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WHAT KIND OF REVOLUTION IS BERNIE SANDERS LAUNCHING?

WRITTEN BY [GARY ZABEL](#)
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Photo by Derek Kouyoumjian

On Monday morning, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont spoke at a rally in Somerville in support of candidates for local office endorsed by his national political organization, [Our Revolution](#) (OR) and its state affiliate, [Our Revolution Massachusetts](#) (ORMA). Coming on the heels of a victory in the race for the [Massachusetts](#) Senate by another OR endorsee, Paul Feeney of Bristol and Norfolk, and in the presence of candidates for the Somerville Boards of Aldermen and Cambridge City Council, Sanders' speech caught fire with the overflow audience of 300 or so progressive political activists assembled at the [ONCE](#) Ballroom.

There is no denying that Sanders is a powerful speaker. In the Brooklyn accent that has stayed with him in his passage through Vermont, where he was mayor of Burlington, and then on to the US House of Representatives and Senate, Sanders hit just the right combination of progressive populist enlightenment, outrage, and optimism that brought him close to the Democratic [Party](#) presidential nomination, and has now, according to the polls, made him the most popular political figure in the United States. For the past year, he has spent his time debating the Republican right (he recently [squared off against Ted Cruz](#)), crafting a multi-issue progressive congressional agenda, miraculously winning the support of 30 Democratic senators for his Medicare for All, single-payer health plan, and building Our Revolution, which now has around 400 chapters nationwide.

Throughout the race for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, Sanders insisted that his campaign was merely the opening salvo in a "political revolution" that would need to be carried further by thousands of grassroots activists running for office across the US. Politics in this country has become the private property of such billionaires as the Koch Brothers, who, as Sanders pointed out in his Somerville speech, are currently funding the Republican drive for tax cuts, 80 percent of which will go to the wealthiest 1 percent of the population, and 40 percent to the top one-tenth of 1 percent, while the cuts will be funded by throwing 12 million people off the Medicaid rolls. The billions of dollars flowing into the coffers of political candidates and campaigns have made a mockery of the idea of democracy. The United States is becoming an outright oligarchy, the best that money can buy.

Sanders' revolution is certainly not the kind of armed insurrection that has been the dominant historical fact of the last two centuries, giving birth to nearly all countries in the world today. His is a peaceful revolution to defeat the oligarchs in the electoral arena and restore something of the substance of American democracy.

But just how democratic did the United States used to be? The men who drafted the US Constitution were the oligarchs of their day. They created the federal government to protect their wealth from poor farmers, Revolutionary War veterans who were taking over town halls and burning the foreclosed mortgages that had transferred their property to rich men who spent the war relaxing on their estates.

The oligarchs were white, of course, and many had good reason to fear slave rebellions. A centralized national government with a standing army would be necessary to put down slave revolts as well as farmers' insurrections. It would also serve as the instrument of near genocide of the native population as America began its long trek westward. A century after the Constitutional Convention, the federal government would back the robber barons as they enslaved miners as well as railroad and factory workers in "dark Satanic mills" and company towns. When workers dared to rebel by forming unions, the barons—with the support of the National Guard—did not hesitate to gun down their own employees as they walked on picket lines. And so the story continues to our own day.

But ours is also a history of farmers' uprisings, slave rebellions, labor union organizing, veterans' marches, three waves of feminism, civil rights heroism, and gay and lesbian activism. The success of Our Revolution will depend, not just on election campaigns, but on a revival of those genuinely revolutionary movements of our past, and invention of the new ones that will decide our future.

Gary Zabel is a senior lecturer in philosophy at UMass [Boston](#), and longtime labor activist.

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GARY ZABEL

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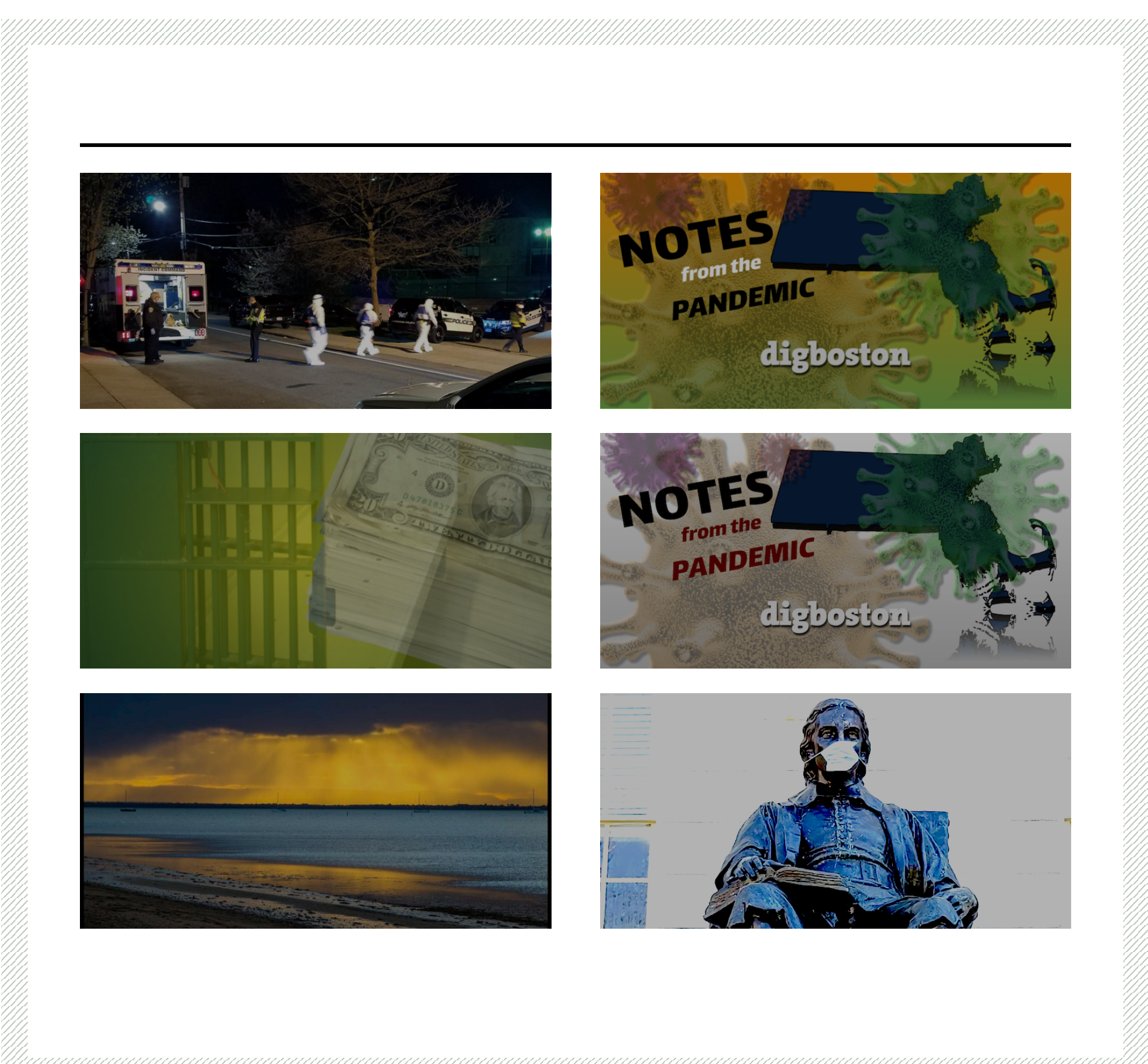
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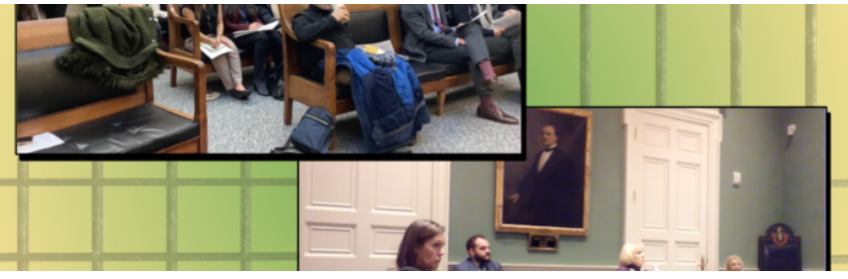
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