

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

BERNIE SANDERS & AOC: “FIGHTING OLIGARCHY” WITH PEOPLE POWER

LAURA FLANDERS: The second Trump administration's first days can be described as aggressive, controversial, and transformative. The president and his unelected advisor, Elon Musk, have taken swift and sweeping actions through a slew of executive orders, restricting immigration, rolling back environmental protections, restructuring government, denying healthcare, and attempting to limit free speech, what is taught in schools and even whom companies hire. All of this has sparked legal challenges and international concern, as well as grassroots protests from Tesla showrooms to congressional town hall meetings, to the streets of Washington and beyond. Who's joining these protests and why? To find out, we hit the states with independent Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who launched a "Fighting Oligarchy" tour just a month after Trump's inauguration. We first met up with Senator Sanders in [Kenosha, Wisconsin](#).

BERNIE SANDERS: So we are here to say loudly and clearly that in our great nation, we will not accept oligarchy. We will not accept authoritarianism. We will not accept kleptocracy. We're here to make it clear that we're gonna fight back and we are going to win.

LAURA FLANDERS: In Warren, Michigan the next night, Sanders' crowd had grown significantly and the senator was joined on stage by local elected officials and United Auto Workers leader [Shawn Fain](#).

SHAWN FAIN: You know, all over America and right here in Michigan, so many of our communities have lived this reality. We've lived the layoffs, the plant closures, the shuttered houses on the block, the neighborhood schools shutting down, the hollowed-out towns that are left behind with empty buildings.

CROWD MEMBER: What's up, Flint?

SHAWN FAIN: That's right. And the next generation of families for the first time in our history are gonna be left off worse than we were. So I have a simple question for you. Don't we deserve better? Don't working class people deserve dignity? Don't we deserve to be treated like human beings? You know, we're fed up with a system where billionaires get everything and the working class gets left behind. And I'm here to tell you, no one's gonna come in and wave a wand and fix this. The only way we're gonna end this system is if we're willing to fight like hell to change it.

LAURA FLANDERS: State representative Donovan McKinney serves constituents in Warren and Detroit.

DONAVAN MCKINNEY: I have a lot of Republicans in my district, in Macomb County in particular, who have reached out and said, "I did not know he would be doing this. I thought it would be focusing on, similar to the day one promises when he got in office, lower the cost of eggs and groceries." The minimum income in my district is \$14,000. In terms of a House district in the state, it's one of the poorest, if not the most impoverished House district in the state. So I'm struggling as it is on the State House salary at \$71,000. Can you imagine when somebody living on \$14,000 has to struggle? And those decisions they have to make every single day to survive and make it through. So, you know, those are the things I take with me to Lansing when I fight in the halls of the state government for my constituents. But in reality, we have to keep people and educate them to understand that they have the right and the ability and the power to make a difference and a change.

DR. ABDUL EL-SAYED: My name is Dr. Abdul El-Sayed. I am a physician epidemiologist. I lead Wayne County's Department of Health, Human and Veteran Services. And, you know, I'm out here today in large part because we are watching as the government that our tax dollars paid for is being gutted by a set of billionaires who never actually had to use it. And they're gutting it for pennies on the dollar to make sure that they can continue to pass a tax cut for folks who don't really need more money. And so, you know, I find that deplorable and disgusting and I think the 9,000 people who are here today feel the same way.

LAURA FLANDERS: While Laura Flanders & Friends was alone among national media at those early rallies, by the time Sanders arrived in Las Vegas, Nevada on March 20th, more media had caught on. And local Congressman Steven Horsford, as well as New York Congresswoman [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#), joined Sanders in front of an excited hot midday crowd.

ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ: We are at a point where the wealthiest people in the world like Elon Musk and all the Republicans enabling him are turning to loot what is left of Medicaid, Medicare, and social security to bankroll even deeper tax cuts and sweetheart contracts for themselves, their fellow billionaires, and their corporations. And our political system right now is ill prepared for this abuse of power. In fact, our political system enables it, starting with the role of money in politics. But I am here to remind you that we are not powerless in this moment. People are starting to put the pieces together.

LAURA FLANDERS: What's drawing people to the "Fighting Oligarchy" tour? We heard fear and loneliness, and a longing for hope. Danielle and Jordan Lovik drove all the way from Salt Lake City, Utah with their children. Retirees Thomas Dyer and his sister Pam West drove across town.

DANIELLE LOVIK: I had to drive down 'cause he was coming remotely close.

LAURA FLANDERS: And why did you think it was worth making the trip?

DANIELLE LOVIK: Well, it's historical. We've like followed Bernie like his, like most of his journey, like throughout our lifetime, and really interested in AOC and like what she has to bring to the table with him and their like, coordination together. And yeah, we're just hoping for some hope.

LAURA FLANDERS: Are you afraid? Would you say you're afraid?

THOMAS DYER: Oh yeah, I'm terrified.

PAM WEST: I can't believe this is the country I've lived in my whole life. That's how I feel. It's unbelievable.

LAURA FLANDERS: So you're really coming here with hope for kind of marching orders, what to do.

PAM WEST: Lots of hope.

THOMAS DYER: Yeah, lots of hope. I wanna see what people that they're in contact with, people in the government are doing or planning on doing to start pushing back and bringing things back to where the Constitution means something again.

LAURA FLANDERS: Jacqueline Davania-Williamson was worried about her community.

JACQUELINE DAVANIA-WILLIAMSON: I come from the Latin community and I think a lot of the Latin community is very scared. I think they're very nervous, they're very worried. I think people aren't going to work. I think that everybody's just worried about their day to day and what the future holds for them. And I think that everybody's really concerned about, well even if I'm legal, will that status change? Will that change? Will the laws change? You know what I mean? So I think everybody's very, very concerned here.

LAURA FLANDERS: Are you afraid?

JACQUELINE DAVANIA-WILLIAMSON: I'm not afraid. I'm a fourth generation, but, you know, you never know. Anything could happen in this administration.

LAURA FLANDERS: Sandra Martinez and her husband feared losing social security.

SANDRA MARTINEZ: I'm here because I wanna see what Bernie has to offer to help us in our time of need because I just applied for social security.

LAURA FLANDERS: Tell me about that experience and start with your name.

RAYMOND MARTINEZ: My name's Raymond Martinez. The social security, I think I called them and there was a wait line and then they called me, but I left a number to call me back. It took a week from them to call me back and then I had scheduled an appointment and it's not until mid-May.

SANDRA MARTINEZ: And in the meantime, he's on home dialysis and if we lose social security, what's gonna happen to him? You know, we paid all our lives. We started working at a very young age. And we're here, you know, just trying to make it. We moved out here in 2019 and it's been downhill and a rough way to get started through here. And it's not easy. We need the help.

LAURA FLANDERS: Have you come to rallies before?

SANDRA MARTINEZ: This is our first time.

RAYMOND MARTINEZ: This is our first time.

LAURA FLANDERS: And why did you feel that this was the one to come to?

RAYMOND MARTINEZ: I think it's unity. It's unity and having to bring people together to hear the words and spread it.

SANDRA MARTINEZ: Know that our party's not leaving us behind. We need to be fighting back. And that's all I wanna see is the fight in us 'cause we have it.

LAURA FLANDERS: The event attracted first-time activists, people like Veteran Terrence Deuel who'd never attended such a rally before.

TERRENCE DEUEL: I am not a Bernie supporter. I have never been political in my life.

LAURA FLANDERS: So what brings you here today?

TERRENCE DEUEL: I'm disappointed in the direction our country is moving and I wanna hear what people have to say.

LAURA FLANDERS: So you said you've never been political?

TERRENCE DEUEL: No, ma'am. I did 28 years in the Army. I maintained an apolitical front at all times.

LAURA FLANDERS: And now something's changing?

TERRENCE DEUEL: Yes, ma'am. I think we're sliding into tyranny and I took an oath to support and defend the Constitution and I'm gonna do that whether in or out of uniform.

LAURA FLANDERS: Talk about the situation of vets like yourself under this administration. You've been feeling the heat of it?

TERRENCE DEUEL: I have been feeling betrayed. I use the VA for most of my primary medical care. And I think what they're doing to vets is unconscionable.

LAURA FLANDERS: While rallies attract the media and a crowd, people are also showing up in unusual numbers to constituency meetings with their representatives and they're joining new organizations. In Las Vegas, just hours after the Sanders-AOC rally, eight-term congresswoman Dina Titus held a town hall meeting at the government center downtown.

DINA TITUS: I give you the example of Medicaid. Our state legislature's gonna have to deal with that if they cut Medicaid. And that's exactly what they're planning to do.

LAURA FLANDERS: And late into the evening, 100 or so Nevadans were attending a meeting of the group Indivisible, an organization which barely existed here three months ago.

DINA TITUS: Well, thank you very much. It makes me feel good to see people who are this energized and organized and the election isn't anytime soon. Usually this doesn't happen until closer to November of an election year. But this is great. Thank y'all for doing that. I had my own town hall tonight, so I'm right downtown. We had about 200 people there. I met with AFGE last night. Those are the different unions that represent public employees and you can imagine how concerned they are. And they were about 100 there and then the Boulder City Democrats went out there and met with them. There were 50 people there. That's all the Democrats who live in Boulder City. So that was encouraging.

CROWD MEMBER: What I wanna know is you're there during the fight in government. What can we do to help you?

DINA TITUS: I appreciate that because we're gonna have to do it together. We're all in this together. I think I'm preaching to the choir 'cause I think all of you know what you have to do and being here is the first step.

LAURA FLANDERS: So what is going on here? Could the Trump administration's exercise of executive power be shocking people into reinvesting in US democracy? That's clearly what Senator Sanders intends as he told me in this exclusive interview. In North Las Vegas, the city of North Las Vegas with Senator Bernie Sanders. Bernie, thank you so much for taking some time with us. It was great to be out there in the crowd with you here in Nevada. I've seen big crowds in Nevada before out for Bernie. I would love you to talk about what you are adding to your pitch. You've been talking about oligarchy forever. Today you talked about autocracy. You talked about authoritarianism. How do they relate?

BERNIE SANDERS: Oh, they relate very much. But I've been to Las Vegas a number of times. This was by far the largest turnout that we have ever had. And it tells me that people are really deeply worried about the movement toward oligarchy, which is manifested. You don't have to be a genius or an economist to understand that. You got Elon Musk, the richest guy in the world, going around trying to get 80,000 employees off of the Veterans Administration, which will lower the quality of care that our veterans receive, trying to dismember the Social Security Administration. These guys are going after Medicaid, they're going after education, they're going after environmental protection. They're on a rampage against the working families of this country. All so they can get their huge tax breaks that Trump has promised them.

LAURA FLANDERS: So tax breaks are in the offering, but as you said, there's also authoritarian rule in the offering. What's the relationship?

BERNIE SANDERS: That people who have the money want more and more power to be able to do what they wanna do. So right now, you know, it's not just they don't wanna pay their fair share of taxes. That I got. They really take it personally that we try to protect the environment. That we try to protect workers. Some of these oligarchs really believe they're like the, you know, the divine right of kings. They have the right to rule. And how dare you say that workers could form a union in my company. Who do you think you are? It's my company. How dare you to suggest that we have to protect the environment, that we have to treat, you know, all people equally and we can't discriminate. Who do you think you are? So what we are seeing right now is a movement toward authoritarianism, where Trump, in an unprecedented way, is threatening the media, going after the media, going after the courts, going after the Congress. You know, I'll tell you something, I think back to the civics classes that I took when I was a kid in elementary

school. And I'm thinking those Founding Fathers back in the 1790s were nobody's fools and they said, you know, we're gonna have a government with separation of powers, you know, an executive branch, a legislative branch, a judiciary, so that no one person can assume all of that power. And Trump is working overtime trying to end the separation of powers.

LAURA FLANDERS: You've been talking about the need for radical reform inside the Democratic Party for decades.

BERNIE SANDERS: Yes.

LAURA FLANDERS: What makes you think the chances of that are different now or aren't they?

BERNIE SANDERS: I have no idea whether they are or not. You got a, you know, leadership in the Democratic Party, you know, it's a party.

LAURA FLANDERS: It's at an all-time low in popularity.

BERNIE SANDERS: So for whatever reason, in many ways, the Democratic label is toxic and it's a party that's controlled, as the Republican Party is, by big money and a group inside the Beltway Consultants who have no idea what's happening in the real world. Will the party change? I have no idea. All I can do is rally the American people to stand up and fight back. And if Democrats don't change, people should start running as independents outside of the two party system.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, let's talk about it. I mean, out of the struggle against slavery, the Republican Party was born, a new constellation of forces against an -

BERNIE SANDERS: That's right.

LAURA FLANDERS: obvious immoral wrong. Could something like that happen today? Is that something you and AOC are maybe thinking about?

BERNIE SANDERS: What I think is you have two parties that are way out of touch with the American people. And I think it's not me saying that, it's what the polling shows. More and more people are moving, you know, registering as independents, massive dissatisfaction with a two-party system. You have a campaign finance system which is disgusting, totally corrupt. Who thinks that it makes sense that one guy can spend \$270 million to elect the president of the United States and then become the most powerful person in government? That's totally absurd. And I think people at the grassroots level know that the system is not working. They want

change. Will the Democratic Party evolve and respond to that change? Your guess is as good as mine. All I can do is rally the American people to fight for at least a government that works for all and not just a few.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, so speak to that. The people I spoke to in the crowd were split. A lot of them felt that it was enough to come together with others to feel like they weren't alone. Others wanted to hear from a fighter and they believe that you're a fighter on their behalf. The third option didn't seem so clear. What can they do now? What do you think they can do?

BERNIE SANDERS: Well, what we can do, this is, look, Trump, to his credit, thinks outside of the box. His people think outside of the box. They're doing immense damage to this country in a way that no one thought that a president ever would do. And we have got to start thinking outside of the box too. I mean, what role do we play as citizens, as workers, as teachers, as doctors, as people concerned about the political process. So at the very least, what it means that we do not have the luxury of not paying keen attention and getting involved in the political process. Whether it's your local school board, whether it's your city council, whether it's the state legislature, pay attention, demand. Demand in a way that you haven't done before, that they start talking and representing the needs of ordinary people, not just the campaign contributors. But I think the message of the moment is to understand that the vast majority of the American people do not think that we give tax breaks to the rich and cut social security or veterans programs. They don't. And our job is to work as hard as we can. And part of what this trip is about, this tour is about, to bring people, to get them involved in their own local communities. You know, I think we have, I think my staff got the names and emails of everybody who's here and they're not gonna hear the last of us. All right, so we'll be back to them and we'll be urging them to start meeting, demand that their members of Congress respond to their needs and build a kind of grassroots movement. What you said is right. Real change has always, always come from the bottom on up, never from the top line.

LAURA FLANDERS: You've been doing this kind of campaigning since you ran for mayor of Burlington, door to door, pounding the streets.

BERNIE SANDERS: Yup, that's right.

LAURA FLANDERS: While others take the route of campaign ads, TV advertising.

BERNIE SANDERS: My last campaign, we didn't run one TV ad, got 63% of the vote.

LAURA FLANDERS: So what do you get from this communicating with people? What do you hear? What are you hearing on this tour?

BERNIE SANDERS: Well, I love doing this. You know, sometimes when you're inside the Beltway and you're talking to your colleagues, there's one world out there and you come out here and there's another world, an entirely different world, a world of people who wanna understand why things are happening, wanna understand that there are some people with some power who actually understand that they are in pain and that they are struggling. And making that connection means the world to me personally. You know, and very often when we have meetings smaller than this and people start talking about what's going on in their life, people start crying. You know, people can't afford healthcare, worried about their kids. But just to be able to relate with ordinary people and it's a source of, you know, that people are willing to open up about what's going on in their lives is something that I'm very grateful for. You know, I'm a stranger to many people in a sense, personally. So that's it.

LAURA FLANDERS: Do you think people power is really any match for these unlimited billions and the billionaires?

BERNIE SANDERS: Yeah, I do, I do. Look, nobody in the world knows the power of these guys, I know it, but at the end of the day, I do believe that when people stand together, we can beat them. I do believe that.

LAURA FLANDERS: If there was one thing you had somebody do when they left this rally today, what would it be?

BERNIE SANDERS: To get on the phone and start meeting with your friends to figure the best way forward for your community. You might wanna be demanding, if you're in a Republican district, especially. You might wanna demand a town meeting and hear from your Republican congressman as to why they think it's a good idea to vote for tax breaks for billionaires and cut Medicaid. Go to your city council meeting and ask why we're not doing more for affordable housing, why we're not demanding that the wealthiest people, large corporations, start paying their fair share of taxes. So the goal would be get involved in the political process in a way that you have never done before. Go outside of your comfort zone. All right.

LAURA FLANDERS: Last question. Politicians, people in education, people in media, people in government, a lot of feeling very afraid and they're acting in very afraid ways. You have managed to be brave for decades. How does it feel? How has your life been?

BERNIE SANDERS: Well, I do what I do, but I would pick up on your point. We are seeing, I'm seeing just as a United States Senator, the timidity, the growing timidity of people. If I do this, what will the Trump people think? Maybe I'll stay silent. I'm seeing that.

LAURA FLANDERS: They're afraid of violence.

BERNIE SANDERS: Yeah, yeah.

LAURA FLANDERS: Would you say they're afraid of violence?

BERNIE SANDERS: Well, I don't know that it's just violence. It's afraid of lawsuits. It's afraid of just being attacked verbally, in ugly ways that we are not used to. And people are saying who needs it? You know, why do I wanna do that? So I'll go along with, you know, Mr. Trump or I won't speak up. Not good. All right, on that note. All right, thank you.

LAURA FLANDERS: You're not afraid.

BERNIE SANDERS: Good interview.

LAURA FLANDERS: Thank you so much. At the very same time that powerful institutions from mighty universities and affluent media companies to wealthy liberal law firms were bending down to the demands of Trump and Musk this spring, the crowds greeting Senator Sanders and AOC only grew. In Denver, the "Fighting Oligarchy" duo attracted some 34,000 people, the largest such event that city has seen since Barack Obama ran for president. While influential people in boardrooms and the halls of Congress bow down under pressure, it seems that regular Americans have been doing what Sanders suggests, getting out of their boxes, leaving their homes and their screens, and showing their resistance in ways we haven't seen in decades. What does the future hold? Well, that story's not written yet, but many of the protestors expressed the same view, that it's only people power that is gonna hold off tyranny. The balance of powers, the US Constitution, and representative government, they could all certainly be on their last legs in this country in our time. But alternatively, 2025 just might turn out to be the year in which Americans reinvest, reengage, and remake their democracy. Which story do you think the future will tell? For much more reporting like this and the speeches of Senator Sanders, Representative Ocasio-Cortez, and UAW President Shawn Fain in full, visit our website. And while you're there, you'll see all the information about subscribing to our free podcast. Podcast subscribers receive free audio extras, including uncut interviews and more. Until the next time, stay kind, stay curious. For Laura Flanders and Friends, I'm Laura.

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