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By Patrick Martin
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Growing attacks on socialism in Democratic presidential race

With polls showing Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders the likely first-place finisher in tomorrow's Democratic presidential primary in New Hampshire, Sanders' opponents have focused their attacks on his public identification as a "democratic socialist."

Friday night's seven-candidate debate in New Hampshire began with former Vice President Joe Biden claiming that Sanders at the top of the ticket would doom Democratic candidates for other offices on the ballot November 3. "Bernie's labeled himself ... a democratic socialist," Biden said. "I think that's the label that the president's going to lay on everyone running with Bernie if he's a nominee."

Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar joined in the attack, suggesting that Sanders would "out-divide the divider in chief," i.e., Trump. "I think we need someone to head up this ticket that actually brings people with her, instead of shutting them out," she said, touting her own appeal to "moderate Republicans" and voters "in the middle."



From left, Democratic presidential candidates former South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg, Senator Bernie Sanders, former Vice President Joe Biden, and Senator Elizabeth Warren (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

At a rally at Dartmouth College Saturday, Klobuchar's staff handed out copies of newspaper editorials endorsing her, including from the ultra-right *Manchester Union-Leader*, the largest circulation paper in the state. "I don't agree with everything that's said on that debate stage," Klobuchar told the audience. "When they asked should a socialist lead the ticket, I raised my hand and said 'no.'"

The issue dominated the appearances by Democratic presidential hopefuls on network and cable television interview programs on Sunday. Sanders himself was interviewed on four programs and was asked about his identification as a democratic socialist on three of them.

It is remarkable that in a country where socialism has been the subject of official vilification and witch-hunting for a century, where anticommunism has been elevated to the status of a state religion, and where genuine socialists are subject to a media blackout, that the "s word" has suddenly become a major subject of media discussion.

It attests to the worsening of social inequality and the growing consciousness among millions of working people and youth that the concentration of wealth under the control of a tiny handful of multimillionaires and billionaires has become both an impassable obstacle to social progress and a deadly threat to democratic rights. Poll after poll has shown deepening popular hostility to capitalism and rising support for socialism, particularly among the younger generation.

This shift to the left in popular consciousness finds only the most distorted expression within the corporate-controlled two-party system. In 2016, it took the form of an explosion of support for the Sanders campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, surprising the senator himself and the entire US political establishment. Sanders attracted mass support, enthusiastic rallies, a huge outpouring of small-dollar donations over the internet, and ultimately 13 million votes.

The Vermont senator originally sought to occupy the gadfly role played by Jesse Jackson, Dennis Kucinich and similar candidates in the Democratic presidential primaries, giving a "left" cover to this staunchly pro-capitalist party while it chose yet another right-wing nominee for the position of "commander-in-chief" of US imperialism.

After being unexpectedly catapulted into the position of a major figure in capitalist politics, Sanders bowed to the dictates of the US ruling elite, accepted his defeat in 2016,

and endorsed and campaigned for the Democratic nominee, the choice of Wall Street and the CIA, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Sanders is not a socialist. He is not seeking public ownership of industry or nationalization of the giant corporations. He wants to tax the wealth of the billionaires at a slightly higher rate, not confiscate it to use it to meet social needs. He cites as his models the wholly capitalist countries of Denmark and Sweden, and even Germany, where the neo-Nazis are the main opposition party in parliament and dictate policy to the coalition government headed by Angela Merkel.

In the 2020 campaign, after being largely ignored by the corporate media for months, Sanders has surged in the polls, held the largest rallies, and raised far more money than any of his non-billionaire rivals, largely in small donations from working people. His top contributors are teachers as well as the low-paid employees of Amazon, Starbucks, Wal-Mart, Target and the US Postal Service.

After his strong showing in Iowa, he leads in polls ahead of the vote Tuesday in New Hampshire, and a virtual panic has broken out in the Democratic Party establishment and its media allies that Sanders is now the frontrunner for the party's presidential nomination. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, for example, told the *Wall Street Journal* that declaring Sanders the frontrunner was premature and that the socialist label was "a big pill for a lot of voters to swallow."

On Sunday, former Vice President Biden appeared on ABC's "This Week," where he reiterated his attack on Sanders, telling interviewer George Stephanopoulos, "Now, you've been around, George, as much as anybody, you're going to win with that label, you're going to help somebody in Florida win with the label democratic socialist? Because it's going to go all the way down the line. That's what's going to happen. You're going to win in North Carolina? You're going to win in Pennsylvania? You're going to win in those states in the Midwest?"

Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, the other ostensibly "progressive" candidate along with Sanders, said on Sunday: "I am a capitalist. I believe in markets, but markets need rules."

Sanders was asked directly on NBC's "Meet the Press," on CNN's "State of the Union," and on Fox News Sunday to reply to charges that his socialist label—which he claims less and less frequently—will doom him and the Democratic Party to defeat in November. In

each instance he evaded a direct answer, instead criticizing Trump or attacking economic inequality and the failures of the profit-driven US health care system.

When NBC interviewer Chuck Todd cited likely charges by Trump that Sanders had a record of “cozying up” to Latin American “left” leaders like Evo Morales in Bolivia and Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela, Sanders responded with a similar red-baiting attack on Trump, citing the president’s efforts to woo Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. “If you want to talk about cozying up to communists around the world, it ain’t me, it’s Donald Trump,” Sanders said.

On Fox, Sanders adopted the most “left” pose in any of the four interviews, telling interviewer Chris Wallace, “We are a campaign of the working class, for the working class, and by the working class.” He declared that health care should be a basic right, although he went on to assert, as he did in other interviews, that his health care program would slash spending by trillions of dollars. And he told Wallace, in response to a question about Trump’s denunciations, that Trump “knows I’m not a communist.”

Sanders never used the word “socialist” to describe his own political beliefs, either in the nearly 40 minutes of interviews on four television networks or during the two-hour debate on Friday night.

He is evidently seeking to appease his right-wing critics in the Democratic Party, as demonstrated by his conciliatory response on CNN’s “State of the Union” Sunday when interviewer Jake Tapper asked him about efforts by Democratic Party officials to mask his victory in the Iowa caucuses, where he outpolled former South Bend, Indiana mayor Pete Buttigieg by 6,000 votes.

Tapper cited criticisms by Sanders’ supporters who said the call for a recanvass of the Iowa results issued by Democratic National Committee (DNC) Chairman Tom Perez on Thursday appeared timed to overshadow news that Sanders had a comfortable lead in the votes cast by caucus-goers and was nearly tied with Buttigieg in “state delegate equivalents.” The exchange continued:

Tapper: Do you think the Democratic Party is trying to openly hurt your campaign?

Sanders: Look, all I can say about Iowa is, it was an embarrassment...

Tapper: Do you think that the Democratic Party, whether the Iowa Democratic Party or the DNC, was trying to hurt you, though?

Sanders: I have no idea. And that's—we're going to monitor the situation closely, but that's not my impression at this point.

While Sanders said this on Sunday, there is little doubt that if he wins the New Hampshire primary, the hysteria in the Democratic Party establishment over his supposed “socialism” will reach new heights.

If the current group of right-wing alternatives—Biden, Buttigieg and Klobuchar—looks unviable, there is likely to be a shift to support billionaire Michael Bloomberg, who has entered the contest but will not appear on any ballot until the March 3 “Super Tuesday” primaries, when 40 percent of the delegates to the Democratic convention will be selected, including from such large states as California, Texas, Massachusetts and Virginia.

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