

The dismissal of the Paula Jones suit: What it says about the Clinton sex scandal

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In throwing out Paula Jones's sexual harassment suit against Bill Clinton, Judge Susan Webber Wright simply confirmed what objective and informed observers have known all along—that the entire case was a contrived amalgam without any legal merit.

In her decision granting Clinton's motion for summary judgment, Wright demonstrated that even if one assumes Jones is telling the truth—that then-Governor Clinton made a lewd proposition in a Little Rock, Arkansas hotel room seven years ago—there was no evidence that she suffered subsequent discrimination on the job or psychological injury.

Yet this specious civil suit has been the anchor for Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's inquisition into Clinton's sexual activities. The allegations of perjury, suborning of perjury and obstruction of justice are based on Clinton's deposition in the Jones suit and the affidavit filed in the case by Monica Lewinsky.

This latest turn of events underscores the fact that the judicial assault on the White House, carried out in tandem by Jones's lawyers and Starr's team of prosecutors, is a massive political provocation, aimed at humiliating, destabilizing and ultimately bringing down the Clinton administration.

For working people the issue is not the fate of Clinton. He is a representative of American capitalism and seeks to carry out the demands of big business both at home and abroad. He is, nonetheless, the target of a ferocious attack by powerful forces within the ruling class and the capitalist state. These forces are prepared to use their vast resources to undermine elected officials and restructure the government to make it an even more pliable instrument for attacking the social conditions and democratic rights of the working class.

Thus it is crucial for workers to understand what political and economic interests are operating behind the facade of a sleazy sex scandal, and what their actions imply for the future.

From the first day that Paula Jones emerged on the national scene, it was clear she was a tool of extreme right-wing elements. She publicly charged Clinton with sexual harassment at a February 1994 press conference called by the Conservative Political Action Conference. At a certain point, the corporate-controlled media began to give sympathetic coverage to her civil suit and publicize the salacious details of her allegations

against Clinton.

Last May the Supreme Court, in an astonishing 9-0 ruling, rejected Clinton's bid to delay the case for the duration of his term. Soon after, Jones dumped her first legal team, who were pressing for a financial settlement, and took on lawyers provided by the Rutherford Institute, a right-wing, fundamentalist Christian outfit that was intent on bringing the case to trial and willing to finance the project.

Jones's lawyers issued subpoenas to any and all women rumored to have had sexual liaisons with the president. This process, of dubious legal validity, was aimed at providing grist for the media mill and embarrassing Clinton.

It was also a means of entrapping Clinton and others, who, it was assumed, would be compelled for political reasons to lie about their private affairs when deposed by Jones's lawyers. This, then, would provide Independent Counsel Starr with the pretext for launching a criminal investigation into perjury and related offenses.

Starr himself is a partisan Republican with close ties to forces on the extreme right of the party, including Senator Jesse Helms and Richard Mellon Scaife. Scaife is the heir to the Mellon banking fortune who is financing a propaganda campaign charging the White House with a series of crimes, including the murder of the late deputy White House Counsel Vincent Foster. Starr is a millionaire corporate lawyer who has continued his legal practice in defense of the tobacco industry while serving as prosecutor-in-chief of the White House.

In the aftermath of Judge Wright's dismissal of the Paula Jones suit, Starr told reporters he intended to continue his investigation, insisting the collapse of the civil action had no bearing on his criminal probe. His grand jury proceedings in Washington and Little Rock have become dragnets, corralling scores of individuals and subjecting them to media harassment and massive legal bills.

Starr has ridden roughshod over civil liberties, hauling in Clinton aides and others whose "crime" was criticizing the independent counsel and exposing prior legal abuses by members of his prosecutorial staff. In the past week, he has subpoenaed the records of bookstores patronized by Monica Lewinsky as well as notes of conversations between Vincent Foster and his lawyer.

Moreover, reports have emerged that figures who made public statements damaging to Clinton or served as friendly witnesses in Starr's grand jury probes received payoffs in return for their testimony. Peter W. Smith, a Chicago banker and Republican campaign donor, told the *Chicago Sun Times* that he paid more than \$50,000 to spread the story that Arkansas state troopers procured women for Clinton when he was governor. This included, he admitted, payments of \$6,700 each to two state troopers who made such charges in public speeches. Smith also acknowledged giving \$5,000 in expense money to David Brock, the journalist who first published the troopers' allegations in the right-wing magazine *American Spectator*.

In addition, Attorney General Janet Reno announced she intends to investigate charges that David Hale, a former judge in Arkansas and a key witness in Starr's Whitewater probe, received money and favors from an employee of *American Spectator*.

An operation such as that spearheaded by Starr, with many elements of a political coup, cannot simply be the work of a few right-wing crackpots. It must reflect the interests and aims of powerful sections of the American ruling class. This fact is underscored by the role of the media, which for months on end promoted the Jones case and publicized every piece of salacious gossip connected with it. Now, in the aftermath of Judge Wright's ruling, television pundits acknowledge that Jones's lawsuit was, from a legal standpoint, unsustainable.

What are the broader political conclusions that must be drawn from the political warfare in Washington? First, workers must recognize the immense apparatus of manipulation employed by big business and its media outlets. Political, economic and social issues affecting the lives of millions are decided not through public debate or genuinely democratic elections. Rather, differences within a narrow financial elite over the policies and personnel of government are fought out through intrigue and dirty tricks, behind a smoke screen of public scandal.

None of the contending factions within the ruling class, least of all Clinton and the Democrats, make an appeal to the masses of working people, because they all pursue policies detrimental to workers' needs, and fear above all a movement of the working class that can evolve into an independent political struggle against the entire political and social system.

Indeed, the obsession of the media and official politics with sex and scandal-mongering is an expression of the enormous chasm between the political parties and institutions of American capitalism and the aspirations and interests of the population at large. The fact that the majority of Americans have reacted to the Clinton sex scandal with disgust, and sense that behind it lies a political struggle among those who wield power, is itself indicative of the growing alienation of the entire political system from the masses of working people.

In the aftermath of the ruling on the Paula Jones suit, some

voices are being raised within ruling class circles warning of permanent damage to the traditional institutions through which American capitalism has ruled. Republican Senator Arlen Specter, for example, has publicly cautioned against the launching of congressional impeachment proceedings. There are, however, other powerful factions that insist on prosecuting the judicial assault to the end. Thus the *Wall Street Journal* in its editorial on Judge Wright's ruling reported favorably the suggestion of a Washington lawyer that Starr indict Monica Lewinsky and force Clinton to testify by calling him as a witness in her trial.

Regardless of the immediate outcome of the political wars in Washington, the Clinton sex scandal is a symptom of a political and social order in deep crisis. It exposes the increasingly hollow character of democracy in America, and raises serious dangers to the democratic rights of the working class.

If, after all, sections of the ruling class are prepared to go to such lengths against one of their own, what are they prepared to do against a working class that begins to move into struggle against the destruction of its jobs, living standards and basic rights?

The defense of democratic rights is a class issue. History has shown again and again, for the most part in the form of tragic defeats of the working class, that working people can defend their interests only by relying on their own independent strength. Neither the White House, nor Congress nor the courts can be relied on to counter the attacks of big business, since all of these institutions are ultimately political instruments of the capitalist class.

The working class must build an independent political movement against the capitalist system and its political representatives, and defend the social interests and democratic rights of the masses of people on the basis of socialist policies. The Socialist Equality Party is the vehicle for building this political movement.



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