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By Patrick Martin
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Democratic debate shows cross-party support for imperialist intervention in Syria

The Democratic presidential debate Tuesday had the largest field of candidates in history, but displayed the narrowest range of political differences, particularly on the central questions of foreign policy and the impeachment inquiry against President Donald Trump.

Twelve candidates were on the debate stage, two more than any previous such encounter, but there were virtually no divisions on foreign policy. All twelve declared their opposition to President Trump's order for US troops to withdraw from Syria, breaking a five-year military alliance with the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia.

And they all declared their support for the impeachment of Trump on the narrow, CIA-dictated "national security" terms laid down by Speaker Nancy Pelosi, barring any consideration of Trump's real crimes against immigrants, against democratic rights more generally, and against the working class.

Significantly, after an initial question that forced those on the stage to state their attitude to the House impeachment inquiry, the candidates stayed away from any discussion of impeachment, Trump's defiance of Congress, or his efforts to mobilize ultra-right forces in an extra-legal campaign against being removed from office. In the entire three-hour-long event, not one candidate made mention of fascists, neo-Nazis, white supremacists or even bigots, and there was only one reference to Trump's appeals to racism.



Democratic presidential candidate former Vice President Joe Biden, left, Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., center and South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg speak during a Democratic presidential primary debate hosted by CNN/New York Times at Otterbein University, Tuesday, Oct. 15, 2019, in Westerville, Ohio. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

On the question of the US role in Syria, every one of the 12 candidates denounced Trump for his “betrayal” of the Kurds, although they expressed tactical differences over how best to recoup the US position in Syria that Trump had supposedly abandoned.

Former Vice President Joe Biden openly defended a continued and even strengthened US troop presence in Syria. South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg, a military intelligence veteran of the Afghanistan war, hailed the role of US Special Forces, i.e., highly trained death squads, in Syria. But the defense of American imperialism was just as pronounced by the two “left” candidates, Senator Bernie Sanders and Senator Elizabeth Warren, as by the more conventionally “moderate,” i.e., openly right-wing, politicians.

Sanders said, “The crisis here, as I think Joe said and Pete said, is when you begin to betray people, in terms of the Kurds, 11,000 of them died fighting ISIS, 20,000 were wounded. And the United States said, ‘We’re with you, we’re standing with you.’ And then suddenly, one day after a phone call with Erdogan, announced by tweet, Trump reverses that policy. Now, you tell me what country in the world will trust the word of the president of the United States? In other words, what he has done is wreck our ability to do

foreign policy, to do military policy, because nobody in the world will believe this pathological liar.”

House Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard was the only candidate to criticize the war, saying it was a “war for regime change” and that the US was allied with ISIS. Gabbard asked Warren to pledge to end the war, which the latter refused to do.

Warren tried to have it both ways, declaring, “I think that we ought to get out of the Middle East. I don’t think we should have troops in the Middle East. But we have to do it the right way, the smart way... In Syria, [Trump] has created a bigger-than-ever humanitarian crisis. He has helped ISIS get another foothold, a new lease on life.” She then boasted, “I sit on the Armed Services Committee. I talk with our military leaders about this.”

Her staff later told the *New York Times*, in a significant “clarification,” that Warren did not actually advocate removing all US troops from the Middle East, only removing them from combat zones like northern Syria. She would do nothing to reduce the massive US military presence at bases throughout the Persian Gulf region, including in Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia itself.

Pro-Democratic media commentators gloated that Trump had provided the Democrats a further opportunity to endear themselves to the military-intelligence apparatus. Typical was the column by Dana Milbank in the *Washington Post*, headlined, “Democrats flip the script on a cut-and-run president.”

He wrote, with evident approval, “In Ohio on Tuesday, Democrats sounded very much like Republicans of yore in denouncing Trump for jeopardizing national security.” And he concluded, appropriating the notorious phrase used by Nixon to denounce opponents of the Vietnam War, that with Trump’s pull-out from Syria, “The party of Ronald Reagan has become the party of cut and run.”

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On domestic issues, which took up the lion’s share of the debate, there was little new from the previous three interminable exercises in demagoguery and mudslinging. All the Democrats promise to create a paradise on earth, with universal access to health care, universal pre-K education, free or near-free college education, and good-paying jobs for everyone. How this is compatible with a global capitalist system in the midst of financial meltdown, trade war, dog-eat-dog competition, and a frontal assault on the jobs and living standards of workers in every country, no candidate bothered to say.

The differences between the two “left” candidates, Sanders and Warren, and their “moderate” rivals revolve around the size of the dose of populist demagoguery that is required to disguise the reality of class warfare. Sanders and Warren advocate a (purely rhetorical) assault on the billionaires, involving a very modest degree of income and wealth taxation, which the billionaires who control every lever of the political system as well as the media will simply refuse to pay.

One of the candidates, businessman Andrew Yang, noted that European countries that had attempted to impose a wealth tax had abandoned it because there were “massive implementation problems and did not generate the revenue that they’d projected.” In other words, the capitalists refused to pay, and the social democrats who had proposed the measures to disguise their own support for austerity policies simply dropped the effort. Sanders and Warren, if either were elected president, would do likewise.

The argument made by Biden, Buttigieg, Yang, Senator Amy Klobuchar, former Representative Beto O’Rourke and others, in various forms, was that such “left” proposals were divisive—in O’Rourke’s formulation, “punitive”—and that it was better to advocate small-bore reforms in the areas of health care, education, gun violence and so on.

The reality, however, is that no reforms, large or small, would be forthcoming if one of the Democrats on the stage in Ohio Tuesday night were to replace Trump in the White House. The crisis of world and American capitalism leaves no room for any genuine improvements in jobs, living standards or public services without the mobilization of the working class as an independent political force and a frontal assault on capitalist property—confiscating the assets of the billionaires and the giant corporations and placing them in the hands of the working people as the basis for a rationally planned economy.

The Democratic Party is a capitalist party. Its new frontrunner, the left-talking Elizabeth Warren, has declared herself a “capitalist to my bones.” In response to O’Rourke’s charge that her policies were “punitive,” she adopted a pose of injured innocence. She had nothing against billionaires, Warren said, but only wanted them to pay a little bit more, two cents on the dollar from their wealth, which would finance all the reforms she advocated. That arithmetic tells more about the dimensions of Warren’s “reforms” than anything else: she truly expects the working class to live off pocket change obtained from the super-rich.

She made sure to combine her phony populism with a dose of economic nationalism to pit US workers against workers internationally, denouncing “giant multinational corporations that have no loyalty to America.”

Media coverage of the debate was largely focused on the horse race aspect of the campaign—which candidate was leading in the polls in which state, or nationally, how much money and how many endorsements they have collected, and so on. In that context, the consensus was that Warren has emerged as the front-runner, with a slight lead over Biden and a larger one over Sanders.

This assessment was shared by virtually all the candidates on the stage, as made evident by whom they attacked. Warren came under fire from nearly all the candidates seeking to become the representative of the “moderate” right wing of the Democratic Party in the event that Biden’s campaign continues to sink. These included Pete Buttigieg, Amy Klobuchar, Beto O’Rourke and Kamala Harris.

Equally telling was the decision of all the other candidates to avoid the subject of Joe Biden’s son Hunter cashing in on his father’s role in the Obama administration by taking a lucrative position on the board of a Ukrainian gas company, collecting as much as \$50,000 a month. Evidently it was felt that the Biden campaign has been so badly damaged that further combat is superfluous. This assessment is bolstered by the drying up of his campaign fund.

According to the latest tabulation, Biden had only \$9 million in the bank, compared to \$33.7 million for Sanders, \$25.7 million for Warren and \$23.4 million for Buttigieg. Even Harris, at \$10.5 million, has greater resources. The other Democrats all had far less campaign cash, and most were spending money faster than they were raising it, a virtually infallible indicator of impending failure in capitalist politics.

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