

A reply to letters on “The campaign to keep Paris Hilton in jail: nothing healthy about it”

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The *World Socialist Web Site* has received a large number of responses to the article posted June 9 on the efforts to return heiress Paris Hilton to jail in Los Angeles.

We argued there was nothing socially healthy or progressive about such a campaign. Some supported our views, many did not.

In part, of course, legitimate anger toward the vast social inequality in America, including the different treatment inevitably meted out to the ‘rich and famous,’ motivated certain of the letter writers. This is understandable in a country where official decisions and policy are determined almost solely by what will benefit the very wealthy.

Moreover, there is assuredly nothing admirable about Hilton’s public conduct. That she became the object of fascination in the first place, without a discernible talent except for attracting notoriety, is a symptom of a crisis-ridden and deeply confused culture.

Hilton is an especially easy target. An emotionally distorted or perhaps disturbed personality, she is, however, by no means exceptional. The world of the very rich, very spoiled and very bored contains no shortage of such individuals, most of whom are kept out of the spotlight.

Nonetheless, those demanding that Hilton be jailed, or worse, need to stop and think more carefully about their arguments.

First of all, who are their allies? The reactionary pundits: Nancy Grace of CNN, Bill O’Reilly of Fox and the rest of that vile crowd. These self-appointed moral guardians have been thundering nightly about the “special treatment” Hilton has received to divert attention from the real criminality in American life. Fox News, the *New York Post* and the entire Murdoch empire have gone to town on the Hilton issue—the same

people who brought you the Bush administration and the war in Iraq.

Moreover, few of the angriest letter writers cared to address the fact that due to massive overcrowding, large numbers of non-violent offenders in Los Angeles County are sent home before their sentences are complete, many of them having served less than 10 percent of their sentence (some of them far less). Over a four-year period, 150,000 non-violent offenders were released early in the county, according to a *Los Angeles Times* article last year.

A number of the letter writers did not let such facts stand in their way, and manifested precisely the type of confused rage to which the original article pointed.

Right-wing correspondents, true to form, revealed the usual intellectual level of their ilk, complete with the inevitable obscenities. “You are a communist moron. Now you know why communism is in the toilet,” wrote one. “You are a f*****g idiot,” commented another.

The American media works very hard at whipping up a certain social element into this type of ugly backwardness, and not without success.

But the mean-spirited anger came in a “radical” form too. Hilton, asserted one irate letter writer, is a “fascist brat of the ruling elite.... I want the bitch to die in prison.” The writer continued, “Your comments enrage me beyond words.”

Another dismissed the facts of the case, writing, “No one cares about that.” People “want to relish” her punishment, “and rightly so.” The correspondent continued, “You can play ‘Mr. P.C.’ all you want—but let others enjoy what they consider her come-uppance.”

This attitude of our contemporary Madame Defarges (the embodiment of vengeance in Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, Defarge sits knitting by the guillotine as heads roll) has nothing in common with socialism—or

even democratic liberal opinion, for that matter. Politics merely based on rage often has quite reactionary consequences. The socialist project for transforming society is not rooted in dreams of revenge. Indeed, socialism arises far more from compassion than from hatred.

Frankly, there is no indication on the basis of their outraged and verbally violent letters that some of the correspondents have much interest in a rational or egalitarian response to the present social crisis, or that they would act any differently from those currently in power. They certainly have no apparent interest in seriously considering the issues or the underlying processes.

Involved in the Hilton case is the foulness of the entire culture. It's easy enough to score points against her, but more difficult to look at the broader picture. Everyone plays a part in this wretched sort of episode: the demonized celebrity (Michael Jackson, Barry Bonds, Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan, Hilton, and on and on), the indignant talking heads, the tabloids and the paparazzi, the crowd that allows itself to be stirred up.

The political and media establishment encourage these public acts of human sacrifice for definite reasons: to discourage critical thought, to accustom the public to scandal-mongering and witch-hunting as legitimate means of 'settling scores,' to brutalize the population and make it indifferent to suffering and life's complexities, and to provide a harmless outlet for popular outrage.

Paris Hilton is not guilty of war crimes, or running a sweatshop. Why has she been chosen to be demonized? She is expendable. She can be sacrificed to 'appease' popular discontent without any serious cost to those running America. The anger at Hilton is so far out of proportion to her importance or her sins that one can't help but think that the element of envy plays a role. And that is sad too. Why should anyone envy such a life, apparently spent in vacuous activities among vacuous people? She might rather be an object of pity.

There is nothing generous or humane about celebrating Hilton's "come-uppance." The US has massive social problems, unsolvable under capitalism. The system is internally rotten. Millions are suffering on a daily basis.

Let us ask our angry critics: If Paris Hilton were to

serve her entire sentence, what wrongs would be redressed? How would the world be a better place?

Those who gain a sense of satisfaction from Hilton's incarceration, once the excitement of the incident has passed, will more than likely sink again into apathy and cynicism. The socialist movement is driven by different impulses.



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