

The world historical implications of the political crisis in the United States

Barry Grey
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Introduction

The past decade has been a period of sharp political crisis within the United States. It has presented a rather obvious anomaly that is generally ignored by bourgeois commentators: the coincidence of America's victory over its Cold War nemesis, its emergence as "the world's only superpower," and its enjoyment of an unprecedented business expansion, on the one hand, and a series of political eruptions, on the other, that have thrown into question the viability of bourgeois democratic institutions in the US.

How are these seemingly opposite phenomena to be explained? I think it is fair to say that outside of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the *World Socialist Web Site*, nobody has been able to provide a cogent answer. We, on the other hand, have been tracing and analyzing for an entire decade the mounting social, political and ideological contradictions of American capitalism. We were able, literally the moment the web site began making daily postings back in January of 1998, to meet the political and intellectual test of explaining the significance and delineating the underlying forces behind one of the most bizarre episodes in the history of the twentieth century—the Monica Lewinsky scandal and witch-hunt of Bill Clinton.

American politics over the past decade has resembled a badly scripted soap opera with plot inventions so improbable that, one would think, even the network moguls would balk. Finding one's way through such events, being able to make rational what certainly seems—and in some ways is—an irrational process, revealing its class underpinnings, tracing its emergence as a historical process, gleaning its political significance for the working class and for the socialist revolution—this is a critical challenge to Marxist theory.

How has the International Committee been able to develop a Marxist analysis of these events and on that basis articulate the independent standpoint and interests of the working class? Once again, one comes to the legacy of Trotskyism and, in particular, its conception of world socialist revolution and Marxist perspective.

There is no question that our ongoing work on the political crisis in the US has been grounded on, and could only develop from, the analysis of the world crisis of capitalism elaborated by the ICFI in the aftermath of the 1985-86 split with the British Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP).

The ICFI perspectives document of August 1988 focused on the universal, global transformations in political economy that underlay the crisis of the Stalinist regimes. It uncovered the crucial fact that the breakdown of the regimes most directly based on policies of national autarky was the initial expression of a general crisis of the nation-state system—a crisis that had been brought to a head by the globalization of capitalist production and exchange.

This profound analysis was entirely in the tradition of the method of

Marxist analysis whose supreme exponent was Leon Trotsky. It was the product of the political struggle waged by the ICFI to reorient the movement on the internationalist foundations of Marxism in opposition to the national opportunism that had come to dominate the WRP leadership.

In subsequent statements and documents the International Committee and the movement in the US deepened this basic analysis, stressing that the breakdown of the Stalinist regimes signified the collapse of the international equilibrium that had emerged from the Second World War. It heralded a period of international disequilibrium, which would inevitably bring in its wake a new eruption of inter-imperialist conflict and class struggle within each capitalist country.

This theoretical conquest of Marxism sensitized our movement to the growth of social and political contradictions within the US, the center of world capitalism. Thus, under conditions of America's seeming ascendancy—when the whole bourgeois world (and most of humanity) were dazzled by Uncle Sam's economic and military successes, the ICFI perceived the more profound processes of economic crisis and political decay.

There is an important methodological question that arises in relation to the development of perspective that I would like to touch on. Internationalism, correctly understood, is not a set of phrases or formulas that must, as a matter of protocol, be attached to every article or statement dealing with political or social developments in any given country. The relationship between the international and the national is, like every other category of thought, a dialectical one. A truly international and scientific approach makes possible and, one might say, finds its most concrete expression in the ability of a movement to analyze in depth the historical and social processes at work in a given country or part of the world.

Internationalism is anything but a license to dispense with a study of conditions within the US, Germany, Britain, Australia, Sri Lanka, or any other country. Rather, proceeding from world economy and world politics, the Marxist is able to arrive at a more or less comprehensive and accurate understanding of the conflation of international tendencies in the unique and contradictory form which they assume in one or another country. It makes it possible to reveal the tendencies of development and political issues posed to the working class of the given country, and thereby concretely establish the international character of the class struggle and the need for workers of all countries to base their policies on an international strategy.

It is not an accident that Trotsky, who more than any other figure of the twentieth century made the world socialist revolution the axis of his political life, was also the greatest practitioner of political analysis and prognosis in a whole series of specific countries. One need only mention Trotsky's writings on Britain, Germany, France, Spain, China, the US and, of course, Russia to establish the relation between international perspective and the development of program and strategy for the working class in particular countries.

To make an analogy, perhaps a crude one, to the physical sciences:

consider the medical specialist who devotes his efforts to treating disorders of the heart, or the lungs, the skin, etc. He can provide proper treatment only to the extent that his diagnoses are informed by an overall scientific understanding of the human body, including the brain, the complex and even antagonistic interrelationship of its parts, and the relation of those parts to the whole.

In this connection, a well-known passage from *In Defense of Marxism* comes to mind. Trotsky writes in “The ABC of Materialist Dialectics”: “The fundamental flaw of vulgar thought lies in the fact that it wishes to content itself with motionless imprints of a reality which consists of eternal motion. Dialectical thinking gives to concepts, by means of closer approximations, corrections, concretisation, a richness of content and flexibility, I would even say a succulence which to a certain extent brings them close to living phenomena. Not capitalism in general, but a given capitalism at a given stage of development. Not a workers' state in general, but a given workers' state in a backward country in an imperialist encirclement, etc.”

Beyond these general methodological considerations, it must be stated categorically that the breakdown of democracy in the United States is a world event of immense significance. It signals a new stage in the crisis of capitalism on a global scale. This fact flows from the unique position of American capitalism and its particular role within the world capitalist system in the twentieth century, a question to which I will return. First, however, I would like to outline the major features of the present crisis within the United States.

The 2000 election and its aftermath

The 2000 election in the United States is a historical watershed. It marks an irrevocable break with the forms and traditions of American democracy. Phrases such as “crossing the Rubicon” are appropriate in assessing the significance of the five-to-four Supreme Court ruling that handed the election to the Republican candidate, George W. Bush. Notwithstanding the attempts of the media and the political establishment—liberal no less than conservative—to pass over the events of November and December 2000 and “move on,” as though nothing of great significance had occurred, America has been changed in a fundamental way, and nothing will ever be the same in the United States, or, for that matter, the world.

It took five weeks after the November 7 vote for the political establishment to resolve the disputed presidential contest—itsself a development unprecedented in twentieth century American history. The final resolution was effected on an openly partisan and anti-democratic basis.

The Republican Party, with the general support of the mass media, campaigned for its candidate—who lost the national popular vote by more than 500,000 votes—to be declared the winner in the pivotal state of Florida (whose 25 electoral votes would determine the winner of electoral votes nationally) on the basis of an official margin of several hundred votes out of six million cast state-wide. This could be achieved only by blocking local election boards from carrying out manual recounts of ballots that had not registered a preference for president in the initial machine count. Such hand recounts are provided for by Florida law, and by election laws in every other state. They are by no means rare in American elections. Republican candidates in a number of electoral contests around the country asked for, and received, such recounts as a matter of course.

Indeed, within hours of the November 7 vote there were widespread reports of voting irregularities and fraud in Florida, involving thousands of Jewish voters in Palm Beach who, because of a confusing ballot, mistakenly voted for the anti-Semite Pat Buchanan, and African-Americans and Haitian-Americans in other areas who were kept from voting by police roadblocks, or told, incorrectly, that they were not properly registered to vote.

Florida is run by Governor Jeb Bush, the brother of the Republican president. The Secretary of State, Katherine Harris, who used her office to block local election boards from conducting recounts, was co-chair of George W. Bush's presidential election campaign in the state. The Republican-dominated state legislature early on said it was prepared to disregard an official count in favor of Democratic candidate Al Gore, should that occur, and appoint its own slate of electors pledged to Bush.

Yet the media generally treated any suggestion of political bias or manipulation on the part of the Florida authorities as partisan slander. It is worth noting that they were joined in this by the cult around Jack Barnes known as the Socialist Workers Party. After publishing a series of issues of the *Militant* in November and December that said nothing—literally nothing—about the election and its aftermath, Barnes and company published an article in the *Militant* dated January 8 that accused Democratic candidate Gore of attempting to steal the election and characterized Katherine Harris as the victim of an “anti-woman” attack mounted by the liberals.

From the moment it became clear that the presidential election would remain in dispute after November 7, a basic question was posed before the American political and corporate establishment. What considerations would guide its efforts to resolve the impasse? Would it proceed from the need to find a democratic resolution—i.e., one that corresponded to the will of the electorate, as best as that could be determined—or would it proceed from other considerations?

Only a few weeks prior, Washington had not only cheered on, but also helped organize a stage-managed popular revolt in Serbia, replete with a storming of government offices, in the name of the sanctity of the ballot. But when it came to its own electoral crisis, the American ruling elite from the outset evidenced no similar concern for the principle of popular sovereignty.

In the course of the struggle over the Florida vote, the Republican Party organized a mob attack on election officials in Miami Dade County that had the intended effect of convincing them to shut down their recount of disputed ballots. It made direct appeals to the US military to oppose the recounts requested by the Democrats and sanctioned by the Florida Supreme Court.

In the end, five right-wing Republican US Supreme Court justices, who comprise the majority of that unelected body at the apex of the capitalist state, decided the election by overriding the Florida high court, halting the recounts and thereby suppressing votes. They cited as their legal justification an overtly anti-democratic interpretation of the Constitution, one that flies in the face of the general trajectory of constitutional jurisprudence concerning the franchise over the previous 130 years. The US Supreme Court declared, in its majority, that the American people had no constitutional right to vote for the president.

Since the Supreme Court ruling and Democratic candidate Al Gore's craven concession speech, the most significant political fact has been the virtual absence of protest from the liberal establishment, including the Democratic Party, the AFL-CIO trade unions, the civil rights organizations, academia and the press. With a few scattered and timid exceptions, the entire spectrum of official politics and opinion has rapidly fallen into line, accepting the theft of the election with barely a whimper.

Among the few articles evincing some degree of awareness was a column published two weeks ago by Robert Kuttner, a liberal economist and political commentator. Decrying the Democrats' prostration in the face of the electoral fraud and their refusal to seriously oppose the extreme right-wing cabinet being assembled by Bush, Kuttner wrote: “It's like a country after a bloodless coup d'etat. Daily life goes on. The tame media make soothing noises. Rituals of democracy endure. The out-party simulates opposition, toothlessly.”

The United States has not been transformed into a dictatorship. But its ruling elite has embarked on a course that must lead either to authoritarian

rule of a fascist type, or social revolution. The 2000 election marks the onset of a revolutionary crisis in the global bastion of capitalism.

The events of the past 11 weeks have demonstrated, moreover, that there exists within the bourgeois establishment no significant constituency for the defense of democratic rights, even in the circumscribed form they inevitably assume within the framework of bourgeois democracy. As the struggle over the Florida election unfolded in November and early December, the essential political question that arose was the following: How far was the ruling elite prepared to go in breaking with democratic norms? As the denouement revealed, the answer was: Very far indeed! Further, in fact, than we could have predicted.

That is not to say that these events have taken the Socialist Equality Party or the International Committee of the Fourth International by surprise. On the contrary, the SEP and our international organ, the *World Socialist Web Site*, have for many years been carefully following the signs of crisis and decay within the institutions of bourgeois democracy in the US. One could point to any number of articles and statements published over the past five years analyzing the growing chasm between the political establishment and the popular masses, the intensification of political warfare within the corporate and political elite, and the increasing recourse of powerful sections of the ruling class to methods of conspiracy and coup. At the height of the anti-Clinton impeachment crusade, in December of 1998, the *WSWS* published a statement with the prescient headline "Is America drifting towards civil war?" [<http://www.wsws.org/news/1998/dec1998/imp-d21.shtml>]

In light of recent events, it is instructive to quote certain passages from that statement. It began as follows:

"In the aftermath of Saturday's vote to impeach President Bill Clinton, it has suddenly become clear that the United States is in the throes of a political crisis of historic dimensions. Even the media—which throughout the year has covered the turmoil in Washington as if it were some sort of uproarious joke—is beginning to recognize that what is happening is deadly serious, and may have deadly consequences.

"The most striking aspect of the debate that preceded the vote to impeach was its vitriol and viciousness. To find historical precedents for the bitterness of the political infighting one would have to go back, not simply to the last impeachment of a president in 1868, but beyond that—to the years that led up to the outbreak of civil war in 1861. In the aftermath of the vote, Rep. Richard Gephardt, the Democratic minority leader, warned that politics in the United States were approaching the level of violence."

The statement continued: "The crisis in Washington arises from an interaction of complex political, social and economic processes. Bourgeois democracy is breaking down beneath the weight of accumulated and increasingly insoluble contradictions. The economic and technological processes associated with the globalization of the world economy have undercut the social conditions and class relationships upon which the political stability of America has long depended.

"The most significant aspects of this erosion are the proletarianization of vast strata of American society, the decay in the size and economic influence of the traditional middle classes, and the growth of social inequality, reflected in the staggering disparities in the distribution of both wealth and income. The United States is the most unequal of the major industrialized nations, with a far greater gap between the financial elite and the rest of the population than 25 or even 50 years ago...

"The unprecedented degree of social inequality imparts terrific tensions to society. There is a vast chasm between the wealthy and the working masses that is hardly mediated by a middle class. The intermediate layers which once provided a social buffer, and which constitute the main base of support for bourgeois democracy, can no longer play that role...

"The strength of the Republican right consists in this: it represents, more consistently and more ruthlessly than any other bourgeois political faction,

the requirements of the American financial elite. The radical right knows what it wants and is prepared to ride roughshod over public opinion in order to get it. The Republicans are not playing by the normal constitutional rules, while the Democrats wring their hands as helpless and passive onlookers.

"If the Republicans express the brutality of class relations in America, their bourgeois opponents in the Democratic Party, by contrast, embody a flaccid and demoralized liberalism, whose watered-down perspective of reform has been entirely discarded by the ruling class."

From the outset of the 2000 electoral impasse, the SEP and the *WSWS* explained that the crisis arising from the November 7 vote was a continuation and culmination of the breakdown of democratic institutions at the heart of the anti-Clinton scandals and the impeachment drive of 1998 and early 1999. Nevertheless, we could not anticipate prior to election day that these processes would assume the sharp and definitive form that they assumed in the 2000 election. When events take such an unexpectedly explosive turn, they indicate that the contradictions building up within society have reached a point of enormous tension. Such turning points in history embody the dialectical point of discontinuity—the transformation of quantitative changes into a qualitative leap—the emergence of a new reality from out of the old forms.

The incoming Bush administration exemplifies in a rather perfected form the crisis of bourgeois rule in the United States. Bush himself is a political and intellectual cipher who subsumes within his own persona the traits of the social layer that owes its economic success and social prominence to the speculative boom of the past two decades—a boom that has been based on a ruthless assault on the working class and a staggering growth in corruption and parasitism. Ignorant, short-sighted and grasping, this layer has reinforced those sections of the corporate and financial elite that demand the elimination of all restrictions on the accumulation of private wealth and the realization of profit.

Bush's cabinet is a combination of multimillionaire operatives from previous Republican administrations and corporate America, and extreme-right ideologues who represent the fascistic wing of the Republican Party—the Christian right, the gun lobby, the militia elements, with their ties to white supremacist and terrorist forces. It is a highly unstable administration that is remarkably insensitive to the social contradictions building up beneath it.

If one set out to select a hypothetical government that would embody the extremely narrow social base of official politics and the chasm that separates it from the masses, one could hardly do better than the personnel chosen by Bush and his mentors.

Bush and his political caretaker, Vice President Richard Cheney, (both of whom are multimillionaire oil men), are proceeding with their pro-business agenda as though they had won an overwhelming popular mandate. They are determined to impose the massive tax cut for the wealthy that was the centerpiece of Bush's election campaign. Their nominee to head the Justice Department is a Christian fundamentalist spokesman who has campaigned for a constitutional amendment to ban abortions, and is on record opposing school desegregation. Their nominee to head the Department of the Interior champions property rights over conservation, and their nominee to head the Department of Health and Human Services made his name in the drive to destroy welfare and undermine public education by means of private school vouchers.

It is an administration that balances between corporate America and the deranged middle-class elements that constitute the active "base" of the Republican Party. Insofar as its economic policies, especially under conditions of a developing recession, are bound to disappoint its middle-class supporters, it is obliged to keep its fascistic partisans in a state of excitement by engaging in provocations of various sorts, both at home and abroad. Hence the *Wall Street Journal's* call for Independent Counsel Robert Ray to indict Clinton for his Monica Lewinsky sins after Clinton

leaves office.

This trajectory is bound to provoke enormous upheavals. The mood of the broad masses is quite at odds with the creed of avarice and social reaction that animates the incoming government. The November 7 election revealed a society deeply split, with broad sections of the working population moving in a direction opposite to the laissez-faire nostrums promoted by the political and corporate elite over the past two decades.

The popular vote was extremely close, but if one combines Gore's vote with that of Green Party candidate Ralph Nader, the margin won by the candidates representing—broadly speaking, and taking into account the extremely narrow framework of American politics—a liberal or “left” orientation was some 3.5 million, or about 3.5 percent of the votes cast. Moreover, Gore's vote was concentrated in the major urban and industrial centers of the Northeast, the Midwest and the West Coast. Gore won a majority of working class votes, and an overwhelming majority of the votes cast by the most oppressed sections of workers—blacks, Hispanics, immigrants—who turned out in unusually large numbers in many cities.

Bush's vote was concentrated in the more rural and, generally speaking, backward sections of the country—such as the South and the upper-Midwest. The electoral map itself presents a picture of a nation starkly divided.

The underlying social polarization is reflected in all of the political institutions of the country. The Republican majority in the House of Representatives represents one of the smallest margins in the history of that legislative branch. The Senate is divided 50-50. The Supreme Court is split 5-4 between an extreme right majority and a more moderate minority.

While there was no great outpouring of working class support for Gore's timid and half-hearted campaign, there was, especially among the most oppressed sections of the population, an expression of deep-going opposition to Bush and the Republicans. Notwithstanding Gore's many attempts to reassure the ruling elite that he was a partisan of “small government” and fiscal conservatism, the Democratic candidate did at various points attempt to present himself as the advocate of the “people against the powerful” and the defender of “working families” against “big oil,” the HMOs, the drug companies, the insurance monopolies, “big tobacco” and other sections of big business. He criticized Bush's tax program as a windfall for the rich.

Within the framework of a two-party system and a corporate-controlled media that exclude any direct or open expression of the aspirations of the working class, the election did, necessarily in a distorted way, have the character of a referendum over the distribution of the nation's wealth. And a significant majority of those who voted—almost half of eligible voters stayed away from the polls—indicated their opposition to the increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of the financial oligarchy.

There were other unmistakable expressions of opposition to the Republican right. Anger over the impeachment conspiracy was reflected in the victory of Hillary Clinton, by a wide margin, in the race for senator from New York. Incumbent Republicans who played prominent roles in the impeachment drive were defeated in Florida and California.

Despite the relentless efforts of the media to blackguard Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky affair, the indignation over the assault on democratic rights in the impeachment episode remains. In a post-election poll, Bill Clinton tied the Pope as the man most respected by Americans, and Hillary Clinton won by a wide margin in the category of “most respected woman.” While such polls reflect political illusions, they also register a definite mood of defiance.

The assault on democratic rights that has culminated in a stolen election will continue to reverberate within the working class. It will not be forgotten that the disputed result in Florida occurred in a state where tens of thousands of ballots, mainly in Democratic precincts with large populations of blacks and other minorities, were, for one reason or

another, thrown out.

One thing that has emerged from the crisis over the 2000 election is an aspect of the mechanics by which the electoral process devalues the input of the working class and gives disproportionate weight to the votes of more affluent layers of the population. It just so happens that the oldest, least accurate and worst maintained voting apparatuses exist in working class centers, insuring that many more votes cast by workers will be discarded than those cast by their “betters.”

Florida is also, as one of the Deep South states of the former Confederacy, a state with a history not only of slavery in the nineteenth century, but Jim Crow apartheid in the twentieth. There are many thousands of Florida voters who vividly remember what happened to an early pioneer of voting rights for blacks in Florida, Harry T. Moore. He and his wife were killed when their home was dynamited in 1951.

The legacy of these struggles for democratic rights—very much concentrated in the right to vote and have one's vote counted—is deeply embedded in the popular consciousness. Under the conditions emerging in the United States today, it has a profoundly revolutionary content.

These issues of democratic rights will, moreover, acquire an increasingly social and class significance as they merge with the issues of jobs, wages, working conditions, social benefits, and economic inequality under conditions of deepening economic crisis. There are already signs that the past quarter century of corporate deregulation, sanctified by the secular religion of “the market,” is culminating in a debacle. One notable example is the collapse of the electricity and natural gas system in California.

The stage is being set for an economic and social crisis that will rapidly puncture illusions in the capitalist market, at a time when all of the political institutions of American bourgeois rule stand in disrepute. The US Congress had already discredited itself in advance of the 2000 elections as a result of the impeachment witch-hunt. Now the stench of election fraud hangs over the presidency, and the Supreme Court's pretensions to supra-class and supra-party neutrality have been shattered.

The very fact that the electoral impasse had, in the end, to be resolved by the high court is indicative of the ferocity of the contradictions tearing apart the political system. We have written and spoken of the parallels between the Court's ruling of December 12, 2000 and the infamous Dred Scot decision of 1857. At that time the legislative and executive branches of the federal government proved incapable of resolving the issue of slavery because the divisions between North and South had become so intense. Increasingly they appealed to the Supreme Court to settle the conflict. When the Court did so, in a sweeping decision in favor of the slavocracy, it discredited itself for generations to come and plunged the country on the road to civil war. Similarly, in its ruling last December, the US high court adjudicated a raging conflict between different factions of the ruling class in favor of the most reactionary sections, seizing on the crisis as an opportunity to deliver a blow against democratic rights.

The seemingly reckless manner in which the dominant sections of the ruling elite have undermined the credibility of their own institutions is a phenomenon worth pondering. In its own way it testifies to a turn toward new methods of rule. Legitimacy is less important to a ruling elite that is moving toward dictatorship.

In an article entitled “The Republican right prepares for violence,” [<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/nov2000/elec-n24.shtml>] the WSWWS took note of an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* that bore the provocative headline “The Squeamish GOP?” The *Journal* editorial called on the Republicans to forego all traditional constitutional restraints in suppressing the vote challenges in Florida and seizing control of the White House. It demanded, among other things, that the Republican-dominated Florida legislature defy the state Supreme Court and name its own presidential electors. It advised the Bush camp that extreme measures in gaining the presidency would be “the best preparation for what may lie

ahead,” and concluded ominously: “It is Governor Bush’s nature to extend the velvet glove, but he will be much more successful if he and his party can show that within it there is some steel.”

The *WSWS* commented: “If the campaign the Republicans are waging to gain the White House begins to resemble a covert operation akin to those mounted by the CIA against US imperialism’s liberal and leftist opponents in Latin America—for example, in Chile—then it must follow that an option under serious consideration is the Pinochet solution.”

Those sections of the ruling class for whom the *Wall Street Journal* speaks may very well, however, be making the dangerous error of mistaking the flabby opposition of the liberals and Democrats for the opposition they will face from the working masses. One need only pose the question: if you remove from the ideological arsenal of the American ruling class its traditional banner of popular sovereignty, secured by means of the ballot box, what is left to reconcile the masses with the status quo?

The breakdown of bourgeois democracy in the US is not simply, or even primarily, an American question. It is the most advanced expression of the crisis of world capitalism. In the short term, ruling classes all over the world must contend with a government that will be inclined, even more than its predecessor, to pursue a course of unilateralism and militarism. Can any serious observer doubt that an unstable regime that has come to power on the basis of illegality and provocation will employ similar methods against its international rivals—friend and foe alike?

The Bush administration is committed to scrapping the anti-ballistic missile treaty and building a missile defense system—a course that will immediately destabilize international relations and fuel a new arms race. It is presently scouring the globe—from Colombia and Venezuela to Iraq—in search of a likely target for military attack.

The greater the economic and political crisis of American imperialism, the more it will seek to foist the brunt of its crisis onto its European and Asian rivals. This axiom of the twentieth century will apply with even greater force in the twenty-first.

To consider more deeply the global significance of the political crisis in the United States in the new century, it is necessary to reassess the historical role of American capitalism in the century that has passed.

American capitalism and the world socialist revolution

In considering the fate of the socialist revolution in the twentieth century, the Trotskyist movement has always, necessarily and correctly, placed emphasis on the subjective factor, i.e., the betrayals of Stalinism and social democracy and the crisis of revolutionary leadership. In such monumental works as *Lessons of October* and *Strategy and Tactics in the Imperialist Epoch* Trotsky stressed the critical role of leadership, perspective, strategy and tactics in the modern world, pointing out that a matter of days, or even hours, can, under certain conditions, spell the difference between revolution and counterrevolution, and consequently shape the course of world events for an entire period.

Certainly after the Russian Revolution, the role of Stalinism was decisive in aborting the development of the world socialist revolution. Trotsky was obliged to expose the mistakes, and later the crimes, of the Stalin clique, trace them to their political and ultimately their social roots, and elaborate a perspective and a strategic and tactical orientation for the working class to overcome the obstacles thrown in its path by both capitalism and capitalism’s bureaucratic agencies within the labor movement.

We take nothing back from the immense theoretical and political legacy left by Trotsky to his generation and future generations, at the center of which was the defense of proletarian internationalism against Stalinism and all other forms of national opportunism. This legacy remains the indispensable foundation for the workers movement today.

But as all great Marxists have understood, the relationship between objective and subjective in history is highly complex and dialectical.

Ultimately, the subjective factor can contribute to historical progress only insofar as it expresses in conscious form the objectively progressive tendencies of social and historical development. In the epoch of capitalist decline and socialist revolution, the objectively revolutionary role of the working class can be realized only if and when that class, or at least its most advanced layers, becomes conscious of its revolutionary role and the historical necessity embodied in that role.

In revolutionary politics, the party of the working class must always base its policies and tactics on a scientific appreciation of the objective course of development and the real contradictions of world economy and world politics. This is how Trotsky summed up the relationship between the objective and subjective factors in his famous 1924 speech published at the time under the title “The Premises for the Proletarian Revolution” and later published by the Fourth International under the heading “Perspectives of World Development”:

“We analyze the conditions of development as they take shape behind our backs and independently of our will in order, after having understood them, to act upon them through our active will, i.e., the will of the organized class.

“These two sides of our Marxist approach to history are linked most closely and indissolubly.... The whole art of revolutionary politics consists in correctly combining objective analysis with subjective action. And in this is the gist of the Leninist school.”

Bearing this relationship in mind, when one considers the overall failure of the socialist revolution in the twentieth century, one is obliged to ask: what objective force or forces in the final analysis provided capitalism and its agencies within the workers movement the means to withstand the repeated revolutionary assaults of the working class?

We would contend that the basic answer to this question is American capitalism. The emergence of American capitalism as the dominant economic power at the beginning of the century, and its even greater global hegemony after World War II—a dominance far beyond that previously exercised by British imperialism—bolstered by the colossal scale of the resources at the disposal of Wall Street and Washington imparted to US capitalism a unique role: it was *the* bulwark against the world socialist revolution. If the twentieth century was, above all, the century of October and the eruption of world socialist revolution, it could also with some justification be called—and here we must grant the old reactionary Henry Luce his due—the “American century.” But then one would have to add that the events at the very end of the century signify that the “American century” is well and truly over, and that the breakdown of American stability must signify a crisis of the world capitalist system of unprecedented dimensions.

As the great Marxists—Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg—understood, the eruption of world war in 1914 was the predatory expression of the contradiction between capitalist property relations and the nation state system on the one hand and the development of the productive forces on the other. It signified that, in a historical sense, capitalism had exhausted its progressive role and an epoch of wars and revolutions had begun. This perspective was fully confirmed by the October Revolution.

This did not mean, however, that world capitalism had completely consumed its internal resources. As it transpired, the overthrow of bourgeois rule was a more extended, contradictory, complex and tragic process than any of the great Marxist revolutionaries could have anticipated. In the final analysis, the staying power of capitalism must be linked to the power for the greater part of the century of its most dynamic outpost—the United States.

The final third of the nineteenth century was above all the period of the consolidation of the nation state system of Europe and the emergence of European imperialism, with its system of colonial possessions in Africa and Asia. It was, at the same time, the period of the emergence of the socialist working class as an international force. The debacle of World

War I was the expression of the crisis of world capitalism, but, most immediately, it signified the breakdown of European capitalism.

This event and the Russian Revolution that issued from it coincided with the global emergence of the United States as a rising—indeed, as the world's most powerful—industrial and financial power. The US staked its claim to world supremacy with its entry into the war in April of 1917. The US entered the war within a few weeks of the February Revolution in Russia. Thus, at the very moment that America assumed the role of arbiter of Europe's destiny, it simultaneously took on the task of leading the camp of international counterrevolution.

Of all the leaders of the October Revolution, Trotsky most clearly and firmly grasped the immense significance of the emergence of the United States. His appreciation of this fact was intimately bound up with his profound understanding and defense of an international perspective.

For him, the new role of the United States, in particular the new relationship between the US and Europe, assumed decisive importance in the aftermath of the defeat of the German revolution in October of 1923. Here again, one sees the complex and dialectical interplay of subjective and objective factors. The capitulation of the German party, due in great measure to the misleadership of the epigones then at the head of the Russian party, dramatically altered the constellation of political and class forces in Europe and internationally, giving capitalism in Europe a new lease on life and driving back the working class. This defeat enabled the United States to bring to bear its massive resources—both economic and political—in stabilizing—albeit temporarily—European capitalism. It did so, as Trotsky explained, not only by means of loans and credits, but, no less importantly, by creating the conditions for a revival of European social democracy. It did so to its own advantage, and at the expense of its European rivals.

Allow me to cite a few further passages from Trotsky's 1924 speech, in which he characterized the international role of the United States:

“Comrades, whoever wishes or tries today to discuss the destiny of Europe or of the world proletariat without taking the power and significance of the USA into account is, in a certain sense, drawing up a balance sheet without consulting the master. For the master of the capitalist world—and let us firmly understand this!—is New York, with Washington as its state department.

“There is no enemy of Bolshevism more principled and more savage than American capitalism. Hughes [US secretary of state, 1921-25] and his policy are not accidental whims. This is not a caprice: this is an expression of the will of the most highly concentrated capitalism in the world, which is now entering the epoch of open struggle for its autocratic rule over the planet. It comes into collision with us, if only because the paths through the Pacific lead to China and Siberia. The thought of colonizing Siberia is one of the most alluring thoughts of American imperialism. But a guard stands there. We hold the monopoly of foreign trade. We possess the socialist beginnings of economic policy. This is the first obstacle in the way of the autocracy and undivided rule of American imperialism.... Everywhere, in Europe as well as in Asia, imperialist Americanism is colliding with revolutionary Bolshevism. These, comrades, are the two principles of modern history.”

Summing up the new balance of power in the world, Trotsky went on to characterize US policy toward Europe with the famous phrase: “It wants to put capitalist Europe on rations.”

An essential component of America's bid for global autocracy was its ideological and political role in corrupting the labor movement of both Europe and America, by fostering the growth of national reformist bureaucracies and promoting an image of what Trotsky called “pacifist reformism.”

“American imperialism,” he said, “is in essence ruthlessly crude, predatory, in the full sense of the word, and criminal. But owing to the special conditions of American development, it has the possibility of

draping itself in the toga of pacifism.”

European social democracy, in the immediate aftermath of the defeat of the German revolution, became the apostle of Americanism. It was able, for a time, to position itself in opposition to the European bourgeoisie by espousing the gospel according to Woodrow Wilson.

In the same speech Trotsky expounded on the historically unparalleled corruption of the US labor movement, attributing this political phenomenon ultimately to the enormous material resources at the disposal of the American bourgeoisie:

“How is it possible to realize now, in the second quarter of the twentieth century, this standardized conciliationism in practice, after the imperialist slaughter in which the USA participated, and after the great experiences of the workers of all countries? The answer to this question is to be found in the power of American capital, to which nothing in the past can compare...

“It is this power that permits the American capitalists to follow the old practice of the British bourgeoisie: fatten the labor aristocracy in order to keep the proletariat shackled. They have entered into this practice to such a degree of perfection as the British bourgeoisie would never even have dared to consider.”

The Achilles heel of American imperialism, as Trotsky went on to explain, was that its rise to supremacy occurred in the period of the overall decay of world capitalism, and that US capitalism, as it expanded, was compelled to subsume within it all of the contradictions of a decadent system.

Contained in this speech are the germs of an analysis of some of the most fundamental dynamics of the socialist revolution in the twentieth century. It is particularly important, in light of recent events, to note that the ability of American imperialism to present itself to the world as a force for peace and democracy, to delude and disorient the working class and keep it shackled to reactionary labor bureaucracies, was dependent on America's vast economic reserves and its position of global hegemony.

The intimate connection between Trotsky's profound conception of the international character of the socialist revolution, centered on his insistence on the primacy of international program and strategy, and his appreciation of the world-historical role of American capitalism emerges clearly in his pivotal work of 1929: *The Draft Program of the Communist International—A Criticism of Fundamentals*. Following his deservedly famous opening section, in which he lays down the principle of socialist internationalism as the cornerstone of perspective, strategy and tactics—counterposing it to Stalin's national socialist dogma of “socialism in one country”—Trotsky moves immediately to the question of the new global role of American imperialism.

He considers the failure of the official Comintern draft program to seriously consider the implications of America's newly established supremacy over Europe to be a sharp expression of the program's essentially nationalist orientation. He writes:

“America's *new* role in Europe since the capitulation of the German Communist Party, and the defeat of the German proletariat in 1923, has been left absolutely unevaluated. No attempt at all has been made to explain that the period of the ‘stabilization,’ ‘normalization,’ and ‘pacification’ of Europe as well as the ‘regeneration’ of the social democracy, has proceeded in close material and ideological connection with the first steps of American intervention in European affairs.”

This failure to analyze the significance of the new global role of the US, Trotsky explains, prevents the authors of the draft from accounting on the one hand for the temporary restabilization of European capitalism under the political aegis of reformism, and, on the other, for the enormous intensification of inter-European conflicts and class struggles both in Europe and America that must inevitably arise from the pressure of American imperialism.

The power of American capitalism was immense, Trotsky explained, but more powerful were the contradictions of world capitalism, which found a

concentrated expression within the United States itself. The collapse of American capitalism in 1929-31 vindicated this analysis, but once again, the subjective factor of revolutionary leadership, already enormously damaged by the triumph of the Stalinist clique within the Soviet Union, proved inadequate to meet the challenge of a new period of crisis and revolutionary confrontation.

The price which the international working class and, indeed, all of humanity paid for the degeneration of the Soviet regime was the triumph of fascism in Europe and the carnage of World War II. It is not the purpose, and it is well beyond the scope of this report, to provide a detailed analysis of the class struggle over the course of the century that has passed. Suffice it to say that American capitalism established over the ashes of Europe and Asia a hegemonic position in the postwar period far greater than the dominance it had achieved in the aftermath of the first world slaughter.

American capitalism essentially rebuilt world capitalism, and was obliged to take upon its shoulders far more directly than before the defense—economically, politically and militarily—of the profit system throughout the world. Our movement correctly criticized the Pabloite revisionists' formulation of postwar reality as the conflict between the two superpowers—the US and the Soviet Union. In the camp of those who were abandoning the principles of Trotskyism, this formulation expressed an adaptation to the surface phenomena of the Cold War, which became the theoretical basis for an adaptation and capitulation to Stalinism.

Nevertheless, there was an element of truth underlying this view, an element that was abstracted by the Pabloites from its historical roots, presented in an entirely one-sided manner, and thereby falsified. But certainly the emergence of the United States as the global policeman of imperialism, bastion of anticommunism and leader of the so-called “Free World” reflected its singular role as the indispensable bulwark against world revolution.

The demands of such a role were too great for any capitalist nation state to fulfill, and by the 1960s the symptoms of deepening crisis within the US were mounting. A whole host of signposts could be cited: the assassination of Kennedy in 1963, the violent struggles associated with the movement of blacks for civil rights, the eruption of the ghettos across the country, the growth of militant labor struggles. The sharpening of social struggles was bound up with the intensifying contradictions of American capitalism on the world arena.

The collapse of the Bretton Woods system in 1971 was a major turning point, expressing at a fundamental level the erosion of America's world position. The weakening of American hegemony found two further convulsive expressions in that decade: the collapse of the Nixon administration and the defeat of the United States in Vietnam.

As we explained in our international perspectives document of 1988, world capitalism was able to survive the wave of crises and revolutionary upheavals that beset it from 1968 to 1975 largely thanks to the services of Pabloite liquidationism. But the United States was never able to regain the position of unchallenged world supremacy that it had enjoyed in the decade or so that followed the Second World War. Its weakened world position found expression in the turn by the ruling elite to policies of class warfare within the US. The ability of the Reagan administration and those that followed to effect a dramatic redistribution of wealth from the working masses to the most privileged social layers and place American capitalism on an economic war footing in the global struggle for markets and sources of cheap labor was entirely dependent on the services of a slavish labor bureaucracy.

In breaking from the past policies of social reform and relative class compromise, American capitalism was responding not only to its weakened international position, but also to the demands flowing from the profound changes in world economy that have come to be known as globalization.

These same processes, as we have explained, sounded the death knell for the autarkic regimes presided over by the Stalinist bureaucracies, and the collapse of the Soviet Union gave American capitalism a short-term infusion of optimism and economic growth.

However, the ostensible successes of American capitalism of the past two decades, both at home and abroad, have come at an enormous price. They truly constitute a Pyrrhic victory. For the American ruling class has been systematically undermining the political and ideological foundations of its rule, creating a political system grotesquely alienated from the broad masses of the population and resting on an ever more narrow and unstable social base. The events surrounding the 2000 election are the culmination of a protracted process of social polarization and political decay.

The decline in the world position of American capitalism and the crisis of US democracy

A hallmark of all revisionism is its exclusion of any possibility of a serious crisis of American imperialism. This political trait goes back to the origins of Pabloism, which more or less wrote off the prospect of a social crisis in the US assuming revolutionary dimensions and consigned the American working class, rather than Stalinism or social democracy, to the dustbin of history.

This took perhaps its crudest form in the thesis of the Latin American Pabloite, Posadas, who maintained that the only way to defeat American imperialism was to launch a preemptive nuclear war and blow up the United States.

In the political crises of recent years this position has been reaffirmed by the various groups of ex-radicals. The general line on the 2000 election from so-called “left” organizations—from Ralph Nader's Green Party to the assorted Maoist, state capitalist and ex-Trotskyist groupings—was summed up by the Spartacist League, which literally declared the unprecedented constitutional crisis a “tempest in a teapot.”

For the most part they assumed the stance of “a plague on both houses” and denied that there were either serious divisions within the ruling elite or major issues involved in the hijacking of the election with which working people should concern themselves. The statements of the Socialist Workers Party that I quoted earlier were a particularly right-wing variation on this general theme. The SWP blurted out in a naked form the political orientation common to all of these politically diseased outfits—the lack of any genuine independence from the bourgeoisie and a cowardly adaptation to the most right-wing forces in American politics.

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee, on the other hand, have theoretically rooted their analysis of US political developments on a continuing examination of the crisis of American capitalism and its deepening social contradictions. The past 30 years, demarcated by the collapse of the Bretton Woods system in 1971, have seen a decline in the world economic and political position of the United States. This general descent has intensified internal class antagonisms and accelerated the crisis of American democracy.

There is a clear correlation between the breakup of American global hegemony and the decay of bourgeois democracy in the US. In a recent article on the United States from 1900 to 1945, the British historian and biographer of John F. Kennedy, Hugh Brogan, made an observation that, as a broad generalization, is quite astute. He wrote:

“No matter what the challenge (the Great Depression of 1929-39 was to be the worst), the United States remained liberal, and responded to every crisis until 1945 and beyond, not by jettisoning its constitution or any part of it, but by extending its reach. By the standards at the end of the twentieth century, the United States was at its beginning a highly defective democracy: black citizens, and the poorest white ones, mostly could not vote in the South, and women in only four Western states. There were other defects; but Americans believe that the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy.”

Brogan went on to cite constitutional amendments in the early part of

the twentieth century providing for the direct election of US senators and women's suffrage, and the movement for voting rights for blacks in the South which began in earnest after World War II.

As a general proposition, for approximately a century—from the end of the Civil War to the early 1970s—disputes over the scope of democracy were ultimately resolved through a formal expansion of political democracy, above all through an extension of the franchise. Indeed, the extension of the franchise again and again became the means by which the ruling elite accommodated itself to internal crisis and the pressure of social opposition from below.

The so-called Reconstruction Amendments to the Constitution—the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, ratified between 1865 and 1870—expressed the revolutionary and democratic impetus of the Civil War, abolishing slavery, granting citizenship to the former slaves and to all people born in the US, barring the states from depriving any persons of due process or equal protection of the laws, and barring the federal government or the states from abridging the voting rights of any citizens on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude.

The Seventeenth Amendment, ratified in 1913, established the election of US senators by direct popular vote. (Previously, the two senators from each state were elected by the state legislatures.) This constitutional change was the outcome of mounting social protest against the great trusts and their domination of Congress.

The Nineteenth Amendment, ratified in 1920, established women's suffrage.

The Twenty-Third Amendment, ratified in 1961, gave citizens residing in the District of Columbia the right to vote for president.

The Twenty-Fourth Amendment, ratified in 1964, barred poll taxes in federal elections. This Amendment was enacted in response to the civil rights struggles for voting rights in the South.

The Twenty-Sixth Amendment, ratified in 1971, lowered the voting age from 21 to 18, a change that was prompted by the mass movement in opposition to the Vietnam War. The rationale behind the Amendment was the assertion that people old enough to fight and die for Uncle Sam were old enough to vote.

Thus eight of the seventeen Amendments enacted after the Bill of Rights (which comprises the first ten Amendments to the Constitution) effected a legal expansion of political rights and strengthened the principle of popular sovereignty.

In addition, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawed the discriminatory registration procedures that had effectively disenfranchised Southern blacks. It empowered federal examiners to take over registration procedures in the South. Mississippi had just 22,000 black registered voters in 1960. By the end of 1965 it had 175,000. The Civil Rights Act of 1970 extended and strengthened the provisions of the Voting Rights Act.

After 1971, however, the trend toward legislative and constitutional extension of democratic rights in general and voting rights in particular came, for the most part, to an end. (The most obvious exception was the 1973 US Supreme Court ruling legalizing abortion. This, however, was more a final gasp of democratic reform than the starting point for a new period of expansion, and it has since been followed by a series of federal actions and state laws narrowing the ability of women to take advantage of the right upheld in *Roe v. Wade*. The current chief justice, William Rehnquist, was one of two Supreme Court justices who cast dissenting votes in the landmark case.)

The past 30 years have witnessed an ever more pronounced decay of bourgeois democratic institutions and narrowing of democratic rights. Within the highest echelons of the ruling elite and the capitalist state, the response to social and political contradictions has increasingly taken extra-parliamentary and conspiratorial forms.

Each decade has produced major political crises marking the deepening of the process of decline. The 1970s was the decade of Watergate, which

exposed the recourse to outright criminality by the Nixon White House. Nixon's use of gangster methods was in response to mass popular opposition to the Vietnam War as well as social turmoil in the cities and militant labor struggles.

The 1980s witnessed an even more far-reaching utilization of illegal and unconstitutional methods in the Iran-Contra affair. Right-wing military officers and intelligence officials, operating from the basement of the Reagan White House, functioned as a virtual secret government, funneling arms and money to counterrevolutionary militias and death squads in Central America, in defiance of a law banning such aid.

In the 1990s the Republican right employed the “dirty tricks” methods of provocation and subversion in an effort to destabilize and bring down the Clinton administration. This took the form in 1995-96 of the shutdown of the federal government, spearheaded by the Republican Congress. By the final years of the decade the Republican Party had reached the point of an attempted political coup, in the form of the impeachment and Senate trial of Clinton.

The decade concluded with the theft of the presidential election and the new decade begins with the installation of a president on the basis of fraud and political usurpation.

The scale of criminality and illegality has grown from decade to decade, while the opposition from within the political and media establishment to such methods has withered. Watergate ended with the forced resignation of Nixon and the conviction and imprisonment of many of his top accomplices. In the Iran-Contra affair, Congress acted to suppress the most damning aspects of the conspiracy and Reagan got off scot-free, as did his chief lieutenant, Oliver North. In the Clinton impeachment the media functioned as a virtual press agency for the conspirators, and in the 2000 election it played a similarly reactionary role.

In this progression one sees a body politic that has become less and less able to fight off anti-democratic tendencies, like a diseased person whose immune system is no longer capable of keeping viruses in check. To extend the analogy, in the 2000 election the patient succumbed.

Other aspects of the decay of American democracy over this period include: the purging of the political establishment of prominent liberal congressmen and officeholders in the 1970s and 1980s; the fostering and legitimization of extreme right and fascist elements by the media and the Republican Party, including the Christian right, the gun lobby, anti-abortion zealots, anti-tax and states' rights groups, and militia elements; the promotion of law-and-order and “victims' rights” demagoguery; the curtailment of civil liberties by the courts.

The assault on democratic rights began in earnest with the government-led attack on trade union struggles and the right to strike. The decade of the 1980s, beginning with the smashing of the PATCO air traffic controllers' strike, was a period of relentless attacks on workers' rights. It saw a revival of the methods of class warfare that had been absent from the political scene since World War II: the use of strike-breakers, professional goons and industrial armies, anti-union injunctions and fines, labor frame-ups, picket-line violence and killings.

Over the course of this period the decay of the political system and the erosion of its democratic content have been expressed in a marked decline in voter turnout, reflecting the withering of the popular base of both capitalist parties. The culmination of this process in the 2000 election is an open attack on the foundation of American democracy—the right to vote, something that would have been unthinkable not very long ago.

American atrocities such as the Vietnam War long ago shattered the pacifist pretensions of the United States. But it still held one great ideological trump card—its ability to pose as the global citadel of democracy. This was a rather shabby pretense, belied in a thousand ways by the practical workings of the American two-party system. Nevertheless, it retained considerable efficacy for deluding workers and intellectuals both within the United States and around the world.

Capitalism might be cruel, it might foster economic inequality, but at least the people had the right to vote for their representatives. Insofar as the vast majority of the world's people mistakenly identified Stalinism with socialism, the American bourgeoisie could counterpose its democracy to the despotic methods of the Soviet regime.

But the 2000 election has shattered such pretensions, and thereby deprived American imperialism of its most important ideological weapon in the struggle against socialism.

Socialism and the defense of democratic rights

The political conclusions that flow from this analysis are far-reaching, and much work will have to be done to elaborate their implications for our movement. Clearly, we must anticipate and prepare for a period of mass radicalization and a resurgence of interest in socialist and revolutionary ideas.

I would like here to touch on one important programmatic issue—our general attitude toward democratic questions and the defense of democratic rights. Surveying the press of the middle-class ex-radicals, one is struck by their lack of interest in the question of voting rights that has emerged so sharply in the US. Their complacency and contempt for such questions reflect not the feelings or interests of the working class, but rather the general indifference of the liberal bourgeoisie.

Among working people, especially the most oppressed sections of the working class, the right to vote is a deeply felt issue, even though there is widespread and justified contempt for the politicians and the official parties. The abandonment of any serious defense of this right by the political and media establishment is a reflection on the political plane of the economic chasm that separates the wealthy elite from the masses. There is an enormous political vacuum in the United States, which the socialist movement must strive to fill.

We must be extremely sensitive and take an active and aggressive attitude toward all questions of democratic rights. The socialist movement should present itself to the masses as the champion of democratic rights. We do so from the standpoint of the independent interests of the working class. Our educational task is to demonstrate that only the working class can provide serious leadership in the struggle to defend basic rights, and that it can do so only on the basis of a program that proceeds not from the framework of capitalist society and the nation state, but rather from the standpoint of the unified and international struggle of the working class for a socialist world. Insofar as the working class demonstrates its commitment to democratic rights and its readiness to struggle in their defense, it will rally behind it the most progressive sections of the middle class and undermine the extreme right.

It is from this standpoint that the *World Socialist Web Site* has sought to patiently but mercilessly expose the cowardice and impotence of the liberals, the Democrats and their acolytes in the trade union bureaucracy. Our task is to reveal the social roots of their prostration, and demonstrate that, in the end, they can play no other role than that of accomplice in the destruction of basic rights. There are critical issues of political orientation, ideology, history and philosophy that need to be examined and explained in relation to the decay of liberalism. Ultimately, however, this phenomenon goes to the class structure of society and the very nature of the capitalist system.

This is not to say that the right to vote exhausts the question of democratic rights. For us, democracy has a far richer content, embracing the active and democratic participation of the producers in the decisions—political, social, economic, cultural—that affect their lives. Nevertheless, the elementary right of the masses to vote has a progressive significance, and there can be no advance to a broader expression of democracy, let alone the struggle for socialism, if this right is not defended in the most determined way.

This question is especially important in a period like ours when the socialist movement has suffered tremendous setbacks and the crimes of

the labor bureaucracies have resulted in a decline in socialist consciousness among the broad mass of working people. In such a period, the struggle over democratic issues will for many become a stage in the political evolution to revolutionary socialism. Our movement must encourage this evolution.

This approach has clearly found a deep response both in the US and internationally. Those who have read the correspondence published by the *WSWS* on its coverage of the political crisis in the US—and this is only a fraction of the mail we have received—cannot fail to see that our analysis and polemics have struck a chord among the most serious and politically aware sections of the population. The *WSWS* is increasingly being seen as an oasis of progressive, democratic and socialist thought and politics, and a rallying point for those seeking a perspective for struggle.

But while this approach to questions of democratic rights is all the more crucial in a period of widespread political disorientation and, we should add, transition to a new birth of socialist consciousness, it is rooted in the nature of the epoch and the fundamental problems of the socialist revolution. It really flows from Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, which is not simply or even primarily a program for the backward countries, but rather a perspective for socialist revolution in the imperialist epoch. The working class must take the lead in the defense of democratic rights not only in the countries with a belated capitalist development, but in all countries. If the liberal bourgeoisie demonstrated its bankruptcy in the period of fascist victories of the 1920s and 1930s, its impotence is all the more ingrained today.

The socialist workers movement defends the democratic rights of the working population on the basis of the program of world socialist revolution and the struggle to bring the working class to power. Such is the perspective dictated by the mounting crisis of bourgeois rule in the United States.



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