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USA

Where to Begin?

- IV Online magazine - 2018 - IV524 - September 2018 -

Publication date: Saturday 1 September 2018

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Without losing any of the outrage that the present situation demands – highlighted by the sheer sadistic brutality of the Trump regime’s crimes against humanity perpetrated on refugee families – it’s also necessary to analyze it carefully. Donald Trump did not arise from a vacuum. Riding retrograde trends that have been developing for decades, he’s emerged in his grotesque way as a kind of “transformational” president, promoting a set of programs that the right and far-right in U.S. politics have long envisioned.

These forces have consciously encouraged and exploited well-known factors including the growing respectability of white racial resentment, Christian religious fundamentalism, and above all the profound erosion of the labor movement and decline of real wages and job security, fueling and reinforcing fear and anger within much of the white electorate. Similar ominous trends have grown internationally. They are expressed in racist anti-immigrant hostilities and in a real, although distorted, revolt against the global ravages of neoliberalism.

Trump seized on all this during and after the 2016 election, and has also hooked up with the nastiest elements of anti-immigrant and xenophobic currents in European nations. His jaw-dropping performances at the G7, NATO and Helsinki summits may appear to policy elites as the acts of a buffoon. More importantly, however, Trump must be recognized as a skilled manipulator of his base, and both agent and intimidator of his Republican enablers, even if he’s overmatched when his petty wannabee-godfather act runs up against the real thing in Vladimir Putin.

By comparison, much of the liberal left had hoped that Barack Obama’s presidency would be transformational in a progressive direction. Those expectations were sadly beached on the shoals of Obama’s “post-partisan” corporate centrism and ultimately drowned in the Hillary Clinton debacle. In fact, much of what president Obama actually did – aggressive prosecution of whistleblowers, mass deportations, expanded drone warfare, welcoming the reactionary coup in Honduras, overthrowing the Libyan regime with no thought of what would follow – opened the way to many of Trump’s atrocities.

Where Trump is most likely to fail is where he’s swimming against dominant currents in the global economy – notably, in imposing protectionist tariff barriers against U.S. allies as well as adversaries. Possibly, as with his North Korea and NATO performances, Trump will end up declaring victory without getting much of substance. That appears to be the case with the United States and European Union backing away from the cliff of crippling auto and retaliatory tariffs.

Why hasn’t Trump been reined in by a Republican establishment who know perfectly well that he’s a liar, fraud, swindler and probably criminal racketeer? His stratagems of enriching the rich while dealing in faux-populist rants and racist appeals have yielded results beyond what supposedly conventional Republican politicians could manage.

The underlying Republican agenda includes gutting and ultimately privatizing Social Security and Medicare, eliminating what’s left of Obamacare and wiping out Medicaid, deregulating the banks again, and creating a nonunion America. Following the infamous Janus decision, rightwing institutions are mounting aggressive campaigns for public sector workers to drop their union membership. [\[1\]](#)

Previously, these efforts have proceeded only incrementally. George W. Bush’s second-term agenda of privatizing Social Security crashed, as did John McCain and Mitt Romney’s campaigns when they ran against Obama (who did nothing to support unions, but wasn’t out to destroy them). Trump gives the Republicanmen and the super-rich what they know is the best chance they’ll ever have to carry out a brutal, anti-democratic and unpopular transformation in

the service of power and privilege, not to mention misogyny.

Much of the non-affluent part of Trump's voting base, captivated by dog-whistle white identity and nationalist appeals, don't yet see what's being done to them. That point, most deeply understood and eloquently expressed by Rev. William Barber, organizer of the New Poor People's Campaign, needs to be at the center of what's called "the resistance."

What Can Stop the Madness?

That resistance has been heroic, and at times massive. From the spontaneous outpouring against the first Muslim travel ban, to nationwide actions at immigrant detention centers, to Black Lives Matter, to the Women's Marches and Spring 2018 teacher walkouts and so many other actions large and small, people have mobilized and organized almost nonstop against the Trump gang's atrocities.

The progressive legal community has mobilized massively around deportation and detention abuses, with at least some successes. A huge fight is promised over the Kavanaugh Supreme Court nomination, especially its threat to labor, abortion and queer rights.

Besides the near-impossibility of sustaining these struggles at a mass level, the burning issue for huge numbers of people, right now, is the question of power. What can be done to stop this administration's assaults on women, on labor, on health care, on voting and basic democratic rights, and the unforgivable crimes against humanity perpetrated every day at the border and in our communities against asylum seekers, refugees and immigrant families?

One proposition comes from the dominant corporate power center of the Democratic Party and much of its subordinate liberal wing: It's the voters' or the non-voters' fault. You should have worked full-out for Hillary Clinton. Have you learned your lesson? Now, to "take back the Congress," you have to back whatever Democrat is on offer or is presumed more "electable." Once in control, Democrats would supposedly act to control or impeach Trump, block his far-right judicial appointments, etc.

There are multiple problems with this dreamlike scenario. First, because the House of Representatives election is effectively rigged by extreme gerrymandering and voter suppression, the Democrats are highly unlikely to flip the majority. Second, if they did they are unlikely to be unified around impeaching Trump, which would inflame the right wing in any case; and third, even if they did so there is no chance of a two-thirds Senate vote for removal. (The only real possibility for Trump's removal would arise if the Republican leadership and the capitalist ruling class were to turn against him.)

A second perspective is emerging from the startling victory of insurgent Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez in New York's 14th Congressional District primary, as our readers undoubtedly know, sweeping out longtime leading Democratic figure Joseph Crowley with a grassroots campaign appealing to voters in the Bronx and parts of Queens boroughs of New York City.

A proud member of Democratic Socialists of America, Ocasio-Cortez become an inspiration for a number of other self-declared socialist candidates in other primary races. (To our knowledge, her support unfortunately doesn't extend to socialists who are running as independent or Green Party candidates, outside the Democratic Party's tentacles. Under pressure, she's also softening her admirable pro-Palestinian stance.)

Where to Begin?

Most importantly from our perspective, by all accounts the success of Ocasio-Cortez has newly inspired thousands of folks to join the socialist movement, and like Bernie Sanders' campaign, helped put socialism into the U.S. political discourse. That means there are critical discussions to be had — what socialism is all about, its relationship to ongoing social struggles in our society and globally, and how to fight for it — which for a long time involved relatively small numbers of activists, but now concern some tens of thousands and perhaps soon hundreds of thousands of organized and engaged people.

That's potentially a huge advance, and we modestly suggest that this magazine with our "socialism-from-below" perspective can be a helpful asset. (In fact, our currently running series on the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx's birth might offer a worthwhile starting point.)

The problematic side of the recent developments is the revived notion that an energized "progressive wing" will develop inside and take over the Democratic Party. This permanent delusion has made the Democratic Party the graveyard of movements, and the most powerful barrier to independent working-class, African-American or anti-capitalist politics for many decades.

In fact, keeping progressive forces within the two-party trap has been the Democratic Party's most outstanding service to U.S. capital's political "stability."

A kind of left politics can, and probably will, carve out an enlarged niche within the Democratic tent — but that will not change its corporate-dependent and stagnant neoliberal center, nor turn it into a progressive or even small-d democratic party. The hard struggle for a new independent politics needs to engage both the Democrats' voting base, and the question of how to break the reactionary, racist stranglehold on the huge numbers of working-class and lower middle-class Trump and Republican supporters who are voting against their own rights on the job, the health of their own communities, and their children's very survival.

The Democratic Party's electoral strategy, with its orientation toward prosperous suburban and upper-income "socially liberal, fiscally conservative" sectors, takes the party's own popular base for granted and has nothing to say to the non-affluent part of the Trump supporters.

Everything else about the daily spectacle — the outcry over Trump's fawning before Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin and contempt for U.S. allies, his dismissal of Russian support for his presidential campaign and for far-right European parties, his lying twitstorms — are all secondary. All the blathering about Trump's "treason" in Helsinki is so much empty noise within the echo chamber of establishment elites of both capitalist parties.

Bernie Sanders' 2016 campaign showed the capacity of a pro-labor, socially progressive message to reach that voting base. The Clinton campaign and the corporate Democratic leadership stifled it — remaining committed to the sacred neoliberal global institutions and so-called "rule-based" free trade regimes that destroy the lives of working class and poor people around the world, and to their blind "America was always great" mantra — while mass incarceration cripples African-American life and while sectors of small town and rural America wither and slowly die, hospitals close, jobs disappear and opioid epidemics rage.

Already, as an energized progressive base emerges — inside, on the fringes of, and outside the Democratic Party — voices of cynical wisdom warn that the party must turn not leftward but toward the "center" in order to be electable. But if the center is what the U.S. population wants, it includes universal health care, preserving abortion rights, protecting social security and getting serious about the climate change catastrophe. If it's what corporate America is prepared to accept — as Hillary Clinton arrogantly lectured Bernie Sanders, "this isn't Denmark" — then all social considerations are subordinate to the needs of profit, and the Republicans and neoliberal Democrats keep

winning, along with the corporate rulers behind both parties.

The Struggles Ahead

The position of this magazine has consistently been for independent political action, outside the capitalist parties and aimed at building a new party based on the movements of working class and oppressed people. That remains the essential goal. But even after everything we've seen in recent years, from the Occupy upsurge to Black Lives Matter, #Me Too, the brilliant victory of the West Virginia teachers and the mass post-election "Resistance," we can't claim a road map or formula for getting there.

To reiterate one of our earlier observations, the most important fact is that the discussion involves a vastly expanded and energized activist base. We suggest a few vital starting points for readers' consideration:

â€¢ "The Two-Party System in the United States," by Mark A. Lause, reprinted from [Against the Current](#).

â€¢ "[The Two Souls of Democratic Socialism](#)," by Kim Moody, and the subsequent responses [2] [with Moody's rejoinder](#).

â€¢ "[Why Socialists Support Jovanka and Gayle](#)," by Mike Parker.

Let the discussions and struggles unfold. The opportunities and the urgency are equally great.

September-October 2018, ATC 196

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[1] On Janus and labor's future in "open-shop America," we urge readers to [see "and order" Labor Notes' special issue at http://www.labornotes.org/openshop](#).

[2] [These are at http://org/content/fighting-soul-socialism and https://bit.ly/2OCPqNW](#)