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USA

Transition, Trauma, and Troubled Times

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JANUARY 6 CERTAINLY marked a highly original way of showing “the celebration of America’s sacred peaceful transition of presidential power,” and a signal of continuing troubled times. It was a spectacle for the ages — a final futile grasp at retaining power by the outgoing president, morphing from an absurdist quasi-putsch into a deadly aspiring lynch mob inside the Capitol, followed by the late-evening reconvening of Congress for the ritual of ratifying the Electoral College vote for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris.

It will take quite a while to assess the lasting impact of these events and their likely aftershocks. The second impeachment trial of Donald Trump ended as everyone knew it would: with overwhelming proof of his guilt, and his acquittal with Republican Senators refusing to convict. But multiple ironies and contradictions remain, as the continuous criminal enterprise of the Trump administration finally gives way to the “normal” workings of the U.S. capitalist state under the centrist neoliberalism of Biden, Harris, Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer.

Consider the striking contrast between progressive uprisings in so many countries against anti-democratic repression and corruption, which we plan to discuss in their own right — in presidents-for-life Putin’s Russia and Alexander Lukashenko’s Belarus, in Hong Kong, in Peru, in Poland and Argentina with women mobilizing for abortion rights, in India with farmers mobilizing against the regime’s attack on their survival, in the revival of the Arab uprising in Lebanon, Sudan and Algeria, and now in Burma protesting the military coup — versus the spectacle of the Trump-and-QAnon-fuelled white-supremacist riot of January 6.

Most dramatic as we go to press, the resistance to the coup of the generals in Myanmar (Burma) has become a potentially world-shaking event — a mass strike, including walkouts and road blockades as well as daily street mobilizations by an outraged population. Although the movement is unarmed in the face of the coup regime’s tanks, the military is vulnerable: Its mafia-like control of the country’s economy can be crippled if the internal revolt wins support from international sanctions. Most important of all are signs that the popular movement is overcoming its devastating weakness — its long silence on the military’s brutal war against the Rohingya people and other oppressed ethnic minorities.

Another contrast is Biden’s headline-making executive orders undoing some (not all) of Trump’s most cynical and vicious moves, despite his almost entirely conventional roster of top Cabinet appointments. The picture of a fast-moving “first 100 days” of the new presidency reflects partly its sheer contrast with Trump — but also Biden’s relatively large-scale relief and economic stimulus and vaccination proposals.

These moves are forced by the monstrous scale of the objective crisis: The U.S. economy shrank by 3.5% in 2020, with recovery still far off — especially for African-American and Latina women whose jobs and income have been devastated. The normal slow, cautious “bipartisan” approach would be a guaranteed failure.

Another irony lies in the contradictions besetting the Republican Party in Trump’s wake. The big twit-now-without-twitter expanded the size and enthusiasm of its voter base, building his personality cult and energizing the ugliest nativist and white-supremacist elements in U.S. society, and tens of millions now living in a reality-free alternative universe where Trump’s “landslide reelection” was “stolen.”

This now renders the party hostage to a far-right and conspiracy-sotted cohort that makes up about half its voting base — as shown in polls by the 45% of Trump voters who approved the Capitol invasion, and 50% of Republicans favoring a large continuing role for him in the party — making it a somewhat less reliable and useful instrument for

capital. The “Grand Old Party” is in the early stage of a vicious internal war.

The infighting among Republican politicians, operatives and donors reflects this interesting dilemma of a party trying to hold together two visions of American greatness. One is a degraded form of so-called “traditional conservatism” — mainly upholding austerity and service cuts for the populace, tax cuts and gilded opulence for corporate elites, U.S. military might to rule the world, and reverence for the “institutions” that both administer and disguise those policies. Against this so-called traditional conservatism has arisen is an undisguised cultish white nationalism that regards those very institutions with contempt, along with whatever democratic substance exists in political life.

Left’s Difficulties

Most important for those of us on the socialist left, however, is the problem of our own situation, on which we’ll focus in most of the remainder of this statement.

Like most of the country and the rest of the world, we were relieved by the end of the disgraced Trump reign, and inspired by the African American and Latinx organizing that overcame voter suppression in critically important states. But we have no illusions that the Biden-Harris election brings anything like “unity” or overcomes the racist polarization that’s poisoning the U.S. working class.

The roots of the toxic politics in this country are aptly summarized by Jackson Lears (New York Review of Books, January 14, 2021, in a sharply critical review of Anne Applebaum’s *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*): “The Democratic Party’s turn toward market-driven policies, the bipartisan dismantling of the public sphere, the in-flight marriage of Wall Street and Silicon Valley in the cockpit of globalization — these interventions constituted the long con of neoliberal governance, which enriched a small minority of Americans while ravaging most of the rest.”

The electoral consequences of those dynamics are discussed in considerable detail in Kim Moody’s essay on the 2020 election in this issue of *Against the Current*. And if the initial energy of Biden’s initiatives goes somewhat beyond what might have been expected from this background, that reflects the gravity of the crisis much more than any pressure from the Bernie Sanders and “the squad” wing of the Democratic Party.

Certainly, the farther the Biden-Harris administration can be pushed — on stimulus and relief, on immigration and the catastrophe of detention and family separation, on the environment and mass incarceration and so much more — the better. But the capacity of the left to meaningfully intervene in today’s crises is sharply limited, not only by the small size and fragmentation of our organizations but even more by the grim fact that a sizable fraction of white working-class people have been attracted to the nativist, racist rightwing authoritarianism of “Trumpism.”

By no means is it appropriate to paint all working-class Trump voters with the same broad brush, as hardened racists or “deplorables” or anything else. Nor are workers the majority of Trump’s hardcore supporters. But while people vote the way they do for many diverse reasons, it’s still true that some of the ugliest politics in this society have sunk deeper roots in the working class than the United States has seen in a long time — and at this moment, considerably stronger than the socialist left can claim.

Any notion that today’s U.S. left can be the leading force in mass working-class and social movement “united fronts” to confront and physically defeat far-right forces on the ground is, in most places, rhetorical delusion. That doesn’t mean that we can or should be silent or retreat — far from it. It does mean beginning with a sober appreciation of

where we are.

Moving Forward

We offer the following observations and suggestions to contribute to the vital discussions unfolding in various organizations and online platforms.

First: Social movements are the key forces in combating the right and pressuring, and ultimately resisting, the Biden/Harris administration, as they were in resisting the atrocities of the Trump regime and responding to serial police murders of unnamed Black and brown civilians. The most successful protest actions have been resolutely militant and tactically disciplined, with clear demands and democratic decision-making.

In these movements as well as in some of the promising resurgent labor struggles, left activists have a significant presence and make important organizing contributions. For example, in multiple cities these activists are at the core of housing rights and anti-eviction movements.

Second: The eruption of rightwing violence, which now directly targets political figures and government institutions, has compelled the FBI and Justice Department to openly recognize “far-right and white-supremacist domestic terrorism” as the “greatest security threat we face.” The drive to find and arrest perpetrators of the January violence, and perhaps shut down some of the white-supremacist nexus, is underway.

There’s no doubt that these ultra-reactionary forces pose a clear and present danger. It remains true nonetheless that the institutions of this capitalist, imperialist state are the greatest threat to civil liberties and democratic rights. The “domestic terror” legislation to be introduced in Congress will aim not only at the violent ultra-right, but also — probably sooner than later — against Black Lives Matter protesters, Indigenous and environmentalist water protectors, and others including the BDS (Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions) movement for Palestinian freedom.

A great many Democratic liberals and centrists have demonstrated an astounding ability to learn nothing from history and experience — as shown by the “unity” of response to the September 11, 2001 attacks that brought about the PATRIOT Act, Guantanamo, the Department of Homeland Security, and going further back into the 1980s and 1990s, the “war on drugs” and “tough on crime” legislation leading directly to racialized mass incarceration.

The necessity to fully investigate and dismantle the white-nationalist armed and dangerous network must absolutely not be allowed, in the name of achieving bipartisan consensus, into an even more dangerous expansion of police and FBI surveillance and infiltration powers when existing laws are already more than sufficient.

Third: Even amidst the raging coronavirus pandemic that not only exposes but widens the brutal race and class stratifications in this society — and powerfully contributed to the growth of irrationalism, climate change denial, QAnon, the radicalization of Trumpism and widespread economic despair — a number of promising labor struggles have emerged.

These include actions by teachers and nurses on the pandemic front lines, organizing by Amazon and grocery workers, the victorious Hunts Point produce market Teamsters strike, and others. There’s also a movement in the United Auto Workers, in the context of the jaw-dropping corruption within the top union leadership, seeking direct member election of top officers. In the current climate, that would be an enormous advance.

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Working-class struggles, whether they're on the rise or retreat at a given moment, must always lie at the center of socialist attention and organizing. That's not because they substitute for other crucial movements — and certainly not because they put instant revolution on the agenda — but rather it's because the workers' movement ultimately makes it possible to win and keep serious democratic and social changes.

That is especially true now in this pivotal time of upheaval and crisis. Even though the capacity of the socialist movement is constrained, there are sites of struggle where it makes a material difference. It's of enormous importance that for a large percentage of young people, "socialism" is no longer a forbidden word and, in fact, represents an increasingly attractive notion, even if in imprecisely defined forms.

Today's socialist U.S. left, however, is by no means a mass organization or capable of acting like one. The key to moving forward isn't by overestimating the left's strength, and certainly not by illusions in progressives permeating the Democratic Party to "push Biden to the left." The first-100-days flurry of executive actions will likely give way soon enough to the restoration of centrist ideology and sordid "bipartisan" compromise in conditions of political gridlock.

The most important place for activists is on the ground, building movements and grassroots forces that can force "the institutions" to address the mammoth crises facing us, and in the process fight to expand a democracy based not on ritual form, but substance.

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