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USA

# Defending "Our Democracy"

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**Amidst the swirling chaos of the Trump White House, with scandals and coverup and threats of firing the investigators, and Cruise missile launches to gratify the big twit's ego, let's not lose sight of the underlying fact that what's called "American democracy" really is under attack " and not from the outside.**

Even more important is how democracy is being defended, and hopefully extended " by teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Kentucky, by the magnificent youth upsurge in the wake of the Parkland massacre; by the resistance against Trump's brutal immigration policies; by the new movement fighting back against sexual harassment and rape culture.

The victorious strike of the West Virginia teachers erupted in a state where they don't have legal collective bargaining rights, where their union leadership was essentially swept up in the tide of militant action organized at the rank-and-file base, and where the teachers stayed out against the leadership's wishes until their five percent pay raise (for all state employees) was delivered and signed into law.

It may be premature to proclaim the much-awaited dawn of a "new labor upsurge." But we might be seeing the future of public sector worker activism in the face of an anticipated Supreme Court's Janus decision to cripple their unions by outlawing the collection of non-member "agency fees" for services that unions are required to provide. West Virginia teachers, like many public sector workers across the country, are at the mercy of their state legislature " which is how they wound up close to the national bottom in wages and benefits.

Their statewide unauthorized (i.e. "wildcat") strike instead put the legislature and the governor at the teachers' mercy. Why did it happen? Skyrocketing health care costs, and the denial of the respect and dignity the teachers deserve, was the last straw. Importantly, they didn't think only of themselves. Recognizing that many of their students in deeply distressed communities depend on free school lunch programs, teachers organized food deliveries on their own to bridge the gap while the schools were shut down.

Respect, dignity and solidarity " those values are essential to keep in mind, because they fuelled not only the West Virginia and other teachers' actions, but other manifestations of labor unrest, notably the Fight for \$15. And yes, they're also driving forces for the youth movement that the Parkland, Florida high school students have spearheaded.

In the wake of yet another unspeakable school massacre, mourning their 17 classmates, teachers and coaches sacrificed on the altar of the unrestricted "right" to sell and buy semi-automatic assault rifles, the students were confronted by yet another wave of politicians' boilerplate "thoughts and prayers" and the gun manufacturer lobby's cynical proposal to turn schools across the country into locked-down armed fortresses.

The Parkland students' response is remarkable, not only for its eloquence in the face of unimaginable pain. First, they spoke up for themselves, not letting politicians usurp the platform " and the students' voices were what stood out, both at Parkland and at the huge March for Our Lives in Washington on March 24. ("I trained to be a teacher, not a sharpshooter" was one notable sign among many.)

Second, while the Marjory Stoneman Douglas students are relatively middle class and "privileged," they recognized immediately that other young people, in communities of color particularly, face deadlier daily threats " not so much from mass school shootings as from risking violence and death on the way to and from school, or just walking on the

street and playing basketball in the neighborhood. And placing armed police in every school automatically means disproportionately kids of color arrested, suspended and expelled for minor infractions or for nothing at all.

Because they understand what's at stake not only for themselves but their entire generation, these students will not let the issue fade out as usual — per the gun manufacturer lobby's strategy — until the next mass shooting. It's not a question of fine-tuning one or another particular piece of gun control legislation. (Surely, people can responsibly own guns for protection and hunting without having millions of AR-15s all over the place?) It's a matter of confronting the realities of this brutally violent, chaotic and unequal society and getting to the race, class and gendered roots of our condition.

Those values of respect, dignity and solidarity are also on the table when the DACA recipients — from teenagers to young adults, these are Americans who lack citizenship because their parents brought them as children without documents — are not only fighting for their own lives.

They're refusing to sell their families and communities down the river by accepting relief for themselves in exchange for supporting Trump's border wall and stepped-up immigration raids. Their courage is what's impelled many cities to defy the immigration police's "right" to grab and deport folks who are in local custody for traffic or minor misdemeanor violations.

## Trump Going Down?

It's naturally tempting to fantasize that Donald Trump will be removed by indictment, impeachment or implosion from the combined weight of scandals, investigations and revelations of the criminal conduct of his enterprise before and during his occupancy of the White House — as if the prospect of the creepy Christian-supremacist Mike Pence were an improvement. Unfortunately, it's necessary to put some sobering realities on the table.

Reality: Donald Trump is not going to be brought down by sex scandals. His filthy contempt for women was no secret to anyone, including his voting base, before the November 2016 election. And while we fully believe the accounts by women who have come forward, and while America loves "celebrity sleaze" beyond all other forms of infotainment, those revelations with more to come aren't going to turn the ruling corporate elites against "their President" and useful tool.

Reality: Trump isn't going to be impeached by popular demand or through the initiative of Congressional Democrats. By its nature, impeachment is a long and grinding affair, which is instigated by elites when the president no longer meets their needs, or when his behavior actually threatens the institutions that guarantee the "stability" they crave. In Richard Nixon's case, that was the 1973 "Saturday night massacre" firing of special prosecutor Archibald Cox. For Trump, it would be firing Robert Mueller, which is why he hasn't done it. (The impeachment of Bill Clinton was an opportunist Republican stunt, which fizzled in the Senate and backfired.)

Reality: If and when the big twit is brought down, it will be either because his antics are dragging the Republican Party into the electoral abyss, or because his incoherent economic nationalism and policy zigzags threaten to generate a recession or global slump.

It appears that ruling class intervention has pulled the Trump team back from its brinkmanship NAFTA demands that would cripple the North American auto industry. Fears of economic chaos also led to an exemption for the European Union from his much-touted steel and aluminum tariff scheme, and no one yet knows where the threats of

anti-Chinese measures and China's retaliation might lead.

Reality: Behind all the wild and weird doings in Washington, much business as usual continues. Donald Trump grumpily signed the \$1.3 trillion "bipartisan" spending bill that didn't fund his border wall or some of the savage budget cuts he'd trumpeted, but did allocate \$700 billion to the military " while leaving in the lurch the DACA youth and "Dreamers" whom the Democrats had pledged to defend. Another day, another betrayal.

Hundreds of thousands of families " parents who risked everything to find a place where they hoped their children would be safe and secure, and the young people who have grown up as American as anyone else in this country " are left to be collateral damage of Trump's blatant appeal to racism, along with Haitian and Salvadoran refugees losing Temporary Protected Status and facing deportation to countries that U.S. policies have shattered.

All this was punctuated by the April 14 bombing of the Syrian regime's suspected chemical weapons facilities, which changes effectively nothing in that country's catastrophe " but did give Trump the opportunity to tweet "Mission Accomplished." That this strike was not only meaningless in substance, but illegal under both U.S. domestic and international law, hardly registers in the news cycle.

## Rights Under Attack

So where are the threats to democracy coming from? Elsewhere in this issue of *Against the Current*, we're publishing several pieces exploring the left's response to the rise of open, sometimes violent racism and ominous far-right militancy that Trump's presidency has enabled. We refer our readers to that important discussion of strategy and principle.

But what about Russian meddling with all the fake-news campaign ads targeted at gullible U.S. voters? In fact, if the Russians are guilty of everything they're accused of, it barely rates in fourth place among the attacks on democratic rights in the United States.

First, there's the electoral system rigged by racist voter suppression laws, extreme gerrymandering, and now a pending "citizenship" question on the 2020 census that's specifically designed to depress participation and thereby reduce political representation and budgets for cities with communities of immigrants and people of color.

The disenfranchisement of prisoners and in many states, lifetime disqualification of convicted felons " in the context of mass incarceration in America " also reduces the voter base of working class and people of color. Of course, there's the anachronism of the Electoral College that enabled the 2000 election to be stolen in Florida for George W. Bush and put Trump in the White House in the 2016 election.

Second, in a country that's so grossly unequal to begin with, elections and legislatures can be bought with the dark money of the Koch Brothers, the likes of the Mercer and DeVos family fortunes, and the other operations detailed in Nancy McLean's *Democracy in Chains*, reviewed by Dianne Feeley in this issue. It's not so much a deep conspiracy as a heist in broad daylight, designed to make democracy itself meaningless.

Third, in a relatively short time the Trump swamp creatures and Republican Congress have done substantial damage, some of it difficult to reverse (with or without a 2018 midterm "blue wave," given that the Democrats won't fight for much of anything).

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Climate change not only isn't reversing, it's accelerating" and the administration is committed to extracting every bit of the fossil fuels that so desperately need to be left in the ground. Puerto Rico remains in a devastating crisis after Hurricane Maria, with the next hurricane season now months away. Arctic sea ice has reached all-time lows, with winter temperatures reaching up to 45 degrees Fahrenheit above normal" while the U.S east coast and northern Europe suffered a series of monstrous storms, and the west coast burns up and then floods.

Raids and deportations terrorize immigrant communities. The "tax reform" bill, Trump's major legislative "achievement," stuffs hundreds of billions of dollars into corporate coffers and the fortunes of the super-rich, and puts the country firmly on the road to bankruptcy" deliberately, so that Paul Ryan can claim the "necessity" to privatize and gut Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

Those are the real live threats to what's called "our democracy" along with the reactionary Supreme Court majority that may be getting ready to strip away what remains of workers' right to organize unions, women's right to abortion, Muslims' right to enter the country, and people's right to elect their representatives without crippling voter suppression and other election-rigging techniques.

The Democrats' feeble resistance will barely slow down these attacks, let alone stop them" no matter how long or short the big twit's presidential tenure may be. It will be now, as it always has been, the power of mass movements that change the tide and the political equation.

Substantive democratic rights, more important than the purely formal ones, are always hard won and subject to being lost if not continually defended and renewed. That's where the West Virginia teachers, the students of Parkland and the nation, and all the communities of resistance large and small, are showing the way.

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