The socialist perspective in the 2020 US elections

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This report was delivered on November 1 to the final meeting of the Socialist Equality Party's 2020 election campaign, titled "On the eve of the Civil War Election."

The United States elections are being held under conditions of unprecedented social, economic and political crisis. Whatever happens in the coming days and weeks, there is no going back to the status quo. The alternative confronting workers in the United States and indeed internationally is socialist revolution or capitalist barbarism.

As the election comes to an end, the coronavirus pandemic is spiraling out of control. The Socialist Equality Party has defined the global coronavirus pandemic as a "trigger event," that is, an event that is accelerating and bringing to a head all the underlying contradictions of American and world capitalism.

The virus is natural in origin, but its effects are bound up with the society in which it has emerged. It is exposing the consequences of decades of social reaction and the endless diversion of resources into the financial markets and the instruments of militarism and war. It is revealing the nature of capitalist society, a society dominated by a financial oligarchy whose control is no longer compatible with democratic forms of rule. And it is propelling millions of workers and youth into social and political struggle.

The average number of daily new cases globally is approaching half a million. The average daily death toll, according to official figures, is above 6,000. Already, nearly 1.2 million people have died. After a drop in the summer months, new cases throughout Europe are at record levels. In France, new cases average over 40,000, nearly ten times higher than the previous peak in early April. In the UK, new cases are above 20,000. In Italy, new cases peaked on Friday at over 30,000, more than five times the level in late March, when the explosion of deaths forced the shutdown of the entire country.

No country, however, has proven more incapable of safeguarding public health than the United States, which has four percent of the world's population but nearly a quarter of deaths from COVID-19. More than 236,000 people have died from the coronavirus, and 1,000 more are added to this horrific toll every day. The number of infections is approaching 10 million, increasing by more than 10 percent in the past two weeks alone. The virus is spreading without restraint throughout the country, and hospitals in Texas, Wisconsin and other states are reaching or have surpassed capacity.

The pandemic and the response of the ruling class to it have created a social crisis in the United States unlike anything seen since the Great Depression. According to official figures, 13 million people are unemployed in the United States, seven million more than before the pandemic hit. Two-and-a-half million people have been unemployed for more than 27 weeks, and this figure is increasing at a faster rate than at any point in recorded history. The number of people in poverty has increased by eight million since May, and 10 percent of the adult population reports that they cannot buy enough food. Amidst a deadly pandemic, nearly one fifth of households report that they are not getting medical care because of the cost, while nearly half report that they are struggling to cover basic expenses and bills.

Mass layoffs are accelerating, as the ruling class uses the conditions of the pandemic to implement far-reaching changes aimed at boosting profitability. The economic consequences of the pandemic are having a permanent and devastating impact on an entire generation of young workers, predominantly employed in the gig and service sectors.

This catastrophe is the product of definite policies pursued by the ruling class over the past 10 months. The financial oligarchy is implementing a policy of mass death and social devastation. After first downplaying the danger, it utilized the pandemic to organize the largest transfer of wealth to the rich in world history, far surpassing even what was done following the 2008 financial collapse.

The printing presses of the Federal Reserve have been turned over to Wall Street, to the tune of trillions of dollars. Bank profits have surged. Morgan Stanley announced last month that its profits have risen 25 percent compared to a year ago. Goldman Sachs is doing even better, with quarterly profits at $3.6 billion, nearly double from a year ago. The wealth of the corporate and financial oligarchy has soared to new heights. Since the end of February, Jeff Bezos has increased his net worth by close to $80 billion.

The pandemic and the crisis of American democracy

It is impossible to understand the political situation in the United States on the eve of the elections outside of this social reality.

The final weeks of the election campaign have made clear: Trump is running not for president, but for Führer. The White House is the center of a conspiracy to ignore the results of the election, stoke fascistic violence, and utilize the courts to overturn the popular vote.

It is less than one month since the initial exposure of a fascistic plot to kidnap and murder the governors of Michigan and Virginia, plots that were encouraged and incited by the highest levels of the state. The plots grew out of the anti-lockdown demonstrations in April and May, following the bailout of Wall Street, as the ruling class was implementing its back-to-work campaign. They were encouraged by Trump's calls to "liberate" Michigan, Minnesota, Virginia and other states from any restraints on the spread of the coronavirus. Far-right organizations are being mobilized in order to implement and enforce a homicidal policy of the ruling elites.

In the final days of the election, Trump is doing everything he can to delegitimize the results. If the results are not known by the evening of November 3, he said in Pennsylvania yesterday, "you're going to have bedlam in our country." He denounced two recent Supreme Court

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decisions at least temporarily allowing the counting of mail-in ballots that arrive after Election Day. “Somebody’s going to play games, and they just got an extension. What’s the extension all about? Wouldn’t you like to hear, November 3, we win, we lose?” There is, in fact, nothing in the Constitution that requires a result of the election on November 3. The winner of the election is determined after all the ballots are counted.

Pennsylvania, a battleground state, is a particular target. “Are they going to mysteriously find more ballots” after polls close, Trump asked yesterday. “Strange things have been known to happen, especially in Philadelphia.” National Guard troops have been deployed to Philadelphia, where they will remain until after the election, following the eruption of protests over the latest incidence of police murder.

Whatever happens over the coming weeks, Trump is building up a fascistic movement based on extreme nationalism, anti-socialism and authoritarianism.

Trump’s fascistic politics are directly connected to the ruling class’ policy of “herd immunity” in relation to the pandemic. In his campaign rallies, accompanied by chants of “Superman,” Trump is doing everything he can to downplay the threat to the lives of millions of people and encourage the spread of the coronavirus. In recent days, he has claimed that doctors are deliberately inflating the number of deaths due to COVID-19 in order to make more money. Trump’s son, Donald Jr., declared in a recent interview that deaths from the virus are “almost nothing,” echoing Trump’s earlier comment that the coronavirus affects “virtually nobody.”

The Democratic Party and the bankruptcy of “lesser evilism”

While Trump is attempting to steal the election, the Democrats are doing everything they can to cover up the threat to the most fundamental democratic rights.

At his own campaign events, Democratic candidate Joe Biden makes no mention of the election coup, the plot to kidnap and murder Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer and other governors, the confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, or anything else related to the threat to democratic rights in the election. Indeed, the Democratic Party played a central role in the ramming through of the nomination of Barrett by refusing to do anything to stop it.

The Democrats’ cowardice in response to Trump’s conspiracies is entirely bound up with their own opposition to any policies to address the spreading pandemic or the devastating social crisis. Beyond talking about masks, the Democrats have nothing to propose, as they reject any measures that threaten the interests of the corporate and financial elite.

The Democratic Party is terrified of anything that will spark mass unrest, which would threaten to develop into a movement against not just Trump, but the entire capitalist system.

The Democratic Party and the various pseudo-left organizations that surround it insist that in these elections all the energy of workers and youth must be directed toward the election of Joe Biden. Only in this way, they claim, can there be a return to “normalcy” and an end to the disaster that has been produced by Trump.

Completely absent from these arguments is any actual analysis of what the Democratic Party is and the class interests it represents, or the social and political conditions that have produced Trump.

The Democratic Party is a party of Wall Street and the military. Indeed, as the election approaches, Biden’s fundraising in the third quarter has benefited from an influx of money from the finance industry. For the past four years, the opposition of the Democratic Party to Trump has focused not on his fascistic politics, but on the demand of dominant sections of the military and intelligence agencies for a more militarist foreign policy against Russia and in the Middle East, which culminated in the impeachment fiasco.

Biden has the support of some of the leading war criminals of American imperialism, who have wreaked havoc on populations throughout the world: John Negroponte, the former US ambassador to Honduras during the US-backed war against the Sandinistas, former ambassador to Iraq and former director of national intelligence; Michael Hayden, the former director of the CIA implicated in constructing “black site” torture centers under Bush; Colin Powell, one of the leading architects of the 2003 invasion of Iraq; and countless others.

The policy of a Democratic administration will be one not of social reform, as the apologists for Biden claim, but brutal austerity. The eight years of the Obama administration, in which Biden was vice president, saw a massive transfer of wealth to the rich following the 2008 economic and financial crisis. Indeed, it was the legacy of Obama, along with the right-wing and militarist character of the Hillary Clinton campaign, that allowed Trump to posture demagogically as an opponent of the status quo.

And it is remarkable that as Trump engages in his fascistic plots, the layers around the Democratic Party have dedicated themselves to an extended effort aimed at attacking the democratic foundations of the United States and attacking the legacy of the American Revolution and the Civil War. The center of this campaign is the *New York Times*' 1619 Project, a work of historical falsification that presents all of American history as a conflict between races, aimed at promoting the Democratic Party’s politics of racial division.

As for Bernie Sanders, what has become of his so-called “political revolution”? The central aim of Sanders’ campaigns, both in 2016 and 2020, has been to contain mass social anger and opposition to both parties, to contain it within the framework of the Democratic Party, and to ensure that it finds no genuine progressive expression. He is performing that role now as a leading campaigner for Joe Biden.

To rely on the Democratic Party to defend democratic rights would be suicidal.

The social and political roots of the breakdown of American democracy

Moreover, nowhere in the media and political establishment is there any serious analysis of social and political conditions that have produced an unprecedented crisis and breakdown of American democracy. Trump is presented as some sort of demon from hell. To paraphrase Trotsky in writing about Hitler, they claim that if it were not for Trump, American democracy would blossom like a garden. What a contemptible lie! Trump is an expression of a far deeper disease.

For decades, the ruling class has been engaged in the single-minded pursuit transferring wealth to the rich. Beginning in the late 1970s and 1980s, the ruling elites launched an offensive to destroy all the gains won by workers through bitter struggle. Endless resources have been channeled into the financial markets through deindustrialization and the ripping up of social infrastructure.

Social inequality has reached levels not seen since before the Great Depression. With the crucial assistance of the trade unions, working class opposition to this social counterrevolution was suppressed. As a result, the national income share for the bottom half of the population fell from 20 percent in 1980 to 12 percent in 2014, while the income share for the top 1 percent rose from 12 percent to 20 percent. Wealth and income are even more heavily concentrated in the top 0.1 and 0.01 percent of the population.

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The American ruling class responded to the dissolution of the USSR with an orgy of militarism. The terrorist attacks of September 11 were seized on to invade Afghanistan and then Iraq. More than one million people were killed in the “war on terror.” Torture was instituted as official government policy. NSA spying on the population became a central element of conspiracy against democratic rights. The persecution of Julian Assange, supported by the entire political establishment and spearheaded by the Democratic Party, was used as a test case for the criminalization of opposition to war.

All of this, all the crimes of American capitalism, all the inequality, all the violence at home and aboard—all of this is coming to a head. Historians will look back at the 2020 elections as both a continuation and a new stage in the protracted crisis of American democracy.

The socialist strategy in 2020 and beyond

There are various scenarios for what will play out over the next several days, on Election Day and after. What can be ruled out, however, is that somehow the political crisis in the United States is going to be resolved peacefully. Whether or not Trump is in the White House come January, the mobilization of fascistic organizations is now a fact of American political life. The pandemic will continue to rage, and there is no faction of the ruling class that proposes anything that will stop it.

What happens, however, cannot be separated from the development of the class struggle. The working class will not and cannot remain a bystander in events. It must prepare to respond through its own independent initiative.

Any attempt by Trump to steal the election in defiance of the popular vote will certainly be met with mass demonstrations. The working class must intervene through the method of class struggle. It must oppose Trump’s coup-plotting and the incitement of fascistic violence through strike action, including preparation for a political general strike. Opposition to Trump’s conspiracies must be connected to the independent intervention of the working class on the basis of a program that represents its own interests.

The working class requires a perspective not just for November 3, but for November 4 and beyond.

At the beginning of this year, we published a statement on the *World Socialist Web Site*, "The decade of socialist revolution begins.” Before the pandemic had emerged as a global crisis, we called attention to the essential characteristics of the world situation that had developed over the previous decade—the institutionalization of unending military conflict and the growing danger of world war; the breakdown of democracy and the rise of the far-right internationally; the degradation of the environment and the growing danger of climate change; the extreme growth of social inequality, particularly following the 2008 economic crisis.

We wrote: “The objective conditions for socialist revolution emerge out of the global crisis. The approach of social revolution has already been foreshadowed in the mass demonstrations and strikes that swept across the globe in 2019: in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Colombia, Chile, France, Spain, Algeria, Britain, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Kenya, South Africa, India and Hong Kong. The United States, where the entire political structure is directed toward the suppression of class struggle, witnessed the first national strike by auto workers in more than 40 years.”

The dominant and most revolutionary feature of the development of the class struggle, we explained, was its global character. The working class is an international class that has grown enormously over the past two decades and is united like never before through the processes of production and advances in communications.

“The growth of the working class and the emergence of class struggle on an international scale are the objective basis for revolution,” we explained. “However, the spontaneous struggles of workers and their instinctive striving for socialism are, by themselves, inadequate. The transformation of the class struggle into a conscious movement for socialism is a question of political leadership.”

When we launched the Socialist Equality Party election campaign at the end of January, we explained that its central task was to fight for a socialist program and perspective for the working class, not only in the United States but throughout the world.

Then the global pandemic hit. As with everything else, the pandemic had a significant impact on our campaign. We decided very early on to cancel all of our in-person election meetings and our travel plans, in the US and internationally. We also decided that we could not petition to get on the ballot, as attempting to meet the already anti-democratic restrictions in the US—requiring the gathering of thousands and thousands of signatures just to get on the ballot—would have deadly consequences in the midst of a pandemic.

The courts and Democratic Party state governments defended these restrictions. Michigan Governor Whitmer, the target of the fascistic coup plot, even referenced the anti-lockdown rallies in the spring to argue that we should have gathered signatures, while the judge in the case complained of gyms being shut down—the same complaint voiced by the militiamen.

While the form of our campaign changed as a result of the pandemic, the essential content remained. Indeed, the pandemic and the response of the ruling class to it have demonstrated that the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party, and only the Socialist Equality Party, is the way forward for the working class.

We say to workers and youth who are listening in on this meeting: The central conclusion that must be drawn from the experiences of this year is to join the SEP. You know what is happening in your plants and workplaces. The ruling class is using the pandemic to carry out a massive restructuring of class relations. The capitalist class has contempt for the lives of workers, forcing you to choose between starvation or sacrificing your lives for profit.

You see what Trump is doing. You see the conspiracies that are being carried out, which are directed above all at the opposition of workers. You know that there is growing anger over inequality, exploitation, unemployment, police violence, the attack on democratic rights, and endless war.

The struggles of workers cannot be advanced unless a socialist leadership is built. A political movement must be developed that takes direct aim at the source of the crisis: the capitalist system.

The fight against the pandemic must be waged on the basis of a program for the massive redistribution of wealth. The ill-gotten gains of the oligarchs must be seized in order to finance universal health care and other critically needed social infrastructure. Non-essential production must be shut down until the pandemic is under control, and all workers must receive full income and be protected from eviction. Where production is essential to the functioning of society, workplaces must be made safe, with conditions overseen by the workers themselves, in consultation with health care professionals.

To organize society on the basis of social need, not private profit, the giant banks and corporations must be turned into public utilities. World economy must be restructured on the basis of a scientific and rational plan. To carry out this program, the working class must take power into its own hands, to establish a government of, by and for the workers.

To organize the struggles of the working class, the Socialist Equality Party is spearheading the fight for the formation of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, independent of the corporatist trade unions. It fights to unify the working class, in opposition to all efforts to divide

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workers along racial, gender and national lines.

There is no national solution to the global pandemic, as there is no national solution to any of the great problems confronting the working class—inequality, exploitation, war, environmental degradation. The building of a mass socialist movement in the American working class must be connected to the mobilization of the billions of workers throughout the world, the massive social force that can chart a new way forward for mankind.

To meet these challenges posed before the working class, a new movement must be built, a political movement based not on pragmatic impressions and empty hopes, but on a scientific analysis of the nature of capitalist society. It must be a movement that is based on an assimilation of the great lessons of history--a movement that understands that to the crisis of capitalism the working class must respond with the perspective of socialist revolution.

The leadership of this movement is the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International.

I encourage all of you to vote for the Socialist Equality Party candidates, Norissa Santa Cruz and myself. But most importantly, make the decision to join the SEP and take up an active fight for the building of a socialist leadership.

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