

Week one of the Trump administration: A government of war and social reaction

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It is one week since the inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the United States, and the actions and orders of the new government make clear what the working class can expect from the next four years.

At the center of Trump's "America First" agenda is a massive escalation of military violence. At a swearing-in ceremony at the Pentagon Friday for the new secretary of defense, retired general James Mattis, Trump signed an executive order to begin a major "rebuilding" of the military. The order directs Mattis to prepare a policy to upgrade the US nuclear arsenal and prepare for conflict with "near-peer competitors," a term that traditionally refers to China and Russia.

The action follows Trump press secretary Sean Spicer's reaffirmation of a statement by incoming Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the former CEO of ExxonMobil, that the US would seek to bar Chinese access to islets in the South China Sea, implying military actions that would amount to a declaration of war.

Trump has also pledged to establish "safe zones" in Syria, which will be coupled with a temporary ban on all immigration from a number of majority Muslim countries. While Democrats have denounced Trump for being "too soft" on Russia, during the elections the Clinton campaign called for the setting up of "safe" no-fly zones, policed by US military aircraft, as part of an effort to counter Russian backing of the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad. In a speech at CIA headquarters, Trump also said that the US should have "taken the oil" in Iraq, and pledged that the CIA would have another chance to do so.

On domestic policy, Trump signed a series of executive orders that freeze hiring on all federal workers, freeze all pending government regulations and remove all obstacles to the completion of the Keystone and Dakota Access oil pipelines. Early in the week, he held meetings with the CEOs of the largest US manufacturing companies and with US auto companies, promising to "cut regulations 75

percent" and shift the business climate from "truly inhospitable to extremely hospitable."

On Wednesday, Trump announced that his administration would proceed with the construction of a wall along the US-Mexico border, while launching a crack-down targeting millions of immigrant workers for detention and deportation. The same day, he said that the White House would seek a "major investigation" into completely unfounded allegations that "voter fraud" by millions of people cost him the popular vote in November—a claim aimed at creating the conditions for a further assault on the right to vote.

As part of a policy of extreme economic nationalism, early in the week Trump signed an executive order blocking US entry into the Trans-Pacific Partnership and pledged to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Many of the policies of the incoming administration were outlined in Trump's interview Wednesday night with ABC News anchor David Muir, during which Trump interspersed lying claims about his own popularity and the size of his inauguration with casual threats of war, torture and repression. The overall impression of Trump during the interview was that of a gangster in the Oval Office, the assumption of power by an underworld reflecting all that is corrupt and filthy in American capitalist society.

On torture, Trump proclaimed that if Mattis and incoming CIA Director Mike Pompeo "want to do [waterboarding], that's fine. If they do wanna do, then I will work toward that end." A draft memorandum is circulating in the White House that would reopen secret CIA prisons and torture centers overseas.

And this is only the first week. With the support of Democrats, Congress is moving rapidly to approve Trump's cabinet of billionaires, former generals and corporate CEOs, and it has already approved Mattis, Pompeo and the head of the Department of Homeland

Security, retired Marine Gen. John Kelly. Trump's other cabinet picks are committed to a policy of destroying public education, eliminating basic social services and slashing Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security.

There is no doubt that the election of Trump marks a watershed in American politics. However, when future historians examine this period, they will inevitably direct attention to what preceded it, to the conditions and climate out of which the Trump presidency arose. Many factors could be pointed to—the extraordinary decay in the political culture of the United States, the domestic consequences of unending war and violence abroad, the extreme growth of social inequality and the rise of a parasitic financial oligarchy.

Rather than a complete break, the Trump presidency represents a transformation of quantity into quality. He is, in the final analysis, the product of the desperate crisis that afflicts American and world capitalism.

For four decades, the ruling class in the United States has been engaged in a campaign of social counter-revolution, systematically eliminating all the gains won by workers through bitter struggles in previous decades. The Obama administration accelerated these processes. Obama's White House continued and expanded the bank bailouts initiated under the Bush administration and helped funnel trillions of dollars to Wall Street through the Federal Reserve's "quantitative easing" programs, while working, as in the 2009 auto restructuring, to slash wages for the working class.

The results are expressed in the extraordinary growth of social inequality. According to a recent report by University of California Berkeley economists Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, between 1980 and 2014, the share of pre-tax national income going to the bottom 50 percent of the population fell from 20 percent to 12 percent, while the share going to the top 1 percent increased from 12 percent to 20 percent. The gains for the top .1 and .01 percent of the population are even more extreme.

The foreign policy of the Trump administration likewise does not arise out of nowhere. For a quarter century, the American ruling class has been engaged in a desperate project to reverse its economic decline through military force—in the Balkans, North Africa, the Middle East and central Asia. Fifteen years of the "war on terror" have metastasized into an ever more direct conflict with larger competitors. Trump's focus on China is in fact in continuity with the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," which has seen the deployment of US military

resources throughout the South Pacific and East Asia.

What Trump adds to these processes is the distinct odor of fascism, of extreme nationalism and the threat of violent repression of opposition. His declaration in his inaugural address that the "bedrock of our politics will be total allegiance to the United States of America" is a threat to criminalize dissent, which will be associated with treason.

However, here too Trump is giving naked expression to the long-term decay of democratic forms of rule. It was, after all, Obama who will go down in history as the president who proclaimed the power to assassinate US citizens without due process. Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, drone assassination, NSA spying—this is the toxic mix out of which Trump's particular contempt for constitutional norms emerges.

In July, as Trump was formally nominated as the candidate of the Republican Party at the Republican National Convention, the WWSWS noted that "Trump's particular fascistic personality was forged not in the beer halls of Munich and the trenches of World War I, but in the real estate market of New York City. With his casinos, his fictional universities and his endless stream of failed businesses, this personification of corporate fraud could hardly be a more fitting symbol for the state of American capitalism."

There are sharp and bitter divisions within the American ruling class, but these divisions are over tactics, not basic class policy. It will not take much for Trump to bring on board many of his present critics within the political establishment and media, or, for that matter, more privileged sections of the upper middle class.

It is not from such forces that enduring opposition to the new administration will develop, but from the working class, in the United States and internationally. Trump's absurd posturing as a defender of the "forgotten man" will, sooner rather than later, give rise to bitter class conflict as the impact of the new administration's policy are felt. It is to the broad mass of the working class that socialists must now turn, and, through systematic organization and education, forge a political leadership to prepare for the struggles on the horizon.



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