

Twenty years since the Oklahoma City bombing

20 April 2015

April 19 marked the twentieth anniversary of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City. At the time, the attack was the bloodiest act of terrorism in history on US soil, claiming the lives of 168 men, women and children.

Below, we republish “The Oklahoma City bombing: a somber warning to the working class,” a statement that first appeared in the May 8, 1995 issue of the International Workers Bulletin, a forerunner of the World Socialist Web Site.

The statement examined the political and social roots of the atrocity in Oklahoma City. It pointed to the growth of social inequality and militarism, the ever-more intimate ties between the Republican Party and the extreme right, and the political vacuum created by the collapse of the trade unions and the Democratic Party’s abandonment of any vestige of social reformism.

Two decades later, these tendencies not only remain, but have been immensely exacerbated. The polarization between wealth and poverty has continued unabated. The explosion of American militarism has seen tens of thousands of US soldiers sent into colonial wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries, passing through a similar experience to that of Timothy McVeigh, who was a veteran of the 1991 Persian Gulf War before he became a right-wing terrorist and blew up the Oklahoma City federal building.

As outlined in the statement published below, the only answer to the growth of extreme-right forces is the building of an independent political movement of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist program.

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The Oklahoma City bombing: a somber warning to the working class

The heinous crime that took the lives of nearly 200 innocent men, women and children in Oklahoma City has laid bare a political crisis in the United States long in the making. It has exposed the growing instability of American bourgeois democracy and revealed the degree to which its traditional institutions are being undermined by deep-going social antagonisms.

In response to this event, moral outrage and indignation are not sufficient. It is necessary to examine its roots, to answer the question: what produced such a horror?

First, and most fundamental, is the extreme polarization of wealth and poverty in America. Over the past two decades broad masses of people have suffered an enormous erosion in their living standards. Even when the economy is on the upswing, it is only to the benefit of corporate profits and executive salaries. Working people face worsening economic insecurity, and the ranks of the poor continue to swell.

The social crisis has engendered a growing sense of despair and

frustration, for which the capitalist system has no progressive answer. Under these conditions, seeing as yet no alternative to the profit system and presented no lead by the organizations that claim to represent the working class, masses of people become susceptible to the nostrums of the political right. The Perot candidacy in 1992 already showed the depth of popular alienation from the capitalist two-party system.

It would be wrong to equate this widespread and political inchoate discontent with mass support for the extreme right. The ranks of those who back the actions and fascist politics of the Oklahoma City bombers are minuscule. This fact must not, however, be taken as a cause for complacency.

The bombing was a conscious political act. From the standpoint of the fascists who carried it out, their present lack of popular support was all the more reason for an outrage of huge proportions. It was their way of announcing their arrival on the political scene. They hope that after the initial shock and revulsion have dissipated, growing numbers of people will see them as a force that must be contended with.

While the social crisis has provided the objective basis for the growth of right-wing forces, this process has unfolded within a definite political environment. For decades the American people have been subjected to a barrage of ideological reaction, which has reached a crescendo over the past 15 years. The corporate powers that control the mass media have waged a mind-numbing campaign via television, radio and film to promote the most right-wing ideologies. From the Rambo-style glorification of militarism to the chauvinist filth spewed by talk show agitators, every form of backwardness is encouraged. The unifying thread is the attack on socialism, aimed at discrediting all socially progressive thought.

The ruling class has deliberately cultivated inside its military a psychopathic element, ready to carry out mass murder against any population targeted for subjugation. The Pentagon takes people like Timothy McVeigh, who face a future of low-wage, dead-end jobs, or no job at all, trains them to be killers and bloodies them in colonialist adventures such as the Persian Gulf War. A former soldier who fought with McVeigh in Iraq recited for the television cameras his unit’s daily chant: “Blood makes the grass grow. Kill! Kill! Kill!” He said McVeigh’s voice could be heard above all others.

The politics of the Republican majority in Congress is barely distinguishable from that of the ultra-right and the fascists. One of Newt Gingrich’s first acts as Speaker of the House was to invite right-wing radio talk show hosts to set up shop in the broadcast facilities at the Capitol.

The Congress-militia connection

A substantial number of the freshmen Republicans elected last November owe their seats to the active support of militia groups, whose

fanatical opposition to gun control they echoed in their campaigns. Even in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, they maintain intimate political ties with groups that are led by white supremacists, racists and anti-Semites.

Those who carried out the bombing are thus the Frankenstein monsters of the ruling class.

The political weight of the ultra-right is magnified by the social crisis, which gives them access to a far broader audience than ever before. But whatever strength they have is largely theirs by default. They are able to exploit the political vacuum created by the absence of any leadership from the so-called mass organizations of the working class.

It is a damning indictment of the organizations that claim to represent the working class, the trade unions, that some of the largest paramilitary groups have emerged in industrial states where years of plant closures and layoffs, carried out with the complicity of the unions, have devastated the working class.

The growth of the Michigan Militia in the environs of Detroit, Flint, Lansing and other auto centers shows the bankruptcy of the United Auto Workers, an organization that has long since ceased to represent the aspirations of auto workers and the working class as a whole.

Unions such as the UAW, the United Mine Workers, the United Steelworkers, and the AFL-CIO as a whole are unwilling and unable to provide any way forward for the masses of working people. Conservative and complacent to the bone, they devote their efforts to smothering all resistance from below. They fervently support the ruling class and its political representatives, in order to defend the privileged social position of the trade union bureaucracy.

The struggle against the growth of right-wing and fascist forces is, therefore, entirely bound up with the struggle to free the working class from the grip of the outlived and reactionary organizations of the labor bureaucracy. Once the working class begins boldly to present itself as the leading force in the defense of democratic rights, and advances a social program to end the enrichment of the few at the expense of the many, it will rapidly undermine the right wing and win the allegiance of millions of middle class people.

The real source of social discontent

It is entirely predictable, but nevertheless noteworthy, that the mass media have not produced, in all their coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing, a single commentary penetrating beneath the surface of events and linking the bombing to the social crisis in America. None of them has dared mention the staggering growth of economic inequality.

After a 20-year assault by big business and its political representatives on the living standards of working people in America, the United States is today the most unequal of all the industrialized countries in the world. The concentration of wealth has reached the point where the richest 1 percent of the population controls 40 percent of the wealth.

Another statistic provides insight into the class divisions that are ripping apart American society. According to Census Bureau data, the percentage of men aged 25-34 who earn less than the official poverty level for a family of four has more than doubled over the past quarter century.

Nearly a third (32.2 percent) of males in this group—precisely the age when young couples must establish a financial basis for raising a family—fall below the poverty level. This compares to 13.6 percent in 1969.

While the class divisions sharpen, the domination of political life by two big business parties forecloses any possibility for the masses of workers to articulate their aspirations and fight for their needs. The Clinton

administration is proof of the futility of looking toward the Democrats to defend jobs, living standards and democratic rights. Their disagreements with the Republicans are tactical—how best to defend the interests of American big business at home and abroad and make the working class pay the cost.

There is a direct connection between the right-wing record of Clinton and the depths of the outrage felt by millions against the government. For those who voted for the Democrats in 1992, swayed by Clinton's promises to reverse the reactionary social policies of Reagan and Bush, nearly two-and-a-half years of budget cuts, mass layoffs and declining wages on the one side, and record profits for big business on the other, have brought their anger to the boiling point.

Clinton's reaction to the Oklahoma City bombing has been a further lurch to the right. The antiterrorism bill he is proposing represents a sweeping and unprecedented assault on civil liberties and constitutionally guaranteed rights. In violation of the oldest and most basic principles of bourgeois democracy, he is calling for the use of the military to carry out police operations against civilians. The measures demanded by Clinton are certain to be turned against the working class and the socialist opponents of capitalism, not its ultra-right defenders.

Flogging the dead horse of liberalism

Actions taken to strengthen the police powers of the state are not only intrinsically reactionary. From the standpoint of opposing ultraright and fascist forces, they are counterproductive. The growth of such elements cannot be countered by police methods. What is required is a political response—not from the ruling class and its representatives, but from the working class.

The liberal and reformist defenders of the profit system are incapable of providing a viable alternative to the right wing. They dismiss as paranoia the deep-going distrust of the state and the popular belief that the government itself is the source of attack on democratic rights. These conceptions, however, are based on a multitude of facts and bitter experience. The destruction of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas two years ago, for example, was indeed an act of mass murder. Eighty-six people, including 25 children, were slaughtered so that the government could demonstratively extinguish a challenge, no matter how minor, to the authority of the capitalist state.

To the extent, therefore, that the trade unions, in the name of the working class, come forward to uphold the authority of the state and paint American bourgeois democracy in bright colors, they politically disarm the working class and alienate oppressed sections of the middle class, driving them further into the arms of the right wing. A perfect example was a full-page ad taken out by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and published in the April 27 issue of the *New York Times*: "The United States of America is a government of, by and for the people.... This is our government," the ad read.

The decay of capitalist democracy and the tendency of the profit system to turn toward authoritarian and fascist forms of rule are not fundamentally the result of the subjective inclinations of capitalist businessmen or politicians. The ruling class would prefer to maintain the forms of electoral activity and congressional debate that have long served to mask the class oppression at the heart of its system.

But even the hollowed-out democracy which presently exists cannot be maintained under conditions of an ever-widening chasm between the haves and the have-nots. In a country where 1 percent owns 40 percent of the wealth, political democracy cannot survive.

Capitalism is today producing staggering disparities of riches for the few

and poverty for the masses on a world scale. That is why the rise of extreme right-wing and fascist forces is an international phenomenon—to be seen in Italy, Germany, France, Britain, Russia, Japan, India—in every country of Europe, in the major countries of Asia and in North America.

What is the alternative?

The only viable and progressive alternative to the threat from the right is one which rejects the entire framework of the profit system and advances a socialist alternative to the exploitation and injustice which this system engenders. The basis for genuine democracy is not toting guns, but achieving economic equality.

This requires a radical transformation not only of the political superstructure of society, but of its economic and social foundations. Economic life must be reorganized so as to meet the needs of the masses of people who produce the wealth, rather than being subordinated to the profit greed of a handful of billionaire capitalists.

Every worker must be assured the right to a secure, good-paying job. Decent housing, health care and education must be provided for all. There must be an end to racial discrimination, the assault on immigrant workers and all attacks on democratic rights.

The working class is the only force that can carry out such a progressive and truly democratic transformation. The class struggle, waged by the working class as a conscious political offensive for a program articulating the needs of the vast majority, is the only means for resolving the social contradictions in America in a positive way.

The working class can carry out such a struggle only if it frees itself from the political domination of the Democratic Party and organizes itself as an independent party fighting to win state power.

The political and social crisis revealed by the Oklahoma City bombing poses above all the urgency of this task—the building of an independent mass party of the working class, based on a program of economic, social and political equality, that is, a socialist program.

This is the means for uniting every section of workers—white, black, Hispanic; native and foreign-born; employed and unemployed—and rallying behind the working class the broad middle classes which are being ruined by the predatory policies of big business.

The Oklahoma City bombing raises starkly the danger of the growth of right-wing and fascist forces. But it does not mean they are about to take power. Ahead lies a protracted period of political and social struggle. The class contradictions which grow sharper by the day can find a progressive outlet in the form of a broad political movement of the oppressed against an economic system which breeds poverty and injustice. Or they can assume the malignant forms of racism, fascism and homicidal violence directed against the victims of that system.

The decisive issue, which will determine the outcome of this struggle, is the development of a politically conscious, socialist leadership in the working class. The task before advanced workers is to build that leadership by joining and building the Workers League.



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