

Trump “hush money” trial begins—A political diversion

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The criminal trial of ex-President Donald Trump on charges linked to “hush money” payments to porn actress Stormy Daniels began Monday in Manhattan. Judge Juan Merchan made a series of procedural rulings, followed by the questioning of the first potential jurors, in what is expected to be a long and contentious process of selecting the jury.

The New York case, brought by Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, is a diversion from the momentous political issues raised by Trump’s four years in the White House and the subsequent three years during which he has been plotting and preparing a return to power.

It is not connected in any way to Trump’s real crimes, particularly his central role in the attempted coup of January 6, 2021, when his supporters attacked the US Capitol, blocked the congressional certification of the 2020 presidential election, won by Democrat Joe Biden, and sought to maintain Trump in the presidency despite his repudiation by the American people.

Trump’s sexual encounter with Daniels is of interest only to his wife and family. The money paid to Daniels during the 2016 election campaign to keep her from selling her story to the media is likewise of little interest. The manner in which the funds were routed from Trump through his personal fixer Michael Cohen to Daniels constitutes at most a technical violation of federal election laws, which would ordinarily be settled with the payment of a fine.

As for state law, the filing of false business reports, portraying the money disbursed to Cohen as payments for legal services, was only a misdemeanor, and the statute of limitations has long expired. DA Bragg, however, leveraged the misdemeanor into a felony by alleging that the false reports were an element of a conspiracy to violate federal law, even though no

federal prosecutor has chosen to bring such a case. He charged each of 34 false reports separately as a four-year felony, with a combined maximum 20 years in prison upon conviction.

Both the substance and the timing of the case are clearly calculated to benefit the Democratic Party in the 2024 election, at least in part by confining Trump to the Manhattan courtroom, away from his own presidential campaign, every day of the trial, which is expected to take many weeks. That political calculation could well be utterly mistaken.

Certainly over the past year Trump has made use of the obviously concocted and politically motivated character of the Manhattan criminal case to claim that all other charges against him—particularly those related to January 6 and other efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 elections—are equally bogus.

Only the Democratic Party could manage to provide Trump the opportunity to posture as the victim of a political frame-up and to do so with a shred of credibility. It is of a piece with the entire posture of the Democrats since Trump first entered the White House, which has been to avoid all the fundamental democratic questions raised by the transformation of the Republican Party, under Trump’s auspices, into an increasingly fascist political formation.

The Democrats’ differences with Trump have largely revolved around foreign policy, particularly over the use of Ukraine as a political and military spearhead against Russia. This goes back to the 2014 Maidan coup, under the Obama-Biden administration, which ousted an elected pro-Russian president and installed a virulently anti-Russian right-wing regime in Kiev, backed by fascist and neo-Nazi groups.

The Mueller investigation, based on false allegations of widespread Russian interference in the 2016 US

elections, and the first impeachment of Trump, based on his temporary withholding of US military aid to Ukraine, were both examples of this clash over foreign policy. Today, the central issue in official Washington is how to push through another \$60 billion in emergency military aid to Ukraine, despite the opposition among a section of House Republicans.

Nothing of this political reality is acknowledged in the coverage of the Trump trial in the corporate media. Instead, there are solemn, hushed-voice commentaries about the “historic” character of the first-ever criminal trial of a former president.

The obvious question—never voiced, of course, on the network news—is why Trump should be the first. Every ex-president in living memory should have been criminally prosecuted on charges like sanctioning mass murder, waging illegal wars, supporting military coups, authorizing torture, and spying on the entire world, including American citizens. But these actions, committed in defense of the worldwide interests of the US ruling elite, are not considered crimes by the US “justice” system.

And now Trump, who as president separated thousands of migrant children from their parents, breaking up many families irreparably, who openly incites fascist violence against political opponents, the first president to defy the results of an election in which he lost by a near-landslide, is being prosecuted for something which is not a crime at all.

As we wrote last year:

[P]aying someone to remain silent about a sexual encounter, or buying someone’s story in order not to publish it, is not illegal. Nor is lying about one’s personal conduct in the course of an election campaign. If every politician who lied about such matters were prosecuted, the jails would overflow.

The criminalization of private sexual conduct is fundamentally reactionary, as are sex scandals in general. They degrade popular consciousness and drown political understanding in a geyser of sensationalism and prurience. The use of such allegations always involves an effort to conceal from

the masses the real political differences being fought out within the ruling elite.

As for the question of “hush money,” it is well known that Democratic President Bill Clinton offered to pay \$700,000 to Paula Jones to settle her lawsuit over her allegations of improper behavior. In that case, right-wing Republican lawyers induced Jones to refuse the money in order to engineer the perjury trap that led to Clinton’s impeachment. In the current case, a Democratic district attorney is using equally underhanded methods. There is nothing progressive or democratic in such political cynicism.

The WSWS and the SEP are intransigently opposed to the politics of both Trump and his Democratic opponents. We have consistently warned of the fascistic transformation of the Republican Party, even as Biden and the Democrats continue to beseech their Republican “colleagues” to join with them in a bipartisan policy of militarism abroad and austerity and anti-democratic attacks on immigrants and anti-war protesters at home.

We do not cede the defense of democracy to “Genocide Joe” and the Democrats, the party of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus. The only effective method of fighting the threat of fascism personified by Trump is the mobilization of the working class, through the development of the class struggle and the political organization of workers as an independent force against both parties of big business.



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