

5 years since Trump's January 6 coup

Patrick Martin
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One day after the fascist-led mob summoned to Washington by President Donald Trump overran the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote that the attack was “a turning point in the history of the United States.”

The hoary glorifications of the invincibility and timelessness of American democracy have been exposed as a hollow political myth. The popular phrase “It Can’t Happen Here,” taken from the title of Sinclair Lewis’ famous fictional account of the rise of American fascism, has been overtaken by history. Not only can a fascist coup happen here. It did happen here, on the afternoon of January 6, 2021.

The correctness of that assessment is clear in what has transpired over the past five years.

On January 6, 2021, Congress convened to certify the Electoral College vote confirming the victory of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. What was supposed to be a constitutional formality became the target of an organized operation to overturn the election by force.

A mob of several thousand marched from the White House at Trump’s command, stormed through lightly held police barricades and assaulted the Capitol. Organized paramilitary forces—above all the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers—forced their entry through doors and windows and spearheaded the attack into the building; subsequent prosecutions established that leading figures were guilty of seditious conspiracy and related felonies aimed at preventing the certification. The violence was severe and sustained: More than 140 police officers were injured during the assault.

The political objective was the overthrow of the Constitution and the annulment of the election results. A gallows erected outside the Capitol was not a grotesque prop; it was a declaration of intent. Trump’s own Vice President Mike Pence and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi narrowly escaped capture. Had leading officials been seized, the coup would have acquired the leverage it required—through execution or hostage-taking—to compel capitulation and impose a political outcome the electorate had rejected.

January 6 was not a spontaneous eruption. It was the

culmination of a conspiracy that developed over months and gathered momentum as the inauguration approached. The House impeachment report produced immediately afterward documented Trump’s course of conduct in the months leading up to January 6, including his efforts to pressure officials, summon supporters to Washington and direct them toward the Capitol.

Trump was at the center of the plot. He attempted to compel state officials and governors to reverse certified results—most notoriously in Georgia, where he pressed the secretary of state to “find” enough votes to overturn the outcome. When these efforts failed, the conspiracy converged on January 6 itself: a plan to block certification, create institutional paralysis and use violence to block the transfer of power.

The most damning feature of January 6 is not only that a coup was attempted but that it came so close to success and encountered no organized political resistance from the Democratic Party.

As the assault unfolded, Democratic leaders did not call on the population to mobilize in defense of democratic rights. Senators and representatives fled and hid; there was no appeal for mass action, no call for a nationwide mobilization of the working class and no effort to transform public outrage into active resistance. Biden’s response during the coup attempt was not a summons to the people but to issue an appeal on national television for Trump—the coup plotter-in-chief—to call off his own forces.

The Democrats feared, above all, that a popular mobilization against a coup would rapidly take the form of a broader social eruption—an opposition that would escape their control and assume a direct, anti-capitalist character. Their “defense of democracy” was constrained from the outset by fear of legitimizing mass struggle from below.

The coup did not fail because democratic institutions proved “strong.” It failed narrowly, through the inexperience, logistical errors and operational incoherence of the conspirators, combined with their inability to secure decisive leverage quickly enough.

The deployment of the D.C. National Guard was delayed for hours. Testimony and documentation describe a roughly 3-hour-and-19-minute gap before the National Guard arrived at the Capitol. That delay provided precisely the window in which the coup could have been consolidated.

The outcome would likely have been different under only slightly altered conditions. Had the mob succeeded in taking even a single prominent Democratic senator or representative hostage, the Democratic Party would have moved rapidly into negotiation—under conditions of terror—in the name of “stability” and “national unity.” The Democrats’ conduct during the attack itself demonstrated that they had neither the will nor the program to prosecute a genuine struggle against dictatorship.

Far more important to the Democratic Party than defending democratic rights was maintaining “bipartisan” unity for the strategic priorities of American imperialism, above all, escalation of confrontation with Russia.

Even in the immediate aftermath of January 6, Biden and Democratic leaders insisted on the need for a “strong Republican Party,” signaling their determination to restore the very political instrument that had enabled Trump. The Democrats’ governing orientation was to secure Republican collaboration on foreign policy, war appropriations and the expansion of the national security apparatus while suppressing any independent political mobilization of the population.

The record of the Ukraine war underscores this class logic. The Biden administration repeatedly sought vast funding packages and relied on “bipartisan” mechanisms to prosecute the proxy war against Russia, culminating in major congressional passage of large Ukraine aid allocations with significant cross-party support. In practice, “defending democracy” at home was subordinated to the requirements of war abroad.

The Democrats’ collapse is most exposed by their conduct in the 2024 campaign and its aftermath. During that campaign, leading Democrats declared that Trump was a fascist and that his election would mean dictatorship. Yet when Trump won, they accepted the outcome passively and did nothing to build resistance to the incoming regime. Their warnings functioned as electioneering, not a strategy for stopping dictatorship. It was necessary to ensure a “smooth transition.”

After Trump returned to office, the normalization accelerated. Trump’s early actions included blanket clemency for January 6 defendants, pardons and commutations issued as a presidential proclamation.

Investigations that dragged on for years were then shut down or neutralized in the wake of his electoral victory. Special Counsel Jack Smith, who is now the target of legal persecution by congressional Republicans and Trump’s Department of Justice, told the House Oversight Committee last month that Trump clearly planned the January 6 coup: “Our view of the evidence was that he caused it and that he exploited it and that it was foreseeable to him,” Smith said.

Over the past year since his return to power, the Trump administration has implemented a systematic conspiracy for dictatorship, which is to accomplish what it failed to achieve on January 6. This has taken the form of the deployment of

National Guard troops to American cities, the vicious assault on immigrants, open defiance of the courts, the criminalization of political opposition and threats to invoke the Insurrection Act.

The invasion of Venezuela and kidnapping of President Nicolás Maduro are open gangsterism. Trump’s declaration that the United States would “run” Venezuela following the operation marks a point of no return. His language dispenses with any pretense of legality and replicates the criminal military operations of the Nazi Third Reich.

These actions are inseparable from the internal trajectory of the regime: impunity for the coup plotters, political persecution, rule by decree and the normalization of violence as state policy. The fundamental conclusion follows inexorably: The defense and revival of democratic rights is impossible without a fight for socialism.

The Socialist Equality Party is fighting for the development of a new base of mass resistance to dictatorship. This is bound up with the development of the class struggle, animated by a clear anti-capitalist perspective. What is required is not a “broad coalition” behind the Democratic Party, but the independent political mobilization of the working class against the oligarchy and its state.

That means, centrally, the systematic development of working class rank-and-file committees—in factories, workplaces, logistics hubs, schools, hospitals and neighborhoods. These organs of democratic, workers’ self-organization are critical: They provide the practical means to break the grip of the corporate bureaucracy, unify struggles across industries and regions, defend immigrants and targeted communities and transform scattered anger into coordinated action guided by a socialist program.

This fight must be taken forward in 2026. The lessons of January 6—and of what has followed—must be burned into the collective memory of the working class, not as a lament but as a guide to action: Dictatorship will not be stopped by appeals to the very institutions and parties that enabled it. It can be stopped only through the conscious political mobilization of the working class to take power, expropriate the oligarchy and reorganize society, within the United States and internationally, on socialist foundations.



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