

What is the meaning of the political warfare in Washington?

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The past week has seen an escalation of political conflict within the highest echelons of the American capitalist state that is without precedent. Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's attempt to silence public criticism of his tactics by hauling Clinton administration aides and investigators before his grand jury is a flagrant violation of First Amendment rights.

This is only the most extreme of many measures, such as subpoenaing the president's Secret Service bodyguards and White House lawyers, which challenge not only Clinton, but the traditional prerogatives of the presidency as an institution. One result of Starr's radical tactics is a virtual guarantee that the political crisis will drag on for months, all but paralyzing the remainder of Clinton's tenure, as legal challenges over executive privilege and other matters work their way through the courts.

This new stage in the judicial and political offensive against the White House has staggered even some of Starr's supporters, who have expressed bafflement over the crudity of his assault on Constitutional guarantees of free speech and freedom of the press. The very brazenness of such measures, and the ferocity of the public attacks by both sides, inevitably call forth the question: what political and social forces are doing battle, and what issues are being fought out behind the facade of a White House sex scandal?

The mass media never bother to probe beneath the latest bits of gossip or rhetorical salvos between the supporters of Starr and the defenders of Clinton. But when the independent counsel all but declares war on the administration, threatening to prosecute the White House for orchestrating an "avalanche of lies" against him, he is clearly motivated by a sense that there are immense issues at stake.

The current tumult over an alleged sexual liaison is

only the latest in a series of scandals that have plagued the Clinton administration from its inception. Investigations into everything from a failed real estate deal to the firing of White House travel agents to campaign finance practices have been used by Clinton's Republican opponents, speaking for powerful corporate interests and backed by the media, to whip the White House into line whenever it showed the slightest inclination to retreat from the right-wing social policies begun in the Reagan and Bush administrations.

This relentless assault on the administration has taken on an almost obsessive character. But behind the apparent dementia is a clash of definite economic interests. A very small and very privileged layer at the top of American society has seen its wealth mushroom over the past two decades, through the dismantling of government programs and a social policy designed to promote the inflation of share values on the stock market at the expense of the jobs and living standards of working people.

This powerful social element will tolerate no easing of the offensive against the working class. Rather, it demands far more sweeping measures than those enacted up to now to abolish social programs and remove all restrictions on the accumulation of private wealth. A substantial segment of the ruling class is convinced that Clinton is not up to the job, and is using its vast resources to destabilize and, if possible, topple his administration.

American capitalism confronts a series of contradictions and crises that are exacerbating the divisions within the ruling class. They emerge over every policy question—whether it is the US war drive in the Persian Gulf, the struggle against rival imperialist powers in Europe and Asia, or the federal budget.

Looming over everything is the unknown quantity of

the financial meltdown in Asia. Even as Wall Street pretends that the Asian crisis is over and sends share values soaring to new records, more serious bourgeois commentators warn about the inevitable impact of a breakdown of the Asian economies on the US. Already, nervous articles are being written about the implications of a staggering growth in the US trade deficit, as the American market is flooded with cheap Asian exports.

Speaking before the House Banking Committee earlier this week, Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan warned of the “storm clouds massing over the western Pacific and heading our way.” He went on to complain about bankers “becoming too complacent” and lending too freely, cautioned against the growth of protectionism, and declared “it is unwise to count on any string of good fortune to continue indefinitely.”

He made a particular point on the need for vigilance in containing inflation. This is a euphemism for the danger of rising working class resistance to the ongoing erosion of job security and living standards. He did not have to remind his audience of the scattered, but nonetheless disturbing signs, such as the Caterpillar workers’ rejection of the UAW sellout and the Saturn workers’ vote to throw out their corporatist contract with GM.

The extraordinary events in Washington of the past month are the symptoms of a political system suffering from something akin to an electrical overload. The social antagonisms at home and the conflicts abroad can no longer be contained within the framework of the traditional political forms through which the American ruling class has for so long exercised its power. The political wars in Washington prefigure a movement of American capitalism toward Bonapartist and outright dictatorial forms of rule.

At the same time these events are omens of immense social and political upheavals. They are a prelude to the most explosive struggles in America in the past half century.

The great danger is that the crisis develops more rapidly than the political consciousness of the masses of working people. This contradiction must be overcome—a task that poses the necessity for the building of the Socialist Equality Party as the new, revolutionary leadership of the working class.



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