

Trump escalates conflict with congressional Republicans

Patrick Martin
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Tensions within the Republican Party exploded into public recriminations Tuesday, with presidential candidate Donald Trump issuing a series of strident statements denouncing House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senator John McCain, two leading congressional Republicans, for their refusal to support his campaign.

In a particularly revealing Twitter comment, Trump gloated over his open break with the Republican congressional leadership, declaring, “It is so nice that the shackles have been taken off me and I can now fight for America the way I want to.”

By “shackles” Trump is referring to the political norms of the US constitutional system, which he has defied with his threats, should he win the presidency, to prosecute and jail his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, as well as his encouragement of violence and his denunciation of the electoral process as “rigged.”

At two campaign rallies Monday, Trump suggested that a Democratic victory in the presidential election would be illegitimate, the result of ballot-box fraud in key states such as Pennsylvania. He told his supporters to send poll watchers to “certain communities”—alluding to African-American neighborhoods in Philadelphia—to “make sure that this election is not stolen from us and is not taken away from us.”

Trump’s strident attacks on his own party as well as the Democrats make clear that his perspective is no longer to win the presidential election on November 8. His orientation is rather toward the building of an extra-parliamentary far-right movement for the period of social and political upheaval that will follow the elections.

Maine Governor Paul LePage, a fervent Trump supporter, said in a radio interview Tuesday that the United States needed someone like Trump to wield

“authoritarian power” because “we’re slipping into anarchy.” LePage was only articulating in the crudest form the strongman politics that are the essence of the Trump campaign.

Trump has said that a collapse of the world financial system on an even greater scale than in 2008 is likely, and he is positioning himself to offer an ultra-right alternative to a Democratic administration that will become deeply unpopular as it imposes policies of economic austerity and imperialist war. Whether this approach costs the Republicans legislative seats on November 8 is irrelevant to Trump, because he anticipates that in the next period in American history, political issues are going to be decided in the streets, not in the halls of Congress.

This divergence underlies the conflict between the Republican presidential candidate and House Speaker Ryan, the top Republican in Congress, who announced Monday he would no longer defend Trump or campaign for him. Ryan informed the House Republican Caucus of his decision in a Monday conference call, during which all members of the House leadership declared their agreement while a minority of pro-Trump representatives loudly objected.

Effectively declaring the presidential race lost for the Republicans, Ryan said that while he would not withdraw his endorsement of Trump, his number one task was to defend the Republican majorities in the House and Senate, “making sure that Hillary Clinton does not get a blank check” when she becomes president next January.

The House Republican leaders were reacting to polling data showing that Clinton has opened up a double-digit lead over Trump nationally. Of particular concern to the Republicans were indications that Trump’s unpopularity was having an effect on

congressional races. While loss of the Republican majority in the Senate had been widely considered possible, the 60-seat Republican majority in the House of Representatives was seen as impregnable until last week.

Trump unloaded on Ryan in a series of tweets on Tuesday, calling him “weak” and suggesting that the congressional Republican leadership would be responsible if he lost the election to Clinton. He also denounced the 2008 Republican presidential candidate John McCain, one of ten Republican senators who announced Saturday they could no longer support his presidential campaign.

Clinton’s response to these events has been a further shift to the right, redoubling her efforts to win support from leading figures in the Republican Party. Her campaign launched advertisements in at least four states that include testimonials from Republican voters who are supporting Clinton this year. Campaign spokesman Brian Fallon said, “She is reaching out to voters that may well have supported Mitt Romney in 2012 and in a normal year might also be inclined to support the Republican nominee, but are so troubled by Donald Trump they are open to supporting Hillary Clinton.”

As part of this “outreach” effort, Clinton followed up a campaign rally at Wayne State University in Detroit Monday with a private meeting with Republican billionaire Dan Gilbert, the Quicken Loans mogul who has bought up most of downtown Detroit in order to make a killing from the city’s bankruptcy.

For the Democratic Party and its supporters in the media, Trump’s slide in the polls and the very public crisis of the Republican Party are cause for celebration and complacent sighs of relief. Typical is the column by Roger Cohen in the *New York Times*, which begins with a lengthy verbal lashing of Trump:

“It’s fortunate that we are less than a month from the election because we are running out of words to describe him: this phony, this liar, this blowhard, this cheat, this bully, this misogynist, this demagogue, this predator, this bigot, this bore, this egomaniac, this racist, this sexist, this sociopath. I will not go on. It’s pointless. Everyone knows, not least his supporters.”

Cohen and his like are hostile to acknowledging the widespread economic desperation that is driving millions of working people to vote for and support the

billionaire demagogue. But as *Times* columnist David Leonhardt pointed out on the same page Tuesday, tens of millions of Americans confront economic stagnation and generally deteriorating conditions of life. He wrote:

“The typical household, amazingly, has a net worth 14 percent lower than the typical one did in 1984, according to a forthcoming Russell Sage Foundation publication. The life-expectancy gap between the affluent and everyone else is growing. The number of children living with only one parent or none has doubled since the 1970s (to 30 percent). The obesity rate has nearly tripled (to 38 percent). About eight million people have spent time behind bars at some point in their life, up from 1.5 million 40 years ago. While college enrollment has grown, the norm for middle-class and poor students is to leave without a four-year degree.”

Cohen dismisses this social layer as “the losers to turbo-capitalism,” but they comprise, as Leonhardt suggests, the vast majority of the working class and large sections of the middle class, for whom living standards have declined or, at best, stagnated.

Hillary Clinton, the handmaiden of the stock exchange and the Pentagon, has no credibility as a defender of working-class jobs and living standards. It is the complacent, right-wing defense of capitalism and imperialism by the Democratic Party—given a “progressive” coloration by its pseudo-left apologists, who share its obsession with the politics of race, gender and sexual orientation—that provides an opening for fascistic demagogues, whether Trump himself or a more politically skilled successor.



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