

On eve of first presidential contest: US two-party system in crisis

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The Democratic and Republican caucuses in Iowa tonight mark the first actual contest of the 2016 US presidential election campaign, but they will involve only a tiny fraction of the population of one of the smaller American states. The US electoral system is the least democratic and the most subject to manipulation of any major capitalist country purporting to be a democracy. Just two parties, both of them right-wing and controlled by corporate interests, have an effective monopoly.

There is an acute and intensifying contradiction between the vast and diverse population of the United States, a country of 330 million people, and a political structure controlled by the top one-tenth of one percent.

The two-party system, controlled by this elite, is confronted with an unprecedented crisis of political legitimacy. Both the Democratic and Republican parties – political institutions that are more than 160 years old – are losing their hold on a population that is deeply and profoundly alienated from the political establishment.

The media has been taken by surprise by the emergence of candidates in both political parties whose sudden rise and popularity was unforeseen: Donald Trump on the Republican side and Senator Bernie Sanders on the Democratic.

At the start of the campaign, the candidacy of Trump, the thuggish real-estate mogul and reality-television celebrity, was viewed as a entertaining sideshow that would soon lose its audience. As for Sanders, the media largely ignored the announcement of his candidacy, assuming that the campaign of a septuagenarian who described himself as a democratic socialist would attract only negligible support.

Contrary to all expectations, both Trump and Sanders have acquired mass support and emerged as the dominant figures in the primary process. There is a growing realization within the political establishment that the Trump campaign is a deadly serious matter, and that

Trump may emerge as the nominee of the Republican Party. And while the corporate-financial interests that control the Democratic Party still expect the badly-battered Clinton to win the nomination, the Sanders candidacy is seen as a harbinger of a continuing and uncontrollable left-wing political movement.

What accounts for this unfolding crisis of the two-party system? Like all significant political developments, it has deep political and social roots. The contradictions that are now blowing the two-party system apart -- developing out of the protracted decline of US capitalism -- have been accumulating for decades. But the massive economic collapse of 2008, on the very eve of the election of Barack Obama, marked a qualitative turning point in the crisis of American society.

The disastrous impact of the economic crisis upon the lives of tens of millions of people is reflected in the growing rejection of a political system that is seen to be controlled by the elite which first caused and then profited off the 2008 collapse.

On the extreme right, Trump's barrage of insults against his Republican opponents and the media resonates with a section of the electorate that feels it has been betrayed and bamboozled. Moreover, his candidacy is the end-product of a degraded political environment that has relentlessly promoted and legitimized the sort of reactionary backwardness that Trump skillfully exploits.

On the other side of the political spectrum, the growth of working class militancy and anti-capitalist sentiment, expressed in strikes and contract rejections by autoworkers, steelworkers and teachers, as well as in opposition to police killings and outrage over lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan, demonstrates that the working class is moving to the left, towards an open struggle against corporate America.

This is the primary factor behind the crisis of the two-party system. The leftward movement among broad

masses of the population has found expression in the growth of support for Bernie Sanders, who calls himself a “democratic socialist” and has placed economic inequality and Wall Street criminality at the center of his campaign. Sanders has moved into a virtual tie with Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton in pre-caucus polls in Iowa, as well as opening a significant lead in polls in New Hampshire, where the next primary contest takes place on February 9.

The *Des Moines Register* poll published Saturday, the last before the Iowa caucuses, found that Sanders had opened up a lead of more than 30 points over Clinton among potential voters under the age of 35. The poll found that 68 percent of likely Democratic voters thought a socialist president was a good idea, a remarkable figure in a country where socialism has been subjected to endless vilification by the media and the political elites.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has explained that Sanders is not a socialist, but rather a moderate liberal whose views would have been considered middle-of-the-road in the Democratic Party of the 1960s. While criticizing the stranglehold of the billionaires over the US political system, Sanders defends the foreign policy of American imperialism: i.e., the use of military force, assassination, espionage and political subversion to defend the interests of these same billionaires around the world.

The main function of the Sanders campaign is to appeal to the increasingly radical sentiments among youth and working people in order to divert them back into the political confines of the Democratic Party. Despite this political service, however, there is growing nervousness in the Democratic Party establishment, and more widely in ruling circles, that Sanders’ attacks on Wall Street could encourage a movement going well beyond the intentions of the senator from Vermont.

This explains the concerted attack on Sanders this weekend by the principal organ of the Democratic Party, the *New York Times*. The *Times* published a lead editorial Sunday endorsing Hillary Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination, while dismissing Sanders as a candidate who has raised useful ideas but could not possibly put them into practice. It singles out Clinton’s role as a paragon of identity politics—she would be the first female president and an advocate of black women, gays, etc.

More extensively elaborated is the argument of *Times* columnist Paul Krugman in a commentary headlined, “Plutocrats and Prejudice.” He claims that Sanders and Clinton represent competing diagnoses of what is wrong

with America, with Sanders focusing on economic inequality and “the corrupting influence of big money,” while Clinton (and Krugman himself) maintain that “money is the root of some evil, maybe a lot of evil, but it isn’t the whole story. Instead, racism, sexism and other forms of prejudice are powerful forces in their own right.”

The conclusion is that issues of race and gender are just as important, or even more important, than issues of class. As a result of the prevalence of racism and sexism among white workers, Krugman argues, “visions of radical change are naïve” and “political revolution from the left is off the table.”

This analysis of American society is a political libel against the working class. Krugman cites no evidence of the supposed dominance of racism in a country that elected an African-American president in 2008. On the contrary, issues of race and gender are being deliberately injected into the political arena in order to divide the working class and head off the growth of class consciousness.

Much of the press coverage of the Iowa caucuses and the broader election campaign concedes that the overwhelming sentiment among millions of people is anger at the existing political system and both parties. But there is no explanation of why there is so much anger, when, according to the media, the US economy is in the sixth year of recovery.

The official media are either oblivious to the reality of declining living standards and deteriorating social conditions or are deliberately covering it up. Their America is the rising stock exchange—at least until January—and the increasing wealth of the super-rich and a privileged upper-middle-class layer.

America is a deeply class-polarized society, with a vast and unbridgeable gulf between the wealthy and the rest of the population. It is this social reality that underlies the mounting crisis of both the Democratic and Republican parties. As the class issues come to the fore, shaking the sclerotic and unrepresentative political system, there will undoubtedly be more political shocks and surprises in the course of the 2016 election campaign.



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