

The political crisis in the US: its implications for Europe and the world

Editorial of Gleichheit, journal of the Socialist Equality Party of Germany

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For five weeks the world held its breath awaiting the outcome of the American presidential election. The political crisis that developed at the summit of the last remaining superpower caused unrest in government offices around the world. At the same time, all those who perceive the global dominance of American-style capitalism to be a threat pricked up their ears.

Does George W. Bush's impending move into the White House mean the crisis is over? Such a conclusion would be as short-sighted as it is naive.

For the second time in two years, the most powerful political office in the world has become the subject of bitter conflict. In February of 1999 Bill Clinton was almost driven out of the White House due to what was, in fact, an insignificant sex scandal. Now the same extremist right-wing forces behind the impeachment attempt have prevented a counting of the votes in Florida, which, if carried out, would almost certainly have made Democrat Al Gore the new president instead of the Republican candidate George W. Bush.

It was not the people who decided upon America's highest government office, but the slender ultra-conservative majority of the US Supreme Court, who do not owe their office to any democratic process, but rather were appointed by former Republican presidents. Bush's success has the whiff of a coup d'état.

The crisis has been limited so far to the political elite; broader social layers have not yet become involved. But the ferocity with which the dispute was fought out can only be explained by the sharp tensions at the base of society. It would not be the first time in history that far-reaching social conflicts found their point of departure at the tip of society.

American society has never been as polarised as it is today. To a large extent, the economic successes of the last 20 years have benefited only the wealthiest section of the population, which has vastly enriched itself. In contrast, the great majority live either in poverty, or their existence, despite relative well-being, is so precarious that a significant drop in the stock market threatens economic repercussions that could plunge them into social ruin.

Bush and Gore both come from the social elite and their political programmes hardly differ. But there are important tactical differences.

Bush represents that part of the ruling class that wants to continue

unabated the past period's orgy of enrichment and is not prepared to accept any social concessions, even under conditions of a recession. Its "compassionate conservatism" is oriented less to the norms of the welfare state than to those of the soup kitchen. This is shown most clearly in its plan to substantially lower taxes, which will empty the treasury's coffers and benefit the very social elite that has already benefited from the redistribution of income and wealth of the past two decades.

The Bush camp senses that this programme cannot be carried out by democratic means, hence its attack on fundamental democratic rights. The right-wing majority of the Supreme Court halted the counting of tens of thousands of legally cast votes with the argument that there was no constitutional right for the people to elect their president; it is merely the exercise of a privilege. This is tantamount to abolishing one of the most basic democratic rights—universal suffrage.

In contrast to Bush, Gore speaks for those sections of the upper strata that evince greater concern for the long-term stability of society. He fears for the democratic institutions that have historically served the ruling class in America so well. But precisely because Gore and the Democratic Party as a whole are unreservedly for the preservation of bourgeois order, they are incapable of seriously opposing the attack on democratic rights by the right wing.

The dispute surrounding the election result followed the same pattern as the impeachment attempt: an aggressive, shameless and ruthless Republican right—which does not shrink from employing any dirty trick or peddling any demagogic lie—and a timid, defensive, self-abasing response from the Democratic Party—which above all endeavours to conceal the extent of the conflict from the broad public.

The concession speech in which Al Gore accepted defeat epitomised this attitude. Although in a court writ from his lawyers, he had stated just three days before that the demand of the Bush camp to end the recount in Florida contradicted "established law, the US Constitution and basic principles of democracy", he now denied that the crisis had any far-reaching significance. He appealed to God and patriotism, preached reconciliation ("what remains of partisan rancour must now be put aside") and assured Bush of his unlimited support: "Now is the time to recognise that that which unites us is greater than that which divides us."

Gore's unconditional surrender was aimed at dispelling all fears that the Democrats might appeal to broader social layers, become the focus of opposition to the new administration, and unsettle Wall Street. But

the appearance of reconciliation is deceptive.

On the one hand, the Republican right has no intention of accepting the olive branch offered by Gore. The Christian fundamentalists, opponents of abortion and other right-wing extremists with links stretching into the terrorist milieu supported Bush in the election campaign, which is why the overtly right-wing candidate Patrick Buchanan received so few votes. Now they expect their reward, and accordingly will pressure Bush to deliver.

On the other hand, the election revealed a deep division in American society that Gore's conciliatory rhetoric cannot dispel. The deep gulf running through the population between the North and the South, city and countryside, rich and poor, ethnic minorities and the white majority, men and women, must inevitably erupt on the surface of society.

America—where 40 million people do not have any health insurance, where workers have virtually no legal protection against being fired, where most households are highly indebted, and where old-age pensions, workers' incomes and family savings depend upon the unstable stock market—is a social powder keg. A major fall in the stock market or a recession would mean disaster for millions. It could be the spark that sets off an explosion.

Under conditions where the institutions of state are largely discredited, such an explosion has revolutionary implications. The new president does not possess the necessary authority to smooth over such sharp social conflicts. Millions who feel they have been robbed of their right to vote regard such an administration as illegitimate. And, with its partisan intervention for Bush, the Supreme Court has lost its authority as the state's highest institution of arbitration.

Even one of the high court judges arrived at this conclusion. In a dissenting minority finding, Justice John Paul Stevens wrote, "Although we may never know with complete certainty the identity of the winner of this year's Presidential election, the identity of the loser is perfectly clear. It is the Nation's confidence in the judge as an impartial guardian of the rule of law."

The political crisis at the centre of world capitalism is of immense international import. Considering the twentieth century as a whole, American capitalism served as the last bastion of the old order against which all of the great revolutionary movements foundered. Politically, the role of social democracy and Stalinism was crucial for the defeats of the revolutionary workers movement in the 1920s and 1930s. But in the long run, despite these successes, capitalism could not have saved itself had it not found economic support in America.

After the First and particularly after the Second World War, the big brother across the Atlantic helped a completely exhausted and discredited European capitalism back onto its feet. After the decay of Europe's colonial empires, America took over the role of world policeman, politically and militarily. Ideologically, the productivity of the American economy and the vitality of American society formed the strongest arguments against socialism, which had, at the same time, been discredited by Stalinism. When the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union collapsed 10 years ago, the rejoicing in ruling class circles over the victory of capitalism knew no bounds.

But such triumphalism was premature. The present political crisis heralds the intervention of a force in political events upon which nobody outside of the Trotskyist movement had counted: the American proletariat. The emergence of the US working class will influence the thinking of millions of workers and oppressed people throughout the world. It will cause them to view the question of a

socialist perspective in a new light, to consider critically the historical experience of the Soviet Union and to see Stalinism for what it really was: an attack on the fundamental principles of socialism.

This edition of *Gleichheit* contains two detailed contributions examining the political crisis in the US. *The Working Class and the 2000 US Elections*, published by the Socialist Equality Party in the US, analyses the social changes that found their political expression in the election crisis. *Lessons from History: the 2000 Elections and the New "Irrepressible Conflict,"* a lecture by David North, examines the crisis in historical perspective, in particular, in light of the last great revolutionary crisis in the US—the American Civil War of 1861-65. Numerous other articles dealing with the election crisis cannot be reproduced for reasons of space, but they can be read on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

With the return of the Republicans to the White House, the international climate will undoubtedly grow more contentious. Many editorials in the European, and particularly the German press have spoken along the following lines: "The new masters in Washington will behave more vigorously and will more readily act in keeping with their superpower status than their predecessors." This is not seen necessarily as a negative. "It is nevertheless good for Europe that George W. Bush won in America. His victory forces the European Union, itself an economic world power, to pull closer together politically in order to maintain its ground," declared a commentary in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

In view of the conflict opening up with the US, all of the political parties in Germany are moving closer together. This is the background to the cross-party enthusiasm for German culture and nationality, the political development upon which the domestic affairs section of *Gleichheit* focuses. This trend extends from the Christian Democrats' promotion of a "defining German culture" to the suddenly discovered love for Germany of the former Stalinists in the Party of Democratic Socialism. For the working class, this development promises nothing good. Rather, it heralds intensified social attacks at home and increasing militarism abroad. The response of German workers to the crisis in the US must take another form: solidarity and unity with the workers across the Atlantic.



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