

The Clinton sex scandal

A crisis of the political system in America

Editorial Board
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The crisis of the Clinton administration continues to intensify. In the absence of any political explanation, the ferocity of the assault on the White House seems increasingly bizarre and even deranged.

The media remains obsessed with the sleazy details—real or imagined—of Clinton’s sex life. If one accepted as good coin the explanations for the turmoil in Washington provided by newsmen and politicians, one would be inclined to dismiss the entire affair as a distasteful farce.

But as history teaches, a political impasse of such proportions, whatever its outer form, reflects profound social and political antagonisms. Those who seek to defend the interests of working people are obliged to make a class analysis of such a breakdown in the normal methods of capitalist rule.

It is not a question of defending the White House. Clinton is a representative of American capitalism and a political enemy of the working class, but that does not alter the fact that a battle is raging within the highest circles of the ruling class and its state apparatus, and powerful forces are seeking to bring down his administration. If the working class is to adopt an independent standpoint in this political crisis, it must understand what interests are involved and what political issues are at stake.

Last week’s 700-page submission by Paula Jones’s lawyers confirmed the fact that her civil suit against Clinton is a political provocation aimed at bolstering the inquisition of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr. The vast bulk of the documents made public by Jones’s legal team are unsubstantiated allegations of sexual misconduct and purported attempts by Clinton associates to cover them up.

As Jones’s lawyers are well aware, most of their testimonials have little or no bearing on the suit and are unlikely to be admitted into evidence by the trial judge. But the purpose of their filing was far less to convince the judge or future jury than to supply the media and Starr with a fresh supply of salacious gossip.

Two days later CBS News’s “60 Minutes” broadcast an interview with Kathleen Willey, a Democratic Party activist and former “friend of Bill,” who has become a key witness for Starr. CBS was well aware that Willey’s past included her late husband’s indictment for embezzlement and her present activities involve negotiations for a \$300,000 book deal. The network, however, kept silent on these matters.

Whether or not the allegations of Jones, Willey and others are true, the fact remains that the Clinton administration is being paralyzed and could very possibly be brought down not because of

“high crimes and misdemeanors” in violation of the Constitution—as was the case with Nixon in Watergate and Reagan in the Iran-Contra affair—but because of Clinton’s private relations with members of the opposite sex.

One aspect of the proceedings highlights the single-minded determination of those who are orchestrating the offensive against the White House. In a country where polls play an extraordinary part in the calculations of politicians and the presentation of events by the media, TV pundits and the champions of the independent counsel have brushed aside the indices of popular anger over the scandal mongering, and pressed ahead with their attack on the White House, pausing only to lecture the American people on their supposed lack of moral scruples.

Millions of people sense that the political warfare in Washington cannot be explained by the excesses of Clinton’s libido. They suspect there is something more profound and sinister behind the sex scandal. The media obsession with sex is calculated to obscure the issues that really matter. What are the social and political sources of the current crisis? What is the agenda of those leading the attack on the White House? What does the present impasse portend for the democratic rights of the working class?

A serious political crisis is inevitably a complex phenomenon—the convergence of economic, social and political contradictions that in their totality suddenly call into question the old order. It is impossible to delineate the constituent elements of such a crisis with arithmetic precision, but one can identify general interests and concerns driving the process, all of which, in the present case, are of a deeply reactionary character.

The right-wing forces backing Kenneth Starr speak for powerful sections of the American ruling class. They are determined to intensify the assault on working class living standards that has sustained the unprecedented run-up of corporate profits and share values on the stock market. They consider the administration’s piecemeal approach to dismantling social programs and weakening government restraints on business intolerably timid and desultory. They demand the destruction of every social reform instituted since the turn of the century, beginning with Medicare, Social Security and the progressive income tax.

On the international front, they demand a more aggressive use of military force to secure the global interests of American big business. Major sections of the corporate establishment and the military brass have grown even more embittered as a result of Clinton’s acceptance of the deal with Iraq brokered by UN

Secretary General Kofi Annan. As the *World Socialist Web Site* predicted last month, the diplomatic setback for the US in the Persian Gulf has been followed by a deepening of the administration's crisis at home.

Within the corporate and political establishment, there is a growing consensus that the implementation of these policies requires a far-reaching restructuring of the government, to foreclose any return to the social reform policies of the past and strengthen the police powers of the state to deal with social unrest.

In the aftermath of the New Deal of the 1930s, the executive branch was associated with a policy of placing certain restraints on big business and ameliorating the worst abuses of capitalism—poverty, hunger, racial discrimination. It is therefore no accident that right-wing elements over the past two decades have sought to rein in the authority of the federal government on such issues as education, health and safety rules, environmental regulation and social welfare.

The 1980s saw a concerted effort spearheaded by Christian fundamentalists and other ultra-right-wingers to obtain the votes of state legislatures for a new constitutional convention, where they hoped to rewrite the Constitution so as to ban abortion, sanction prayer in the schools and gut civil liberties.

Two years ago the Republican majority in Congress shut down the federal government for weeks on end in an attempt to push through their program of dismantling basic entitlement programs and piling on new tax cuts for the rich.

Even though Clinton has largely adopted their policies, the same basic forces are today seeking to humiliate him and discredit the presidency. This does not mean they see no need for a strong executive. On the contrary, they want a presidency that is far more authoritarian, but one that has been stripped of any resonance with the liberal reform administrations of the Depression and post-World War Two periods.

In the face of the right-wing offensive, Clinton and the Democratic Party as a whole have been intimidated to the point of paralysis. It is impossible to name a single Democrat in Congress who has come forward to aggressively defend the administration. Hillary Clinton has all but disappeared from public view. After going on network TV two months ago to denounce a vast right-wing conspiracy against her husband, she has grown silent. Meanwhile the conspirators have stepped up their provocations.

The response of Clinton and the Democrats demonstrates the impotence and decay of American liberalism. Their cowardice is bound up with their fear of raising issues that might encourage the broad mass of working people to intervene in the crisis. As a political tendency within bourgeois politics, liberalism has abandoned any association with the social aspirations of workers and become a sounding board for the narrow and self-centered concerns of layers of the upper-middle class, whose interests are reflected in various forms of identity politics, i.e., black nationalism, feminism, etc.

Independent of Starr's immediate target, his witch-hunting methods represent an immense assault on civil liberties, but the Democrats have shown themselves to be neither able nor willing to defend democratic rights.

With the support of an utterly corrupt, corporate-controlled

media, Starr has turned his investigation into a dragnet. Virtually anyone can be hauled before what amounts to a Star Chamber proceeding and threatened with indictment, prison and fines for "obstruction of justice." Those who refuse to cooperate, i.e., provide the testimony demanded by Starr's prosecutors and FBI goons, risk a financial and personal disaster from which they will never recover. At the very least, the victims of this process are likely to find themselves burdened by massive legal fees and tarred by the media.

Starr and company are taking advantage of the quiescence and political disorientation that prevail among workers to push this struggle within ruling class circles to the extreme. Even in advance of a movement of the working class, the old political order is at an impasse.

Thus, in the tawdry form of a White House sex scandal, the mounting contradictions of US and world capitalism are breaking through the surface of political life. Throughout history, such a crisis within the state apparatus has heralded the advent of enormous social upheavals. America is no exception.

The danger is that the working class is politically unprepared and disorganized in the face of extremely reactionary forces that are highly conscious and organized. Under these conditions workers can become entranced by the fate of Clinton, believing they must support him in order to oppose the right-wing cabal whose front man is Starr. But if democratic rights depend on the actions of Clinton, they hang by a slim thread indeed!

The defense of democratic rights is today a class question. The working class must defend its rights, but it cannot do so by relying on the political semi-corpse of the Democratic Party or the institutions of the capitalist state. That is why the Socialist Equality Party is fighting to construct a revolutionary leadership and develop an independent political movement of the working class based on socialist policies.



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