Gettysburg and the New Birth of Freedom—then and now

Tom Mackaman
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We are publishing a lecture WSWS contributor Tom Mackaman delivered to the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at Gettysburg University on April 23.

It's a privilege to be able to speak to a gathering of students at Gettysburg University. Given where we are, it would be wrong to begin with anything other than a reminder of the immensely important history that unfolded here a little more than 163 years ago in the middle of the Second American Revolution, the Civil War.

On July 1, 2, and 3, 1863, the armies of the Union and the Confederacy collided at this little town. The Battle of Gettysburg engaged roughly 165,000 soldiers, about 51,000 of whom were wounded, captured, missing, or killed—by far the bloodiest battle in American history. The climax came on the third and final day, when Confederate General Robert E. Lee ordered what has come to be known as Pickett's Charge, a frontal assault aimed at the center of the Union lines. In the early afternoon, around 2 p.m., at the very same moment that a mathematics professor at this campus, Michael Jacobs, recorded a temperature of 87 degrees, the Confederates emerged out of a tree line on Seminary Ridge and advanced nearly a mile up gently rising open ground toward fortified Union positions on Cemetery Ridge. After advancing under cannon barrage—in fact, the endpoint of a massive artillery duel felt as far away as Pittsburgh—and then rifle and canister fire, a small number of Confederates actually made it to the Union lines, where they were defeated in hand-to-hand combat. Roughly half of Pickett's attacking force was captured, or lay dead or wounded in the fields separating the contending positions. According to a later account, after the charge, Gen. Lee told Gen. Pickett to gather his division to regroup, to which Pickett replied, "General, I have no division."

The very next day, July 4, 1863, the world learned both of the victory at Gettysburg and that at far away Vicksburg, the last Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi River fell to a Union army under the command of Ulysses S. Grant. To religiously minded Americans, it appeared to be providential that both victories came on Independence Day, which celebrated, as Lincoln explained in November of 1863 at the dedication of the national cemetery here at Gettysburg, "the proposition that all men are created equal," the founding proposition made "four score and seven years" earlier.

As it turned out, the war, which had been converted into a revolutionary struggle for the destruction of slavery by Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, dragged on for two more years. But never again would Confederate armies threaten the North, as Lee had in his march into Pennsylvania, during which hundreds of free blacks were captured from their homes and workplaces and spirited away into slavery in Virginia.

Thus, that stone wall on Cemetery Ridge, two miles from where we are gathered, turned out to be the high-water mark of the Slaveowners' Counterrevolution, a counterrevolution that had sought to overthrow the founding American principle of human equality. Indeed, in mockery of 1776, southern states that seceded from the Union in 1861 had issued forth declarations of independence and constitutions that made slavery and inequality inviolable and perpetual, as had their national union, the Confederate States of America. Not only that, but the United States was the only large democratic republic in the world after the bloody defeats of the revolutions of 1848 in Europe and the installation in Mexico during the Civil War of an Austrian prince as emperor. Lincoln was hardly exaggerating when he said that the war was a test of whether "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" would perish from the earth. Those were the stakes in 1863. It was, as Lincoln said elsewhere, "a moment piled high with difficulty."

Our moment is also piled high with danger. The counterrevolution spearheaded by the American ruling class, and all of its political representatives, puts in the shade even the designs of the South's old slaveocracy. It is a ruling class that is seeking to turn back history, as if the past three centuries of human progress had never taken place. No realm is left unmolested—from basic democratic and human rights to the social right to an education, from infrastructure to culture, from history to science.

Consider just one example—the counterrevolution being waged on public health, and think of what this attack means in light of the history of medicine. It is not widely known that the greatest share of the soldiers who died in the Civil War were taken by disease and sickness, in fact, two-thirds, or 500,000 of the estimated 750,000 total deaths. Of the remaining 250,000 killed in battle, about half died after failed medical interventions, particularly amputations. American medicine had not yet adopted the germ theory of disease. The great pioneers who established that theory—Ignaz Semmelweis, who proved that doctors themselves were transmitting fatal infections in maternity wards; Louis Pasteur, who demonstrated that microorganisms caused fermentation and disease; Joseph Lister, who developed antiseptic surgical technique; and Robert Koch, who identified the specific bacteria responsible for tuberculosis, cholera and anthrax—were either just beginning their work or had not yet had their findings accepted by the medical establishment. It was not understood how infection and bacteria spread. There was no concept of antiseptic surgery, so field surgeons often moved between amputations by wiping the blade down with a rag. Here at Gettysburg, it should be added, the "field surgeon" was literally that—at work out of doors or in barns, often with doors on sawhorses converted to tables.

The primitive character of medicine in the war sheds light on a larger reality. Before the Civil War, life expectancy in the US was but 40 years, a figure that was driven down by the large number of youth who did not survive the infectious diseases that culled children at a frightful rate. Even Lincoln's family was not spared: In 1850 his three-year-old son, Eddie, died of tuberculosis, and in 1862, during the Civil War, Lincoln lost his 11-year-old boy Willie to typhoid fever contracted from the contaminated White House water supply. Typhoid and tuberculosis were but two of the killers. Diphtheria, scarlet fever, whooping cough, cholera, smallpox,

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influenza and measles also ravaged the population—the last of which is being revived by anti-science "health policies" targeting universal vaccination.

Life expectancy in the United States grew to nearly 79 years over the next century and a half, gains that demographers attribute overwhelmingly to public health measures, peaking in 2014 before plateauing and setting on a downward decline, even before the COVID pandemic. And this decline in longevity is concentrated entirely in the working class. One new study this year found that those who live in the bottom 50 percent of the American income brackets can expect to live seven years shorter lives than the richest 1 percent. Could there be any greater indictment of this literally diseased social order? The rich have a right to life that workers do not.

Being revived by America's ruling class is the aristocratic principle. As Lincoln described it,

> It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time; and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity, and the other the divine right of kings. It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself. It is the same spirit that says, "You toil and work and earn bread, and I'll eat it." No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.

We could add, it is the same tyrannical principle in the mouths of capitalist politicians.

The saying that behind every great fortune there is a crime is attributed to Balzac. When we speak of chattel slavery, the criminal aspect of the labor exploitation is obvious to us. Historians estimate that in 1860, three-fifths of the richest 1 percent of all American households were slave owners. But the wealth accumulation of the slavocracy is mere child's play compared to the fortunes of today's superrich.

We have by now become familiar with the basic data on wealth inequality in the US, which has been growing inexorably since the early 1970s, more than a half-century ago, aided and abetted by both capitalist political parties. But let me cite one more data point: There are roughly 900 billionaires in the US, about .000026 of the population. They hoard a combined wealth of $8 trillion. This $8 trillion for 900 people is the equivalent of all federal spending on K-12 public education for eight years, which serves about 50 million children per year. And supposedly there isn't enough money for the schools! We often hear media pundits telling us that "we can't afford" this or that service—education, Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security. This is 180 degrees wrong. The working class can no longer afford the rich.

It is in the interests of this galactically wealthy oligarchy that the neo-colonial wars in the Middle East are being waged and that far-advanced preparations for war against China and Russia are underway. The worst crimes since Hitler's Third Reich are being committed. The genocide of the Palestinian people. The threat to destroy Iran—in Trump's own words, to wipe out an entire civilization. The starvation of masses throughout the world through the war-driven surge in fuel and food prices.

The claims that these wars are being waged to "defend the American people," who, opinion polls show, overwhelmingly oppose the war in Iran, are preposterous. None of it is in the interests of American workers or youth. Just the contrary. As Trump bluntly put it, "We're fighting wars. We can't take care of daycare … Medicaid, Medicare, all these individual things."

Workers and youth will have to pay for the oligarchy's wars through inflated prices, cuts to education, and worse still, with their lives. Virtually unreported in the mainstream media are advanced preparations to implement a draft, now including the automatic enrollment of young men, ages 18–26, in the selective service draft lottery system.

The ruling class's moral bankruptcy, revealed so nakedly by the Jeffrey Epstein scandal, is the mirror image of its financial bankruptcy. The sovereign US debt now stands at $39 trillion, and will very soon reach $40 trillion. There is no prospect of paying it away, under conditions in which the two parties rally behind ever new rounds of tax cuts for the superrich and vote through ever greater levels of military spending to wage their neo-colonial wars against working people in other countries. The dollar, the preeminent symbol of American power, will inevitably be debased. Workers and retirees, the youth and the elderly, will again be made to pay.

The development of AI, far from opening broad new horizons for capitalism, only deepens its crisis. In the hands of a democratically, cooperatively run society, that is, under socialism, AI and robotics will be used to alleviate human beings from the most taxing, monotonous and dangerous jobs. Production will increase and necessary labor time will decrease, as it should. The deployment of augmented human intelligence will conquer broad new vistas in science.

But under capitalism, AI will be used to slash jobs and benefits, immiserate new millions, and tighten police state surveillance. Moreover, it will only exacerbate the gathering profits crisis, as surplus value, as Marx long ago showed, can only be extracted from human, living labor. The contours of a major financial crisis are already beginning to come into relief. Trillions of dollars have been spent to develop a massive AI buildout. But profits so far derived from productivity increases emerging out of these facilities, as opposed to profits cornered from financial speculation on the manipulation of tech share values, have been minimal. This is nothing new. Through wave after wave of technological innovation, from globalization, computerization, to AI, from container shipping to the development of just-in-time production, to the internet, there has been one constant: the relentless, remorseless decline of American capitalism.

The horizons of the American ruling class are crowding in all around it. It sees no way out, other than war and police state repression. As stated on the *World Socialist Web Site*, the second Trump administration signals the violent realignment of the forms of political rule with the actual physiognomy of the society. And this, in the final analysis, is the origin of the Frankenstein monster of American politics, Donald Trump, a creature of the shady borderlands of real estate, casino gaming, entertainment and organized crime. And it is this crisis that is the origin of the counterrevolution that Trump leads—not by accident, but because he has been placed there, selected by the decisive sections of American capitalism.

One of the questions long posed by historians is why it was that the slave oligarchy of the South risked everything in seceding from the Union and launching a war to perpetuate and expand slavery. The outcome of their counterrevolution was the complete opposite of what the masters expected. As the great historian of the American Civil War, James McPherson, puts it: "Seldom in history has a counterrevolution so quickly provoked the very revolution it sought to preempt." Lincoln, as is well known, began the war first as a means of preserving the Union with slavery intact—though, like the founding fathers, he believed that if slavery were hemmed in it would ultimately perish. But the ferocity of the slaveowners' counterrevolution propelled Lincoln to reach for revolutionary solutions: Emancipation and the destruction of the entire southern social order.

The Trump administration has likewise launched a preemptive

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counterrevolution. It has deployed military-style crackdowns on major American cities, most notoriously in Minneapolis and St. Paul, where ICE Gestapo assassinated peacefully protesting citizens. There has never been such a far-reaching attack on basic constitutional and democratic principles as that leveled from the centers of power in Washington D.C., with the criminalization of immigrant workers only the stalking horse for the much larger target: the working class as a whole.

There is today no mass socialist movement. And yet everywhere the ruling class raises the threat of “socialism.” Trump does not mean by this the “socialism” of his chum Zohran Mamdani, who has abandoned all of the radical phraseology that he used to lure New York’s workers and youth to vote him into office. In fact, even Mamdani’s most milquetoast reform proposals, such as cheaper bus fares, are also in the scrapheap. The nightmare that haunts the minds of the ruling class is a politically conscious, politically independent working class, fighting for a political program that actually expresses its real needs: for international solidarity with workers everywhere, for an end to capitalist wars, for good jobs and good pay, for healthcare, a clean environment, for access to culture and beauty.

This is why the fundamental task confronting the youth here at Gettysburg and everywhere else is to turn to the working class, the only social force that has both the power and the need to stop the world’s descent into barbarism and planetary destruction; why the revolutionary duty is now more essential than ever: to tell the truth.

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