

# Big business parties preside over a social catastrophe in 21st century America

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The second Democratic Party debate held on Tuesday and Wednesday in Detroit featured the four “frontrunners”—former Vice President Joe Biden and Senators Kamala Harris, Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders—and 16 others engaging in the standard mixture of demagoguery and lies.

The content of the debate could be divided into three categories: (1) promises made that none of the 20 will ever make good on, (2) chastising each other for their right-wing policies, and (3) depicting right-wing policies they have championed as progressive.

Left off the debate stage was any serious discussion of the unprecedented social catastrophe gripping 21st century America, for which both parties are responsible: falling working class living standards, declining indices of health, the assault on immigrants, police killings, mass incarceration, the US prosecution of endless war around the globe.

These omissions are by design: The Democrats have no more intention than the Republicans of addressing the burning social questions confronting the working class. Just what is the horrific state of affairs that they seek to cover up and make worse for workers and their families?

## Social inequality

The wealth of the ruling elite is soaring to new heights. Amazon’s Jeff Bezos has the world’s highest net worth: \$131.4 billion. The average annual income among US households in the top 1 percent stands at about \$1.8 million, while average income among the lowest fifth of households is a paltry \$21,000. The average hoard of the 10 highest net worth individuals is 222,530 times the annual income of a worker earning a \$15 “living wage,” who works 40 hours per week.

There are about 40 million people living in poverty, based on the absurdly low official poverty threshold of \$25,000 for a family of four. This includes 15 million children. While struggling to pay for housing, transportation, food and other necessities, 40 percent of Americans say they would have trouble coming up with \$400 for an unexpected expense, like a medical bill.

Working families are drowning in debt, including for credit card payments. Student debt reached an astronomical \$1.5 trillion last

year, while auto debt is up nearly 40 percent in the last decade, adjusting for inflation, to \$1.3 trillion. Household debt increased by nearly \$9 trillion between 1989 and 2018, with 74 percent of that issued to the bottom 90 percent of households by net worth.

## Declining life expectancy & “deaths of despair”

Life expectancy, a key indicator of a society’s well-being, has declined each of the last three years. “Deaths of despair”—premature deaths from suicide, alcohol abuse or drug overdose—continue to rise in nearly every state. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2017 there were more than 70,000 deaths due to drug overdoses, with opioids involved in more than 47,000 of these.

Paradoxically, the high cost and/or lack of health care is contributing to Americans’ deteriorating health, as health is subordinated to the profit of the health care industry. As of the end of 2018, 30 million adults remained uninsured; 44 percent of the population had insurance but were considered “underinsured” due to high out-of-pocket costs.

## Deteriorating working conditions

Wages have remained basically stagnant over the last two decades. Over the last year, average hourly wages have grown by only about 3.2 percent, which, when accounting for inflation, amounts to a mere 1 percent increase. In July, average weekly hours edged lower to 34.3, as increasing numbers of workers are pushed into part-time work involuntarily.

Plant closures are slamming the auto industry as the contract expiration for General Motors, Ford and Fiat-Chrysler workers approaches. As the debate took place in Detroit, GM closed its 78-year-old transmission plant in Warren, Michigan. The plant is one of five in North America the company has slated for closure by early 2020, at a total cost of 14,000 production and white-collar jobs.

The US industrial slaughterhouse claimed 5,147 workers’ lives

in 2017. Workers are killed daily in manufacturing, steel plants, on the road, in construction, in retail and other service industries, and in myriad other occupations.

Unintentional overdoses due to alcohol or nonmedical use of drugs at work increased from 210 in 2016 to 272 in 2017, the fifth consecutive year in which unintentional workplace overdose deaths have increased by at least 25 percent. Workers are increasingly bringing their personal problems, particularly their financial troubles, to work in the form of drug and alcohol abuse, with deadly results.

## Violence “Made in the USA”

There were a staggering 39,773 gun deaths in 2017 in the US, up by more than 1,000 from the year before. This was the largest yearly total on record in the CDC’s electronic database, which goes back 50 years. Nearly two-thirds of these deaths were suicides; 37 percent were homicides.

According to the *Washington Post*, 519 people have been killed in police shootings so far in 2019; 992 were killed in 2018.

The US prison system holds almost 2.3 million people, the highest number and the highest rate of incarceration of any country on record. The American gulag comprises 1,719 state prisons, 109 federal prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,163 local jails, and 80 Indian Country jails, as well as military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the US territories.

About one in 143 people in America is incarcerated. Two-and-a-half thousand languish on death rows across the country. Despite growing popular opposition to capital punishment, it is still practiced. Since 1973, 1,500 people have been sent to their deaths; 25 were executed in five states in 2018.

## The war on immigrants

On any given day, 40,000 immigrants are incarcerated in the US. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) concedes that half of those imprisoned pose no criminal threat, and that another 35 percent are held for traffic tickets and other nominal infractions. The biggest complaints of immigrants in custody are related to inferior medical care or lack thereof, poor food and prolonged detention.

Since 2018, the Trump administration has carried out 2,300 separations of children from their parents. Children and families have been caged, held under overpasses and in tents, and exposed to the heat. Children and adults have been forced to sleep on the bare floor and have been denied access to proper sanitation and showers.

Since last year, three Guatemalan children in US custody have died from influenza and its complications. Due to a lack of any

systematic health care, immigrants have been found to suffer from tuberculosis, pneumonia, scabies, lice, the mumps and other preventable communicable diseases.

Earlier this year the Trump administration threatened a dragnet to round up some 2,000 immigrants. While this has yet to materialize in these numbers, the aim has been to terrorize the population. The threat has garnered opposition from wide layers of the population, with demonstrations taking place in cities and towns across the country and internationally. In one instance last month, a working class neighborhood in Nashville rallied to support a man and his son threatened by ICE with deportation and prevented it.

## A government of war, violence and austerity

The indices of social crisis detailed above are an indictment, not only of the Trump administration, but of the Democratic Party. In the wake of this week’s Democratic debate there has been a backlash in the Democratic-supporting media and among Obama supporters against the attacks made against his administration in the course of the debate.

Their concern is that in the hypocritical criticisms of Obama, more is said than intended. The basic reality is that the policies of the Trump administration were prepared by his predecessor, and that the Democrats are currently functioning as Trump’s enablers.

The US Senate, with overwhelming Democratic support, just passed a budget for the fiscal year beginning October 1 that includes a record \$738 billion for the military and \$638 billion for everything else, a gap of more than \$100 billion. The House passed the bill earlier, also with the support of the Democrats.

Any action against the deplorable state of US society will not come through the maneuvers of either big business party. Both support the exploitation of the mass of workers by a tiny minority of bloated millionaires.

The massive social crisis in the United States—repeated in different forms internationally—cannot be addressed outside of a fundamental transformation in social and economic relations. The unimaginable wealth of the ruling elite must be expropriated and the giant banks and corporations transformed into public utilities. The endless diversion of resources toward war and plunder must be redirected to meet basic social needs.

The social catastrophe in America is a product of capitalism. It must be overturned through socialist revolution.



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