

Robert Barsky and Noam Chomsky discuss Bernie Sanders

Barsky: Sanders has been very consistent in his political views over the past 50 years, ascribing them to socialist influences that he has read or encountered over the years. When we look to his self-described greatest influence, Eugene Debs, we find many areas in which Sanders approach is at variance. For instance, one crucial difference is in Sanders’ talk about *American* workers, rather than workers of the world, which has important consequences for his views on immigration. Is there a nativist side to Sanders politics, in your opinion?

Chomsky: I can’t claim to be very knowledgeable about Sanders’s thinking and commitments. It’s true that he focuses his attention on American workers, but it’s worth bearing in mind that it’s a different era. There are no major strikes now with the International Workers of the World (IWW) playing a prominent role, or figures like Luxemburg and Liebknecht, Russell, or Debs upholding solidarity of workers worldwide – from their jail cells. Wilson’s Red Scare soon expelled such dangerous figures from the political arena, in fact from the country, by the thousands. Sanders hasn’t said much about international affairs generally. My sense is that he would be amenable to the kind of internationalism that’s a prerequisite for survival in these dark times – which includes taking seriously the term “International” in the names of many unions.

Barsky: You mentioned to me that you were in contact with Sanders during his stint as the mayor of Burlington. Can you relay some details of the discussions you had? Do you feel that he was inspired by your approach?

Chomsky: In the mid-80s, Sanders invited me to give a couple of talks in Burlington. I spent a couple of days there, a lot of it with him, mainly following him around in his daily activities. These were mostly meeting with a wide range of citizens – firemen, housewives, citizens groups,... I was impressed with his easy and forthcoming relations with all of them, including groups that surely didn’t like his ideas at all. All could see that he really cared for them and their problems, and for the welfare of the town. No doubts about his sincerity. Not the usual politician pretense and posturing. We didn’t talk much about matters more general than the immediate problems. I doubt that he even remembers. I have never been approached in his campaigns. Probably a wise decision.

Barsky: In tracing Sanders’ peculiar approach to socialism, we have looked at the work of Karl Polanyi, Eugene Debs, Karl Liebknecht, Francis Bellamy, Rosa Luxemburg, Charles Fourier, John L. Lewis and the journalism in the *New York Tribune*. In your opinion, are any of them of particular interest for Sanders’ approach? Are there others that you would add to our list, to help identify crucial interlocutors and influences?

Chomsky: I doubt that they have much relevance for him. Remember, this is America, a very insular society. It’s had very vibrant and radical farmers and workers movements, crushed by state-corporate force when they were close to unifying at the turn of the 20th century. That could have led to a very different America. They were homegrown, apart from the influence of immigrants – though some of the most important working class thinkers were reading Smith and Ricardo and using their labor theory of value as a pillar for their quite sophisticated critique of appropriation of someone’s labor by owners and managers. In the ‘30s, when labor revived from the crushing blows of state-corporate repression, the US led the way to social democracy while Europe succumbed to fascism.

Apart from being insular, the US is unusual in many other ways. One is that it has an unusually powerful and organized business class, dedicated Marxists who are fighting relentless class war – and for the past 40 years have been winning – big. One measure of the victory was given by a Rand corporation study of “transfer of wealth” from workers and the Middle Class (the lower 90% of income) to the very top, mostly a fraction of 1%. They estimate the highway robbery at almost \$50 trillion. Perfectly predictable consequences of government policy. There have been many other onerous consequences.

That bears on Sanders and socialism. A lead correspondent for the London *Financial Times* quipped – not entirely in jest – that if Sanders were in Germany, he could be running on the conservative Christian Democrat ticket. In fact, his main programs are conventional in Europe and elsewhere. They would not have surprised Dwight Eisenhower. Nowadays it’s called “too radical for Americans” (who happen to support most of his programs), even “socialism,” a scare word in the US after years of state-business propaganda, innocuous in most other countries.

Barsky: Have you ever had communications or discussions with Larry Sanders?

Chomsky: No.

Barsky: We have been speaking with CNN correspondents about Sanders, and with his campaign manager. They all speak of the influence he has had on the Democratic Party, but they all say as well that the future of the Democrats is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Would you agree? Given the limitations of mainstream American politics, do you find AOC to be a viable and constructive candidate for the future?

Chomsky: The Democratic Party is split between a Clinton-Obama donor-oriented party of wealthy professionals who run the party and a mostly young progressive sector of voters – by international standards, social democratic. AOC is an effective activist and spokesperson for the latter faction. How it will play out depends on what people like you do.

Barsky: Thank you so much Noam.