

Clinton crisis signals a further shift to the right

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On the eve of the State of the Union address the Clinton administration remained engulfed in crisis. On Monday, with allegations of sexual misconduct, perjury and obstruction of justice continuing to dominate the airwaves, Clinton made a brief appearance and issued a terse denial of the charges against him.

The bourgeois media remains obsessively fixated on the salacious details of the scandal. The great question of the day, according to the pundits of CNN, ABC, NBC and CBS, was whether Clinton's denial of "sexual relations" between himself and Monica Lewinsky covered only intercourse or included other forms of physical intimacy.

Amidst all this sick and degrading "commentary" the establishment media shows not the slightest interest in probing the politics that underlie the events that have staggered the presidency.

And yet, the sudden eruption of a sex scandal and its overnight escalation into a political crisis threatening to bring down the Clinton administration can only be rationally comprehended if these events are viewed as the high point of an increasingly bitter struggle within the ruling class over the policies of the federal government.

The breakdown of the East Asian economies and its reverberations in the US and internationally, as well as deepening foreign policy crises in Iraq, Israel, Bosnia and elsewhere, have added fuel to conflicts at the highest levels of corporate and state power over the orientation of American policy both at home and abroad.

The events of the past week have demonstrated that very powerful sections of Big Business have decided to force a rapid and violent lurch of state policy much further to the right than the Clinton administration has indicated, at least up to now, that it is prepared to go. Utilizing an unelected "independent counsel" as the instrument of a quasi-legal political coup, these forces have decided to escalate the struggle to the point of forcing Clinton out of office.

The struggle over policy matters between the administration and its critics within the ruling class is continuing behind the scenes in the very midst of the present scandal. While Clinton and his top aides have remained largely silent, as have Congressional leaders of both parties, no one should doubt there are intensive discussions and negotiations going on behind the scenes over what price Clinton must pay to be allowed to remain in the White House.

The record of the Clinton administration is one of ever more pronounced accommodation to his right-wing Republican enemies. Nor is this the first time corruption charges have been leveled against Clinton to whip him into line. Indeed, Starr was appointed Independent Counsel and began escalating the Whitewater inquiry early in 1994, just a few months after Clinton introduced his health care program, a reform which he subsequently abandoned. The hue and cry over Whitewater, White House coffees, "filegate," "travelgate" and other alleged abuses escalated in the run-up to the 1996 election, and only died down temporarily after Clinton agreed to sign the bill to end welfare.

The timing of the crisis—a week before the State of the Union Address, when the president lays out his policies for the coming year—is significant. There are matters to be decided that could mean a gain or loss of hundreds of billions of dollars for corporate interests: Whether, for example, the federal budget surplus will go to shore up the Social Security fund, as suggested recently by Clinton, or be used to offset new tax cuts for the rich, as demanded by leading Congressional Republicans.

Far greater profits are riding on the issue of so-called Social Security reform, with Wall Street intent on channeling the multibillion-dollar trust fund into the stock market. Clinton has so far hesitated to sign on to this scheme.

More broadly, there is a powerful element within big

business that is not satisfied with Clinton's piecemeal assault on social welfare programs. Its political representatives in the right wing of the Republican Party consider every reform measure enacted since the days of Theodore Roosevelt—from the Sherman Anti-Trust Act to the income tax to child labor laws—to be an intolerable infringement on the rights of property. They want to see all that remains of the social safety net dismantled and all taxes on private wealth eliminated.

On the international front, these forces demand a more aggressive and bellicose policy to defend US corporate interests, especially under conditions of mounting financial turmoil and growing signs of a slump in corporate profits and share values.

Indeed, the now widely expected bombing of Iraq is intended by the Clinton administration to convince its critics within the ruling class that it is prepared to take tougher actions in pursuit of the global imperialist interests of the United States.

Virtually all of the public protagonists in the offensive against Clinton—Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, Linda Tripp, Lucianne Goldberg, the Paula Jones lawyers and prominent media news personalities—have close connections to forces in the extreme right wing of the Republican Party, including Christian fundamentalist groups. (See the accompanying article on today's web site).

Perhaps the most baffling aspect of the entire affair in the minds of masses of people is the silence of the White House. Why is the president paralyzed in the face of this assault on his political position?

In answering this question, the first thing to note is the career of Clinton himself. His entire political life has been characterized by an adaptation to the pressures exerted by powerful corporate interests and right-wing forces. All of his attempts to appease these forces have only emboldened them to intensify their demands for deeper and more ruthless attacks on the working class.

But Clinton's presidency expresses more than the proclivities of an individual. It embodies the abandonment by the Democratic Party of its previous reformist policies and the moribund state of American liberalism as a whole. And the more Clinton and the Democrats have embraced the policies of the Republican right, the more narrow their base of popular support has become.

Were Clinton to go on the offensive, attack Starr and expose the elements of conspiracy and extra-constitutional intrigue in the present crisis, he would begin to lay bare the reality of the political and social

structure of America. The question of the political agenda of the conspirators would rapidly arise, as well as the class forces they speak for.

But this is the very agenda to which Clinton has adapted, and the very class forces he has served. Moreover, the last thing any section of the American ruling class wants is a politically aroused population, because its concern would be not so much the defense of Clinton, as the defense of the social conditions and democratic rights of working people, in opposition to the policies of big business and both of its parties.

What then are the central lessons to be drawn from the Clinton crisis? It is first necessary to recognize the putrefaction of American democracy, and the dangers of the emergence of more authoritarian and repressive forms of rule.

But this danger cannot be fought by clinging to the corpse of the Democratic Party, or relying on the institutions of capitalist democracy—Congress, the courts, the White House. The greatest danger that working people face arises from the fact that they remain without any real political organization or representation. By virtue of their continued subordination to the two-party system, they are politically disenfranchised. This in turn gives the ruling class the ability to carry out with virtual impunity its economic assault on jobs and living standards, and organize political conspiracies against basic democratic rights, without the knowledge or understanding of the masses.

These attacks can only be halted by an independent political movement of the working class, which consciously identifies the class forces arrayed against it and advances a socialist program to meet its needs, in opposition to the capitalist profit system and all of its political representatives. The construction of such a movement is the urgent task to which the Socialist Equality Party is dedicated.



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