Interview with Hampton Stall, an expert on the far right, on fascist activity in school reopening campaign and January 6 aftermath

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Ten months have passed since Donald Trump and his cabal of fascist advisers initiated an attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 elections.

On January 6, Trump mobilized far-right supporters to block the certification by Congress of the Electoral College vote, won by Democrat Joe Biden. Facilitated by high-level connections within the police, intelligence apparatus, military and with the support of congressional Republicans, Trump was given a window of opportunity to take control of the U.S. Capitol.

He made use of far-right forces previously cultivated by his own faction of the US ruling class to attack the limited lockdown measures taken in 2020 to control the spread of the pandemic.

The WSWS recently spoke to Hampton Stall about the impact of the January 6 coup attempt and the coronavirus pandemic on the far right. Stall is a researcher with MilitiaWatch, a nonprofit organization that monitors the online activity of the far right. In particular, he addressed the role played by the far right in the anti-mask, back-to-school movements cultivated by sections of the political establishment.

WSWS: How prominent in far-right propaganda is opposition to mask requirements and other COVID-related restrictions?

Stall: Extremely. It's one of a handful of points of unity among a broad swath of far-right actors, militia groups included. It's been interesting seeing a lot of the "patriot" community therefore looking to places like Australia, expressing solidarity with those abroad or using cherrypicked footage to stoke paranoia among their own milieu here in the States.

WSWS: How do the far-right groups view the importance of the anti-lockdown protests of 2020? Do they view the fact that restrictions have essentially been rescinded as a political victory?

Stall: Anti-lockdown demonstrations were super important for far-right groups, especially militias and other "patriot" movements. In many ways, the inertia from that moment became the summer reaction [anti-lockdown rallies in 2020] became the "critical race theory" response we're still dealing with today. Specifically on the Proud Boys, there's already a lot of anecdotal evidence that many people found out about the group via anti-lockdown demos. I don't, however, think there's a lot of celebration of political victory around them, since even still having assorted masking requirements has kept a lot of that world mad even now.

WSWS: How active are the far-right groups in promoting the school reopening initiatives, which have included outbursts and protests at school board meetings?

Stall: The school board meeting outbursts are probably most connected to Proud Boys and clandestine neo-Nazi organizing more so than militia. Some of the nationalist social clubs have even demonstrated outside of these meetings, though usually in attempts to intimidate their opponents. The "patriot" movement, though, loves to share and build community around some of the viral clips from these meetings—thus leading to the creation of more viral clips given incentive structures and fame.

It's really, really a worrying showing. The canary in the coal mine is long dead for this type of organizing; it stopped singing in August if not before. And it's important to note that it's less about school and more about reaction and intimidation with these guys.

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WSWS: Based on what you see in far-right groups, what would you say they are most focused on in the near future? How has this changed since 2020?

Stall: There is still a ton of focus on things like mask and vaccine mandates, as well as "critical race theory." Some of this is quite astroturfed, but there's plenty more that at least appears semi-grassroots. This moment feels different from the Tea Party period, but I'm still not sure that means it will be calmer or better than that previous trajectory provided. It's especially interesting, from an electoral politics side of things, just how much control a single right-wing politician [Trump] has over the rightest [most right-wing] political party.

Right now, in my opinion, looks extremely different from 2020. Many of the groups I track are extremely reactive (in addition to holding reactionary politics, their actions are almost always reactive rather than proactive). It feels like a totally different context right now than summer and fall of 2020, namely because militia groups aren't finding BLM demonstrations to go oppose or otherwise threaten. The thing that could really change this is when gun restrictions start to materialize, since many of these actors are extremely sensitive to Biden's agenda on this.

WSWS: How do members of the far-right groups view the prospect of a Trump presidential campaign? How do they discuss the fact that the Republican Party is increasingly loyal to Trump?

Stall: Most militia groups I track are still all in for Trump. The inertia behind Stop the Steal that mobilized many militia groups earlier this year is essentially the same inertia behind "CRT" and whatnot now. I don't feel, though, like there's really a conscious conceptualization of the control that Trump has over the GOP, at least among these folks—it's just kind of assumed at this point rather than reflected upon.

WSWS: How do US fascist and far-right groups discuss the historical meaning and importance of January 6?

Stall: It's pretty mixed on how militia groups and the "patriot" movement is responding to J6. It also depends not only on which group you ask but which members, even. Some individuals think the riot was a psy-op or a false flag. Others think it was a "honey pot" (notably, a far-right streamer and participant used this term last week on Tucker Carlson's documentary series). Others still describe the event as a "dumbass contest." Others, of course, think it was great and should be repeated. Recently, at a conservative "Take Back Virginia Rally" protest in Henrico County, people pledged allegiance to a flag that was present at J6.

WSWS: Are you encountering an increase in unity or an increase in division and infighting among the far right?

Stall: Among the groups that I usually track, there's still a lot of chaos right now, with a few counterexamples. A good part of this seems to still be related to the groups losing a lot of their usual communications and organizational tools (namely Facebook, Zello and a few other sites). For other groups I don't track as closely but have kept an eye on, new collaborations and coalitions are appearing, but those are by groups that think everyone involved in J6 were too left, for what that's worth.

WSWS: Are far-right groups active in defending the so-called "political prisoners" who were arrested for participating in the events of January 6? What about the plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer?

Stall: I've only seen minor instances of this. Most seem to just be friends of a few members of Congress. My thought is that there's not a lot of unity among militia groups and their friends because there's still major disagreement on what J6 is and what it means. Also, there's the context that many of these groups are turning on each other or offering information on one another in cooperating with the Feds.

WSWS: Thank you for speaking to us.

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