

Social inequality and American politics

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Last week the *New York Times* released the results of an opinion poll, conducted in collaboration with CBS News, showing overwhelming and growing popular opposition to social inequality in the United States.

The details of the poll are striking. Asked whether “In today’s economy, everyone has a fair chance to get ahead in the long run,” for example, 61 percent of participants said that “just a few people at the top have a chance to get ahead,” compared to 35 percent who said that “anyone can get ahead.” Significantly, the percentage of people who chose the latter response has *fallen by 17 percentage points* since a similar poll conducted in early 2014.

Even more strikingly, 66 percent of participants said that “the distribution of money and wealth in this country... should be more equal,” compared with only 27 percent who said it was fair. The margin between the two responses was 39 percentage points.

When the question was put a different way, the results were even more pronounced. Asked whether social inequality is a “problem that needs to be addressed now, a problem but one that does not need to be addressed now or not a problem,” only 17 percent of respondents said that social inequality was “not a problem.”

Similarly, 68 percent of those polled said they favored raising taxes on people who earn more than \$1 million a year, and 71 percent of respondents said they favored raising the federal minimum wage. Eighty percent favored requiring employers to offer paid leave to parents of new children and employees caring for sick family members, and 85 percent favored requiring employers to offer paid sick leave.

Polls such as the one carried out by the *Times* are always an imperfect reflection of the actual state of public opinion. Moreover, other surveys have consistently found that Americans significantly underestimate the actual level of social inequality. If anything, therefore, the results understate the overwhelming hostility of the population to the essential feature of American and indeed world capitalism: social inequality.

The widespread opposition to social inequality in the

United States stands in sharp contradiction to the policies pursued by the entire political establishment. Indeed, the presidency of Barack Obama, who presented himself in the 2008 election as the champion of the “middle class,” has seen one of the most precipitous increases in social inequality in US history.

During only the first four years of the Obama presidency, the top 0.1 percent of the population increased their share of US wealth from 19 percent to 22 percent, while the top 1 percent of income earners in the US took in 95 percent of all income gains since 2009.

The enrichment of the financial elite has paralleled an enormous decline in US median household income, which has fallen by 12 percent, with a typical household earning \$6,400 less per year in 2013 than it did in 2007.

The immense growth of social inequality over this period has been the direct result of the policies pursued by the Obama administration, which has sought to make the working class pay for the financial crisis that erupted in 2008 while protecting and expanding the wealth of the financial oligarchy.

The concerns within the ruling class over the implications of its policies can be seen in efforts to promote figures such as Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, a self-proclaimed “democratic socialist” running as a Democrat in the 2016 election. Sanders, who rhetorically denounces social inequality, is in fact a thoroughly conventional bourgeois politician.

The stated opposition of Sanders to social inequality is entirely of the same character of that of Obama: i.e., purely rhetorical. His candidacy is merely an attempt to keep the growing opposition to social inequality and the capitalist system within the confines of the Democratic Party.

Whatever the rhetoric of figures such as Sanders, Senator Elizabeth Warren, and New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, there exists no section of the political establishment that supports any genuine reduction in social inequality. The most telling example is perhaps de Blasio, promoted as a champion of “progressivism”

within the Democratic Party, who last month announced a series of measures hiking housing fees for low-income New York City residents while moving to privatize sections of public housing.

What none of these figures can acknowledge is that the growth of social inequality and the unprecedented concentration of wealth is a product of the capitalist system that they all defend, a system that is based on the subordination of all aspects of life to a financial aristocracy that controls the entire political system.

In contrast to the pseudo-left defenders of the Democratic Party, who have sought to present race and gender as the most important social categories, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has insisted that the growth of social inequity is the central political issue in contemporary society. The ICFI has insisted that social inequality is itself the expression of the division of society into two great classes; the working class, the vast majority of the population, and the ruling class.

The opposition to social inequality expressed in the *New York Times* poll is a product of both the objective reality of world capitalism and the experiences that the American working class has made over the past eight years.

But this spontaneous sentiment must be given a conscious political program, based on the understanding that the fight against social inequality is a revolutionary question that is inextricably tied to the independent political mobilization of the working class against capitalism. The creation of a genuinely egalitarian society means the overthrow of the capitalist system and its replacement with socialism and the democratic control over economic life.



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