The dictatorial impulse behind Trump's political purge

Patrick Martin
9 April 2019

The series of firings of top US security officials over the past few days has brought to the surface a profound crisis within the Trump administration and the national-security state as a whole.

On Friday, Trump withdrew the nomination of Ronald Vitiello, acting head of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), a unit of the Department of Homeland Security, to become the permanent director, telling reporters, "We want to go in a tougher direction." On Sunday, he fired Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen, reportedly because she objected to resuming the policy of forcible separation of parents and children for refugees seeking asylum. On Monday, he fired Randolph Alles, the director of the Secret Service, which supplies the president's personal bodyguard. Like ICE and Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the Secret Service is a unit of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the second largest US government department, created as an all-encompassing domestic police agency in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Trump's principal adviser on immigration issues, the fascistic Stephen Miller, was reportedly the driving force in the purge of DHS officials. Miller previously spearheaded the "Muslim ban" against visitors and refugees from mainly Muslim countries and has developed close relations with the most vicious right-wing elements in American political life. The firing of Nielsen came after demands for such action were voiced by the fascist *Daily Stormer* publication, by *Breitbart News*, and by leaders of the Border Patrol union.

According to a CNN report, during Trump's visit to the California-Mexico border area on Friday, he told a group of border agents that he wanted them to stop letting refugees cross the border to make asylum claims, although this procedure is laid down in US and international law and has been repeatedly upheld by the federal courts. Only after the president left the room did supervisors tell the agents that what Trump had asked them to do was illegal, and that they should disregard his request.

The Department of Homeland Security will be run, at least temporarily, by Kevin McAleenan, who has been director of the Customs and Border Protection unit. As a result, DHS, as well as three of its major units, ICE, CBP and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, will all be run by "acting" officials. The Department of Defense is also under an acting secretary, former Boeing executive Patrick Shanahan, following the ouster of Secretary James Mattis, a retired Marine general, in December. A slew of other top posts in the Trump administration are now held by "acting" officials: White House chief of staff, budget director, UN ambassador, secretary of interior.

There are two reasons for Trump's reliance on such appointees. The "acting" officials conduct themselves as direct instruments of the White House, hoping to gain a permanent appointment by ingratiating themselves with the president. And these officials are not subject to Senate confirmation: there are no committee hearings at which they must testify, undergo questioning, or defend the policies they plan to implement. In this way, the executive branch of the US government more and more conducts itself independently of the legislative branch, rejecting any shred of democratic accountability.

It is significant that such appointments are concentrated in the military-police agencies. This must be understood as an effort by Trump to establish personal control of all the major security forces in the US government, surrounding himself with a network of loyalists. He seeks to create a sort of praetorian guard to protect the administration, not merely from its political opponents within the ruling elite, but from an expected upsurge in social struggles from below.

What is taking place in America is not merely the outcome of the installation in the White House of Trump,

© World Socialist Web Site

the gangster billionaire from the worlds of real estate, casino gambling and “reality” television. Or more precisely, there is an objective social logic to the turn by the US ruling elite to gangsterism as its method of class rule. The constitutional framework through which the United States has been governed for more than two centuries is breaking apart under the stress of class tensions fueled by the unprecedented growth of social and economic inequality.

There is a certain resemblance between the methods of the current White House and those of Mussolini during the first period of his rule. Italy maintained a semblance of constitutional government, although the fascist leader more and more sought to free himself from the constraints of bourgeois parliamentarism, culminating in the murder of the socialist deputy Matteotti after a speech in parliament denouncing the fascists.

Trump, too, seeks at every point to free himself from traditional constitutional restraints, as in the 35-day shutdown of the federal government, followed by his declaration of a national emergency, on a completely illegal and unconstitutional basis, to obtain funds for building a border wall after Congress had refused to provide the money. Now he seeks to incite murderous attacks by the Border Patrol on vulnerable immigrants and refugees fleeing repression and state violence in Central America, while railing against judges who declare his anti-immigrant persecution to be against the law.

There are, of course, important differences between Trump and Mussolini. Trump does not command a mass fascist movement or thousands of black-shirted thugs. But his preparations for violent repression are just as dangerous because they involve the mobilization of the police, the military and the intelligence agencies of the most powerful imperialist state.

The Trump administration is gripped by fear of a social explosion in America, particularly amid signs of an economic slowdown and return to recession conditions, which would explode Trump’s right-wing populist demagogy about restoring jobs in the deindustrialized Midwest and Appalachia.

When Trump rants against socialism and pledges to destroy it, he is reacting to a powerful movement that is developing from below—strikes and protests by teachers, service employees and industrial workers; the prospect of a major clash with autoworkers in the fall; the widespread oppositional sentiments among young people. This terrifies the White House and the entire American financial elite, because its objective logic is to challenge the profit system as a whole.

The Democratic Party, far from representing an opposition to the drive towards authoritarian rule, is merely an alternative route to the same destination. Both capitalist parties--the Republicans under George W. Bush, the Democrats under Barack Obama--have built up the powers of the national-security state, carried out illegal wars, and attacked the democratic rights and social gains of the American working class. Trump invents nothing new. He merely takes hold of instruments forged by his predecessors to use against his political opponents in the ruling class and, above all, against the working class.

There is a chasm between the ruthless and aggressive posture of Trump and the feckless response of the Democratic Party. The Democrats are more frightened of the implications of appealing to the American people to oppose the government than they are of anything the Trump administration might do. Herein lies Trump’s political advantage: his own inclinations better correspond to the desperate position in which the American ruling elite finds itself, with its social order crumbling, the working class coming forward, and the world position of American imperialism in decline.

The Democratic Party fights Trump on a right-wing basis, appealing to the national-security apparatus through its bogus campaign over Russian “meddling” in the 2016 election. It attacks Trump from the right on foreign policy, demanding a more aggressive approach to Syria, Russia, North Korea and China. Even after the Mueller report has debunked their claims, the Democrats continue to promote allegations that Trump is a Russian puppet.

The real threat to democratic rights in America comes from the capitalist state itself, to which both capitalist parties are loyal, the Democrats as much as the Republicans. While the two parties employ the methods of palace coup against each other, they will use even more violent means against a mass movement of the working class.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site