

The social reality behind the US elections

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The study published this week by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* on the widening of the life expectancy gap in the United States sheds new light on the pervasive impact of social inequality.

The report, based on an examination of some 1.4 billion tax records, documents the fact that higher income is strongly associated with greater longevity. The study shows that the gap between the richest one percent and the poorest one percent is 14.6 years for men and 10.1 years for women. It further establishes that life expectancy for individuals in the top five percent of income earners increased by nearly three years between 2001 and 2014, while for those in the bottom five percent, the increase was negligible.

American men at the bottom one percent of the income distribution at the age of 40 have a life expectancy similar to the average life expectancy of 40-year-old men in Sudan and Pakistan, the researchers noted. Responding to the findings, Nobel Prize-winning economist Angus Deaton said, “It is as if the top income percentiles belong to one world of elite, wealthy US adults, whereas the bottom income percentiles each belong to separate worlds of poverty, each unhappy and unhealthy in its own way.”

Deaton and fellow Princeton University economist Anne Case published a report last year that showed a significant rise in the mortality rate of white, middle-aged working-class Americans over the last fifteen years, tied to a dramatic rise in deaths related to suicide, drug abuse and alcoholism—typical ills of economic and social deprivation.

Drastically worsening conditions in the US are the result not of impersonal economic forces, let alone individual failings. They are the outcome of deliberate policies dictated by the American ruling class and implemented by both of its major political parties over the past four decades to make the working class pay for the crisis and decline of US capitalism.

The working class has suffered a historic reversal in its social position. The postwar boom, when there seemed to be some truth in the reformist claim that “a rising tide lifts all boats,” has long since given way to decades of deindustrialization, increasing financial parasitism and relentless attacks on the jobs and living standards of workers. Income and wealth, under Democratic as well as Republican administrations, have become ever more concentrated in the hands of a financial aristocracy, with devastating consequences for working people and youth.

The trade union organizations that were built by the working class in the mass struggles of the 1930s and 1940s have played the most critical role in carrying through this social counterrevolution—an offensive that has been intensified since the breakdown of the world capitalist system that began in 2008.

Based on their pro-capitalist and nationalist program, the unions responded to the mounting crisis of American capitalism by becoming direct partners with the corporations and the government in imposing the full weight of the crisis on the backs of the workers. They have collaborated in the destruction of millions of jobs, the decimation of wages and benefits, and the imposition of sweatshop conditions, all in the name of increasing the competitiveness of American corporations against their international rivals. For this purpose, they took on the role of an industrial police force for the ruling class, suppressing working-class resistance. Strikes, which were a fact of daily life in America, have all but disappeared.

The bailout of the financial criminals responsible for the 2008 Wall Street crash and Great Recession was paid for through relentless austerity in the United States and around the world. Under the Obama administration, 95 percent of all income gains have gone to the richest one percent. Today, the share of the US gross domestic product that goes to workers is at the lowest level since

World War II, while the percentage that goes to corporate profit is at the highest.

In an earlier period, the rash of studies exposing the desperate conditions in which millions of Americans live would have been treated by sections of the political establishment and the media as a political scandal. Today, these issues are at best given perfunctory attention by the media and quickly dropped, and generally ignored by the political establishment.

Virtually no mention is made by any of the presidential candidates of either party of reports of rising death rates and mortality for working-class people, shocking infant mortality rates among the poor, and increasing life expectancy gaps between the rich and the poor.

Democratic Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, the self-declared “socialist,” seeks to tap into seething anger over economic deprivation and insecurity by denouncing income inequality in his stump speeches, but his remarks remain notably abstract. He says little or nothing about the actual conditions working people and youth face in their daily lives, and manages to avoid any mention of the brutal austerity measures carried out by the Obama administration.

Sanders has said nothing about Obama’s imposition of across-the-board 50 percent wage cuts for newly hired autoworkers as part of his bailout of GM and Chrysler, is silent on the administration’s support for the gutting of workers’ health care and pensions in the Detroit bankruptcy, and avoids any reference to the repeated cuts in food stamps approved by the White House.

The Democratic Party, behind which Sanders is seeking to channel growing working-class opposition, is fully complicit in the social counterrevolution. From the Clintons’ abolition of welfare in the 1990s to Obama’s assault on health benefits for millions of workers under Obamacare, the Democrats have functioned as an instrument of Wall Street and the corporate elite.

A prerequisite for any serious struggle against inequality, war and the drive toward dictatorship is a complete and irrevocable break with the Democratic Party and all of the political representatives of the ruling class. Only on this basis can American workers advance a socialist program that corresponds to their interests and unite with their class brothers and sisters

internationally against the transnational corporations and banks.

This perspective must be brought into the 2016 elections in opposition to all attempts to block the development of an independent and genuinely socialist political movement of the working class.



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