The Trump campaign: A new stage in the crisis of American democracy

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With the eruption of physical conflict inside and outside rallies of billionaire Republican presidential contender Donald Trump, actively encouraged by the candidate himself, the traditional norms of American political life are rapidly breaking down.

The consequences of the explosive social tensions within the United States, combined with unending war abroad, are emerging on the surface of political life. For the first time in the United States, a candidate with a distinctly fascistic and authoritarian program, who openly incites violence against his opponents, and declares that a large portion of the American population must be suppressed, is on the verge of capturing the candidacy of the Republican Party.

Trump—with a fortune accumulated through finance, real estate, and the media-driven marketing of his thuggish business persona—epitomizes the oligarchic character of American society, which is characterized by a staggering degree of social inequality. He represents this oligarchy's collective "will to power." His campaign is a pre-emptive attempt by the most ruthless and determined sections of the capitalist class – fearful of growing popular discontent and increasing working-class militancy – to impose authoritarian and fascistic methods of rule.

Trump is exploiting deep social anger produced by a political system that is hostile and indifferent to the problems of mass unemployment, declining wages and economic decay affecting millions of people. He is channeling this anger along reactionary lines, combining fraudulent denunciations of "disloyal" corporations that export jobs and xenophobic rants against China and Mexico, with racist attacks on immigrants, Muslims and a broad array of "outsiders who don't belong here."

The Trump phenomenon is a symptom of a diseased social, economic and political system. The fact that Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, his main Republican rival, is being presented as a "moderate" alternative demonstrates how far to the right the American political system has gone. Cruz is arguably as reactionary and dangerous as Trump himself, advocating military escalation in the Middle East, huge tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy, and the erection of a semi-theocratic state in America.

Whatever the fate of Trump's campaign in the coming weeks and months, his sudden rise is a clear warning that American democracy confronts a terminal crisis. With or without Trump, the extreme concentrations of wealth and the domination of the corporate-financial oligarchy, based on the capitalist system, is leading to openly dictatorial and fascistic forms of rule. Even if the campaign of Trump Version 1 were to suddenly implode, a Version 2 would soon emerge on the political market – perhaps more slick but not less dangerous. Notwithstanding the differences that presently exist within the Republican Party elite over Trump's crude methods, it agrees with his ultimate objective: the defense of the capitalist system against threats "from below."

The Democratic Party – traditionally presented as the progressive alternative to the Republicans – cannot stop this process. Hillary Clinton, its official front-runner, is the personification of the political and economic status quo. She has presented her campaign as the continuation of the Obama administration, embracing the very government whose policies – bailing out Wall Street at the expense of working people, expanding the wars of the Bush administration, building up the powers of the military-police apparatus – have created the conditions for the rise of Trump.

Clinton's campaign is built on lies and hypocrisy. She and her husband, the former president, have leveraged their positions in the political machine to acquire immense personal wealth.

The desire among masses of working people and youth for an alternative to the existing set-up has found expression in the campaign of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. He has attracted mass support largely on the basis of his self-identification as a "democratic socialist." In a country where even tepid liberalism is referred to as the "L word," and where socialism has been all but excluded for nearly seventy years from official political discourse, the Sanders' campaign has disproved the political myth that the American people will never consider an alternative to capitalism.

The workers and youth who have propelled Sanders into a serious contender for the Democratic nomination are supporting him because they are seeking decisive political and social change.

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However, there is an immense chasm between *what is perceived to be* and *what he really is*. Far more significant than his rhetorical sallies against the "billionaire class" is the fact that Sanders is seeking the nomination of the capitalist Democratic Party, one of the two political instruments through which the financial aristocracy has controlled the United States for 150 years. This party cannot serve as the instrument of a progressive, let alone socialist, transformation of American society.

In the final analysis, Sanders' talk of a "political revolution" is little more than hot air. Tributes to Sanders' "sincerity" are not only naïve, but really beside the point. Those who "feel the bern" today will feel political heart-burn tomorrow, as the Vermont senator dashes their hopes no less cynically and cruelly than Barack Obama – the one-time prophet of "Change you can believe in."

While Trump is deadly serious in his determination to defend the ruling corporate-financial oligarchy, Sanders' "socialism" is no more than a phrase, devoid of any genuinely anti-capitalist content. As the campaign progresses, his program and rhetoric are acquiring an increasingly conventional character.

Moreover, rather than drawing clear and unmistakable lines between himself and Trump, Sanders is adapting his own campaign to the right-wing demagogue's poisonous economic nationalism, denouncing not the capitalist system but various trade agreements that have allegedly enabled China and Mexico to "steal American jobs." He simply ignores the fact that such trade agreements are an inevitable element of capitalism's global operations.

The political situation is explosive. There are definite similarities between the present election campaign and the 1968 election, which saw the racist demagogy of George Wallace, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, and the police reign of terror at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The 1968 campaign occurred under conditions of a growing movement against the Vietnam War, massive urban uprisings throughout the country and militant strikes by the working class.

Comparisons to the 1968 elections are certainly appropriate. However, there is another American election campaign that comes to mind: that of 1860, when the sectional and class conflicts within the United States preceded the eruption of civil war.

The atmosphere of growing violence and social tension that characterizes the presidential campaign of 2016 is an anticipation of massive social conflict in the United States, regardless of who wins the election.

This understanding of the present situation must form the basis of political strategy.

The anger that has fueled the protests against Trump's fascist-style rallies is entirely legitimate. But – and we urge our readers to take this warning seriously – the political danger represented by Trump and the authoritarian and fascistic tendency he embodies cannot be dealt with through confrontations which play into his hands. Indeed, Trump welcomes these incidents as an opportunity to legitimize and expand the operations of his privately financed thugs, and to coordinate their actions with politically sympathetic police forces.

The drastic shift to the right in official American politics must be combatted through the development of a politically independent movement on the basis of a genuine socialist program that surmounts the racial and ethnic divisions incited by capitalism, and which can appeal to all sections of workers and youth. A genuine struggle against the growing right-wing danger requires that working people and youth break out of the straitjacket of the Democratic Party and build a mass socialist movement directed against the capitalist system.

The working class must be armed with an anti-capitalist strategy to defend jobs, living standards and democratic rights, and to fight the growing danger of an imperialist world war. This means a fight for a real socialist program, based on the public ownership of the banks and massive corporations under democratic control, to put an end to the domination of society by the super-rich.

The same issues are posed to the working class in every country. The effort of the ruling elite to stoke extreme nationalism and chauvinism, to divide workers against each other, is aimed at creating the conditions for the escalation of imperialist war and social reaction. It must be countered through the fight to unify all workers in all countries on the basis of socialist internationalism.

The decisive question is the building of a revolutionary leadership in the working class and among young people.

This is a time for political engagement and action. It is not enough to agree "in principle" that Trump is a political menace, that dictatorship and war should be prevented, and that socialism would be better than capitalism. Get off the sidelines! Those who want to see a socialist United States must be prepared to fight for it. We call on readers of the World Socialist Web Site to join and build the Socialist Equality Party.

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