

Romney's "47 percent" video and the bipartisan assault on social reform

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When Mitt Romney told backers at the Boca Raton mansion of a fellow corporate raider that 47 percent of Americans are freeloaders who believe they are "entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name it," he was not just expressing the outlook of the Republican Party.

The secretly filmed video of his remarks, posted last week on the Internet and widely reported in the media, has shocked and angered millions across the country. The half-hearted and evasive response of the Democrats, from President Obama and Vice President Biden to the liberal media pundits, has made clear, however, that Romney was speaking for the entire ruling class.

In all of their criticisms—that Romney is dividing the people, slandering seniors, disrespecting veterans, etc.—the Democrats have carefully avoided the basic issue: Romney's assertion that people do not have the right to food, health care and a roof over their heads.

Romney later defended his remarks and went further. Calling "wealth redistribution" a notion that is alien to America, he cited a 1998 video in which then-Illinois State Senator Obama said he believed in a "certain level" of redistribution.

Desperate to distance himself from his 14-year-old remark, Obama essentially seconded Romney's repudiation of social entitlements. In a campaign speech in Virginia, he declared, "Nobody believes that anyone is entitled to success in this country. We don't believe that government should be helping people who refuse to help themselves."

Boca Raton, Florida was a fitting setting for Romney's attack on social programs for working and poor people. The town boasts three of the ten most expensive gated communities in the US. The *Miami Herald*, noting that the city is home to some of the most notorious con artists, quoted a former US Securities and Exchange Commission chairman that Boca Raton was "the only coastal city in

Florida where there are more sharks on land than in the water."

But Obama spends no less time in such settings. The *New York Times* on Sunday noted that Romney tends to be more blunt when speaking behind closed doors to his fellow oligarchs. Obama is more cautious. He "modifies how he talks to certain groups," taking care not to offend his rich backers with the type of pseudo-populist rhetoric he employs in his stump speeches.

Romney's leaked remarks exposed the real agenda that underlies the current elections. Both parties, whatever their tactical differences, are committed to reversing all of the social reforms of the 20th century, beginning with Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. This open repudiation of social reform is the outcome of an enormous shift to the right in the bourgeoisie over the past 40 years.

Wealth redistribution was a major component of US domestic policy for much of the 20th century. This was not a matter of the ruling class dispensing blessings to the masses out of the goodness of its heart. Not a single reform was granted without massive struggles by the working class in the face of virulent, often murderous resistance from the capitalists and the government.

The social gains of the 20th century had to be wrenched from the ruling elite, which was itself sharply divided between those who believed certain concessions were needed to avoid social revolution and those who opposed any incursions into the wealth and prerogatives of big business.

One hundred years ago, the Progressive Party issued an election platform that called for the government to rein in the corporations and banks and guarantee to all people the basic requirements of life. It denounced the "invisible government" of the banks and corporations and the "existing concentration of vast wealth under a corporate system." The party's presidential candidate was Theodore

Roosevelt, the former Republican president.

This was not a socialist or revolutionary platform. It was one of bourgeois reform that emerged under the pressure of a rising working class movement dominated by popular hatred of the trusts and the abuses of the Gilded Age's robber barons. It was widely understood, even by sections of the ruling class, that the unfettered rule of the monopolies was a danger to society and the longer-term interests of the capitalist class itself.

The failure of capitalism and the need for socialism were broadly felt, not only in the working class but also among middle-class layers and the intelligentsia. The first decade of the 20th century saw the publication of powerful exposures of American capitalism such as *The Octopus* by Frank Norris, *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair, and *The History of the Standard Oil Company* by Ida Tarbell.

In 1913, the 16th Amendment was ratified, instituting a progressive income tax explicitly designed to redistribute the wealth by imposing higher tax rates on the rich.

By the time of the Wall Street crash that ushered in the Great Depression, the basic elements of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal had been formulated over decades of social reform agitation. FDR launched his reform program under the pressure of rising working class struggles and the threat of social revolution.

In his January, 1944 State of the Union Address, Roosevelt proposed a "Second Bill of Rights," declaring that "true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence." He proposed that the government guarantee to every American the right to a job, a decent income, housing, health care, a secure retirement and a good education.

Roosevelt's "Second Bill of Rights" was largely ignored and, after the end of World War II, abandoned. Even at the height of its power during the post-World War II boom, American capitalism was incapable of achieving its modest goals.

The mass struggles of the 1960s—the civil rights movement and urban rebellions, a wave of industrial strikes over wages—led to a second round of social reforms, primarily in the form of Medicare, Medicaid and food stamps. It appeared that the question of the "entitlement" of people to the basic necessities of life had been settled.

There was always a great gap between the promises of bourgeois social reform and the reality, precisely because all such measures remained anchored in the defense of capitalist property and profits. Nevertheless, the fact that

the bourgeoisie today treats its own past reform policies as tantamount to subversion is a measure of the decay of American capitalism and its political system. The major signposts of that decay are the vast growth of social inequality and the increasing role of financial parasitism in the US economy.

The current Democratic administration, in the midst of the second global breakdown of capitalism in the past century, has no "New Deal" to offer. Obama has not proposed a single genuine social reform.

A system that is compelled to violently oppose any form of social progress is a system in profound crisis. To the extent that the ruling class and its political representatives repudiate their own past reform policies, the social layers upon which they base their rule grow ever more narrow.

This sets the stage for immense social upheavals, under conditions where only the revolutionary socialist movement defends the right of the people to the requirements of civilized life.

The Socialist Equality Party affirms unequivocally that people have a social right to a job, economic security, education, housing, food, a comfortable retirement and all of the basic necessities of life. But the fight for these rights can no longer be carried out within the framework of bourgeois politics and the two-party system. It is not a matter of chasing after a non-existent "reform" wing of the ruling class.

These rights can be fought for and secured only in an implacable struggle against the modern-day financial aristocracy that exercises a dictatorship over the economic and political life of the country—and the world.

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