

Liberals discover a new savior in New York Governor Andrew Cuomo

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Andrew Cuomo, the Democrat now in his third four-year term as governor of New York state, has made no attempt to hide his reactionary policies behind the “left” phrases sometimes used by others. His vicious right-wing record includes the refusal to consider even the tiniest increase in state tax rates for the ultra-wealthy, wage freezes for state workers, and full-throated support for charter schools.

Cuomo’s attacks on the working class and ties to Wall Street have been so brazen that he has attracted prominent liberal primary opponents in his two reelection campaigns, in 2014 and 2018. With voter turnout falling to record-low levels, Cuomo’s Democratic critics have worried about this right-wing capitalist party’s loss of credibility. Fordham law professor Zephyr Teachout in 2014 and actor Cynthia Nixon in 2018 each challenged the governor in the Democratic primary, and each received about one-third of the vote.

In 2020, however, Cuomo’s liberal critics, and the political establishment as a whole, have suddenly begun to sing his praises. His daily news conferences on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic in New York have been favorably compared to Trump’s exhibitions of incompetence, ignorance, narcissism and open contempt for both the victims of the pandemic and the medical experts seeking to fight it. There have even been suggestions that the Democrats might find a way to replace Joe Biden, the current front-runner and presumptive presidential nominee, with the governor of New York.

Cuomo’s new fans include the *New York Times* and Britain’s *Financial Times* (FT). Mara Gay of the *Times* Editorial Board has tweeted her enthusiasm. Ben Smith, the newspaper’s media columnist, wrote a piece entitled, “Andrew Cuomo Is the Control Freak We All Need Right Now.”

“Mr. Cuomo has emerged as the executive best suited for the coronavirus crisis,” while “President Trump flails,” Smith wrote. “Mr. Cuomo holds news conferences filled with facts and (accurate) numbers almost every day. He explains systems and challenges and decision-making with a command that Mr. Trump lacks. He even models social

distancing by having speakers stay six feet apart from one another.”

Smith quoted American Federation of Teachers chief executive Randi Weingarten. This supposed defender of the public schools whom Cuomo has spent most of the last decade attacking declared, “This was a moment that [Cuomo] was really built for.”

The *FT* was equally enthusiastic: “From the US epicentre for the pandemic, Mr. Cuomo delivers a sermon each day in which he is, by turns, sober, informative, rousing and unexpectedly vulnerable as he updates viewers on the progress of the current war. At times he is profane, as when he urged soldiers to go out and ‘kick coronavirus’s ass!’

“In just a few weeks, Mr. Cuomo, a 62-year-old divorced dad known for a domineering—at times bullying—persona, has transformed himself into an unlikely father of the nation as it faces one of its gravest modern moments. While President Donald Trump’s early response to the pandemic was characterised by denial and baseless optimism, Mr. Cuomo’s performance has been akin to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s fireside chats during the Depression or the resolve of New York mayor Rudy Giuliani as he steadied the US after the September 11 terror attacks.”

The *FT* adds that Cuomo’s performance “has led many Democrats to nurse the hope that he could somehow be drafted to replace former vice-president Joe Biden as the party’s likely presidential nominee.” The newspaper suggests that is not likely, but it quotes veteran Democratic consultant Hank Sheinkopf, predicting, “Assuming we get out of this alive, the amount of power that Andrew Cuomo will have will be extraordinary.”

The enthusiasm for Cuomo is not limited to the *Times* and the *FT*, major voices for American and British imperialism, which have both attacked the candidacy of Bernie Sanders for the Democratic presidential nomination. Just as significant is the recent praise from Katrina vanden Heuvel, the publisher and former editor of *The Nation*, the leading voice of what passes for left-liberalism in the US. *The Nation* announced its endorsement of Sanders just one

month ago, but now its publisher is praising Cuomo. Vanden Heuvel, writing in the *Washington Post* last week, can hardly restrain herself:

“Andrew M. Cuomo is having quite a moment. Using the bully pulpit that the first Gov. Roosevelt, Theodore, made famous, the current governor of the Empire State hopes to emerge as our era’s equivalent to the second Gov. Roosevelt, Franklin. It’s an astounding, complex transformation brought on by the coronavirus crucible, and the nation is transfixed.”

After acknowledging that Cuomo has enforced austerity and “has favored a blunt view of neoliberalism,” vanden Heuvel concludes by expressing the hope that the governor can channel the reform politics of Franklin Roosevelt. “If Cuomo can find it within himself to embrace” the Keynesian policies of the past, she writes, “he will be the leader that the Democratic Party, and the nation, need.”

The new-found prominence of Andrew Cuomo can only be understood within the context of the COVID-19 crisis and, equally important, the economic collapse and social disaster that it is bringing with it.

The pandemic, exposing the reality of the profit system, is inevitably deepening the crisis of capitalist rule within the US and internationally. Trump reflects the terminal decline of American capitalism and expresses most crudely its drive toward war and dictatorship. The methods of personalist rule and fascistic appeals, however, have provoked intense factional warfare within the ruling class. The opposing factions have only tactical differences. Their disputes reflect in part differing material interests of rival sections of the ruling elite. Trump’s bourgeois opponents also fear the social and political consequences of his methods.

The Democrats have invariably attacked Trump from the right, on foreign policy grounds, also adding complaints about his “incompetence.” Democratic Party circles, as well as Trump’s European critics, have been on the lookout for new “adults in the room,” trusted representatives of the ruling class who can be used to weaken or remove him, the better to take on the growing movement of the working class.

The coronavirus pandemic has quickly brought matters to a new level. Democratic front-runner Joe Biden is universally regarded as a weak candidate. Questions have been raised as to his mental competence, at age 77, not to mention whether he has the stamina to wage a general campaign against Trump and, if successful, to govern.

The replacement of Biden by Cuomo, or even by another candidate, is certainly possible. Much will change in the next few months, and the outcome depends on many factors, including the future course of the pandemic, that are highly uncertain. As previously indicated, Cuomo can be expected

to play a major role, whether or not he is the candidate.

Cuomo has changed nothing of his political persona in response to the pandemic. On the contrary, the latest budget announced in Albany is another indication of what is attracting such favorable attention in ruling circles. Among other reactionary provisions, the budget agreement gives the governor the power to unilaterally cut the budget if he deems it necessary in response to the pandemic and the economic crisis.

Vanden Heuvel’s intervention on behalf of Cuomo highlights the role of the so-called “left” flank of the Democrats in keeping this party afloat, and the capitalist two-party system along with it. The fact that this party of imperialism is widely hated is no secret. Sanders, for all of his efforts to convince working people and youth that the Democratic Party could become the vehicle for popular opposition to Trump and Wall Street, saw his vote decline compared to 2016, particularly in key industrial states like Michigan and Illinois.

Millions of workers and young people are turning away in disgust from the two-party charade. In this context, vanden Heuvel’s column shows that there are few lengths to which the erstwhile liberals, along with their pseudo-left accomplices, will not go in their effort to keep the Democratic Party alive so that it can continue to politically trap and suffocate the working class.

Vanden Heuvel’s hopes for a new Franklin Roosevelt are a desperate attempt to derail the movement of the working class toward its political independence. They are also vain hopes. American capitalism could offer social reform, through the mechanism of the New Deal, more than 80 years ago. The long-term decline of American capitalism and the loss of its global economic dominance mean that is no longer possible today.

The role of Cuomo is more aptly indicated by the *Financial Times*’s comparison of him to Rudolph Giuliani. The prospect is not a “second Gov. Roosevelt,” but rather deepening class struggle and political radicalization, and crucial opportunities for the building of a new revolutionary and socialist leadership. The US Socialist Equality Party candidates, Joseph Kishore for president and Norissa Santa Cruz for vice-president, are fighting to build this new leadership in the working class.



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