

After Matthew Shepard's killing: which way forward to defend democratic rights?

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The murder of Matthew Shepard, a 22-year-old gay student at the University of Wyoming, has provoked widespread revulsion. The depth of the outrage indicates a growing sensitivity to ominous tendencies in American society as a whole.

A number of factors have contributed to this sense of apprehension. There is the spectacle of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's inquisition, engineered by the extreme right, and the media's obsession with its sordid details. The prying into private matters in Clinton's grand jury testimony shocked many people.

There is the increasing prominence of the Christian fundamentalist right in national politics. Pat Robertson, James Dobson of Focus on the Family, Gary Bauer of the Family Research Council and others exert enormous influence over the agenda of the Republican Party.

In regard to the rights of homosexuals, the forces leading the anti-gay campaign were unrepentant after the Shepard killing. The Center for Reclaiming America, the sponsor of an ad campaign calling on gays to 'come out' of homosexuality, issued a statement that essentially blamed the victim for his own death and implicitly warned that further attacks will take place. A spokeswoman told the press, 'When certain elements in our society advocate that everyone should do what they want to do, without any consideration of God's laws, our society will regretfully become more violent.'

The invocation of Christian virtues by both political parties goes hand in hand with the increasing brutalization of society. The death row assembly line in Texas and a number of other states grinds on. Executions are hardly news these days. The jails are full to overcrowding. And the only protesting voices one hears in Washington or the state houses are those complaining that prison life is too easy!

All the while the millionaire politicians and media figures proclaim that things have never been better, and pretend that the racist killing in Jasper, Texas, the abortion clinic bombings and the anti-gay slaying in Laramie are isolated episodes.

What is the reality? A substantial portion of the US population lives in poverty. The majority of working people face tremendous economic insecurity, barely holding their heads above water. Devastating social problems go untreated. Millions are deeply alienated from the political system. Hardly anyone believes things will get better. But there is no avenue for the anger and aspirations of masses of people to find conscious and progressive political expression within a system controlled by two right-wing parties, where, moreover, debate is vetted by the media conglomerates. In the absence of an independent movement of the working class, the social misery and the sense of hopelessness felt by many make fertile soil for the growth of right-wing, anti-social tendencies.

The Shepard killing has once again brought these issues to the fore. A great number of people are looking for answers. The first reaction of many will be the politics of protest, coupled with appeals to Clinton and Congress. In reality, the days have passed when such actions could produce even the most meager results.

The current Democratic administration is a pro-business government committed to taking whatever measures are necessary to defend the status quo. On the one hand, Clinton makes long faces and denounces hate crimes; on the other, he supports deep incursions against democratic rights. The Clinton administration has helped weaken the right to habeas corpus, speeding up implementation of the death penalty. Clinton defended the so-called Communications Decency Act, which entailed a serious attack on free speech on the

Internet. His government has presided over a general strengthening of the powers of the police and FBI; he urged Congress to give the federal police agency the right to use 'roving wire taps' without the need to obtain a warrant. On virtually every front--school uniforms, the hiring of 100,000 police, the so-called v-chip, the prosecution of children--Clinton has accommodated himself to the forces of repression.

Even if one assumes that there are Democrats and liberals who generally sincerely oppose the right-wing attacks, what is their answer? As an immediate measure, they propose hate crimes legislation to put those who carry out racist or anti-gay attacks behind bars. But an orientation toward the courts, the police and the capitalist state as a whole is futile and counterproductive. No matter with what progressive fanfare such laws are passed, they will inevitably open the door to attacks on left-wing opponents. Once new repressive powers are put at the disposal of the state, they become a precedent for a clampdown against dissent.

The ideological response of the Democrats is identity politics, the politics of race and sex, and the demand for special privileges. This is bound up with the Democrats' inability and unwillingness to deal with social problems, and their abandonment of the last vestiges of a reformist program. Racial and sexual politics complement the right-wing attacks, because they tacitly accept the status quo and reduce politics to: which group gets what? To set different ethnic and national groups at each others' throats over a shrinking quantity of jobs and educational opportunities is the conscious goal of the ruling class.

Every movement that makes race, ethnicity or gender the basis for a political struggle overlooks or ignores the central questions, the class and social issues. While the right-wing assault takes the form at present of vicious attacks on gays, blacks and other minorities, the ultimate target is the working population, the vast majority of the people, as a whole.

The present crisis is not a temporary disorder. It requires a fundamental approach and poses the need for radical changes in the organization of society. The source of the problem is capitalism and no resolution of the crisis is possible without settling accounts with it. Even many of those attracted today to right-wing trends, because they lyingly promise to show a way out

of the current impasse, can be won to a movement that demonstrates it will decisively act against the economic stranglehold of the giant corporations and the super-rich.

A movement has to be built with a broad democratic and egalitarian appeal, a movement based on socialist and internationalist principles. The goal of such a mass movement must be a new kind of government, one in which power resides in the hands of the vast majority, not the privileged few, which establishes the control of the working population over economic life, and puts an end to the economic insecurity, social misery and ideological poison produced by the profit system.

See also:

The anti-gay lynching in Wyoming: who is responsible?

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