

The Supreme Court ruling on corporate political spending

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The ruling issued Thursday by the United States Supreme Court lifting long-standing restrictions on corporate financing of elections represents a far-reaching attack on democratic rights. The 5-4 decision ensures that the American political system will be dominated even more directly and completely by the financial elite.

The ruling is a naked assertion of the interests of the American financial elite. It lays bare the reality of class rule beneath the threadbare trappings of democracy in America.

The decision in the case *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, which overturns more than 100 years of legal precedent, strengthens the grip of big business over the political process. It gives legal sanction to the buying of politicians and offices at every level of government to do the bidding of the rich.

The ruling cloaks this attack on democratic rights as a defense of freedom of speech. Its basic premise—that corporations are entitled to the same rights of speech and political advocacy as individuals—is patently absurd. It makes a mockery of the democratic and Enlightenment principles that animated the revolutionaries who led the American War for Independence and drafted the Constitution. Jefferson, for one, counted the influence of finance on politics as “more dangerous to our liberties than standing armies.”

The ruling is the outcome of decades of political reaction, the ever-greater concentration of wealth in the hands of a narrow elite, and increasing attacks on the social conditions of the people.

It culminates years of anti-democratic decisions by

the Supreme Court. For the past three decades, the high court has whittled away at civil liberties and the ability of citizens to seek redress in cases of corporate criminality. In recent years it has upheld and expanded the ability of the executive branch to wage war, invade citizens’ private lives, and arrest and incarcerate without trial those the president declares to be enemies. The Supreme Court has consistently ruled against the rights of third-parties, especially left-wing parties, to ballot access.

Barely ten years ago, the same institution, in another politically-driven 5-4 ruling, halted the counting of votes in Florida in order to sanction the theft of the 2000 presidential election and install in power the Republican candidate George W. Bush, who had lost the popular vote.

The Democratic Party is complicit in the attacks on democratic rights, from its abject acceptance of the Supreme Court’s installation of Bush, to its support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to its cowardly refusal to mount a filibuster to block the confirmation of Bush nominees Justice Samuel Alito and Chief Justice John Roberts.

It was Roberts who played the critical role in seizing on *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*—a narrow lawsuit challenging the applicability of the McCain-Feingold restrictions on campaign advertising to a particular anti-Hillary Clinton documentary—and using it to undo all restraints on the corporate financing of politics.

This in a country where corporate money already manipulates elections, bribes politicians and largely

dictates government policy. As Justice John Paul Stevens noted in his dissent, “While American democracy is imperfect, few outside the majority of this Court would have thought its flaws included a dearth of corporate money in politics.”

The Supreme Court’s decision reflects the drive of the American financial aristocracy to throw off any and all restraints on its political domination.

A major concern of those within the establishment who have attacked the ruling is that it will further undermine public confidence in the Supreme Court and all official institutions. The decision “will, I fear, do damage to this institution,” Stevens wrote.

In fact, the ruling shows that working people, the vast majority of the population, cannot defend their interests through the existing political system. The Supreme Court, the Congress, the presidency and both political parties are controlled by the financial elite.

Recognition of this basic fact is growing, especially after a year of broken promises and right-wing policies by the Obama administration, which was carried to office by cynically appealing to popular hatred of the Bush administration and its policies of war, repression and social reaction.

More fundamentally, the ruling demonstrates that the socio-economic structure of American capitalist society is incompatible with democracy. Democratic forms become mere covers for plutocratic rule and must ultimately give way in a society with such vast disparities of wealth as exist in the United States.

The answer to the Supreme Court’s ruling and all of the attacks on democratic rights is to establish the political independence of the working class and fight for a workers’ government. Democratic rights can be defended only through the struggle for socialism—the transformation of society on the basis of the democratic control of economic life by the working class to meet social needs, rather than the accumulation of corporate profit and personal wealth by the ruling elite.

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