

Thanksgiving 2016 and the social crisis in America

Andre Damon

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On October 3, 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed a proclamation authored by Secretary of State William H. Seward declaring the last Thursday of November “a day of thanksgiving.”

Despite a Civil War of “unequalled magnitude and severity,” the declaration stated, the conflict had not “arrested the plough, the shuttle or the ship,” while “the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore.” The proclamation concluded, “The country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom.”

The ravages of the Civil War would last another year and a half. Nevertheless, it was true that society was being transformed by railroads, steamboats and the telegraph, an expansion in productive capacity that would accelerate with the rapid industrialization fostered by the Second American Revolution. The Civil War would clear the way for capitalist progress—and the explosive growth of the class struggle—by abolishing slavery.

As families throughout the United States gather to share a meal this Thanksgiving, relatively few will agree with Seward’s assessment that the country can expect “years with large increase of freedom.” Rather, for many, Thanksgiving will serve only to underline the economic hardship and oppression they face.

More than one in eight households will have had difficulty putting food on the table the year before, and millions will have a Thanksgiving meal only by standing in line at a food pantry or soup kitchen.

Over a million-and-a-half people were homeless last year, including some 300,000 children and 450,000 disabled people. Millions more live in substandard

housing, doubled up with other families, or in motels. Such conditions may affect only a minority of American families directly. But the great majority of the population is economically insecure.

Forty-six percent of adults are so financially strapped that “they either could not cover an emergency expense costing \$400, or would cover it by selling something or borrowing money,” according to a survey released by the Federal Reserve this year.

Under these circumstances, the announcement that the average premium under the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), supposedly designed to insure lower-income people, will increase 25 percent next year means that millions will either lose their health coverage or face hundreds, or even thousands of dollars in additional expenses.

The terrific stress caused by living in households one accident or illness away from financial ruin, in which young people are burdened by debt and face narrowing prospects, while the elderly confront rising medical costs and decreasing retirement benefits, produces many signs of social distress.

The brutality of this society, compounded by militarism and police violence, falls hardest on the young. One study has found that the prevalence of serious depression among teenagers increased by 37 percent between 2005 and 2014. Another reported that children from 10 through 14 are for the first time more likely to die from suicide than from a car accident.

Perhaps the most devastating manifestation of the social malaise is America’s drug epidemic. This year, a shocking 28,000 people will die from opioid overdose, almost as many as the number killed in car accidents. For tens of thousands of families, Thanksgiving will be a time of mourning for those who have lost their lives to heroin, fentanyl or prescription painkillers.

Many of the states most affected by the drug epidemic are those worst hit by joblessness and deindustrialization. Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania, the “rust belt” states that backed Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 but swung behind Donald Trump in the 2016 election, all saw their rates of opiate overdose increase by more than 10 percent between 2013 and 2014.

The social crisis in the United States is fueling an immense growth of oppositional sentiment, including significant signs of renewed class struggle and political radicalization that found only initial expression in the elections. This came first in the widespread support during the Democratic primaries for Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who called himself a socialist and denounced the “billionaire class” and social inequality.

Sanders’ “political revolution” concluded ignominiously with an endorsement of Hillary Clinton, who ran on the claim that, in the words of President Obama, America is doing “pretty darn great.” The implication of this delusional narrative was that those who disagreed and were swayed by Republican candidate Donald Trump’s demagogic appeals to social discontent were part of the “white racist working class,” seeking to defend their “privileged” status against blacks and other minorities. Basing her campaign on various forms of identity politics, Clinton pitched her appeal to the affluent and complacent. The result was a sharp decline in votes for the Democratic candidate within all sections of the working class.

Trump, who is being installed in the White House with the blessings of the outgoing president and both parties, will not “make America great again.” Neither he nor any section of the ruling class has a solution to the social crisis gripping America. His “America first” economic nationalism will exacerbate the global capitalist crisis and mean sharper attacks on workers within the United States. His program of tax cuts for the wealthy, the elimination of regulations on corporations, cuts in social programs and an immense increase in military spending will fuel social discontent and anger.

Trump’s election marks a turning point in the looming showdown between the financial parasites he personifies and the great mass of the population, the working class.



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