

INSIDE-OUTSIDE

BINJ Dispatch #3 from Our Man in Philadelphia

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Yesterday was a day of protest in Philadelphia—inside and outside the Democratic National Convention. While several hundred Sanders delegates were expressing their opposition to Hillary Clinton’s nomination by staging a dramatic walkout from the Wells Fargo Center where the Convention is being held, I was at City Hall where over one thousand people had congregated for the Black Resistance DNC March. The march, which was organized by the Pennsylvania chapter of Black Lives Matter and the Philly Coalition for Real Justice, began in the impoverished inner city neighborhood of North Philadelphia, and paused to rally at City Hall, while other groups joined them for the four-mile trek to the Wells Fargo Center. The purpose of the march was to protest police violence, including the practice of stop-and-frisk, but also to draw attention to the miserable economic conditions faced by Black people in a city that has one of the highest rates of extreme poverty in the nation. Gentrification, deteriorating schools, astronomical rates of unemployment, lack of access to healthcare, and disastrously low income were all on the agenda.

The crowd at City Hall was racially mixed, with a large contingent of white people participating as well as a number of Asians and Latinos. The Black members of the crowd included seasoned activists as well as ordinary residents of neighborhoods around Philly. The crowd was just as diverse politically as it was racially. In addition to Black Lives Matter posters, there were signs opposing the TPP, advocating action on climate change, supporting a \$15/hr minimum wage, demanding the release of Mumia Abu-Jamal and other political prisoners, opposing US military involvement in Syria, rejecting both Republican and Democratic parties, and supporting Bernie Sanders. Four pallbearers also carried a full-sized coffin marked with the giant letters, DNC, and painted with images of donkeys on each side lying on their backs with their feet in the air. I struck up a conversation with a Black man standing next to me who seemed around thirty-five years old. He said he had lived in Philly his entire life. He had participated in a number of the demonstrations that were being held during the Convention, and had not witnessed violence or arrests at any of them. He told me that he appreciated being able to take part in the political discussions that occurred at each event. He thought it was important for people to be able to express their opinions freely. We talked about what has probably been the most common topic of conversation at the rallies and marches this week: the oppressive heat. It’s not easy to march six miles—as those who started in North Philadelphia would do by the end of the day—with temperatures near 100 degrees.

I was struck by the number of white Southerners I met at the rally. I spoke with two women from Tennessee, another from North Carolina, and a man from Texas. All were all Bernie Sanders supporters, the Texan carrying a “Bernie or Bust” sign. One of the women from Tennessee held a poster that read “Stop Killing Black People,” and her sister Tennessean a “White Silence is Violence” sign. The former, who had just turned fifty, told me this was the first time she had gone out of state to participate in demonstrations. The second had been active in the Occupy movement of 2011.

Many of those at the rally reminded me of the people I had met through Occupy Boston. I spoke with a white man from Long Island in his mid-twenties who had been camping in a tent in FDR park, which was functioning as a kind of protest central. When I asked what he did for a living, he replied that he had a part-time gig helping digitize the documents of a historical society. But he was waiting to begin his real career as a hospital x-ray technician. He had taken the required course and passed the necessary exams, and was now waiting for a position to open. He said he would have to pack up his tent and leave Philly soon, because he had to get back to work. In general, the participants at the rally—Black, white, and brown—seemed to be working class, even if they didn't fit the description of the industrial workers who created the US labor movement. In this regard the whites at the rally differed from the predominantly middle-class student activists of the 60s.

The crowd at City Hall, which was largely, though by no means exclusively young, represented a fusion of the two most dynamic direct-action movements of the past five years, the Black Lives Matter and Occupy movements. While there were quite a few supporters of Bernie Sanders at the rally, some of whom had actively worked in his campaign, their hearts do not lie in electoral politics, at least not for the most part. Neither do the hearts of the Sanders delegates who walked out of the Convention at the time people were gathering at City Hall. The dissidents have been widely criticized by Clinton delegates, the Democratic Party establishment in general, the mainstream press, and even a few moderate Sanders delegates. In an email message sent before the Convention got underway, Sanders asked his people not to boo or walk out or engage in other forms of disruption. He wanted then to understand how much the campaign had already achieved, and to act in the disciplined manner the political revolution required. Short of winning the presidential nomination, Sanders' strategy has always been to get Clinton elected on a platform incorporating much of his program, elect as many progressive candidates to the House and the Senate as possible, and use his extensive email list of supporters and donors to keep pressure on Clinton to pursue the platform agenda. In his view, with a new Democratic Congress, or Senate at least, it ought to be possible to turn much of the platform into law. Obviously, a Clinton-Kaine victory is crucial to this strategy. But many of Sanders' delegates did not join his campaign to involve themselves in the subtleties of institutional politics. They take the idea of a "political revolution" very seriously. They demonstrated that last night when they walked out of the Wells Fargo building and occupied the nearby media tent, their mouths taped shut in reference to the silencing obstructions of the DNC. Not only did they engage in direct action, but they did so on their own, and in opposition to Sanders' wishes.

Are they politically immature? At times, maybe. But let me cite two critical moments in the life of the Sanders campaign when direct action might have had a significant impact on the outcome of the presidential race. In the New York and California primaries, hundreds of thousands of votes were not counted. They were never cast (because poll booths broke down or people were turned away for not having registered months in advance) or were cast but discarded as supposedly illegitimate, or placed in piles of ballots that needed confirmation but were then simply forgotten or discarded. In both elections, Sanders issued statements criticizing the irregularities, and then immediately went on to the next primary or caucus. But what if he had called on his supporters to march on the seats of government in New York and California, to camp out on their grounds, or even to commit acts of civil disobedience until full and fair

recounts were conducted or new elections held? Such direct action might have changed the outcome of the primaries, especially the one in California, where many of the discarded ballots were from cross-over independent voters who overwhelmingly favored Sanders.

The truth is that, in spite of his undeniable accomplishments, from the time of his Burlington, Vermont mayoralty to his run for the US presidency, and in spite of his arrest as a young man in a civil rights protest, Bernie Sanders is not comfortable with direct action. His conception of politics is rather conventional. It's limited to rallies, speeches, sending out emails, ringing doorbells, and so on. This is one of the principal ways in which he differs from his hero, Eugene Debs, who was jailed for his opposition to the First World War, and ran his Socialist Party presidential campaign from prison. Debs believed it was not only possible but necessary to combine electoral politics with militant direct action. Sanders will need to take Debs' position seriously if he really wants to continue his political revolution.