

The working class and the US elections

Editorial Board
2 November 1998

As the midterm election campaigns of the Democrats and Republicans enter their final hours, one fact stands out: neither party is able to address the crucial social questions that face the broad masses of the American people.

The secret behind the debased character of the campaign, in which soundbites and personal attacks substitute for a serious discussion of issues, is the fact that the two parties share a similar right-wing agenda. Neither has anything to say when it comes to the decline in decent-paying jobs and the fall in workers' living standards, or the crisis in housing, health care and education.

The two parties have a tacit agreement to suspend discussion on a whole series of questions until after the elections, including possible military intervention in the Persian Gulf, the Balkans and other international flash points, plans to privatize Social Security and impose new cuts in Medicare, and various schemes to further reduce taxes for the rich. Whatever the outcome of the vote, workers are in for sharp and painful surprises.

None of the politicians, Democratic or Republican, dares mention the world financial crisis that began last year in southeast Asia and is now hitting the centers of world capitalism in Western Europe and the United States. The November 3 vote is taking place in the shadow of this gathering economic storm and the slide into recession in the US. The Federal Reserve Board cut interest rates twice over the past month in an effort to prop up the financial markets until after the election.

The past few weeks alone have seen sweeping layoff announcements in virtually every sector of the economy: finance and brokerage (Merrill Lynch), defense (Raytheon, Pratt & Whitney), computers (Packard Bell, Applied Materials, Rockwell International), consumer products (Gillette, Toys 'R Us), retail (Dillards, Spartan Stores), farm equipment (Case, AGCO), auto parts (Dana, Tenneco), metals (Phelps Dodge, Weirton Steel), paper (International Paper), oil (Atlantic Richfield), to name just a few.

The lurch toward recession in the weeks and months after the election will have devastating implications for working people, who have barely been able to make ends meet during the long boom in Wall Street share values and corporate profits. Many will join the tens of millions already living near or below the poverty line. The impact of the bipartisan assault on welfare and other social programs will hit with even greater force under conditions of economic slump.

Social polarization

None of these issues can be broached because they all point to the most politically explosive question in America: the enormous growth of social inequality.

Economic disparities have widened even more rapidly under Bill Clinton and the Democrats than under the Republicans Reagan and Bush. From 1992 to 1997, the proportion of national income going to the top 20 percent increased from 46.9 percent to 49.4 percent, while every other income group saw its share decline. The poorest 20 percent received only 3.6 percent of national income, down from 3.8 percent when Clinton took

office.

A few additional statistics provide an indication of the fantastic concentration of wealth at the very top of American society:

Between 1994 and 1996, the average income of the top 20 percent of families with children was \$117,499--12.7 times the income (\$9,254) of the bottom 20 percent of families with children.

In Washington, DC--home to the political elite--the gap is even more pronounced. The income of the top 20 percent of families with children was \$149,508, twenty-eight times that of the bottom 20 percent (\$5,293).

The combined assets of the wealthiest three Americans (Bill Gates, Warren Buffett and John Walton) stand at \$94 billion. This is more than the combined assets of the bottom 50 million. Not counting personal residences, the financial assets of the three richest Americans is greater than the combined financial assets of the poorest 100 million.

The immense increase in the wealth of the most privileged layers in the US has come largely at the expense of the working masses. Definite policies have been implemented by Democrats and Republicans alike to sustain a climate of business 'confidence' and foster the unprecedented rise in share values on the stock market.

Corporate downsizing, unionbusting, wage-cutting, the proliferation of part-time and temporary labor have served to increase economic insecurity and deter workers from pressing for improvements in pay and benefits. Health-and-safety, anti-pollution and anti-trust enforcement have been drastically weakened. Social welfare programs have been gutted, forcing millions of poor people to accept jobs at poverty-level wages.

The tax burden has been increasingly shifted from corporations and wealthy individuals to working people. In 1979, for example, the tax rate for Americans with incomes of more than \$1 million was 47 percent. By 1994, the tax rate for this group had declined to 32 percent. In the 1950s, corporations paid 39 percent of US income taxes. By the end of the 80s corporations paid only 17 percent of the total US tax bill.

The majority of working class families have seen their living standards fall steadily for two decades, and this downward trend has continued under the Clinton administration. Economic insecurity dominates everyday life. More workers have experienced layoffs and downsizing during the booming 1990s than during previous recessions. Between 1991 and 1995, nearly 2.5 million Americans lost their jobs because of corporate restructuring.

Working class families are increasingly compelled to work more jobs and longer hours just to make ends meet. This year the average family worked an additional 240 hours more than in 1989--a full six weeks of additional labor--with no increase in income.

The low unemployment rate in the United States signifies not prosperity for the working class, but the prevalence of low-wage exploitation, especially of the younger generation. It is already a truism to say that the young workers of today are the first generation in American history to live worse than their parents. Millions of young people face deteriorating schools, low-paying jobs with few benefits, and a lifetime of economic insecurity.

Some 43 million Americans have no medical insurance--more than when Bill Clinton took office promising measures to alleviate the health

care crisis. Six million women and children have been cut from the welfare rolls over the past three years, not through any alleviation of poverty, which remains virtually unchanged, but through the elimination of the federal AFDC program.

For the vast majority of working people, the five years of financial boom have brought no lasting benefits, only greater debts. The personal savings rate fell to 2.1 percent in 1997, a 63-year-low, the worst showing for American families since 1934, in the depths of the Great Depression. Even before the onset of recession, more than a million American families filed for bankruptcy, the largest number in American history, and a record number of small businesses closed their doors.

Assault on democratic rights

Neither party will address this social crisis. Nor will they discuss the growing threat to democratic rights.

The political issue that has dominated the country for the past nine months--the investigation of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr and the Republican impeachment drive--has been virtually removed from the agenda of the 1998 election. Little more than a month ago, Republican congressional leaders released Starr's report and the videotape of Clinton's grand jury testimony, declaring that it was essential for the public to be informed of every detail of the president's sexual conduct. But now, when the public would presumably have the opportunity to register its response, both parties insist that the November 3 vote is not a referendum on impeachment.

The Republicans want to keep the impeachment drive in the background because they know it is deeply unpopular and could cost them the election. The Democrats want to downplay the matter because they fear that any broad appeal to public sentiment against impeachment, which is particularly strong among workers, could raise social issues for which they have no answers. Both sense that the suspicion and anger against Starr and the Republican Congress could become the starting point for the intervention of wider layers of working people into the political crisis, a prospect which the entire political establishment abhors.

The Starr investigation has been the spearhead of an escalating assault on civil liberties. Behind the independent counsel are extreme right-wing forces with direct links to the top leadership of the Republican Party, the media and the judiciary. Starr has run roughshod over legal principles such as lawyer-client privilege and argued that the exercise of First Amendment rights of free speech is a criminal activity when directed against a government prosecutor. Behind his inquiry is an attempt to carry through far-reaching changes in government institutions, in the direction of more authoritarian forms of rule.

The Republicans have worked in tandem with Starr, while Clinton and the Democrats have sought to temporize and accommodate their attackers. They prefer to conceal from the American people the extent of the assault on democratic rights rather than expose its social and political roots, because to do so would require laying bare the profoundly corrupt and anti-democratic character of the entire political system.

Crisis of the two-party system

The 1998 elections bring into sharp relief a protracted process of political decay. The two-party system has grown increasingly alienated from the concerns and interests of the great majority of the people, and the forms of bourgeois politics have become increasingly devoid of genuine democratic content. The more pervasive the role of corporate money in buying elections, the more hollow and reactionary the political content of the campaigns, the greater the chasm separating the working class from the two big business parties.

For a quarter century the policies of American big business have moved

ever further to the right, and both parties have adapted themselves accordingly. The Republicans have become the vehicle for extreme right-wing forces--Christian fundamentalists, militia groups, and market libertarians who demand the dismantling of all social programs, taxes on wealth and regulations on business. The more the corporate establishment has pursued social policies that are deeply unpopular, the more it has cultivated such ultra-right elements.

Over the past two decades the Democratic Party has embraced the right-wing policies demanded by big business and abandoned any program of reforms or concessions to the working class. In the present election, it is running as the party of fiscal austerity and boasting of presiding over the most lucrative bull market in Wall Street history.

On basic policy questions, there are virtually no significant differences between the two parties. This was underscored by a column which appeared October 30 in the *New York Times* jointly authored by former Republican Senator Warren Rudman and former Democratic Senator Sam Nunn. The column attacked the budget passed earlier this month, which included a token increase in spending for education, as a breach of budget discipline.

The proliferation of opinion polls, focus groups, attack ads and 'wedge' issues is symptomatic of the inability of either party to make an appeal to the masses of people. Another column in the *Times* summed up the anti-democratic outlook of both parties. Written by senior executives of a Republican polling company, it was a defense of the last minute decision to air Republican TV commercials in selected markets making reference to the Lewinsky scandal. Entitled 'You Don't Need Every Vote,' the column declared: 'In the heat of political campaigns, even the experts often forget a simple rule: you don't have to appeal to everyone to win. It's a waste of resources. What you need to do is secure your base--make sure core supporters turn out to vote--and appeal to swing voters...'

Both parties are committed to the policies that have fostered the growth of social inequality, and these policies have led to an erosion in their base of popular support. The alienation of the majority of Americans from the two-party system is demonstrated in the continuing decline in voter turnout, down to a record low of 17.4 percent in the 1998 primaries.

The masses of working people are politically disenfranchised. Their needs can find no expression in a system dominated by two parties that work within the parameters of the capitalist market and the profit system.

The gulf between the political elite and the masses has been underscored by one of the most significant political events of 1998: the stubborn public opposition to the Starr investigation. This demonstrates that even as the American political establishment moves ever further to the right, the working class is shifting to the left.

The public opposition to Starr has confounded the right-wing conspirators, the media, and the Democrats themselves. Expressed in this broad public sentiment is a distrust of the entire political establishment, a more critical attitude toward the media, and a growth of social discontent.

Workers need their own party

For the working class to defend its interests, its instinctive opposition to the parties and policies of big business must be transformed into a conscious political struggle against the capitalist system. This means, first and foremost, a rejection of the two-party system and the building a new political party of the working class.

The working class needs its own mass party in order to advance a socialist program, which rejects the socially destructive workings of the capitalist market and the subordination of humanity to the profit interests of a privileged elite. Only when the working class takes control of the productive forces of society will the conditions be created for economic life to be planned and developed in a democratic and scientific way, so as to serve human needs.

The Socialist Equality Party has been established to spearhead the struggle to create a genuine political alternative for the working class. Our party stands for the international unity of the working class. We reject all forms of chauvinism and nationalism, which seek to divide workers in America from their class brothers and sisters in Asia, Europe, Latin America or Africa. The global economic crisis demonstrates that the working class must have an international strategy to combat the anarchy of capitalism. Within the United States, this means opposition to all forms of racism and discrimination based on anti-immigrant bias or religious bigotry.

The SEP fights for social equality. The development of industry and modern technology make possible the age-old dream of the greatest thinkers in human history, the creation of a world free of want and exploitation.

Social equality and democratic rights are incompatible with the continued existence of the profit system. The SEP advocates the establishment of social ownership and democratic control over the enormous productive forces created by mankind. From mines and factories to computer programs, these are social products created by the cooperative effort of countless millions, yet they are under the control of a handful of speculators, bankers and corporate bosses. The reorganization of economic life under the democratic control of the producers will make possible the development of society for the benefit of all of its members, not just a privileged few.

See Also:

Voter turnout in US primaries hits record lows

[2 October 1998]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact