

The Senate impeachment trial: Democrats paralyzed as Republicans present their case against Clinton

The WSWWS Editorial Board
16 January 1999

In the first two days of the Senate impeachment trial, the House Republicans have established their line of attack—to portray Clinton’s ineffectual attempt to conceal his relationship with Monica Lewinsky as a crime against the “rule of law.”

The aim of the Republicans is to ensure that the trial proceeds within the framework established by the conspirators who organized the entrapment of Clinton in the first place. The issue to be considered is not the right-wing cabal that underlies the impeachment trial, but whether or not Clinton committed “perjury” and “obstruction of justice.”

The opening statements of House Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde, James Sensenbrenner, Asa Hutchinson and their cohorts were laced with charlatanry and deceit. In their hands, the politically-directed lawsuit of Paula Jones—which was orchestrated by the extreme right to destabilize the Clinton administration—has been repackaged as a “civil rights” case. Portraying Paula Jones as a champion of civil rights and justice for women, Sensenbrenner argued that the removal of Clinton was necessary to defend racial and gender equality. This pretense would be laughable were its purpose not so reactionary and menacing to the working class.

It is all the more preposterous given the fact that—as Sensenbrenner and everyone else in the Senate chamber were well aware—one of the Republican prosecutors, Georgia Rep. Bob Barr, and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott have been exposed as supporters of a white supremacist organization called the Council of Conservative Citizens.

The Republican strategy can only succeed as long as the Democrats refuse to expose the political conspiracy

behind the impeachment drive. Yet the White House and the Democrats have no intention of doing this and are therefore entirely on the defensive. In the first week of the trial they gave the Republicans an enormous political victory by voting unanimously for a bipartisan procedural resolution, thereby endowing the proceedings with precisely what the Republican plotters required—a cloak of constitutional legitimacy.

Now they have accepted the Republican framework within which Clinton is to be judged. The White House strategy, such as it is, rests on opposing the calling of witnesses and arguing that the offenses alleged in the articles of impeachment do not merit Clinton’s removal from office. This position plays directly into the hands of Clinton’s enemies. It allows them to posture as the upholders of the truth and the law, and portray the White House as a guilty party desperate to avoid a full airing of the facts.

The only effective and principled strategy for the White House would be to expose the fraudulent character of the Senate trial and denounce the impeachment drive for what it is—a political coup d’état. If the Democrats were serious about conducting a struggle, they would use the Republican demand for witnesses as an opening to call to the stand a whole series of people who have been involved in the political conspiracy: Kenneth Starr, Linda Tripp, Lucianne Goldberg, the Paula Jones lawyers, right-wing publisher Richard Mellon Scaife, to name a few.

But they reject this option out of hand, despite the overwhelming opposition of the public to the impeachment process. Clinton’s entire record, from the Whitewater provocation to the present, has been an unending series of maneuvers and concessions. The one

consistent thread has been the refusal of the White House and the Democratic Party to expose the machinations of the right wing and make an appeal to the American people to oppose their attack on democratic rights.

This is what enables the Republicans to proceed and escalate their offensive. They are now demanding that Clinton testify before the Senate, laying yet another legal and political trap for the White House. At the same time they are holding secret strategy sessions between Senate “jurors” and the House prosecutors.

The Republicans want to extend the trial as long as they can. They calculate that the longer it continues without any resistance from the Democrats, the more public opposition will erode.

Whatever the outcome of the impeachment trial, whether it ends in Clinton’s acquittal, conviction or resignation, the very fact that these proceedings are taking place testifies to an unprecedented political crisis and breakdown of democratic institutions in America.

A cabal of neo-fascist politicians, professional right-wing conspirators and gutter journalists has been able to entrap an elected president and leverage a sexual encounter into an impeachment and trial without any significant opposition from within the political establishment. This is a political fact with the most far-reaching implications.

Every major political crisis ultimately reflects profound social tensions and antagonisms. The impeachment crisis is no exception. It is an expression of the underlying social polarization in America, which has produced a political system thoroughly alienated from the broad masses of the people.

Under such conditions, the most reactionary forces are able to exert enormous political power, grossly disproportionate to their actual base of popular support. They exploit the political disorientation and disorganization of the broad masses of working people. These are the conditions which have given rise to the present spectacle in the Senate.

The Democrats speak in private about the neo-fascistic politics of the Republicans who are spearheading the drive for Clinton’s removal. The *Irish Times* on Friday reported an extraordinary statement by Democratic House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, who recently spoke to a group of feminist leaders about the impeachment campaign:

“This is not about politics,” he said. “This is about God. The Republican Party has been taken over by religious zealots. They don’t care what happens politically. They hate this guy. And they want to take him down even if it hurts them.”

What is the political significance of this statement? The Democratic Minority Leader is aware that both houses of Congress are controlled by extreme reactionaries who are not beholden to traditional bourgeois-democratic political norms, but are committed to the break-up of the existing constitutional system and the establishment of a right-wing authoritarian regime.

But Gephardt and the Democratic Party as a whole refuse to alert the American people about the nature of these forces. The Democrats have not only proven themselves incapable of opposing the right-wing assault, they are complicit in it. All of their efforts are concentrated on concealing from the American people the threat to their democratic rights. The media collaborates in this cover-up. Significantly, Gephardt’s comments were not published in the American press.

The critical issue facing the working class is not the defense of Clinton, but rather the defense of its democratic rights against an attack on the traditional institutions of bourgeois democracy from the right. The working class must oppose this assault, but it can do so only on the basis of an understanding that the offensive against democratic rights is an expression of the crisis of the entire social and political system.

It is not a matter of relying on the Democratic Party or seeking to revive the corrupt institutions of capitalist rule. The history of the twentieth century abounds with the tragic consequences of such a policy. The political conspiracy underlying the impeachment drive poses the necessity for the working class to build its own mass party to place society on truly democratic and egalitarian, that is, socialist, foundations.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact