

# **The social counterrevolution in America and the tasks of the working class**

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Two-and-a-half years after the Wall Street collapse and multi-trillion dollar bailout of corporate swindlers, the ruling class is carrying out a savage and unprecedented assault on the living standards and basic social rights of tens of millions of working class families in the United States. Against the backdrop of an intractable recession, with long-term unemployment at its highest level since the 1930s, the political elite—Democrats and Republicans alike—are engaged in a bipartisan campaign to destroy crucial social programs upon which the working class depends.

What is unfolding in the United States is a social counterrevolution—the ruthless and systematic destruction of the fundamental gains and social rights won by the working class over a century of struggle.

On health care, the Obama administration and congressional Republicans are conspiring to cut trillions of dollars in Medicare and Medicaid, the programs for the elderly and poor. One study estimates that a proposal from Republicans to cut Medicaid—which the Obama administration has refrained from publicly criticizing—would raise the number of people without coverage by 44 million over the next decade. State governments throughout the country, bankrupted by the economic crisis and starved of resources by the federal government, are carrying out their own sharp cuts in services and eligibility.

Public education, a central concern of progressive movements in the United States for over 150 years, is being dismantled. Cities throughout the country are closing public schools, expanding private charter schools, increasing class sizes, laying off thousands of teachers, and imposing sharp cuts in pay and benefits. In response to cuts in state funding, public colleges and universities are raising tuition to levels unaffordable for the vast majority of working class youth.

At the same time, recent data confirms that there is no

letup in the jobs crisis in the United States. Persistent mass unemployment is being used by corporations as an opportunity to drive down wages and slash benefits for those who have work. Long-term unemployment remains at record highs, even as states are taking steps to cut more workers off from benefits. Michigan has already shortened the length of benefits to 20 weeks, excluding federal emergency relief. The Florida legislature passed a similar measure this week.

State governments have passed legislation targeting the basic right to collectively resist the demands of the corporations and states. Several states, including most recently the Democratic-controlled government in Massachusetts, have followed the lead of Wisconsin in passing laws that rip up existing contracts with state employees and prohibit strikes.

With extraordinary speed, the ruling class is working to destroy whatever remains of the social reforms of the 20th Century. These programs were won through bitter struggles, as the corporate elite sought to contain class conflict and preserve the capitalist system through reform measures. The Russian Revolution of 1917 inspired the struggles of workers throughout the world and raised the threat of socialist revolution in the United States itself.

The general strikes in Toledo, San Francisco and Minneapolis in 1934, followed by the great sit-down strikes in Michigan in 1936 and 1937, propelled the reforms of the New Deal, including Social Security, and the gains of manufacturing workers throughout the country. Medicare and Medicaid in the 1960s were the byproduct of the mass mobilization of workers in the civil rights movement, combined with the militant labor struggles of the post-war period.

For the last 40 years, these gains have been under persistent attack. Vast sums of wealth were transferred upwards, into the hands of the financial and corporate elite, fueling the stock market mania of the 1990s and

2000s.

Now under the Obama administration, this scorched earth policy is entering a new phase. The first step was taken last year under the guise of "health care reform," a drive to reduce corporate and government spending under the fraudulent slogan of "universal coverage." Now, there is little attempt to hide the fact that what the administration is seeking is a sharp reduction in access to health care and other social programs.

This assault takes place at the same time as the sums of money controlled by the wealthy reach record highs. Corporate profits in the first quarter of this year are expected to break the record set the previous quarter of \$1.68 trillion at an annualized rate. CEO pay for 2010 exceeded the previous record levels set prior to the crash. The combined net wealth of just the 400 richest Americans is, at last count, \$1.37 trillion—approximately the same amount that would be saved over an entire decade through cuts in Medicaid that will threaten the lives and health of millions of people.

The working class in the United States stands at a historic crossroads. It must mobilize its collective strength against the unfolding social counterrevolution or undergo a devastating decline in its living standards.

The social counterrevolution will not be defeated by mere protests. As last February's events in Wisconsin proved, the protests of the working class could not reverse the policies of the state government.

The entire logic of social and economic development is bringing the working class into conflict with the capitalist system and its political representatives.

There can be no solution to the crisis facing workers without directly opposing the subordination of the economy to the profit demands of the giant banks and corporations. The political representatives of capitalism, both Democrats and Republicans, proclaim that there is no alternative but a drastic lowering in the living conditions of the vast majority of the population. In doing so, they make the greatest argument for the bankruptcy of their system.

Moreover, the struggles of workers in the United States are part of a global struggle. The conditions facing workers in the US are fundamentally the same as those facing workers in every country. Following brutal cuts last year, workers in Europe are confronting new demands for austerity, which will intensify over the coming months. The mass eruptions in Egypt and throughout the Middle East and North Africa this year are a reaction to the same conditions of inequality and exploitation that

prevail in the United States. Workers in every country must be unified in a common fight.

Finally, the struggles of workers are political. If they are to be successful, they require the building of a new political party and a new leadership. The trade unions—controlled by highly-paid functionaries—do everything they can to keep workers tied to the Democratic Party. They have rejected any struggle against the war on the working class, and are now focusing their entire energy on the reelection of Barack Obama in 2012. In brief, they are determined to maintain their political alliance with a government that is engaged in open warfare against the working class.

Throughout the country, there are signs everywhere of mounting anger against the rampant greed of the ruling elite and its unrelenting drive for ever greater wealth at the expense of the basic rights of ordinary working people. The massive growth of poverty and social inequality is deeply offensive to the democratic and egalitarian sentiments that are profoundly rooted in the working class. They feel betrayed by an economic and political system that demonstrates, day after day, its callous indifference to their basic interests and needs.

The working class is looking for a way to fight back.

The critical question is that of political leadership. Last month, the SEP held three regional conferences on The Fight for Socialism Today, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Los Angeles, California and New York City. These conferences discussed and adopted a series of resolutions, including a main resolution, "The war on the working class and the fight for socialism."

We urge all our readers, in the US and internationally, to study this resolution and make it the basis for a renewed struggle of the working class. If you agree with this program, make the decision to join and build the Socialist Equality Party.

*To read the program of the Socialist Equality Party, "The Breakdown of Capitalism and the Fight for Socialism in the United States," click here.*

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