Clinton’s fall in the polls and the crisis of the Democratic Party

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16 September 2016

The presidential contest in the United States has tightened considerably, with Democrat Hillary Clinton leading Republican Donald Trump by the barest of margins. Trump has erased most of the lead of eight to ten points Clinton enjoyed a month ago.

Thursday’s *New York Times* headlined the results of the latest CBS/Times poll, “Clinton, Trump Locked in Tight Race,” with its survey showing Clinton with a two-point lead over Trump head-to-head, 46 percent to 44 percent, and tied with Trump at 42 percent each in a four-way race, when Libertarian Gary Johnson and Green Party candidate Jill Stein are included.

Statewide polls showed Trump closing the gap or taking small leads in such battleground states as Iowa, Nevada, Ohio, Florida and New Hampshire, although Clinton remained ahead in Colorado, Pennsylvania, Virginia and North Carolina and was competitive in previously Republican states like Arizona and Georgia.

It is significant that the trend in the polls is at least as much a decline in support for Clinton as it is a rise in support for Trump. Clinton is doing particularly poorly with younger voters, who flocked to support Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries. A Gallup poll last week found Clinton’s approval rating among voters age 18 to 29 was only 33 percent, the lowest for any age group.

There is enormous disaffection with the choice that the two-party system presents to the American people, particularly among younger voters and those not affiliated with either the Democratic or Republican parties. In a Quinnipiac poll, 52 percent of independents and 62 percent of young people aged 18 to 34 said they would “consider voting” for a third-party candidate.

The obvious question is why, in the face of widespread popular revulsion, particularly among young people, against the racist bigotry and bullying authoritarianism of Donald Trump, the most unpopular figure ever nominated by one of the two major capitalist parties, the Clinton campaign is so obviously struggling.

The answer is that the Democrats—and Clinton in particular—are themselves deeply reviled. As a political organization, the Democratic Party represents an alliance between dominant sections of Wall Street, the military-intelligence apparatus and the most privileged sections of the upper middle class. Behind its empty rhetoric, the attitude of these layers to the working class is one of hostility and contempt.

Clinton, in an unguarded moment before wealthy donors last week, let slip the outlook of the Democrat Party when she said that half of all Trump supporters made up a “basket of deplorables,” speaking of broad sections of the population as if they were another species. Those backing Trump, she said, were “racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it.”

There is no question that Trump has appealed to all those forms of bigotry in the course of his campaign. However, he has also made an appeal, in an entirely demagogic way, to deep-seated economic grievances. Among white men without a college education, he leads Clinton by as much as 50 percentage points.

If there is unrest among white workers, the apologists of the Democratic Party claim, it is due entirely to racism, exacerbated by eight years of the administration of the first black president. President Obama repeatedly asserts that conditions in America are “pretty darn great,” and liberal pundits hailed, falsely, the latest Census report on income as proof that claims of widespread economic distress in America had no factual basis (see: “Further considerations on the

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household income report: Poverty and inequality in America").

In fact, what is ultimately fueling social and political discontent is the enormous decline in living standards, over which the Democrats no less than the Republicans have presided. The association of the Democratic Party with liberal social reform belongs to a particular historical period—between the inauguration of Franklin Roosevelt in 1933 and Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" programs of the mid-1960s.

Since then, a half century has passed without a single meaningful social reform, as the Democrats have moved continuously to the right. During his time in office from 1977 to 1980, Jimmy Carter laid the foundation for the social counter-revolution that took place under Reagan during the 1980s. And during the years of Bill Clinton, the Democrats oversaw the dismantling of welfare, the end of the Glass-Steagall restraints on the banks and other right-wing measures.

Throughout this period, the trade unions transitioned from their alliance with the Democratic Party on the basis of ferocious anti-communism into outright instruments of the corporations and the state. They have and continue to collaborate in the "orderly shutdown" of factories and mines, after pushing through wage and benefit cuts on the bogus pretext of "saving jobs."

The Democratic Party's "liberalism" consists, not in advocating economic reforms, but in promoting identity politics—setting aside a portion of the profits and perks of the ruling elite for a small section of highly privileged blacks, women, gays, etc., to give a veneer of "diversity" to an increasingly unequal and undemocratic social order.

This reached its culmination in the election of Obama, the first African-American president, who promised "hope and change" and delivered war and economic stagnation. Now we have the candidacy of Hillary Clinton, who would be the first female president, presumably giving a feminine touch to the delivery of cruise missiles and 500-pound bombs and the evisceration of Social Security, Medicare and other social programs in the interests of big business.

What passes for "left" politics in the United States, from the Sanders wing of the Democratic Party to its supporters in the pseudo-left, is completely bankrupt. Yet this bankruptcy is an expression of a broader crisis of political legitimacy of the state apparatus as a whole.

In the end, the actual policy differences between Clinton and Trump are comparatively small. The next administration, regardless of who heads it, will escalate the drive to war against Russia and China, and intensify the ongoing assault on jobs, living standards and social benefits. But the rise of Trump points to new dangers in the political situation. The Trump campaign is tapping into the same social anger, and giving it a noxious right-wing expression, as similar political movements that have developed over the past decade in Europe.

The urgent conclusion that must be drawn from the political crisis in the United States is the necessity for building a revolutionary socialist movement--to unite working people across all lines of race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, etc., in a struggle for common class interests: jobs, decent living standards, the rebuilding of the social infrastructure of roads, schools, water systems and hospitals, and an end to imperialist war and police violence.

It is to build a socialist leadership in the working class that the SEP is running candidates, Jerry White and Niles Niemuth, in the presidential elections. We urge workers and young people to support the SEP campaign and attend the conference that concludes the campaign, November 5 in Detroit, "Socialism vs. Capitalism and War."

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