Three weeks to the US elections: The issues facing working people

Patrick Martin
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Three weeks from the November 6 presidential election, the contest between President Barack Obama and his Republican opponent Mitt Romney remains close, with Obama holding a shrinking lead, according to a number of polls, in the half dozen states that will decide the outcome in the Electoral College.

The closeness of the election reflects two interconnected processes. Working people, the vast majority of the population, are increasingly alienated from both corporate-controlled political parties and their multimillionaire candidates and see less and less reason to prefer one to the other.

At the same time, the ruling elite is divided along lines that could roughly be characterized as greed vs. caution. Those sections supporting Romney want an all-out, undisguised program of self-enrichment for the financial aristocracy. Those supporting Obama are more cautious, fearing that without a pretense of "fairness" and "equal sacrifice"—albeit entirely hollow and false—the capitalist system will face an uncontrollable movement of social opposition from below.

What is most remarkable about the 2012 election campaign is that neither of the two major parties can seriously address the economic crisis that exploded more than four years ago.

Romney blames Obama for the worsening conditions facing millions, without acknowledging the central role of the financial parasites (of which he is a leading representative) in causing the crisis. Obama displays indifference to the plight of working people, while claiming that an economic recovery is under way.

Neither party offers either an explanation for the crisis or policies to provide relief to its victims: 23 million workers unemployed or underemployed, tens of millions living in poverty, record levels of foreclosures, evictions and utility shutoffs. None of the bankers and speculators who are responsible for triggering the financial meltdown four years ago is held accountable. To provide a historical perspective, one would have to imagine the 1932 presidential campaign being conducted without any reference to the 1929 Wall Street crash.

This failure was underscored by Obama's Saturday radio address, which touted the bailout of the US auto industry and the supposed "saving" of one million jobs. "We refused to let Detroit go bankrupt," Obama said, "We bet on American workers and American ingenuity, and three years later, that bet is paying off in a big way."

Entirely ignored is the fact that the bailout was based on the intensified exploitation of auto workers and a drastic cut in pay and benefits—both for newly hired workers, whose pay was slashed 50 percent, and for retired workers, whose health and pension benefits were cut.

So great is the disconnect between the two bourgeois campaigns and the needs and concerns of the great majority of the American population that even sections of the corporate-controlled media have begun to express apprehension that the two-party political system is becoming discredited.

The *New York Times* published no less than three separate commentaries in its Sunday edition voicing such fears. Its Sunday magazine included a column headlined "Vote Obamney!" which noted the pro-corporate "economic consensus" between the two candidates:

"Romney seeks a 25 percent top corporate tax rate, and Obama is proposing 28 percent. Romney wants to eliminate capital-gains taxes for the typical investor and leave the rate at 15 percent for higher earners. Obama wants to increase it to 20 percent. They differ on how to tax the highest incomes. But for most Americans, the distinctions might be mistaken for a rounding error."

An op-ed column headlined "Which Millionaire Are You Voting For?" noted the inbred social character of the two parties: "We can choose Republicans or Democrats. We can choose conservative policies or progressive ones.

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In most elections, however, we don't get a say in something important: whether we're governed by the rich."

The column, summing up research into the socioeconomic standing of those who occupy the top positions in US government, concluded: "If millionaires were a political party, that party would make up roughly 3 percent of American families, but it would have a super-majority in the Senate, a majority in the House, a majority on the Supreme Court and a man in the White House."

"If working-class Americans were a political party," the commentary concluded, legislators from that party "would never have held more than 2 percent of the seats in Congress."

The third column, headlined, "The Self-Destruction of the 1 Percent," was a direct warning to the super-rich not to overreach themselves. The author, Chrystia Freeland of Thomson Reuters, went so far as to quote the founder of scientific socialism, warning that the greed and self-gratification of the ruling elite would ultimately discredit the profit system in the eyes of the masses:

"That was the future predicted by Karl Marx, who wrote that capitalism contained the seeds of its own destruction. And it is the danger America faces today, as the 1 percent pulls away from everyone else and pursues an economic, political and social agenda that will increase that gap even further—ultimately destroying the open system that made America rich and allowed its 1 percent to thrive in the first place."

That such material appears in the leading newspaper in the United States testifies to the uneasiness within ruling circles over what is in store after the election. The next president and the next Congress, whether Democratic, Republican or some combination of the two, has its assignments clearly set by the financial oligarchy.

In domestic policy, the central task is to slash entitlement programs such as Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security in order to make working people pay for the fiscal crisis brought on by the economic slump and the plundering of the US treasury to bail out the bankers and financial speculators.

In foreign policy, American imperialism must push forward with its aggressive and militaristic intervention in the Middle East and Central Asia, seeking to secure key sources of oil, natural gas and other raw materials against rivals such as China and Russia. Military intervention in Syria and war with Iran are both on the agenda.

There is no significant difference between Obama and Romney on either of these major domestic and foreign policy initiatives. The conflict between the Democrats and Republicans is of a tactical, not a principled, character.

After Obama's seemingly inexplicable failure in the first debate to mention Romney's disparaging reference to the "47 percent" of the American population dependent on government aid, Vice President Biden raised the subject repeatedly in his October 11 debate with Republican vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan.

But neither the Democrats nor the media have focused attention on the most significant part of Romney's remarks, his denunciation of the popular belief that people are entitled to food, shelter and health care. That is because Obama and the Democrats agree with Romney and the Republicans that the people do not have a right to these basic requirements of life.

The central issue confronting working people is to reject the claim, promoted by the trade unions and their liberal and pseudo-left allies, that the Democratic Party, despite its reactionary policies, represents the "lesser evil" to Romney and the Republicans. Obama represents not a "lesser evil," but an alternate program of social reaction, militarism and attacks on democratic rights.

The choice before the working class is not Obama vs. Romney, but its continued subordination to the bourgeois political system or the building of an independent political movement of working people. Only the Socialist Equality Party and its candidates in the 2012 election, Jerry White for president and Phyllis Scherrer for vice president, are fighting for a break with the two parties of big business and the building of a mass independent socialist movement of the working class.

For more information, to attend the regional conferences called by the SEP, and to join our party, please visit www.socialequality.com.

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