

ON PLURALISM, BERNIE SANDERS, AND THE FIGHT FOR 15

In one of the hot-take pieces on the Democratic primary many people are talking about today, Jonathan Chait – fresh off being certified as a wonk by Paul Krugman – distinguishes between what he calls Hillary Clinton’s “pluralist” approach and Bernie Sanders’ “statist” vision.

Sanders did not so much dispute the efficacy of Dodd-Frank as to broaden the question. His fixation with Wall Street is not systemic risk – i.e., the chance that another crash will trigger an economic meltdown. He frames Wall Street as a problem of political economy, not economy. Wall Street is so big and rich that it is inherently dangerous, and will by its nature corrupt the political system.

Clinton does not believe that. Her political ideal is what some political scientists have called “pluralism.” A pluralist politics venerates the careful balancing of competing interests. It is okay to bring business to the bargaining table as long as there is also a place for labor, environmentalists, consumer advocates, and other countervailing interests. Clinton’s Democratic Party, and Obama’s, is one in which pluralist agreements struck important progress not only in financial reform but also health care, public investment, green energy, and other priorities.

Sanders does not completely reject the products of these pluralist compromises. (He grudgingly accepts them as worthwhile, piecemeal steps.) What he rejects is the political model that treats pluralism as the normal model of

political action. Sanders believes the interest of the public is not divided, it is united, and only the corrupt influence of big business has thwarted it. He consequently vows to smash its power through a combination of a mass upsurge in political activism and campaign-finance reform.

[snip]

A Democratic Party as monolithically statist as the modern Republican Party is anti-government – one in which any defense of free markets or business is dismissed – would look very different than anything within American historical experience. After decades of this being taken for granted, it has finally become necessary to defend moderation as a governing creed.

Let's ignore how Chait caricatures Sanders for the moment, warning of an awful "statist" Democratic party in which "any defense of free markets or business is dismissed," and take his view of Hillary's pluralism on its face.

In Hillary's Democratic party, citizens exercise their influence through various interest groups. There's business (presented here as a monolith), and there there's "labor, environmentalists, consumer advocates, and other countervailing interests," and together they compromise on incrementalist policy about which everyone gets a say.

That is, in fact, how the mainstream Democratic party organizes itself, and Hillary's endorsement by virtually all of the organizations deemed to represent one of these players reflects it. She does have support from business, but she also has support from League of Conservation Voters, Planned Parenthood, Human Rights Campaign, and other big organizations. (There's a breathtaking list of her endorsements here – you have to scroll down

quite a way to get to the institutional endorsements.) This is what that “establishment organization” hubbub was about: that Hillary has the support of the groups deemed to represent the various pluralities of the Democratic party.

On that list are most of the national labor unions. That’s not surprising. Hillary is (still) a favorite to win nomination and after that the general election, and all these organizations are ensuring they’ll have a seat at that pluralist table Hillary sets (though it’s not clear what the unions that backed Obama early in 2008 really got out of the deal; he certainly didn’t deliver the Employee Free Choice Act, as he had suggested he’d try to do). Union leaders endorse early because it ensures they’ll have the ear of the presumptive president.

Even there, as some have noted, a few unions that let members decide who to endorse endorsed Bernie.

But here’s the thing. Just 11.1% of workers were in a union last year. And to the extent that the Democratic party’s pluralism is mediated through these national organizations, it means the views of workers as such are largely represented by organizations they don’t have any stake in, organizations whose workers make 26% more than non-union workers. And we wonder why so few of these workers show up to vote for Democrats?

I asked Chait on Twitter where these more marginalized workers would get their seat at the pluralist table and thus far haven’t gotten an answer.

This question is probably most pressing with regards to the most exciting labor organizing in recent years: the SEIU-backed Fight for 15, which has found a model that works for franchises, and which has also notched a number of key local wins for a higher minimum wage. Importantly, where it succeeds in raising wages for an entire city, people within and outside of the movement structure will do better. But a lot

of workers who would be incorporated at the pluralist table by a push for a living minimum wage are not and would not be SEIU members.

Fight for 15 is an issue where there's a clear policy difference between Hillary, who favors raising the minimum wage to \$12 (which is not a living wage in many areas of this country) and Bernie, who enthusiastically supports the \$15 goal.

Nevertheless, SEIU endorsed Hillary. Jacobin explained the logic shortly after the endorsement.

If Clinton is going to win – because she has to win – then delaying a primary endorsement has no upside. The union would simply jeopardize its spot on Clinton's crowded list of favors to return.

But the access argument is also unpersuasive. In 2007 the union was divided internally over whether to back John Edwards or Obama. In the end the national union allowed its state affiliates to go their separate ways, only uniting behind Obama after Edwards had dropped out after the first round of primaries. Opting not to come out early for Obama didn't prevent the union from mobilizing members and resources for the general election. Similarly, SEIU will be indispensable to the Democratic nominee's chances in November, so it is hard to argue that Clinton could shut the union out.

[snip]

Comments from SEIU's largest local suggest the union is perfectly happy to see Sanders pressing Clinton to take more left-leaning positions. But the labor movement still sees the election solely through the prism of its outcome – not in terms of what Sanders's candidacy represents, or makes possible.

That narrow electoralism could end up harming Fight for 15 – not just the union’s most important campaign, but arguably the most important labor battle happening today. SEIU’s decision to provide the financial largesse for Fight for 15 comes from the indisputably correct observation that unless the labor movement can bring millions of low-wage workers into its fold, organized labor is scheduled for expiry.

Yet before the endorsement announcement, SEIU President Mary Kay Henry told *Al Jazeera* that though the union is expecting “candidates up and down the ticket who are willing to get in the streets and champion this demand,” support for a \$15 minimum wage is not a “litmus test” but an “aspirational demand.”

Over the last three years, SEIU has spent tens of millions of dollars and galvanized the labor movement around an inspiring fight. It has justified this enormous expenditure to its members by correctly arguing that they won’t be able to protect and improve their own standards unless something is done to boost the wages of the worst paid workers.

But if the union actually believed it could win on this issue – if it believed it could *lead* – then a litmus test is exactly what it would be. Clinton would just have to get in line. Members and non-members have shown that they are willing to fight for \$15 and a union. What does it say to them if they now are asked to knock on doors calling for \$12 and a Clinton?

That is, Hillary’s pluralist table, which leaves little space for the overwhelming majority of workers who aren’t represented by a union, had

already dealt away the key policy platform the key voice pulling up to that table has pursued.

Partly that's a testament to the desperation of unions – that they're willing to trade their key issues even to get a seat at the table, and partly that's a testament to the lack of representation for most workers who might sit there.

But having set the table like that, there's little prospect the large numbers of workers who haven't been as active in Democratic politics of late will have much sway in face of the powerful banks who don't appear to have traded away key issues for their time with Hillary.

Notably: these lower income voters, along with the more widely noted younger voters, are precisely those whom Bernie is winning (though as the primary moves to more racially diverse states, that is expected to change).

There's a key failing in the pluralist vision painted by Chait (even taking it on its face): even to win a seat at the table, labor – and really just that fraction of workers who enjoy union representation – had already started compromising, well before the bankers even sat down for their scotch.

And no matter how this primary ends up, that's not something that's sustainable, particularly not in the wake of the financial disaster that pushed so many people closer to the edge. If Clinton is going to win with a pluralist table, there needs to be, for both electoral and social justice reasons, a seat, a lot of seats, for all the workers who have fallen by the electoral wayside in recent years. Bernie has gotten their attention. What does Hillary plan to do to keep it?