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USA

The War is at home

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While Donald Trump monopolizes media coverage with schoolyard bluster that he’s “locked and loaded” against North Korea, and Venezuela too; while not only Vladimir Putin but Kim Jong-un of all people has Trump’s administration tied up in knots; and while Congressional investigations and the “special counsel” circle the Trump bunker where whatever secrets of his campaign collusion and financial entanglements with Russian agents and criminals may be hiding â€” amidst all this, the more important war is raging at home.

A question often arises whether Trump is a genuine representative of the aims of the capitalist ruling class in general and the Republican right wing in particular, or a self-centered rogue with serious and potentially dangerous personality disorders. The answer is that he’s actually both, and it can be difficult amid the daily “breaking news” frenzy to simultaneously grasp the comical and deadly dimensions of the political situation we face.

It’s amusing, of course, when Rex Tillerson and James Mattis have to trail the big tweet like pooper-scoopers to assure the world he won’t blow it up next week â€” but the Korea war scare (frankly overblown) crowds out the news of the full-scale social counter-reformation this administration is waging.

This is a war on many fronts at once. It’s a war to shrink the electorate, particularly its nonwhite non-affluent sector. It’s an especially vicious war on women’s health at home and globally, not only on the right to abortion but access to contraception and care during and following pregnancy. It’s a war, more generally, on the very idea that health care is a basic human right for anyone. It’s a war on the right to public education, led by the billionaire heiress Betsy DeVos.

It’s a war on the right of communities of color to live without the terror of police violence. It’s a war to expand mass incarceration and resume the worst days of the disastrous “war on drugs.” And the fact that the federal judiciary is now being stuffed with rightwing ideologues means that the war on people’s rights will long outlast the shambles of Trump’s presidency.

It’s a war against human rights protections for transgender young people. It’s a war to remove as many people as possible, as directly stated by Trump’s budget director Mulvaney, from desperately needed federal benefits. It’s a war on every form of environmental regulation and basic scientific research on climate change. In fact it’s a war on the physical and chemical laws of nature, on the premise that these laws can’t do any harm if the population is kept ignorant of them.

It’s mainly a rightwing war, but not exclusively. It’s a war, for example â€” supported by the leadership of both corporate parties â€” to criminalize boycotts of Israel or Israeli settlements called by the UN or other international bodies (Senate Bill 720). Making such boycotts a federal felony, this bill, drafted by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), would make the First Amendment a dead letter. This has caused some of its liberal and conservative sponsors to rethink their position once they got around to reading what it says. (<http://nym.ag/2eDOXOa>)

Suppressing the Vote

If the Russians are guilty of everything they’re accused of “hacking our election,” it rates no higher than third as a threat to democratic process in the United States. The Kobach-Pence “electoral integrity commission” appointed by Trump is no mere vanity exercise to validate his specious claims of mass voter fraud. It is the sharp leading edge of a

systematic rightwing drive to permanently suppress the votes of people of color and the poor.

This is an effort to institute nationwide the kinds of voter-suppression ID and “proof-of-citizenship” laws that have been passed in many Republican-stacked state legislatures, along with hyper-sophisticated gerrymandering techniques that are being fought out in the courts. Behind the rantings of the 71-year-old baby in the White House that he really “won” the popular vote, the purpose of this effort is clear to everyone.

The reactionary hacks behind the concentrated drive to wipe out any shred of national health insurance, cripple Medicaid and ultimately destroy Medicare and Social Security, are fully conscious class warriors. They understand perfectly well that there will never be majority popular support for their savage social agenda and that the accidental Electoral College victory of Donald Trump opened up an opportunity that might not come their way again.

They know that permanent voter suppression is the only means to maintain their political ascendance. Their motivation combines partisanship and ideology: they believe in principle that the kind of folks who benefit from government programs for people (not counting military contractors, private operators of prisons, or recipients of corporate welfare, bank bailouts, etc.) really shouldn't be voting and that in practice it should be made as burdensome as possible for them to do so.

In tandem with conscious and systematic voter suppression comes the vast insertion of money into politics, to the point where a single House of Representatives seat can run up a campaign cost (as in the recent Georgia special election) of over \$50 million. And that's only the visible tip of the iceberg of “dark money” spread around by the Crack (Koch) Brothers and corporate lobbies.

Anticipating the possibility that Mike Pence might be installed as president just in case Trump melts down or is forced out, major rightwing donors are putting together a cache of funding for him. These folks know better than to put all their eggs in one basket case.

At the outer edge of lunacy, the Kochs through their American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) are pushing Republican-controlled state legislatures toward an “Article V” convention (34 states are required to set this in motion), to hijack the U.S. Constitution by prohibiting national health insurance and other social programs, enforce a “balanced budget” and other insanities. (See Common Cause, <http://bit.ly/2eE3md5>) ALEC is also pushing a repeal of the 17th Amendment, which would return the election of U.S. Senators to heavily gerrymandered state legislatures.

It Gets Worse

No “free trade” deal is so horrible, so destructive of jobs, wages and workers' rights, that Trump and his team can't concoct something nastier. The pending “new NAFTA” is likely to incorporate the worst features of president Barack Obama's Trans Pacific Partnership, as laid out in devastating detail by Ethan Earle in “Trump is Trying to Make NAFTA Even Worse” (In These Times, June 28, <http://bit.ly/2txUGZ2>):

(I)n an act of political judo, Trump is trying to use the same anti-establishment, pro-American rhetoric from his campaign to craft a neoliberal NAFTA renegotiation that will include everything demanded in the recently scuttled TPP... .

A Trump-led renegotiation will mean a strengthening of heinous Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS)

mechanisms, which allow corporations to sue governments that “infringe” on profit-making opportunities, for example, daring to introduce anti-tobacco legislation... . Meanwhile, “investor incentives” will increase the liberalization of capital flows and lead to the offshoring of many thousands of jobs, in the ongoing global race to find the most exploitative labor conditions possible.

The list goes on. Rightwing state legislatures are passing laws to bar municipal governments from adopting living wage and anti-discrimination ordinances.

Republican leaders might be looking toward Russia-collusiongate as the occasion to turn against Trump if he becomes more of a liability than enabler for their political agenda. But as of now, Trump’s (and Pence’s) approval ratings, low as they are, still run ahead of those for the Republican Party, or Congress, as institutions.

Bipartisan Dysfunction

The dysfunction of a broken political system affects both capitalist parties, and the health care crisis illustrates it as well as anything. In fact, the Democrats’ dilemma is hardly less acute than what’s facing the Republicans. Not only are they virtually powerless in two-thirds of the states; their politics and dependence on corporate financing are crippling obstacles to forging an alternative that can appeal to workers facing a devastating crisis in the U.S. heartland.

In the wake of Bernie Sanders’ insurgent campaign, the pure savagery of the Republican assault and the inadequacies of the Affordable Care Act itself, big chunks of the Democratic voting base are turning to support single-payer “Medicare for All,” which is in fact the only real solution for health insurance.

It’s now not only figures like Sanders and Congressman John Conyers, longtime single-payer stalwarts, but Elizabeth Warren — who’s on the left end of the Democratic establishment, but certainly part of it — coming out for it. But make no mistake, single-payer is anathema to the insurance industry and Big Pharma, and hence absolutely unacceptable to the Democratic leadership of Obama, Pelosi and Clinton.

In the early 1990s, when a grassroots movement for universal health care was on the upswing, president Bill Clinton appointed Hillary to develop a program. The hopelessly complex scheme she devised, with the leading input from the insurance industry giants, crashed and burned, but the movement was effectively sidelined.

Will today’s Democratic Party, largely wandering in the political wilderness, play a similar role to derail the growing single-payer movement? If Mitch McConnell finally makes that threatened call to Chuck Schumer to negotiate some kind of “fix to Obamacare,” what will Democrats actually bring to the table? Will they peremptorily tell their own single-payer supporters to sit down and shut up, as Hillary Clinton did back in the day and as president Obama did in the debate for the Affordable Care Act?

Possible Openings

Right now, capital and the right wing are winning the war at home, and there’s no point in hiding that reality. Lives and communities are being badly hurt by the social crisis and by deliberately cruel policies, and immigrant families torn apart. But the health care impasse, the incipient crisis of legitimacy of the Trump regime, and the severe internal

problems affecting both corporate parties means that there are real openings for popular “resistance” forces to break out of the stale two-party trap.

This is a moment when large sectors of the population are open to progressive answers, as the growing popular support for single-payer shows. The response to the August 12 Charlottesville killing indicates the latent power of a mass anti-racist movement. And it’s not a phenomenon in the United States alone, as illustrated by Jeremy Corbyn’s terrific showing in the British election where conventional punditry proclaimed that the Labour Party under his leftwing leadership would be all but wiped out.

While the Republican Party is pursuing the most vicious social agenda since the 1920s — with today’s added threat of environmental apocalypse on top of it all — the Democrats are tied up fighting over whether so-called “identity politics” (racial justice and LGBT rights in particular) need to be sacrificed in a “return to the center” in pursuit of supposedly conservative white workers.

Astute activist commentators like Naomi Klein rightly point out that that the anti-Trump resistance needs a positive program beyond just saying “No” to the savage rightwing assault. This is precisely why the beginning of a revival of socialist politics in the United States, and the promise it holds, is so important.

A socialist movement fights for the rights of oppressed people and for the needs of the entire working class. It fights against corporate “free trade” that destroys decent-paying jobs and labor rights, and for the solidarity of workers across borders whether they’re in the USA or Mexico, Honduras, Philippines or China.

A socialist movement fights for the fastest possible transition from fossil fuels, for the right of Native peoples to keep pipelines off their lands, and for the millions of U.S. jobs that can be created in the conversion to a sustainable economy. It’s only a mass socialist movement that can fight for all these things, because it’s not tied to the needs of corporate and finance capital. And it’s the only kind of movement that stands for the expansion and full development of democracy that the right wing is determined to crush. The time is now.

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