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USA

Fighting Back for Survival

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On November 8, some 135 million U.S. voters chose between the two least popular capitalist party candidates in the country's modern history. By a margin of close to 2.7 million votes concentrated, to be sure, in huge majorities in California and New York they opted for the choice that seemed less frightening, if hardly inspiring. She did not, however, win the election. By virtue of a relic of slavery-era federalism called the Electoral College and narrow victories in Midwestern battleground states, Donald J. Trump emerged as the president-elect.

Instead of the widely anticipated result, which for progressive hopes would have been dismal enough the stagnant neoliberalism of a Hillary Clinton administration a con man with a well-earned frightening reputation, uniquely unfit to hold any responsible office, will now assume power on January 20 as probably the most reviled incoming U.S. president in history. The shock waves from the electoral result continue to reverberate, if anything magnified by the bestiary lining up for Cabinet and high-level White House appointments and the prospective rightwing packing of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Drain the swamp? Trump's actually digging a deeper Wall Street-military-corporate cesspool. If one appointment is representative of the lot, it would be Secretary of Education nominee billionaire-heiress Betsy DeVos a voucher-and-charter-school lobbyist and the architect of Michigan's empire of disastrously failing charters, whose only connection to public education or the teaching profession is her commitment to destroying both.

Contrary to premature and superficial prophecies of its demise, the Republican Party will control the presidency and both houses of Congress. What does this portend in a new period where, in fact, both corporate parties find themselves in low-level internal civil wars, where regional wars are raging across the world and where capital is at war against nature itself, with incipient mass extinction as planetary collateral damage?

First, what happened? The result is in part a fluke, but also the culmination of certain trends both internationally including Brexit and a rightwing nationalist tide in much of Europe and in the United States. Even if the voters favored Clinton over Trump by a pretty substantial margin of close to two percent, the Democrats got smashed in areas they once dominated swamped by a revolt against the neoliberal, free-trade "new economic order" to which the Clinton-Obama-Pelosi leadership attached itself.

Second, on a closer look, it's highly dubious to call the election a "populist working class revolt." As Kim Moody's analysis in this issue of *Against the Current* shows, it's much more an uprising of the affluent. (See other election articles in this issue.)

Nonetheless, in those closely fought battleground states that produced the Electoral College result, a declining overall working-class vote and a swing by white workers were decisive factors. A New York Times post-mortem analysis concisely nailed how the Hillary Clinton Democrats managed to lose:

"(A)s the dust settled, Democrats recognized two central problems of Mrs. Clinton's flawed candidacy: Her decades in Washington and the paid speeches she delivered to financial institutions left her unable to tap into the anti-establishment and anti-Wall Street rage. And she ceded the white working-class voters who backed Mr. Clinton in 1992. Though she would never have won this demographic, her husband insisted that her campaign aides do more to try to cut into Mr. Trump's support with these voters. They declined, reasoning that she was better off targeting college educated suburban voters..." (Amy Chozick, "Clinton's Campaign of Hopes and Missteps," NYT special section Election 2016, November 10, P1.)

There's one point to add. Beyond the fact that the Democratic neoliberals saw no need to address much of the working class — white, Black or Latino — is the reality that they have nothing to say to workers whose jobs, communities and lives have been damaged by industrial flight and deteriorating wages and job security. Donald Trump had something to say to them: We'll bring back those jobs by cancelling "bad trade deals" and building that "big, beautiful wall" to keep out those Mexicans.

It was both racist and pseudo-populist, of course. These promises, despite the sound and fury over "saving" those several hundred Carrier jobs in Indiana with a big tax giveaway, are a "huge" fraud that can't and won't be kept. The Trump/Republican game plan is to make those folks feel "great" about being white again, even while their real lives continue to stagnate.

How they will respond when their expectations are betrayed — whether by turning against Trump as the fraudster he is, or becoming more virulently nationalist and racist — is one of the great open questions of the new period. Precisely because the Democrats' abandonment of working people's concerns is one of the main tendencies that have come to fruition in this election, it's up to the independent left and social movements to present an alternative.

Rightwing Agendas

Both parties are sorting themselves out after this election. The Obama/Clinton/Pelosi Democratic "center" is mobilizing to ward off the "progressive" challenge for control of the Democratic National Committee, while much of the Bernie Sanders movement's leadership undertakes the perennial, ever-failing crusade to turn the Democrats into a "people's party."

On the Republican side, the internal divisions are actually greater — and it was the GOP, after all, which was supposed to be going into crisis in the wake of Trump's hostile takeover. Relations between the "Trump party" and Republican establishment will remain tense, but the advantages that power confers will help bridge them at least for a while. That's why the comforting conventional platitude that the responsibilities of government should "moderate" the party's hard-right edge is more likely to prove radically false in this case.

Tactically, to be sure, the need to "replace" and not merely "repeal Obamacare" means that the Affordable Care Act probably won't disappear all at once. But on the whole, the Republicans will not be gradualist. A set of overlapping reactionary agendas, even if partly contradictory, will be pursued with all the more vigor since the ideologues in power know that these next few years might be the only chance to ram them through. Those disparate elements of the Republican coalition — Wall Street and big business, the religious right, and the extreme racist-nationalist elements — can hold together only while each of them feel they're getting something from the new dispensation.

Paul Ryan's scheme to enact huge tax cuts to benefit the rich, and to starve and wipe out most of Social Security and Medicare, is definitely on the table even though Trump promised not to touch these programs. That such tax-cutting policies, to say nothing of the promised massive increases in military spending, would balloon the budget deficit and cause ultimate economic damage as well as absolute social disaster, is a problem to be cleaned up down the road — perhaps when neoliberal Democrats next take over, according to the usual alternating pattern. A national "right to work" assault is also pending.

As these measures hit some of Trump's own working-class voters, the Republicans meanwhile need to consolidate their 2016 electoral good fortune by permanently tilting the scales against Black and Latino voters. Jeff Sessions' nomination for Attorney General means a Justice Department hostile to the Voting Rights Act, which can be effectively dismantled through all of the Grand Theft Election voter-suppression and gerrymandering techniques

perfected in rightwing state legislatures.

The same goes for women's right to choose, as states' assault on abortion will now be abetted by the federal government and ultimately, quite likely, the Supreme Court. Heavily militarized police forces "a product of both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations" will be further emboldened to smash protests and racially profile civilians. The election result has also encouraged the extreme racist "Alt-Right" to emerge from its hole, as Angela Dillard's discussion of events at the University of Michigan shows.

The very idea of "registering" Muslim residents smacks of classic fascist technique. The wave of fear sweeping through immigrant communities will intensify, whether or not mass workplace raids and deportations materialize. One hopeful sign is the open statements of refusal by several large city administrations to cooperate in such atrocities "both as an act of principle and a defense of their own economies that (notably in the case of New York City) are already threatened as people hunker down and stop spending.

Imperial Contradictions

Global strategy is trickier as it involves imperial dilemmas, real risks and potential conflict with adversaries that can actually fight back. Trump's boastful pledge to "smash ISIS and take their oil" (as if it were "theirs" or "ours" to take) is likely to produce little more than a continuation of president Obama's drones-and-special-forces strategy. The new president's peculiar elective affinity with the likes of Vladimir Putin is a wild card that troubles some militarist conservatives even as it sits well with more neo-isolationist America-First types.

For the Palestinian people, as bad as the Obama presidency has proven to be, the Trump and rightwing ascendancy will be even worse. The U.S. election result has emboldened the Netanyahu government and the even more extremist Klan-type Israeli settler forces.

There are open questions. Would Trump really "tear up" the crucially important nuclear deal with Iran, sabotaging the United States' main strategic allies "Britain, France and Germany" and pushing the Iranian regime into the protective embrace of Russia? If motivated by the interests of American business, would he want to mess up the commercial aircraft industry's sales opportunities in Iran (or for that matter, the already lucrative opportunities for business with Cuba)?

No one knows what, if anything, Donald Trump actually believes about any of these issues, or whether he'll be driven by profit or ideology. It may be best to avoid further speculation at the moment, except to say that all those wars that president Obama inherited from George W. Bush, and the new ones that he entered, will rage on under the new administration.

Bitter Neoliberal Legacy

It is still difficult, and will remain so for some time, to grasp the concept: President. Donald. Trump. The anachronistic peculiar institution of the Electoral College has played a particularly nasty trick this time "and we are in the midst of a political upheaval that will reverberate for many years. Although we can't yet know whether this reality will turn out to be problematic for U.S. capital, it will certainly be brutal for the working class, oppressed and immigrant communities, women and civil rights.

Resistance is critical "and it's underway. The flood of contributions to Planned Parenthood and the American Civil

Liberties Union, the upsurge of people (many from the Sanders upsurge) signing up with socialist groups, the flood of activist volunteers heading to Standing Rock – all these are among the positive signs.

But amidst the horror over Trump, it would be remiss to overlook the pernicious role played by the present administration in paving the road to reaction. When Barack Obama took office eight years and so many broken dreams ago, who thought that the Guantanamo prison, which he announced on his first day would be closed, would remain open so that a Republican president could plan to expand it and revive waterboarding “and much worse” torture?

Who imagined then his deportation practices would be so vast that the new president will be hard-pressed to match them? Or that after 15 years in Afghanistan and 13 years after the invasion of Iraq, the U.S. military would remain deeply entangled in both, with no end in sight?

A proper assessment of the Obama presidential era requires a separate treatment, but as we head into a period of escalating reaction and confrontation, it would be wise not to become overly nostalgic for it. There can be, in any case, no going back. The truly sinister menace that Donald Trump represents will be defeated by defiance and mass action, by movements in the streets and by a vibrant genuinely progressive political agenda, not by the resuscitation of a dying Democratic neoliberalism.

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