US election campaign reveals mass alienation from two-party system

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A *New York Times*/CBS poll published Thursday documents the disgust of the American people with the 2016 election campaign and their alienation from the two major corporate-controlled parties. By a margin of 82 percent to 13 percent, better than six to one, those polled said the campaigns of both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump have filled them with revulsion.

According to the *Times* account, "With more than eight in ten voters saying the campaign has left them repulsed rather than excited, the rising toxicity threatens the ultimate victor. Mrs. Clinton, the Democratic candidate, and Mr. Trump, the Republican nominee, are seen as dishonest and viewed unfavorably by a majority of voters."

Both campaigns insult the intelligence of the American people. Trump appeals to raw anger, denouncing his opponent as a criminal who should be put in jail. Clinton and the Democrats alternate between portraying Trump as a sexual predator and smearing him as a tool of Moscow. Neither offers any serious program for improving the living standards and social conditions of the working class, the vast majority of the American people.

The election campaign is one more sign of the profound dysfunction of the US political system, in which two corporate-controlled parties, each defending the interests of the super-rich, enjoy a political monopoly. The *Times*/CBS poll is a statistical verification of what the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* have long argued: the two-party system leaves working people disenfranchised.

The recourse of both campaigns to personal smears and scandalmongering is a means of evading any discussion of the urgent issues that confront the electorate—above all, the worsening social crisis and the mounting danger of a third world war.

To cite two examples of developments ignored by both campaigns:

Friday's newspapers reported that suicide has overtaken automobile accidents as a cause of death of children aged 10 to 14. One could hardly imagine a more devastating commentary on the dismal prospects that America in 2016 offers the new generation.

Another report, published in the British *Guardian*, noted that life expectancy in McDowell County, West Virginia, once the heart of US coal mining, has declined to that of Ethiopia. In 2008, the nearly all-white county voted for Barack Obama. In 2016, 91.5 percent of Republican primary voters cast ballots for Trump—a vote of indignation and despair.

Each of the candidates, in different ways, seeks to direct social tensions within the United States along reactionary lines.

Clinton is the candidate of the status quo, representing the alliance of Wall Street, the military-intelligence apparatus and the complacent and self-satisfied upper middle class, where identity politics holds sway. Her program, were she to state it honestly, is to outwardly direct the social crisis in the form of intensified US military violence, first in the Middle East, but ultimately against Russia and China, both of which possess nuclear arsenals.

Trump represents an attempt to direct social tensions along extreme nationalist lines, appealing to racist and fascistic forces. While he claims, falsely, to have opposed US military interventions in the Middle East, he glorifies the US military and promises to unleash unlimited violence on any country that resists US demands. In the end, his pledge to "Make America Great Again" is little more than the English translation of Hitler's slogan, "Deutschland Über Alles."

That these are the alternatives presented to voters on November 8 is a product of the protracted decay of the US political system. It is more than four decades since the sharp shift to the right began in both parties, in the

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aftermath of the mass social protests of the 1960s and early 1970s against the Vietnam War and for the extension of civil rights.

The Democratic Party abandoned its former commitment to economic improvements for working people and began to restructure itself as the party of Wall Street and identity politics, appealing to newly privileged layers of blacks, women, gays, etc. The Democratic Leadership Council, under its chairman, Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, became the vehicle of this transformation. In Hillary Clinton, this rightward movement has reached its culmination. The Democratic candidate has become the consensus choice of the political establishments in both parties.

The Republican Party incorporated the former defenders of Jim Crow segregation and became the dominant party in the South, while maintaining its traditional ties to big business and the military. Ronald Reagan kicked off his 1980 presidential campaign with a rally in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where three civil rights workers had been murdered 16 years before, and gave a ringing defense of the Jim Crow South's slogan of "states' rights." Trump's embrace by the KKK and the white nationalist "alt-right" is not an aberration, but the logical conclusion of a process that has paved the way for the emergence of an outright fascist party in America.

As Leon Trotsky once wrote, the domination of reaction "signifies this, that the social contradictions are mechanically suppressed" ("Intellectual Ex-Radicals and World Reaction," 1939). The principal mechanism for the suppression of social contradictions in America has been the trade unions. From the late 1970s on, and especially after the smashing of the PATCO air traffic controllers strike in 1981, the AFL-CIO unions have worked systematically to undermine and break strikes, assist the employers in wage cutting and plant closures, and subordinate the working class politically to the ever more right-wing policies of the two capitalist parties.

There is a definite limit to this process, however. Today, the unions are as sclerotic and discredited as the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union on the eve of its collapse in 1989-1991. The first signs of a resurgence of the class struggle in America, in a series of contract rejection votes and strikes, have already demonstrated that workers will have to fight not only the corporations and the government, but the unions as well. As the class struggle intensifies, workers will have to develop new forms of organization that make possible a struggle not just at the level of the workplace, but on the plane of national and international politics.

The *Times*/CBS poll confirms the overriding feature of the 2016 campaign: the growing gulf between the American population and the corporate-controlled two-party system. Working people are moving to the left, but the two major parties continue to lurch to the right.

In the current election cycle, the political radicalization in the working class was expressed most openly in the mass support for the Democratic primary campaign of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. Thirteen million people, including the vast majority of young people who took part in the primaries, voted for a candidate claiming to be a socialist and opponent of the billionaires, an unprecedented political development in America. In the end, Sanders capitulated, endorsed Clinton, and demonstrated that his claim to oppose corporate domination of the political system was a fraud.

Working people must draw the necessary conclusions. It is impossible to fight the capitalist class through the two-party system that it controls. The working class must build its own political party to defend its own class interests. This requires a political break, not only with the Democratic Party, but with all those organizations and political tendencies that defend, apologize for and cover up for the Democratic Party.

The Socialist Equality Party has campaigned in the 2016 elections on the basis of this perspective. Our candidates, Jerry White for president and Niles Niemuth for vice president, tell the truth to the working class, confident that events will prove the correctness of the socialist program. We fight to prepare the revolutionary political leadership required for the struggles into which the working class will enter after November 8.

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