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LESSONS FROM THE PAST FOR SANDERS' POLITICAL REVOLUTION

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I began writing this article on the train from Boston on my way to observe the Democratic Convention in Philadelphia, and am now trying to finish the piece in my hotel room. First of all, I should say that I'm not a delegate or a professional journalist. I've taught philosophy for the past twenty-seven years at UMass Boston, which ought to make me uniquely unqualified to comment on real-world politics. But I grew up in an industrial working-class family and have been involved in the labor movement my entire adult life. I also worked as a municipal coordinator in the McGovern presidential campaign of 1972 and the Jackson campaign of 1988. What I have to say may be wrong, but at least it has some basis in experience.

There is no denying that the Sanders campaign has been path-breaking. It has seriously threatened the presidential aspirations of the candidate anointed by party leaders, Hillary Clinton, while bringing what initially seemed to be a marginal left-wing candidate within striking distance of the presidential nomination. It has elicited enthusiastic support at the polls from millions of young voters, brought hundreds of thousands of them out to rallies, and enlisted tens of thousands as campaign workers. It succeeded in funding a national campaign by raising over 200 million dollars from the contributions of two-and-a-half million small donors, taking no money from corporations or corporate PACs. It has explicitly embraced class politics, identifying the enemy as the "billionaire class" and championing what Sanders calls the "working class" or the "working middle class." It has made the word "socialist" acceptable in mainstream national politics, something even the legendary Eugene Debs was unable to do. It has developed a political program with enormous electoral appeal around demands for a single-payer health care system, free public higher education, a fifteen dollar an hour minimum wage, breakup of the big banks, opposition to neoliberal trade deals, and rejection of the "casino capitalism" responsible for climate change. While the program is not socialist, since it does not challenge private ownership of the economy, it is well to the left of political parties around the world that call themselves "socialist" but are in reality instruments of austerity and privatization of public resources. (Compare the Sanders program, for example, with the recent push by the French Socialist Party to make it easier for bosses to fire workers). Finally, the Sanders campaign has succeeded in getting much, though not all, of its program into the Democratic Party platform. Yet in spite of these achievements, Sanders failed to win the Democratic presidential nomination. There is no question, in my mind at least, that this failure was the result of a rigged system that included electoral fraud (especially in the most populous states, New York and California), Clinton's superdelegate endorsements, the obstructionist machinations of the Democratic National Committee as well as state and local party organizations, and persistent efforts by the corporate press to discredit the campaign. I'm not suggesting that these measures were centrally managed by Clinton's staff. There is no need for conspiracy when the political

system has been shaped over the years to prevent the rise of a serious challenge to those with wealth, power, and privilege. In order to rectify this problem, it's going to require much deeper and more extensive change than getting rid of Debbie Wasserman Shultz.

In the wake of defeat in the battle for the nomination, and in exchange for concessions on the party platform, Sanders has endorsed Hillary Clinton. But he also intends to carry his "political revolution" past the November election by creating organizations dedicated to programmatic development, to encouraging "young people and working people" to get involved in politics, and to recruiting and financing progressive candidates for state, local, and national office. Sanders has framed such efforts as part of a "fight for the heart and soul of the Democratic Party." The big question, of course, is whether this strategy has any chance of working. A good number of his supporters don't think so, as evidenced by the massive protests that took place today in Philadelphia.

There is a perennial debate on the Left, going back more than a century, between advocates of working within the Democratic Party and advocates of forming an independent party of the Left. Both strategies face enormous difficulties. Here are some of them in the form of lessons I've learned from my own experience of historically relevant events.

1968: The Chicago Convention

The first Democratic Convention I paid any attention to was the one in Chicago in 1968. I was fifteen years old at the time and an enthusiastic fan of the antiwar candidate, Eugene McCarthy. Since I lived in New Jersey, I watched live coverage of the Convention on television, which allowed me to witness what the federally commissioned Walker Report was later to call "a police riot." As the police clubbed, maced, tear-gassed, and arrested thousands of young protestors in the streets of Chicago, pandemonium broke out on the convention floor when antiwar delegates squared off against Richard Daley, the Democratic mayor of the city. At one point, Daley mouthed the words, 'fuck you" to Connecticut senator, Abraham Ribicoff, when the latter objected from the podium to the "gestapo tactics" of the police. That year, the Convention chose Lyndon Johnson's vice-president, Hubert Humphrey as the party nominee even though he had not entered a single primary. Nixon defeated Humphrey in the general election by slightly less than one percent of the popular vote. Many mainstream Democrats and their supporters in the press blamed Humphrey's defeat on antiwar voters who sat out the election or voted for third party candidates. Apparently, the fact that they or their friends had been violently attacked by the cops in a Democratic city with the encouragement of its mayor, a key Humphrey supporter, was not a good enough reason for refusing to vote for the party's nominee.

Lesson #I

When the occasion presents itself, the Democratic Party establishment will blame the Left for the loss of the presidency no matter how much they have abused those who refuse to vote for the establishment candidate. This position ironically regards progressive voters as both a captive constituency (where else can they go?) and one that owes loyalty to the party. Independent activity by the Left is tantamount to political treason. The events of 1968 are especially relevant to the current election because Clinton supporters now routinely refer to the Humphrey defeat in

arguing against the Bernie or Bust wing of the Sanders campaign.

1972: The McGovern Campaign

Four years after what Norman Mailer called the "Siege of Chicago," the antiwar senator from South Dakota, George McGovern became the Democratic Party's nominee for the presidency. I worked for the McGovern campaign in the primary race in New Jersey the summer before my sophomore year of college. The nomination of McGovern was possible because a commission he led in the wake of the 1968 debacle had revised party rules to strengthen the role of primaries and caucuses in the nominating process. He did especially well in the caucuses where activist involvement pays off, but he also won many of the primaries, including the one in New Jersey. McGovern gained the nomination against the opposition of the party bigwigs, who were now backing Humphrey's former vice-presidential running mate, Edmund Muskie. But the Democratic Party establishment—including the then-powerful union federation, the AFL-CIO—retaliated by withholding support from McGovern in the general election. The result was Richard Nixon's landslide re-election victory in 1972.

Lesson#2

Those who wield real power in the Democratic Party would rather see a Republican elected president than a left-wing Democrat. This indicates just how important it is for them to prevent the Left from winning the presidential nomination. Today, Sanders finally managed to force Debbie Wasserman Schultz to resign as chair of the Democratic National Committee. Wikileaks' recent release of her email exchanges with other officials of the DNC deriding Sanders and discussing strategies for blocking his campaign were too much for her to withstand. But the truth is that Wasserman Schultz and her cohorts were only doing their jobs. Their failure lay in doing them without finesse and, of course, in getting caught.

1982: The Creation of the Superdelegates

In 1982, on the recommendation of a commission established for the purpose, the Democratic National Committee abrogated the party reforms of 1972 that allowed McGovern to win the presidential nomination. They did so principally by instituting the system of superdelegates. The "moderate" party insiders, appointed as delegates to future conventions without election and without without being bound to candidates chosen by the voters, were supposed to act as "moderators" in the event of a political crisis. It was clear to all involved that a "crisis" meant a serious advance by the Left, such as had happened ten years earlier.

Lesson #3

The superdelegates were created to prevent a leftist or other insurgent candidate from winning the presidential nomination. The Sanders campaign has vacillated on this point. On the one hand, its push to abolish superdelegates recognizes the role they truly play. One the other hand, the campaign's attempt to win superdelegate support away from Clinton on the grounds of Sanders' greater electability perpetuated the illusion that the superdelegates really are 'moderators" interested only in making sure the party is in a position to win the presidency. In so doing it

forgot that the superdelegate system was created precisely to keep the presidential nomination out of the hands of someone like Sanders.

1988: The Jackson Campaign

In 1988, I was teaching at the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University. When Jesse Jackson announced that he would run for the presidency, I joined the Brooklyn chapter of his organization, the National Rainbow Coalition and worked for the Jackson campaign in the primary races in New York City and New Jersey. I also attended the Democratic Convention in Atlanta where I was attached to the Jackson caucus of the New York delegation. The campaign created a great deal of excitement on the Left for a number of reasons. Jackson had solid progressive credentials and ran his campaign on that basis, arguing for greater economic, racial, and cultural equality as well as an anti-imperialist foreign policy. He had walked on picket lines with striking workers across the country, and lent his support to movements for empowerment of other people of color as well as those of women, LGBT people, and the disabled. In addition, the Rainbow Coalition that launched his campaign had the potential to become an ongoing political vehicle of the Left. It was black-initiated, had a multiracial leadership of representatives from various social movements, and a strong connection with the progressive wing of the labor movement. Some Rainbow activists even held out the hope that Jackson would found a new political party and run for the presidency on its banner, But none of this was to be. While he was briefly the front-runner in the race, his opponent, Michael Dukakis, governor of Massachusetts, ended by winning the nomination. Jackson negotiated a deal with the winner before the convention opened in Atlanta. The terms were that Jackson would support the party's ticket in exchange for relatively minor concessions, mainly a few seats on the DNC and some money to conduct a voter registration drive. At the convention, the black Jackson delegates were especially livid. Dukakis had not only passed over their candidate for his running mate, but had chosen Texas senator, Loyd Benson instead. Benson had recently played host to Jonas Savimbi, the Angolan guerrilla leader backed by the apartheid regime in South Africa. But whips from the Jackson campaign were able to prevent an open rebellion. The Democratic Convention came off without a hitch, Dukakis lost the presidential race to George H.W. Bush, and Jackson euthanized the Rainbow Coalition by converting it into advocacy group under his personal control.

Lesson #4

The only real leverage a left-wing candidate with popular support has in the Democratic Party is the credible threat of exit. That means the willingness to break with the Party and run for the presidency as an independent or on a third-party ticket. When Jackson negotiated with party leaders without that credible threat, he succeeded only in winning largely meaningless concessions. By making it clear that he would not play the role of spoiler in 2016, and by endorsing Clinton before the Convention got underway, Sanders appeared to repeat Jackson's mistake. On the other hand, the continuing threat to abandon Clinton that many of Sanders' supporters pose has strengthened his ability to negotiate concessions from the party establishment. Jackson supporters never posed the equivalent threat.

Lesson #5

A real political revolution requires a multiracial movement with a multiracial leadership. The Rainbow Coalition made a promising start in that direction. The Sanders campaign has been less promising in that respect, although it has had some success winning the support of young people of color. The priority it has given to ending mass incarceration is also a step in the right direction. But the political revolution clearly has further ground to make up.

2000: The Nader Campaign

I didn't work in the Nader campaign when he ran on the Green Party ticket in 2000, although I was a member of a group of activists that organized demonstrations opposing his exclusion from the presidential debates. Nader, who ran on an anti-corporate platform, had a large and enthusiastic following, especially among young people. But he never made a serious attempt to raise money for the campaign, or to develop the Green Party as an enduring vehicle for progressive politics beyond the presidential race. He was also accused by some Democrats of acting the role of a "spoiler" by denying their candidate, Al Gore the popular votes he needed to win Florida's electoral votes, which would have given Gore the presidency. Instead, George W. Bush became president. Informed opinion on whether Nader in fact cost Gore Florida is evenly split. There is evidence that Nader took more votes from Bush than he did from Gore, but that is a matter of dispute. But whether or not the spoiler charge is correct, it ignores a broader point concerning lack of democracy in presidential elections. Gore lost the election even though he won a majority of the national popular vote. This was because, under winner-take-all rules, he lost all of Florida's electoral votes. The electoral college was not created to promote democracy. It was perfectly compatible with the widespread property restrictions on the right to vote that existed when the Constitution was ratified. In addition, the selective recount of the Florida vote, which was suspended by the US Supreme Court (the "hanging chad" controversy), demonstrated just how arbitrary the standards are for determining the legitimacy of a voter's ballot in a US election. Undeniably, third party candidates face unfair obstacles in the form of laws that restrict ballot access and rules that limit participation in nationally televised debates. But it is equally, if not more important that voters face obstacles in having their ballots properly counted now matter how many parties contest an election.

Lesson #6

The claim that Ralph Nader was responsible Gore's defeat in the 2000 election has not been established. Nevertheless, it seems foolish to argue that "spoiling" is never the result of third party campaigns, or should not be a consideration in assessing them. Sanders has refused to act the role of the spoiler in the 2016 election by running as an independent or on the Green Party ticket. In his opinion, the beneficiary of such a campaign would be the racist, nativist demagogue, Donald Trump. There is no way of knowing whether his refusal is justified. But it certainly isn't crazy, although as Lesson #4 suggests, his hand in negotiating with the Democratic Party establishment has been strengthened by his "crazy" supporters.

Where do these six lessons leave us? Not in despair, I hope, but with a recognition of just how difficult it is for the Left to participate effectively in US electoral politics, and especially in presidential campaigns. There is clearly a split among Sanders' political revolutionaries between those see wisdom in working within the Democratic Party, and those who want to create an

independent party. Both strategies face stubborn obstacles, but neither is necessarily doomed to defeat. The fact that the debate is even occurring is a testament to what the Sanders campaign has already accomplished.