

250 years since the Declaration of Independence

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Today marks 250 years since the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, which proclaimed that “all men are created equal,” that governments derive their powers from reason and the “consent of the governed,” and that the population has a duty to “alter or abolish” any governments that stand in the way of their “inalienable” rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

The radical proclamation of universal human equality reverberated in the French Revolution of 1789, the Haitian Revolution of 1791, the revolutions of 1848, and the struggles for national unification and democratic rule that swept Europe and the Americas. It was in this sense that Marx, in the preface to *Capital*, wrote that the American War of Independence “sounded the tocsin” for the European bourgeois revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The Marxist movement has always viewed the American Revolution, like the French Revolution that followed it, within its historical context. As bourgeois democratic revolutions, they could not realize the principles they proclaimed except in the most limited sense. Most directly, in what would become the United States, the Declaration raised as a problem the persistence of slavery, which it could not resolve. But it set that process in motion, culminating in the abolition of slavery in the Second American Revolution, the Civil War (1861-65).

If the two American revolutions marked the ascent of the democratic principles proclaimed in 1776, the 250th anniversary is being marked under conditions of their staggering crisis and decay. The present government, and the social order over which it presides, are in every sense a repudiation of the American Revolution and of the principles that found their most profound expression in the Declaration of Independence.

The words of the Declaration of Independence, like those of all great revolutionary documents, come suddenly alive in periods of social struggle. Its denunciation of George III, a ruler “marked by every act which may define a Tyrant ... unfit to be the ruler of a free people,” reads today like a condemnation of the Trump administration. As the historian Adam Hochschild observed in the webinar held by the *World Socialist Web Site* on June 25, the Declaration’s indictment of the king reads as if it “were written this morning.”

In the language of the Declaration, the military has been rendered “superior to the Civil Power” through the deployment of troops into American cities. Immigrants are “transported beyond Seas” without charge or trial to a concentration camp in El Salvador. Federal agents are protected “from punishment for any Murders which they should commit,” as in the cases of the ICE agent who shot Renée Good and the CBP agents who shot Alex Pretti in Minneapolis.

The Declaration’s statement that “all men are created equal” stands as an indictment of a society that has just minted its first trillionaire, Elon Musk. Nearly 1,000 billionaires command \$8.4 trillion, and the top 1 percent holds as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent of the population combined. American society is mired in corruption and criminality, with President Donald Trump having reaped \$1.43 billion in a cryptocurrency scam during his first year in office.

The country that once proclaimed, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” commemorated the 250th anniversary of its birth with a surge of immigration raids. More than 10,000 people were arrested over a period of just five days, according to a new report in *The Independent*, as the Trump administration campaigns openly against the

U.S. Constitution's guarantee of birthright citizenship. While the American Revolution announced a "wall of separation" between religion and government, the Trump administration recently released a 224-page report announcing that the "wall" would be replaced with a "bridge."

The wallowing of the ruling class and its state in filth and criminality cannot be attributed to Trump alone. He is the personification, the expression and the outcome of an extended process. A globally integrated economy has undermined the nation-state system upon which capitalist rule depends. Monopolies long ago replaced the so-called "free" markets, and production has been subordinated to financial speculation and the accumulation of fictitious capital. American capitalism, in protracted decline relative to its rivals, has waged imperialist war continuously since 1991 in an effort to offset its economic decline through military violence.

Out of this decay has arisen a financial oligarchy that has broken with all legality—in its operations within the United States, where it treats the Constitution, the courts and the law as obstacles to be swept aside, and throughout the world, where it tramples on international law, waging wars of aggression and underwriting genocide.

The repudiation of the democratic heritage of the American Revolution today takes two complementary ideological forms. The mythmakers of Trump and the far right drape themselves in the flag, invoking the names of American revolutionary leaders while dismantling everything they established. The official commemorations of the anniversary on the part of the Trump administration have consisted of sparsely-attended festivals, a gladiatorial cage fight in front of the White House on Trump's birthday and a traveling carnival of "Freedom Trucks."

The Democratic Party and its satellites deny the revolutionary character of the revolution itself in the service of the reactionary politics of race and identity. In 2019, the *New York Times*, the mouthpiece for dominant sections of the Democratic Party, announced in its "1619 Project" that the American Revolution was a counter-revolution waged in defense of slavery. Given that premise, there is nothing worth celebrating on the 250th anniversary of the Declaration.

The attitude of the workers' movement towards the bourgeois-democratic revolutions of the past was

summed up by Leon Trotsky in *Results and Prospects* (1906). "The bourgeoisie has shamefully betrayed all the traditions of its historical youth, and its present hirelings dishonor the graves of its ancestors and scoff at the ashes of their ideals," Trotsky wrote. "The proletariat has taken the honor of the revolutionary past of the bourgeoisie under its protection."

After the adoption of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and the Dred Scott decision of 1857, the only way the principles of the Declaration could be preserved was through a revolutionary struggle against slavery. So now, the crisis of capitalism has reached such a stage that the defense of democratic rights can be carried forward only through a revolutionary struggle against the capitalist system itself.

The right to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" is entirely bound up with the struggle for social equality. They mean nothing without the right to a secure and decent-paying job, to healthcare, education, housing and culture, to a life free of war and repression—rights that are incompatible with the domination of society by a financial oligarchy.

There are clear signs of the social and political radicalization of broad sections of workers and young people, in the United States and around the world. Millions have taken to the streets in the "No Kings" demonstrations and in the mass protests against ICE murders. The class struggle is intensifying internationally. The critical task is to arm this growing movement with a historical perspective and a socialist program.

The revolutionaries of 1776 did not petition the existing order; they overthrew it. The third American revolution will be a socialist revolution, made by the working class as part of the world revolution against capitalism. That is the meaning of the anniversary, and the living heritage of the Declaration proclaimed to the world 250 years ago today.



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