Impeachment trial ends, but the conspiracy continues

The WSWS Editorial Board
13 February 1999

The vote to acquit President Clinton in the Senate impeachment trial was followed by a fusillade of self-congratulatory declarations, hymns to bipartisanship, compliments on the senators' sagacity and variations on the theme that the proceedings had once again demonstrated how well "the system works."

It is difficult to square these celebratory remarks with the facts. A political conspiracy, hatched by extreme right-wing and fascistic elements in and around the Republican Party, came very close to effecting a political coup d'etat.

Leading figures in two branches of the government—Congress and the judiciary—were deeply implicated in the witch hunt led by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr and the ensuing impeachment drive. Virtually no resistance to this conspiracy emerged from within the institutions of American bourgeois democracy, least of all the so-called "free press."

In the end, 50 senators from the majority party voted to convict and remove the president on one trumped-up article of impeachment, and 45 voted for the other.

The quasi-constitutional putsch would have succeeded were it not for the overwhelming opposition among the broad masses of the American people. In the given political circumstances, this popular opposition prevented the Senate from consummating the coup by convicting and ousting Clinton.

These facts are well known within the political establishment, but, by common agreement, never broached in public. How well this is understood is indicated by the remarks of Senator Charles Schumer during the closed-door deliberations in the final days of the Senate trial. According to excerpts published in the *New York Times*, Schumer alluded to the erosion of democratic institutions revealed by the impeachment crisis, admitting that "for the first time, I've had doubts about whether our Governmental institutions can withstand the rancorous currents of the present political climate."

The New York Democrat outlined in blunt terms the efforts of a "small group of lawyers and zealots in organizations like the Rutherford Institute [which financed the Paula Jones suit]" to manufacture a sex scandal and use it to bring down the Clinton administration. "What is so profoundly disturbing," he said, "is not that this small group of Clinton-haters hatched this plan. It's that this group--or any group equally dogmatic and cunning—came so close to succeeding." Schumer acknowledged that the plot would have succeeded were it not for the overwhelming opposition of the public. "The American people have saved us from ourselves," he said.

Such remarks, few and far between, were reserved for the inner sanctum of the Senate chamber, once it had been cleared of the public and the press. None of the scores of senators who made the post-trial rounds of TV interview programs—Schumer included—uttered a word about the right-wing conspiracy that underlay the impeachment process.

The stubborn refusal of the vast majority of Americans to succumb to the salacious gossip, half-truths and lies from Starr and his Republican allies has prompted these quarters to issue virulent denunciations of the people. Right-wingers from Pat Robertson to Robert Bork have condemned the public for being immoral and ignorant, and House Judiciary Chairman Henry Hyde has decried the "low standards" of the populace. The implication, broadly hinted by some, is that the people are unworthy of democracy, and that democratic rights are a political millstone best dispensed with.

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The methods of intimidation and frameup employed by Starr are indicative of the profoundly anti-democratic content of the political attack on the White House. If such methods are employed against the president of the US, what is in store for ordinary working people?

While the media and politicians seek to reassure the public that the conclusion of the impeachment process means the political system is healthy, the significant fact is that it happened at all. A crisis of this magnitude at the heart of the political system must be an expression of profound contradictions within society as a whole. The social antagonisms that gave rise to the political crisis--the unprecedented level of social inequality; the relentless assault on jobs and living standards; the growth of poverty, hunger, ill health and homelessness; the decay of public education--remain and grow more intense.

In the aftermath of the impeachment crisis these conflicts will exert themselves more openly and directly. They will be exacerbated by an increasingly unstable economic situation.

This entire episode constitutes a vast warning to working people in America and around the world. The government of the most powerful capitalist country has revealed itself to be fractured and virtually dysfunctional. What is touted as the world's most stable democracy has shown itself to be highly vulnerable to the methods of conspiracy and coup.

The majority party, which prosecuted the coup attempt, is dominated by extreme right-wing and neo-fascist forces. The Democratic Party, beginning with the Clinton administration, has shown itself to be incapable of mounting a serious defense, and unwilling to expose the forces that conspired against it.

A political system so diseased and corrupt cannot and will not cure itself. The major political lesson that emerges from the impeachment crisis is the extreme fragility of the democratic rights of working people under the existing social and political order.

The increasing social polarization which is an essential feature of capitalist development at the end of the 20th century is raising once again a fundamental lesson driven home in the most tragic form in the early part of the century. The triumph of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s demonstrated even then the fundamental incompatibility between capitalism and democratic rights. Recent events show that working people in America and throughout the world ignore this lesson today at their peril.

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