

The specter of Marx haunts the American ruling class

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Last month, the Council of Economic Advisers, an agency of the Trump White House, released an extraordinary report titled “The Opportunity Costs of Socialism.” The report begins with the statement: “Coincident with the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx’s birth, socialism is making a comeback in American political discourse. Detailed policy proposals from self-declared socialists are gaining support in Congress and among much of the younger electorate.”

The very fact that the US government officially acknowledges a growth of popular support for socialism, particularly among the nation’s youth, testifies to vast changes taking place in the political consciousness of the working class and the terror this is striking within the ruling elite. America is, after all, a country where anti-communism was for the greater part of a century a state-sponsored secular religion. No ruling class has so ruthlessly sought to exclude socialist politics from political discourse as the American ruling class.

The 70-page document is itself an inane right-wing screed. It seeks to discredit socialism by identifying it with capitalist countries such as Venezuela that have expanded state ownership of parts of the economy while protecting private ownership of the banks, and, with the post-2008 collapse of oil and other commodity prices, increasingly attacked the living standards of the working class.

It identifies socialism with proposals for mild social reform such as “Medicare for all,” raised and increasingly abandoned by a section of the Democratic Party. It cites Milton Friedman and Margaret Thatcher to promote the virtues of “economic freedom,” i.e., the unrestrained operation of the capitalist market, and to denounce all social reforms, business regulations, tax increases or anything else that impinges on the oligarchy’s self-enrichment.

The report’s arguments and themes find expression in the fascistic campaign speeches of Donald Trump, who routinely and absurdly attacks the Democrats as socialists and accuses them of seeking to turn America into another “socialist” Venezuela.

What has prompted this effort to blackguard socialism?

A series of recent polls in the US and Europe have shown a sharp growth of popular disgust with capitalism and support for socialism. In May of 2017, in a survey conducted by the Union of European Broadcasters of people aged 18 to 35, more than half said they would participate in a “large-scale uprising.” Nine out of 10 agreed with the statement, “Banks and money rule the world.”

Last November, a poll conducted by YouGov showed that 51 percent of Americans between the ages of 21 and 29 would prefer to live in a socialist or communist country than in a capitalist country.

In August of this year, a Gallup poll found that for the first time since the organization began tracking the figure, fewer than half of Americans aged 18–29 had a positive view of capitalism, while more than half had a positive view of socialism. The percentage of young people viewing capitalism positively fell from 68 percent in 2010 to 45 percent this year, a 23-percentage point drop in just eight years.

This surge in interest in socialism is bound up with a resurgence of class struggle in the US and internationally. In the United States, the number of major strikes so far this year, 21, is triple the number in 2017. The ruling class was particularly terrified by the teachers’ walkouts earlier this year because the biggest strikes were organized by rank-and-file educators in a rebellion against the unions, reflecting the weakening grip of the pro-corporate organizations that have suppressed the class struggle for decades.

The growth of the class struggle is an objective process that is driven by the global crisis of capitalism, which finds its most acute social and political expression in the center of world capitalism—the United States. It is the class struggle that provides the key to the fight for genuine socialism.

Masses of workers and youth are being driven into struggle and politically radicalized by decades of uninterrupted war and the staggering growth of social inequality. This process has accelerated during the 10 years since the Wall Street crash of 2008. The Obama years saw the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top in

history, the escalation of the wars begun under Bush and their spread to Libya, Syria and Yemen, and the intensification of mass surveillance, attacks on immigrants and other police state measures.

This paved the way for the elevation of Trump, the personification of the criminality and backwardness of the ruling oligarchy.

Under conditions where the typical CEO in the US now makes in a single day almost as much as the average worker makes in an entire year, and the net worth of the 400 wealthiest Americans has doubled over the past decade, the working class is looking for a radical alternative to the status quo. As the Socialist Equality Party wrote in its program eight years ago, “The Breakdown of Capitalism and the Fight for Socialism in the United States”:

The change in objective conditions, however, will lead American workers to change their minds. The reality of capitalism will provide workers with many reasons to fight for a fundamental and revolutionary change in the economic organization of society.

The response of the ruling class is two-fold. First, the abandonment of bourgeois democratic forms of rule and the turn toward dictatorship. The run-up to the midterm elections has revealed the advanced stage of these preparations, with Trump’s fascistic attacks on immigrants, deployment of troops to the border, threats to gun down unarmed men, women and children seeking asylum, and his pledge to overturn the 14th Amendment establishing birthright citizenship.

That this has evoked no serious opposition from the Democrats and the media makes clear that the entire ruling class is united around a turn to authoritarianism. Indeed, the Democrats are spearheading the drive to censor the internet in order to silence left-wing and socialist opposition.

The second response is to promote phony socialists such as Bernie Sanders, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left organizations in order to confuse the working class and channel its opposition back behind the Democratic Party.

In 2018, with Sanders totally integrated into the Democratic Party leadership, this role has been largely delegated to the DSA, which functions as an arm of the Democrats. Two DSA members, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York and Rashida Tlaib in Detroit, are likely to win seats in the House of Representatives as candidates of the Democratic Party.

The closer they come to taking office, the more they seek

to distance themselves from their supposed socialist affiliation. Ocasio-Cortez, for example, joined Sanders in eulogizing the recently deceased war-monger John McCain, refused to answer when asked if she opposed the US wars in the Middle East, and dropped her campaign call for the abolition of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

The working class and youth are increasingly looking for a socialist alternative, but their understanding of socialism and its history is limited. Here the role of the revolutionary party, the Socialist Equality Party, is critical. It alone seeks to arm the emerging mass movement of the working class with a genuine revolutionary, socialist and internationalist program.

The SEP fights to mobilize and unite the working class in the US and internationally in opposition to the entire ruling elite and all of its bribed politicians and parties. As our program explains:

But socialism will be achieved only through the establishment of workers’ power. This will be a difficult struggle... Socialism is not a gift to be given to the working class. It must be fought for and won by the working class itself.

The task facing workers and youth looking for the way to fight against war, inequality, poverty and repression is to join and build the Socialist Equality Party to lead the coming mass struggles of the working class.



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