

Introductory remarks to “What is Left of American Democracy on the Eve of the 2020 Election?”

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On Wednesday, October 28, the San Diego State University Department of Political Science held an online forum with WSWs International Editorial Board Chairman David North and University of Pennsylvania Professor Emeritus Adolph Reed. The following are David North's introductory remarks to the event.

Allow me to express my appreciation to the Political Science Department of San Diego State University, and to Jonathan Graubart, Briana Wiley, Emanuele Saccarelli, and Latha Varadarajan for organizing and inviting me to participate in this discussion. Let me also state that I am pleased to have the opportunity to share the podium with a scholar so distinguished and intellectually principled, politically militant and as devoted to the cause of the working class as Professor Adolph Reed.

I have had the good fortune to deliver a number of lectures at SDSU during the past few years, but it has always been in person and before a visible audience. The meetings—especially the question and answer period—have always been both lively and challenging. I intend to keep my opening remarks fairly brief in order to allow as much time for questions as possible and for an exchange of views.

I think that Latha has very well opened up this discussion by pointing to the extraordinary circumstances under which we are meeting. The pandemic is what we have called on the *World Socialist Web Site* a “trigger event.” It is in a sense as significant an event in history as the outbreak of the First World War.

This is an event which, if I can speak directly to the students at SDSU, will profoundly change your lives and will have a profound impact upon the future. It is an event which will not be resolved only through science, or even predominantly through science and medicine, but rather through political action. If anything can be said about the experience of the past year—the ever-rising toll and death, the misery and tragedy—it is that it has totally, and irrevocably exposed the political, social, economic—and I might add, moral—bankruptcy of the capitalist system.

In much the same way as the First World War blew apart the myths and self-confidence of an era which, until 1917, capitalism seemed invincible—millions of people all over the world, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, racial background, religion—in all parts of the world the impact of this pandemic is being felt. Latha has already referred to the death toll in America, which is probably greater than 227,000. Over a million people have died throughout the world. In Brazil, the death toll is 157,000, in India 120,000, in Italy 57,000, in Britain 46,000. Today, Germany has once again announced that it is entering into a lockdown.

Every attempt to control this virus has failed, not because it's beyond the ability of society to properly organize an effective response, but because all measures to control this virus are frustrated by the needs and interests of the capitalist system. Nowhere is this truer and more bluntly expressed than in the United States. What has been called the most

advanced capitalist country in the world is being exposed as the most socially impoverished, culturally bankrupt of all societies.

It's within this context that we are going to discuss the present situation in the United States. And with reference again to the pandemic as a “trigger event,” it is intensifying and accelerating all the contradictions that were present even before the pandemic began. Trump did not emerge from hell. He is only the most visible and rotten expression of a very, very advanced political disease in this country.

If I wanted to keep my opening remarks really brief, I could answer the question posed in the title of this forum—“What is Left of American Democracy on the Eve of the 2020 Elections?”—with just two words: “Not much.” But, clearly, that is not a sufficient answer.

But though a more expansive explanation is required, the two-word answer is correct. We are meeting less than a week before the presidential election, and the central question upper-most in the minds of millions of people is not who will win next Tuesday, but whether Election Day will even determine who will occupy the White House come next January 20.

What are the questions that millions of people are asking or thinking about?

Will the voting process next Tuesday be accompanied by violence? Will gun-toting fascists intimidate voters opposed to Trump? Will votes cast against Trump, especially those sent by mail, even be counted? Will the Supreme Court—whose majority now consists of vicious reactionaries—block the counting of ballots or rule invalid, for one or another fraudulent reason, tens of thousands of votes cast against Trump in critical “battleground” states? Will legislators, in states controlled by the Republicans, simply ignore the outcome of the balloting if Biden receives a majority of the vote; and then proceed to select—as the Supreme Court indicates they can—a slate of electors that will cast their votes for Trump when the Electoral College meets in late December?

Will Trump—even in the face of a clear determination that he has been defeated at the polls—accept the outcome of the election? All indications are, at the present time, that he will not. Trump will declare that the vote totals reported by the media are “fake news,” that the election has been stolen, and that he will remain president.

And even if he concludes that he must give up the White House, Trump will remain a substantial political force, appealing to his supporters within police forces throughout the country and right-wing militia groups, declaring that he was “stabbed in the back,” and continuing to build up an extra-constitutional and paramilitary force upon which he, and other elements in his entourage, will continue—using violence and terror—his struggle to regain power.

There is not the slightest element of exaggeration in the political scenarios that I have outlined. In fact, they are not merely predictions of what may occur. The election campaign is already dominated by violent

conspiracies. Just two weeks ago, the FBI exposed a far-advanced plot to kidnap and murder the governor of Michigan. A similar plot has been exposed in Virginia. It is evident that the conspirators are part of a national network of right-wing terrorists.

Even more serious than the plot itself has been the response of Trump, the media and the Democratic Party. Trump, not surprising anyone, has made clear his political and moral solidarity with the assassins, and all but openly proclaimed that he wishes them better luck in their next attempt. He has continued to denounce Michigan Governor Whitmer and has made explicit threats of physical violence against other Democratic governors and elected officials.

The media has all but buried what is the most chilling event in this election campaign. The plot to murder the governor of Michigan and overthrow the state government has been treated as a minor event, requiring only cursory coverage. Within two days the story had disappeared from the front pages of the national press, and within less than a week almost entirely from news reports.

As for the Democrats, their response to the plot to murder a leading member of their party bordered on total indifference. Their expression of political solidarity with Governor Whitmer has been perfunctory. There has been no call by Biden, the Democratic Party leader in the Senate, Charles Schumer, or the Democratic House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, for a full-scale investigation into a terrorist conspiracy against Whitmer and the state government. The matter was not even raised at the last debate between Biden and Trump.

What accounts for the extraordinarily muted response of the Democrats? Why have they not made Trump's fascistic conspiracy to defy the results of the election a central issue? Why have they not issued a warning that the very survival of American democracy is in danger?

To answer this question is to get to the heart of the question posed by this meeting. This election campaign exhibits all the characteristics, speaking metaphorically, of a slow-motion train wreck of American democracy. Trump and forces around him are seeking to create the foundations for a political dictatorship of a distinctly fascistic character. There is no other way his actions can be interpreted.

Trump speaks for the most ruthless sections of the corporate-financial oligarchy, whose political program in essence is the removal of all restraints on the exploitation of the working class. That is why he so openly and brutally declares his indifference to the loss of human life. Nothing must stop the opening of the economy. Nothing must stop the herding of workers into the factories, students into schools, teachers into unprotected classrooms, all for the purpose of continuing to produce profit for the coffers of the financial elite.

As for the Democratic Party, I think one can almost call them the "let's pretend party." A party that pretends to be in opposition, that pretends to be a popular party, but in fact a party which is no less tied to the ruling oligarchy than the Republicans themselves. Their particular function in the division of labor that constitutes American politics is to exert all their influence to prevent the development of any popular movement of protest that comes to threaten the essential financial interests of those who rule this country.

Their concern, above all, is not Trump's threats against democracy, not the danger of dictatorship, their concern is that the resistance to such efforts could acquire the character of a mass movement that threatens the financial and global military interests of American capitalism and American imperialism.

That, in essence, is the nature of the situation. What lies behind it? No discussion of political reality in America is worth anything if it does not call attention to the staggering levels of social inequality. Marx was right. The history of mankind is the history of class struggle. In the modern era, it's the history of the struggle between the capitalist class and the working class.

Now, if there's any election which bears comparison to the present situation in the United States, it's the election of 1860. It was an election in which a substantial section of the country, dominated by the slave owners, would not accept the outcome of an election which put a president opposed to slavery in the White House. When that election went against their interests, they went into insurrection and the Civil War came. The irrepressible conflict had finally erupted into open warfare.

Before the election, Lincoln had said famously that the United States can't exist half slave and half free. Well, democracy can't exist in a country where virtually all the wealth is dominated by the richest 0.1 percent or five percent of the population, where there is a relatively affluent 10 percent, while the remaining 90 percent are in various levels of economic distress and outright poverty.

This is the situation which is undermining American democracy, and in fact democracy throughout the world. Oligarchies rule in every country. In America, it is only the most egregious and most naked, but the same situation exists throughout the world.

This is the issue which underlies the crisis here, and this is why there is no way out of the crisis and no way in which democracy can be defended unless it's reconstituted on an entirely different basis, on the basis of socialism, on the basis of the transfer of power to the working class, the vast majority of the population. This is not just an American question, it is a global question. It's not a question which concerns a race, that great diversion from real issues. It concerns the fate of the vast majority of the world, which consists of working people, the working class.

When we speak of the fate of American democracy, or democratic rights anywhere in the world, we must recognize that we have come into a period where the great issue is that if there is to be democracy, it is only possible on the basis of social equality, on the basis of ending the capitalist system.

Speaking both as the editor of the *World Socialist Web Site* and as the chairman of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States, I hope that those of you who are listening think very carefully about the situation you confront as students, as young people, as workers, and come to the conclusion that a fundamental and profound change is needed in society, one which unites all sections of the working class.



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