

# William Jennings Bryan and the rise and decline of the Progressive Era

## A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan by Michael Kazin

Shannon Jones  
11 August 2006

*A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* by Michael Kazin (Alfred A Knopf, New York, 2006), 400 pages

In 1896, a political newcomer from Nebraska, William Jennings Bryan, won the Democratic presidential nomination. His scathing attacks on the banks and trusts captured the popular imagination and propelled him to the center stage of politics for the next two decades.

The life of Bryan is the subject of a new biography by Michael Kazin, a professor of history at Georgetown University. Bryan's political activity spanned the years of populism and progressivism. This was the period when the United States entered the world stage as a leading imperialist power. It was a time of rising expectations and mounting social contradictions.

Bryan's career expressed a number of contradictory elements. "The Great Commoner," as he came to be known, represented a reaction primarily among lower-middle-class social layers to the growth of monopoly capitalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He combined the narrow-minded outlook of a lay evangelist with the posture of a radical agitator. His denunciations of the Eastern moneyed elite, often couched in Biblical terms, expressed the opposition of small farmers and other oppressed middle-class layers to the emergence of monopoly capitalism.

As his career progressed, Bryan's most reactionary features came to dominate and he drifted steadily to the right. In the end, abandoned by most of his former supporters, he became an object of ridicule and contempt.

It would be the duty of a conscientious biographer to delineate and analyze the tendencies expressed by Bryan, show their origin and trajectory, and explain the social interests they reflected. However, Kazin's book is bound up with an attempt to find a new, refurbished pedigree for the Democratic Party as a "party of the people." Inevitably, this lends the work a one-sided and tendentious character.

Commenting on the 1896 Democratic convention that nominated Bryan for president, Kazin writes, "But the platform officially declared that Democrats were in favor of beginning to redistribute wealth and power in America. In rhetoric at least, the party has never gone back" (p. 55).

The attempt by Kazin to uncritically equate the Democratic Party in the Bryan era to the modern Democratic Party is dishonest. Beginning with the Carter administration and accelerating in the 1980s, the Democratic Party separated itself from the legacy of Progressivism and New Deal liberalism. Under the Democratic Clinton administration, social inequality increased to the greatest level in more than 50 years.

The Democratic Party was never a "party of the people." By Bryan's time, it had long since established itself as one of the parties of the

capitalist ruling class. It combined the defense of some of the most reactionary aspects of American capitalism—most notably, the brutal oppression of blacks in the South—with certain reformist policies that appealed to oppressed sections of the middle class as well as urban workers. Its particular function, well established by the latter part of the nineteenth century, was to capture mass discontent and channel it along non-revolutionary lines, so as to uphold the essential class interests of American big business. This is the role that it played in corralling and emasculating the populist movement, and Bryan personally played a major role in this fundamentally reactionary process.

The attempt to bolster the Democratic Party through a partisan and one-sided interpretation of the careers of historical figures is not new. In his book *The Age of Jackson*, published in 1945, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. attempted to demonstrate that the administration of Franklin Roosevelt continued a tradition of Democratic progressivism that had its roots in the administration (1829-1837) of Andrew Jackson, who cultivated a "commoner" image while upholding the interests of the Southern slave-owners.

Kazin's work is noteworthy for the reactionary political conclusions it draws. He finds fault with the modern Democratic Party, not for abandoning the reformist legacy of the New Deal, but for failing to align itself even more fully with the politics of the Republican right. He calls for an adaptation to the religious right by means of appeals based on Christian morality.

In a previous work, *The Populist Persuasion* (Basic Books, 1995), which traces the use of populist appeals by both left- and right-wing political movements in the United States, Kazin noted in a positive tone "the power of Christian moralism to motivate critics of an unethical status quo" (p. 39). In this work, Kazin takes up this theme in an even more explicit manner, advocating that the Democratic Party adopt a "populist morality" based on a direct appeal to "Christian scripture."

That Kazin should be fixated by Bryan the evangelist says more about the rightward trajectory of liberals such as Kazin than it says about Bryan. At its core, Bryan's embrace of fundamentalist religious views reflected his belief that Christianity represented an indispensable anchor for the capitalist social order. He came to fear that scientific insights, in particular, the theory of evolution, would erode religious faith, threatening chaos. At the end of his life, this became his main preoccupation.

But the most significant feature of Bryan's career was not his pathetic attempt to defend the biblical story of creation in his famous 1925 courtroom encounter with Clarence Darrow, but rather his role in diverting the social protest that rocked the United States in the years preceding World War I into the dead end of the Democratic Party.

William Jennings Bryan was born in Marion County, Illinois, in 1860, on the eve of the American Civil War. His father, Silas Bryan, was a judge and was prominent in local Democratic Party politics. Born in Virginia, he had been a Stephen A. Douglas Democrat before the Civil War and opposed the abolition of slavery.

The young Bryan attended Illinois College in Jacksonville and there pursued training in oratory. While attending college, he came under radical and progressive influences. He heard lectures by prominent orators such as Henry Ward Beecher, Wendell Phillips and Robert Ingersoll.

He later studied law at Union College in Chicago, where he worked in the law office of Lyman Trumbull, who, as a Republican senator from Illinois, had spearheaded the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery.

Bryan practiced law successfully for a few years in Illinois, then decided to move with his family to Nebraska to set up a law partnership with a friend. In Nebraska, he became increasingly involved in Democratic Party politics, giving speeches on behalf of candidates for state office and winning a local reputation as a powerful speaker. In 1888, he attended the Democratic national convention in St. Louis, giving his support to Grover Cleveland.

Bryan's entry into politics seemed almost accidental. In 1890, the Democratic Party chose him as its candidate for a seat in Congress. However, it appeared he had little chance as a Democrat running against a popular incumbent in a state that usually voted Republican. Fortunately, his decision to run coincided with a terrible farm crisis and the rise of agrarian radicalism, reflected in the growth of the Farmers Alliance. In 1890, corn prices fell so low in Nebraska that it was cheaper to burn corn than coal.

Kazin writes, "Bryan tried to make himself the symbolic leader of the prairie insurgency. Alongside attacks on the tariff, his congressional platform thundered with calls to 'suppress' the trusts, to aid debtors by coining silver 'on equal terms' with gold, and to ban land speculation by 'non-resident aliens'—all demands he shared with the agrarian rebels" (p. 26).

His surprising victory launched a startlingly rapid rise to political prominence. He was the Democratic presidential nominee in three elections—1896, 1900 and 1908—losing each time.

In Congress, his speaking abilities captured public attention. However, as Kazin comments, he would be dogged throughout his career by the perception that he was "a man in love with his words, but heedless of rigorous argument" (p. 40).

Despite being defeated in a bid to capture a Senate seat in 1894, he was able to leverage his popularity to win the Democratic presidential nomination two years later.

The period between around 1890 and 1920, the era of Progressivism, saw the enactment of many democratic reforms—the income tax, direct election of senators, anti-trust legislation, women's suffrage, to name a few. It reflected an adaptation to a broad democratic movement that arose in reaction to the development of monopoly capitalism and imperialism. The same period in Europe witnessed the growth of mass social democratic parties.

The founding of the Populist Party in 1892 marked the beginning of this period. Based primarily in the West and the South, the party grew out of the activities of the Farmers Alliances, which advocated radical measures to relieve the distress of small farmers crushed by the pressure of the banks and railroads. In the presidential election of 1892, the Populist Party emerged as a serious electoral contender to the two established parties. Its candidate, former Union general James B. Weaver, won 1 million popular votes and 22 electoral votes.

The movement was an amalgam of disparate and contradictory tendencies. However, at its base were millions of angry farmers willing to consider radical measures as a way out of their distress. Its leaders

denounced the plutocracy and raised demands of a radical and progressive character, such as state ownership and operation of the railroads and telegraph.

With Bryan, the Democratic Party adapted itself to the changing mood of the masses and positioned itself to deflect social discontent in a direction that posed no challenge to the capitalist system. The party claimed to be the party of the common man and sought to blunt the appeal of socialist opponents of the capitalist system by proposing limited reforms. At the same time, Democrats and Republicans reacted violently to any manifestation of independent struggle by the working class. Strikes were crushed under the blows of court injunctions, arrests, and state and federal troops.

Bryan's entry into active politics coincided with the growth of agrarian and industrial discontent in the early 1890s. Neither of the two hidebound and conservative capitalist parties could offer any solution to the growing distress of industrial workers and the mass of small farmers driven to ruin by low farm prices and gouging by moneylenders, merchants and railroads.

Bryan adapted himself to this movement. Kazin notes that in 1892 "Bryan ran, in all but name, as a Populist" (p. 36). He even endorsed Weaver, the Populist candidate for president, against Cleveland, the Democratic nominee.

There were bitter and bloody strikes in this period. In 1892, steelworkers struck the Homestead Works in Pennsylvania. The strikers were defeated after armed battles with private Pinkerton guards and the state militia, in which many workers died.

The issue of the growing power of the railroad monopolies was one of broad concern. In 1893, there was a major financial panic, and conditions for masses of workers and farmers grew even more desperate. In 1894, the newly formed American Railway Union led by Eugene V. Debs called a national strike to support workers at the Pullman Palace Sleeping Car Company. It was met by violent repression by the Democratic administration of Grover Cleveland, which sent thousands of federal troops to attack the strikers. Debs and other union leaders were arrested and jailed.

The Populist Party sought to expand its appeal by supporting the strikers and denouncing the government intervention. Debs was among those won to the Populist ranks.

While the electoral success of the Populists was concentrated mainly in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain states, one of the most interesting features of this period was the growth of the movement in the South. Southern small farmers and sharecroppers, black and white, faced appalling conditions in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In 1892, cotton prices reached their lowest level in decades. There were waves of foreclosures and the forced sale of farms.

Factory workers faced equally dire conditions. Among mill workers in Atlanta, "famine and pestilence are today making worse ravages than among the serfs of Russia," wrote the *Atlanta Journal*. It described workers' quarters where "there is no sanitation, no help or protection from the city, no medicine, no food, no fire, no nurses—nothing but torturing hunger and death" (quoted from *Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel*, C. Vann Woodward, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 225).

Populism in the South drew wide support despite violent and desperate attacks by the Democratic Party apparatus. Populist supporters were mobbed and in some instances killed. The party faced slander in the press and blatant ballot stuffing.

"The feeling of the Democracy toward us is one of murderous hate," wrote one Southern Populist. "I have been shot at many times. Grand juries will not indict our assailants. Courts give us no protection" (ibid, p. 223).

The Democratic Party establishment was particularly enraged by the Populists' rejection of race-baiting. The Populist Party made an appeal for

a united front between black and white farmers and sharecroppers, calling on them to put aside racial animosity and join in a common struggle against the plutocracy. It opposed the Democratic Party policy of white supremacy and sought to foster unity and cooperation between the exploited members of both races. Blacks were included in the ranks of Populist agitators. Often, speaking before mixed audiences, they recorded considerable success.

In the election of 1896, the Populists seemed poised to make impressive gains. Instead, the movement foundered and collapsed. Understanding why this happened is critical to assessing both the weaknesses of the Populist movement and the role and nature of the Democratic Party.

Here, Bryan played an important part. In his person he seemed to many to combine Populist goals with the authority and organizational power of the Democratic Party.

The contradictory and unstable character of the Populist Party became manifest in the presidential campaign of 1896, when a large section of the movement became diverted by the “free silver” panacea. The prominence given to this issue reflected the divide between the movement’s leadership and its worker and farmer base. The latter was attracted by the more radical demands such as public ownership, while the Populist leadership, which included some larger landowners and businessmen, wanted to avoid any challenge to the profit system.

Already in 1895, moves were underway in the Populist leadership to undertake a fusion with a section of the Democratic Party on the issue of the free coinage of silver. Stung by the sharp drop in popularity of the Cleveland administration and threatened by the Populists on the left, by 1895 large sections of the Democratic Party were adopting the call for “free silver” as a means of electoral survival.

When the Democratic Party nominated Bryan as its presidential candidate in 1896, the Populist Party leadership agreed to support his campaign based on common support for “free silver” and several other Populist demands, but not public ownership. The strongest opposition to fusion existed in the South, where a line of blood separated the Democratic Party from the new party.

Facing stiff opposition to fusion, the Populist leaders agreed to a compromise, nominating the Democrat Bryan for president and Populist leader Tom Watson of Georgia for vice president. The elevation of Watson onto the Populist presidential ticket, a concession to the radical wing of the party, turned out to be meaningless, since the Democrats refused to reciprocate by withdrawing their vice presidential nominee, Arthur Sewal of Maine, a wealthy shipbuilder. However, it proved effective in temporarily silencing the anti-fusionists and permitting what turned out to be the effective liquidation of the Populist Party. From that day forward, the party ceased to be a significant factor in American politics.

Writing of Bryan’s role in the 1896 election, Kazin declares, “His campaign endeared him to countless Americans who came to regard him as a godly hero. And in his advocacy of a stronger, more interventionist state, Bryan calmed his party’s ancestral dread of federal power. Every Democratic president from Woodrow Wilson to Lyndon Johnson would reap the benefits of his apostasy” (p. 45).

Kazin is correct to attach importance to the role of Bryan in refashioning the Democratic Party. But to suggest that the nomination of Bryan transformed the Democratic Party in some fundamental way is deceitful. Leaders of the Democratic Party may have been willing to accept Bryan’s nomination as a necessary evil to head off Populism, but that was as far as his services were needed. The Democratic Party establishment actively sabotaged his campaign in order to ensure the election of the pro-imperialist William McKinley.

Though radical on its face in certain aspects, Bryan’s eclectic program could not provide a genuine alternative for masses of workers and small farmers to the growing power of the giant banking, railroad and industrial

monopolies. The central plank of the Democrats’ program, “free silver,” was largely a red herring, reflecting differences between sections of the ruling class itself. It did not in any way challenge the system responsible for the exploitation of workers and farmers. Indeed, “free silver” inflationary policies threatened to erode even further the poverty-level living standards of wage earners.

Missing from Bryan’s platform were demands that challenged, in any significant way, the conditions of class exploitation itself. For example, in place of the call of the Populist Party for public ownership of the railroads, the Democratic platform merely called for “regulation.”

It was difficult for Bryan to convince workers, who had just suffered three years of falling wages, unemployment and strikebreaking under a Democratic administration, to accept Bryan’s claim that this party now truly represented their interests. As Kazin notes, Bryan’s attempt to appeal to urban workers faced “an uncomfortable reality...labor had nothing concrete to gain from free silver and would only suffer if a change in currency drove up prices for food and other necessities” (p. 69).

While Bryan captured broad support in the West and the South, his campaign was received coolly by workers in the major industrial centers of the North and East. Kazin notes, “Outside the Deep South, Bryan carried only one city with over a hundred thousand residents—and that was Denver, stronghold of the white metal, where Republicans hardly bothered to campaign” (p. 77).

The collapse of the Populist Party in the wake of the debacle of 1896 struck hardest in the South. Black tenant farmers were left totally at the mercy of a Democratic Party that terrorized and disenfranchised them. Beginning in the 1890s, laws mandating racial segregation and imposing poll taxes and literacy tests designed to exclude blacks from voting were imposed by Democratic-controlled state legislatures across the South.

These measures were instituted largely as a response to the Populists’ attempt to form an alliance between poor blacks and whites against the southern oligarchy. By driving a wedge between poor blacks and whites and between oppressed workers and small farmers, the Democratic Party sought to institutionalize a divide-and-rule strategy to maintain the system of class oppression. The reign of terror against blacks intensified. Lynchings, tolerated and even encouraged by state authorities, were common occurrences.

Kazin attempts to construct something of an apologia for the Democratic Party’s embrace of white supremacy. He writes, “Most white progressives endorsed segregation of the races; many argued that black people would advance more quickly and suffer less violence if they did so apart. Racism—whether aggressive or paternalistic—posed no barrier to the potential bond between rural Dixie and the blue-collar North.” Kazin continues, “Bryan was the inevitable standard-bearer of this embryonic coalition” (p. 150).

How one could be “progressive” and a white supremacist at the same time Kazin doesn’t explain. Rather than expose the fundamental contradiction between the Democratic Party’s claim to represent the people and its support for terror against blacks and their disenfranchisement in the South, Kazin offers a facile apology.

Lurking in the background of such arguments is the belief, which Kazin shares with many liberals, that the working people themselves are to blame for racism. However, as the brief experience of Populism in the South demonstrated, an alliance of poor whites and blacks was realizable. It was the ruling elites in both the North and the South, through the Democratic Party, that sought to break up this emerging coalition, so threatening to their interests.

Bryan never took a principled stand against white supremacy in the South. Kazin suggests that Bryan’s silence on this question is puzzling. However, it is not hard to explain.

The ruling elite in the South, the remnants of the old southern slaveholding oligarchy, formed a critical base of the Democratic Party.

This Party had defended slavery and secession and had led the struggle against post-Civil War Reconstruction. It had opposed granting suffrage to freed slaves and generally opposed all progressive reforms aimed at alleviating the oppression of blacks and poor whites. No politician could hope for national leadership in the Democratic Party, let alone expect to win the presidency, by attacking the system of racial oppression in the South.

On what basis could a party resting on such a foundation claim to represent the working class? Kazin never bothers to ask this question. However, this fact alone is enough to puncture Kazin's claim that Bryanism represented a progressive, "class aware" movement articulating the aspirations of workers and small farmers.

Bryan's rise to prominence coincided with the entrance of the United States into the world scramble for colonies and markets. In 1896, the United States annexed Hawaii, and in 1898, the US provoked war with Spain, resulting in the seizure of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Guam.

These imperialist adventures were in part a response by the US ruling class to the growing social contradictions at home. The American ruling elite sought to overcome its internal economic contradictions by seeking through military conquest new markets and sources of cheap raw materials.

Despite his anti-militarist posture, Bryan supported the declaration of war against Spain and even formed his own militia regiment. (The McKinley administration made sure his unit never saw action.) Bryan later joined those opposed to the US campaign to suppress the insurgency in the Philippines. However, as Kazin notes, Bryan refused to use his influence in the Democratic Party to derail the Senate vote ratifying the treaty with Spain annexing the island nation.

Bryan's anti-militarism coincided with the genuine feelings of American workers and farmers who wanted no part of wars of conquest. However, the official opposition to colonialism represented an eclectic mixture of progress and reaction. This found expression in the politics of the Anti-Imperialist League, a coalition formed to oppose the annexation of the Philippines.

It included both sincere opponents of imperialist militarism and xenophobic elements, fearful of the consequences of assimilating an alien people. Commenting on this phenomenon, Kazin notes, "But most Democrats who opposed the war juggled their higher principles with their dread of annexing a distant nation populated by what one Missouri senator called 'half-civilized, piratical, muck-running inhabitants'" (p. 92).

Bryan never formally joined the Anti-Imperialist League. However, his politics reflected the same contradictions. While he gave eloquent speeches denouncing militarism, he often evinced a chauvinist, patronizing attitude toward the Filipinos and other oppressed peoples. On July 4, 1906, he gave a speech entitled "The White Man's Burden" before the American Society in London.

Further, with the exception of the Philippine intervention, Bryan never actually opposed any war the US undertook once the war commenced. Appointed to the post of secretary of state in the administration of Woodrow Wilson in 1913, he was responsible for deploying US troops and warships against Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Mexico. In a particularly disgraceful episode, Bryan supported the sending of a US expeditionary force to occupy Vera Cruz, Mexico in response to an alleged insult to the American flag.

Despite Bryan's support for these interventions in America's "back yard," Wilson became irritated with Bryan's pacifist rhetoric, especially as the US began preparing public opinion for entry into the World War. Bryan left the cabinet and resumed his lucrative public speaking career, which had already made him a wealthy man.

Out of the cabinet, Bryan continued to oppose US entry into the war, even endorsing the call for a national referendum on the war question.

However, as soon as Congress declared war on Germany, he lined up behind the US military machine. He even joined in the persecution of those who continued to oppose the war, denouncing them as unpatriotic.

The final years of Bryan's life were marked by a continual shift to the right. World War I demonstrated to millions of workers on all continents the incompatibility of the system of monopoly capitalism with peace, prosperity and democracy. The war, which gave rise to the Russian Revolution and the creation of the first workers state, deflated Progressive Era illusions in the possibility of taming capitalism through the introduction of democratic reforms.

During his years as secretary of state, Bryan had become a prominent spokesman for the Prohibition movement. In the wake of World War I, he became a leading evangelist, though he was never formally ordained. In his sermons, he made opposition to the teaching of evolution in public schools a central theme.

At a time when this issue has been revived by the religious right, it is worthwhile to consider Bryan's role in opposing the teaching of evolution. Kazin attempts a lame apologia for Bryan's embrace of fundamentalist backwardness. He writes, "In recent years, however, the recognition that most evolutionists in the 1920s were dedicated to 'improving' the human race through eugenics has made Bryan seem more sympathetic." (P. 263)

One is prompted to ask: "Sympathetic to whom?"

Kazin laments the fact that the Scopes trial has for decades overshadowed Bryan's career as a social reformer. However, there is an objective reason for this.

The pacifist and reformist illusions advanced by Bryan were, in the final analysis, aimed at forestalling the threat of social upheaval by undermining radical and socialist influences in the working class. Bryan's program was never based on a scientific analysis of the contradictions of capitalism, but rather hazy notions drawing on Christian morality. As events more and more undermined the illusions of the masses in the possibility of peaceful reform, Bryan reacted with an attack on science, blaming the outbreak of war and revolution on the decline in religious faith.

Kazin writes, "Never before had he made a religious question a political priority. But World War I shredded the ideal of peaceful progress and brotherhood, giving materialist doctrines such as Marxism and Darwinism the benefit of the doubt when it came to explaining why warfare intensified and inequality endured" (p. 264).

Within the Presbyterian Church, Bryan became the leader of those forces opposed to the so-called modernizers—those who wanted to reconcile church doctrine with the teachings of science. In 1923, he ran for titular head of the Presbyterian Church, but lost to an opponent with more tolerant views on the question of teaching evolution.

At this time, he also began speaking out more openly in defense of segregation and white supremacy. At the 1924 Democratic national convention, he used his influence to help kill an amendment to the party platform condemning the Ku Klux Klan.

In 1925, five states banned the teaching of the theory of evolution in public schools. When the state of Tennessee sought to prosecute John Scopes, a young substitute biology teacher, for teaching evolution, Bryan agreed to join the prosecutorial team.

The trial proved to be a debacle for opponents of evolution. Under Clarence Darrow's cross-examination, Bryan, the accomplished orator, was made to appear a buffoon and an ignoramus. Bryan was preparing to publish his rebuttal of Darrow when he collapsed and died a few days after the trial.

As the columnist H.L. Mencken wrote, "He seemed only a poor clod like those around him, deluded by a childish theology, full of an almost pathological hatred of all learning, all human dignity, all beauty, all fine and noble things" (p. 298).

But Kazin doesn't agree with "progressive intellectuals who continue to repeat Mencken's great slur" (p. 299). Presumably, Kazin would have preferred Bryan's views to have carried the day.

Kazin expresses perplexity at the relentlessly right-wing trajectory of evangelical Christianity in the decades since Bryan's death. He seems genuinely confused about the fact that today Bryan's legacy is primarily honored within right-wing circles, and then only for his role as an opponent of evolution.

He complains that in the post-war period "white progressives either ignored religious devotion or thought it an impediment to social change," as though Bryan's political evolution wasn't the clearest demonstration of just that. He goes on to criticize liberals who "ignore religious issues grounded in moral conviction."

He concludes with the following tirade: "Time and again, secular reformers defeat themselves by assuming...that they can appeal solely to the economic self-interest of working-class Americans and ignore moral issues grounded in religious conviction" (p. 303).

The Democratic Party is already well along in making this shift, as seen in its efforts to further water down its defense of abortion rights, and attempts by Joseph Lieberman and others to attack the principle of the separation of church and state.

It is highly symptomatic of the mood prevailing in wide sections of the formerly liberal intelligentsia that the most reactionary features of Bryan fascinate Kazin. What about the question of public ownership, the redistribution of wealth, opposition to militarism? The Democratic Party rejects these Progressive Era goals, but this is of little concern to Kazin.

The author displays an amazing indifference to the democratic content of the centuries-long struggle over the separation of church and state. Further, he rejects out of hand the possibility that there is an inherent conflict between the holding of religious and anti-scientific views and the development of a consistent and progressive political outlook. And these are the views of someone who is considered to be in the more liberal wing of the Democratic Party.

Kazin's work underscores the collapse of the liberal reformist perspective and the lack of any real commitment within the privileged upper-middle-class layer on which the Democratic Party rests to the defense of democratic principles.

This has material roots. The social foundations upon which the reforms of the Progressive and New Deal eras rested no longer exist. The global economic position of US capitalism has been decisively eroded. It is now the world's largest debtor nation and faces powerful overseas economic competitors. Under these conditions, all the past gains of the working class, including basic democratic rights, are under attack.

The task facing the working class is not an attempt to revive moribund liberalism, but to construct an independent political party of its own based on a socialist and internationalist program.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**