

The “Tea Party” movement in the US: A right-wing media creation

David Walsh
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The “Tea Party” movement, which held a convention last weekend in Nashville, Tennessee, is largely a media concoction, aimed at shifting official American political life even further to the right.

The convention gathered “nearly 600 conservative activists,” according to ABC News, a weak showing considering the US media has been playing up this “grassroots movement” for the past 12 months.

The press coverage of the Tea Party movement begins from a thoroughly false premise, that wide layers of the American population oppose the Obama administration from the right, outraged over “socialism” and “big government” and the sinister possibility of “universal health care.”

The Tea Party business took shape in a typically sordid and fraudulent manner. One year ago, CNBC correspondent Rick Santelli let loose with a rant from the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade—cheered on by traders—against the Obama administration’s meager mortgage reform, denouncing attempts “to subsidize the losers’ mortgages ... How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor’s mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can’t pay their bills?”

Far from a spontaneous outburst, Santelli’s appeal for a “tea party” protest was a stage-managed event, prepared well in advance and backed by wealthy, extreme right-wing forces. In any case, how could such a reactionary and selfish attack on the millions in danger of losing their homes provide the basis for a “populist” revolt in any meaningful sense of the word? The various rallies organized by the Tea Party network have been attended by a combination of ultra-right activists and highly confused, primarily middle class layers. Again, the gatherings have attracted forces largely through absurdly out-of-proportion media

coverage.

This continues. Last weekend’s convention, addressed by former Alaska governor Sarah Palin, received front-page treatment in the leading US newspapers. The *New York Times* referred to the movement’s efforts to harness “the grass-roots anger that burst onto the streets a year ago.” The *Washington Post* noted the number of convention delegates, but assured its readers that “there are millions of Americans just like them.” This is a movement, declared the *Post*, “that is unmistakably people-powered.”

There are people and there are people. The “people” who organized and spoke at the Tea Party convention happen to be well-heeled scoundrels and demagogues. The speakers included Tom Tancredo, the former Colorado Republican congressman, a fundamentalist Christian and anti-immigrant fanatic; Steve Milloy, the “junk science” commentator for FoxNews.com, i.e., an opponent of any effort to reverse the damage inflicted on the environment by “free enterprise”; Judge Roy Moore, the Alabama Supreme Court justice who refused to remove a monument of the Ten Commandments despite a federal judge’s orders in 2003 and currently a Republican candidate for Alabama governor; Fox News commentator Angela McGlowan, author of *BAMBOOZLED: How Americans Are Being Exploited by the Lies of the Liberal Agenda*; etc., etc.

A leader of the Memphis Tea Party, Mark Skoda, who presided over a final press conference, is a former UPS and FedEx executive and host of a radio program, “For God and Country,” on a Memphis radio station.

The audience, “overwhelmingly white and middle-aged,” according to the *Post*, was regaled with attacks on the Obama administration, including one effort to correlate the current administration and “Marxist

Dictators of Latin America,” the defense of “Judeo-Christian values,” and appeals for fiscal responsibility, less government, lower taxes, states’ rights and “strong national security.”

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In her remarks to the meeting, Palin—reportedly paid \$100,000 for her appearance—offered a simple-minded defense of American militarism and attacks on democratic rights. She denounced law enforcement officials for supposedly granting “our constitutional rights” to terrorism suspects and the Obama administration for “reaching out to hostile regimes, writing personal letters to dangerous dictators, and apologizing for America!” In her appearances at the convention, she made clear her desire to be a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012.

As a political figure, Palin is also largely a media and right-wing concoction. Among her earliest sponsors and advisors were longtime Democratic Party fundraiser and Washington DC lawyer, John Coale, and his wife, Greta Van Susteren, the Fox News commentator. Coale, a Scientologist like his spouse, raised large amounts of money for Sen. John Kerry in 2004 and for Hillary Clinton in 2008. When the latter lost the Democratic nomination to Barack Obama, Coale switched his allegiance to Sen. John McCain and became especially involved in efforts to make Palin into a national figure. This is the incestuous character of American politics.

The Tea Party movement has been organized by a section of the Republican Party, including Dick Armey, the former Texas congressman, House Majority leader and “flat tax” advocate, along with right-wing media types such as Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich has endorsed the movement, and Texas Governor Rick Perry attended a rally in Austin, Texas. Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News has strenuously advertised and promoted the Tea Party events.

The reactionary policies advocated by this movement are not popular with the American people, and if the Tea Party forces were presented before the public in an accurate light, they would not garner significant support. This is not, however, a reason for complacency. The growth of extreme right-wing elements is a real danger.

But contrary to the ~~Nazi~~ claims of the liberal milieu, the risk does not emerge from some mass base for fascistic politics in America. It comes primarily from the continued subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party, and by that means, to the ruling elite. This blocks the development of a progressive alternative and provides the Republican right with opportunities to make gains by demagogically exploiting the political impasse. It is political roadblock that must be addressed.



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