American Poverty

A Presidential Candidate on His Country's Ills and How to Address Them

By Bernie Sanders

In his inaugural remarks in January 1937, in the midst of the Great Depression, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt looked out at the nation and this is what he saw.

He saw tens of millions of its citizens denied the basic necessities of life.

He saw millions of families trying to live on incomes so meager that the pall of family disaster hung over them day by day. He saw millions denied education, recreation, and the opportunity to better their lot and the lot of their children. He saw millions lacking the means to buy the products they needed and by their poverty and lack of disposable income denying employment to many other millions. He saw one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.

And he acted. Against the ferocious opposition of the ruling class of his day, people he called economic royalists, Roosevelt implemented a series of programs that put millions of people back to work, took them out of poverty, and restored their faith in government. He redefined the relationship of the federal government to the people of our country. He combatted cynicism, fear, and despair. He reinvigorated democracy. He transformed the country.

And that is what we have to do today.

And, by the way, almost everything he proposed was called "socialist." Social Security, which transformed life for the elderly in this country was "socialist." The concept of the "minimum wage" was seen as a radical intrusion into the marketplace and was described as "socialist." Unemployment insurance, abolishing child labor, the forty-hour work week, collective bargaining, strong banking regulations, deposit insurance, and job programs that put millions of people to work were all described, in one way or another, as "socialist." Yet, these programs have become the fabric of our nation and the foundation of the middle class.

▷ Homeless man, New York, May 1, 2009. *Ashley Gilberston/VII/Corbis*


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Thirty years later, in the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson passed Medicare and Medicaid to provide healthcare to millions of senior citizens and families with children, persons with disabilities, and some of the most vulnerable people in this country. Once again these vitally important programs were derided by the rightwing as socialist programs that were a threat to our American way of life.

That was then. Now is now.

Today, despite the Wall Street crash of 2008, which drove this country into the worst economic downturn since the Depression, the American people are clearly better off economically than we were in 1937.

But, here is a very hard truth that we must acknowledge and address. Despite a huge increase in technology and productivity, despite major growth in the U.S. and global economy, tens of millions of American families continue to lack the basic necessities of life, while millions more struggle every day to provide a minimal standard of living for their families. The reality is that for the last forty years the great middle class of this country has been in decline and faith in our political system is now extremely low.

The rich get much richer. Almost everyone else gets poorer. Super Political Action Committees (PACs) funded by billionaires buy elections. Ordinary people don't vote. We have an economic and political crisis in this country and the same old, same old establishment politics and economics will not effectively address it.

"Greed Is Destroying Our Nation"

If we are serious about transforming our country, if we are serious about rebuilding the middle class, if we are serious about reinvigorating our democracy, we need to develop a political movement which, once again, is prepared to take on and defeat a ruling class whose greed is destroying our nation. The billionaire class cannot have it all. Our government belongs to all of us, and not just the one percent.

We need to create a culture which, as Pope Francis reminds us, cannot just be based on the worship of money. We must not accept a nation in which billionaires compete as to the size of their super-yachts, while children in America go hungry and veterans sleep out on the streets.

Today, in America, we are the wealthiest nation in the history of the world, but few Americans know that because so much of the new income and wealth goes to the people on top. In fact, over the last thirty years, there has been a massive transfer of wealth—trillions of wealth—going from the middle class to the top one-tenth of 1 percent—a handful of people who have seen a doubling of the percentage of the wealth they own over that period.

Unbelievably, and grotesquely, the top one-tenth of 1 percent owns nearly as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent.

Today, in America, millions of our people are working two or three jobs just to survive. In fact, Americans work longer hours than do the people of any industrialized country. Despite the incredibly hard work and long hours of the American middle class, 58 percent of all new income generated today is going to the top 1 percent.

Today, in America, as the middle class continues to disappear, median family income is $4,100 less than it was in 1999. The median male worker made over $700 less than he did forty-two years ago, after adjusting for inflation. Last year, the median female worker earned more than $1,000 less than she did in 2007.

Today, in America, the wealthiest country in the history of the world, more than half of older workers have no retirement savings—zero—while millions of elderly and people with disabilities are trying to survive on $12,000 or $13,000 a year. From Vermont to California, older workers are scared to death. "How will I retire with dignity?" they ask.

Today, in America, nearly forty-seven million Americans are living in poverty and over 20 percent of our children, including 36 percent of African American children, are living in poverty—the highest rate of childhood poverty of nearly any major country on earth. Today, in America, twenty-nine million Americans have no health insurance and even more are underinsured with outrageously high co-payments and deductibles. Further, with the United States paying the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs, one out of five patients cannot afford to fill the prescriptions their doctors write.

Today, in America, youth unemployment and underemployment is over 35 percent. Meanwhile, we have more people in jail than any other country and countless lives are being destroyed as we spend $80 billion a year locking up fellow Americans.

The bottom line is that today in America we not only have massive wealth and income inequality, but a power structure which protects that inequality. A handful of super-wealthy campaign contributors have enormous influence over the political process, while their lobbyists determine much of what goes on in Congress.

The Second Bill of Rights

In 1944, in his State of the Union speech, President Roosevelt outlined what he called a second Bill of Rights. This is one of the most important speeches ever made by a president but, unfortunately, it has not gotten the attention that it deserves.

In that remarkable speech, this is what Roosevelt stated: "We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. Necessitous men are not free men."

In other words, real freedom must include economic security. That was Roosevelt's vision seventy years ago. It is my vision today. It is a vision that we have not yet achieved. It is time that we did.

In that speech, Roosevelt described the economic rights that he believed every American was entitled to: the right to a decent job at decent pay, the right to adequate food, clothing, and time off from work, the right for every business, large and small, to function in an atmosphere free from unfair competition and domination by monopolies. The right of all Americans to have a decent home and decent healthcare.

What Roosevelt was stating in 1944, what Martin Luther King, Jr. stated in similar terms twenty years later, and what I believe today, is that true freedom does not occur without economic security.

People are not truly free when they are unable to feed their family. People are not truly free when they are unable to retire with dignity. People are not truly free when they are unemployed or underpaid or when they are exhausted by working long hours. People are not truly free when they have no healthcare.

So let me define for you, simply and straightforwardly, what democratic socialism means to me. It builds on what Franklin Delano Roosevelt said when he fought for guaranteed economic rights for all Americans. And it builds on what Martin Luther King, Jr. said in 1968 when he stated, "This country has socialism for the rich, and rugged individualism for the poor." It builds on the success of many other countries around the world that have done a far better job than we have in protecting the needs of their working families, the elderly, the children, the sick, and the poor.

Democratic socialism means that we must create an economy that works for all, not just the very wealthy.

Democratic socialism means that we must reform a political system in America today which is not only grossly unfair but, in many respects, corrupt.

It is a system, for example, which during the 1990s allowed Wall Street to spend $5 billion in lobbying and campaign contributions to get deregulated. Then, ten years later, after the greed, recklessness, and illegal behavior of Wall Street led to their collapse, it is a system which provided trillions in government aid to bail them out. Wall Street used their wealth and power to get Congress to do their bidding for deregulation and then, when their greed caused their collapse, they used their wealth and power to get Congress to bail them out. Quite a system!

And, then, to add insult to injury, we were told that not only were the banks too big to fail, the bankers were too big to jail. Kids who get caught possessing marijuana get police records. Wall Street CEOs who help destroy the economy get raises in their salaries. This is what Martin Luther King, Jr. meant by socialism for the rich and rugged individualism for everyone else.

Healthcare for All

It is time we had democratic socialism for working families, not just Wall Street, billionaires, and large corporations. It means that we should not be providing welfare for corporations, huge tax breaks for the very rich, or trade policies which boost corporate profits as workers lose their jobs. It means that we create a government that works for all of us, not just powerful special interests. It means that economic rights must be an essential part of what America stands for.

It means that healthcare should be a right of all people, not a privilege. This is not a radical idea. It exists in every other major country on earth. Not just Denmark, Sweden, or Finland. It exists in Canada, France, Germany, and Taiwan. That is why I believe in a Medicare-for-all single payer healthcare system. Yes: the Affordable Care Act, which I helped write and voted for, is a step forward for this country. But we must build on it and go further.

Medicare for all would not only guarantee healthcare for all people, not only save middle-class families and our entire nation significant sums of money, it would radically improve the lives of all Americans and bring about significant improvements in our economy.

People who get sick will not have to worry about paying a deductible or making a co-payment. They could go to the doctor when they should, and not end up in the emergency room. Business owners will not have to spend enormous amounts of time worrying about how they are going to provide healthcare for their employees. Workers will not have to be trapped in jobs they do not like simply because their employers are offering them decent health insurance plans. Instead, they will be able to pursue the jobs and work they love, which could be an enormous boon for the economy. And by the way, moving to a Medicare for all program will end the disgrace of Americans paying, by far, the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs.

Democratic socialism means that, in the year 2015, a college degree is equivalent to what a high school degree was fifty years ago—and that public education must allow every person in this country, who has the ability, the qualifications, and the desire, the right to go to a public college or university tuition free. This is also not a radical idea. It exists today in many countries around the world. In fact, it used to exist in the United States.

Democratic socialism means that our government does everything it can to create a full employment economy. It makes far more sense to put millions of people back to work rebuilding our crumbling infrastructure, than to have a real unemployment rate of almost 10 percent. It is far smarter to invest in jobs and educational opportunities for unemployed young people than to lock them up and spend $80 billion a year through mass incarceration.

Democratic socialism means that if someone works forty hours a week, that person should not be living in poverty: that we must raise the minimum wage to a living wage—$15 an hour over the next few years. It means that we join the rest of the world and pass the very strong Paid Family and Medical Leave legislation now in Congress. How can it possibly be that the United States, today, is virtually the only nation on earth, large or small, which does not guarantee that a working-class woman can stay home for a reasonable period of time with her newborn baby? How absurd is that?

Democratic socialism means that we have government policy which does not allow the greed and profiteering of the fossil fuel industry to destroy our environment and our planet, and that we have a moral responsibility to combat climate change and leave this planet healthy and inhabitable for our kids and grandchildren.

Democratic socialism means that in a democratic, civilized society the wealthiest people and the largest corporations must pay their fair share of taxes. Yes, innovation, entrepreneurship, and business success should be rewarded, but greed for the sake of greed is not something that public policy should support. It is not acceptable that in a rigged economy in the last two years the wealthiest fifteen Americans saw their wealth increase by $170 billion, more wealth than is owned by the bottom 130 million Americans. Let us not forget what Pope Francis has so elegantly stated: "We have created new idols. The worship of the golden calf of old has found a new and heartless image in the cult of money and the dictatorship of an economy which is faceless and lacking any truly humane goal."

It is not acceptable that major corporations stash their profits in the Cayman Islands and other offshore tax havens to avoid paying $100 billion in taxes each and every year. It is not acceptable that hedge fund managers pay a lower effective tax rate than nurses or truck drivers. It is not acceptable that billionaire families are able to leave virtually all of their wealth to their families without paying a reasonable estate tax. It is not acceptable that Wall Street speculators are able to gamble trillions of dollars in the derivatives market without paying a nickel in taxes on those transactions.

One Person, One Vote

Democratic socialism, to me, does not just mean that we must create a nation of economic and social justice. It also means that we must create a vibrant democracy based on the principle of one person, one vote. It is extremely sad that the United States, one of the oldest democracies on earth, has one of the lowest voter turnouts of any major country, and that millions of young and working-class people have given up on our political system entirely. Every American should be embarrassed that in our last national election 63 percent of the American people, and 80 percent of young people, did not vote. Clearly, despite the efforts of many Republican governors to suppress

the vote, we must make it easier for people to participate in the political process, not harder. It is not too much to demand that everyone 18 years of age is registered to vote.

Further, it is unacceptable that we have a corrupt campaign finance system which allows millionaires, billionaires, and large corporations to contribute as much as they want to Super PACs to elect candidates who will represent their special interests. We must overturn Citizens United and move to public funding of elections.

So the next time you hear me attacked as a socialist, remember this:

I don't believe government should own the means of production, but I do believe that the middle class and the working families who produce the wealth of America deserve a fair deal.

I believe in private companies that thrive and invest and grow in America instead of shipping jobs and profits overseas.

I believe that most Americans can pay lower taxes—if hedge fund managers who make billions manipulating the marketplace finally pay the taxes they should.

I don't believe in special treatment for the top 1 percent, but I do believe in equal treatment for African Americans who are right to proclaim the moral principle that Black Lives Matter.

I despise appeals to nativism and prejudice, and I do believe in immigration reform that gives Hispanics and others a pathway to citizenship and a better life.

I don't believe in some foreign "ism," but I believe deeply in American idealism.

I'm not running for president because it's my turn, but because it's the turn of all of us to live in a nation of hope and opportunity not for some, not for the few, but for all.

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