and, moreover, start to create it.