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What would have happened if Trump's fascist mob had seized hostages?

On January 6, 2021—in an event for which there is no precedent in the history of the United States—several thousand right-wing extremists, mobilized by various white supremacist, anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant neo-Nazi and fascist organizations—stormed the Capitol in Washington DC. They intended to murder and take as hostages those whom they perceived to be enemies of Donald Trump, including Democratic congressmen and even Vice President Mike Pence. Timed to coincide with the congressional certification of the results of the Electoral College vote, the purpose of the attack was to stop the official recognition of the election of Joseph Biden as president of the United States.

Had the tactical objectives of the operation been achieved, the political outcome would have been not only the delay of the constitutionally mandated certification of the Electoral College balloting. Having murdered congressmen and congresswomen, and taken hostages, the fascist leaders would then have demanded that the outcome of the balloting in states Trump falsely claimed to have won—such as Georgia, Arizona, Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania—be overturned. The demands of the hostage-takers would have received overwhelming support from the Republican Party, not to mention Trump himself. Inspired by the power exercised by the fascist leaders in Washington DC, there would have been, in all likelihood, similar operations carried out in various state capitals all across the United States.



People are seen in the House gallery as rioters try to break into the House Chamber at the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday, Jan. 6, 2021, in Washington [Credit: AP Photo/Andrew Harnik]

As the hostage drama played out, with the official date of the inauguration approaching and countless lives at stake, Biden and the Democratic Party would have come under tremendous pressure to accede to at least some of the hostage-takers' demands in the interest of stopping a bloodbath and reopening the government.

The scenario described above did not unfold, because the fascist insurrection failed to achieve its tactical objectives. The leaders lost control of their mob, which, once it had penetrated the Capitol building, wasted precious time taking selfies and looting. The congressmen escaped before they could be either murdered or taken hostage.

But regardless of the outcome, the event itself was an *attempted coup d'état*. To deny this obvious fact is an evasion and distortion of reality, which serves to cover up the immense political dangers that persist, and will grow more intense, in the months ahead.

In the immediate aftermath of the attempted coup, well-known independent journalists such as John Pilger, Glenn Greenwald, Chris Hedges and Joe Lauria (of *Consortium News*) are advancing a dangerously misguided view of the events of January 6, which claims that what occurred in Washington was nothing more than a constitutionally protected exercise of free speech that simply got out of hand. The event should not be described as a coup or insurrection. Moreover, Trump himself is being falsely accused and victimized. The principal threat to the democratic rights of the American people on January 6 came not from the storming of Congress, but, rather, from the deprivation of Trump's access to his Twitter account. In this disoriented narrative, Donald Trump is far more sinned against than sinning.

Joe Lauria's January 13 article in *Consortium News*, "Trump Impeached Amid Efforts to Cancel Him," sums up these arguments. Belittling the significance of the January 6 coup, Lauria presents a lawyer's brief for Trump and his co-conspirators. He attempts to prove, through a close reading of the text of Trump's harangue before thousands of his supporters, that his words fall short of what is required for conviction by the Senate, in the impending impeachment trial, under Article I, Section 3 of the US Constitution.

Lauria claims that Trump's speech might be read as "just the fighting words of a politician," which were not intended to provoke violence, let alone to provoke a coup:

When [Trump] said the Democrats were "ruthless" and "it's time that somebody did something about it," he was referring to Pence and the Republicans sending the electoral college vote back to key states. That is the entire context of his more than one hour speech. When he said "you have to get your people to fight," he meant Republican representatives who would have to be primaried.

With no proof so far that Trump had prior knowledge of the plan to take over the Capitol, or evidence of direct instructions from him to do so, it would seem difficult to convict him in a court of law, but maybe not in a political trial in the Senate.

The last sentence implies that Trump's conviction would be a political abuse of justice.

Not only Trump, Lauria insists, but also his son, Donald Trump, Jr., had only peaceful goals in mind. Donald Jr., he writes, was only appealing to Republicans in Congress to "vote against certifying election results from key swing states" when he told the crowd that it was necessary to prove "if you are a hero or a zero." As for Trump's fascist personal lawyer, Rudolph Giuliani, Lauria says that his call for "trial by combat" referred only to "continuing to challenge the computer results of the election" in the courts.

There is, he concludes, "no proof so far that Trump had prior knowledge of the plan to take over the Capitol." It is astonishing that Lauria can reconcile such a naïve conclusion with decades of experience as an investigative journalist.

Lauria goes on to insist that the events cannot be described as a "coup d'état" because this refers to "the overthrow of an existing government and its replacement with new rulers." This, however, is precisely what the plotters sought to do: to change the results of the election and prevent the inauguration of Biden. Lauria, however, claims, "The small number of

protestors who may have dreamed of a coup *had only the presidential palace on their side and nothing else.*” [Italics added]

“Only the presidential palace”?!

In an even more absurd effort to deny the gravity of the events of January 6, Lauria proclaims, “It was an attempt to take control of the Capitol, not the country.” The insurrectionists attempted only to seize Washington DC! This news will certainly come as a relief to citizens living in Los Angeles, Houston, Chicago, Detroit, Boston and New York.

Lauria proceeds to justify the efforts of the Republicans to overturn the results of the Electoral College balloting, the very maneuver which provided the political pretext for the assault on the Capitol, asserting that “those Republicans were completely in their rights to challenge the results and spur debate and a vote in both chambers. To suggest that that Constitutional right constituted incitement or support for the riot is extraordinary overreach.” It does not seem to trouble Lauria that the Republican challenge was based on outright lies of a stolen election (i.e., Trump’s version of Hitler’s “stab in the back” explanation of Germany’s defeat in World War I).

Lauria’s defense of Trump ignores the broader political timeline and context of Trump’s actions. He has forgotten that on June 1, Trump used the military police against protesters in Washington and threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act and deploy the military throughout the country. He makes no reference to the plot to kidnap and assassinate the governors of Michigan and Virginia, exposed in October, which were egged on by Trump’s call to “Liberate Michigan!” He also does not note that top Trump allies repeatedly called on Trump to declare martial law in order to seize power if he lost the election.

The denial that January 6 was an attempted political coup is combined with the claim that Twitter’s shutdown of Trump’s account was the most serious threat to democratic rights, more dangerous than anything done by his supporters.

In a January 11 interview on *Democracy Now!* journalist Chris Hedges resorts to the same sort of verbal formalism to acquit Trump of attempting to stage a coup. “I think that, clearly, if we kind of coldly read what Trump said to his supporters, he didn’t call for people to break into the Capitol and take people hostage.”

In any event, the action taken by Twitter against Trump must be opposed: “But to respond by, in essence, empowering these private corporations to function as censors over billions of people will come back to haunt us. And we see that, because it’s not just Trump they target. It’s always, in the end, the left that pays for this kind of censorship.”

It is true that the principal target of state and corporate censorship is the socialist left and the working class. The Socialist Equality Party does not advance the demand for the illegalization or banning of right-wing parties by the capitalist state. However, the socialist left and those who are concerned with the defense of democratic rights do not see it as their duty to safeguard the “free speech” of a fascist president who is directing an armed mob that is seeking to bring about the nullification of an election.

Justifying their defense of Trump’s right to uninhibited free speech—even if that means in practice allowing him to mobilize and direct his followers all over the country in the midst of a fascist insurrection—Lauria, Hedges and others remind their readers of all the terrible crimes committed by American imperialism, supported by the Democratic Party. John Pilger, for example, calls attention to the crimes being committed by the United States against the Houthis in Yemen. This is nothing more than petty-bourgeois demagoguery. Pilger fails to explain how the establishment of a neo-fascist regime in the United States will improve the conduct of American foreign policy in Yemen or anywhere else.

A class-conscious analysis, informed by Marxism and the historical experience of the international socialist movement, would explain that Twitter’s action took place within the context of an acute crisis within the bourgeois state, in which its highly compromised semi-

constitutional faction, threatened with violent overthrow, sought to block Trump from mobilizing his fascist followers. Why should left-wing opponents of the attempted coup oppose the disruption of Trump's communications? In fact, had Twitter not taken this action, socialists would quite correctly interpret its "neutrality" as open complicity with the conspirators.

Moreover, as part of their own independent efforts to mobilize working class opposition to Trump's conspiracy, socialists would urge Twitter workers and others employed in the technology industry to cut off his access to social media and to disrupt the communication networks of his armed followers. There were, in fact, many demands from Twitter workers for precisely such action, which was a significant factor in Twitter's decision to shut down Trump's account. An article in *Vanity Fair* earlier this week notes that "Twitter may have had its own insurrection if it did not dump Trump." Does Hedges consider such demands from workers an impermissible violation of free speech?

The *World Socialist Web Site* is not indifferent to the consequences of a successful fascistic overthrow of the US government. The danger posed by "Big Tech" and the Democratic Party will not be solved by passively accepting, under the cover of the unconditional defense of free speech, the establishment of an authoritarian regime led by Trump, backed by fascist organizations. Our slogan in the midst of a fascist assault on Congress is not: "Hands off Hitler! Free Speech for Trump!"

In answering the false and politically disoriented arguments of Lauria, Hedges and others, it is not our intention to deny or discredit their journalistic contributions to the exposure of the crimes of American capitalism. However, their response to this major and unprecedented crisis is profoundly wrong and must be opposed.

This type of minimization serves not only to provide a political cover for Trump, it sows complacency in the strength of American democracy. Even with the tactical failure, the consequences of the insurrection will be long-lasting. The outcome of the coup, aided by the Democrats' efforts to cover up the conspiracy, will be to integrate the extreme right into the structure of American politics.

That is why the critical question is the political activation of the working class. It cannot leave the working out of this crisis to the Democrats, the Republicans, or, for that matter, "Big Tech."

The significance of the events of January 6 must be understood. The political lessons must be drawn. Only on this basis will it be possible to educate working people and youth, build a genuine socialist mass movement, and defend the democratic and social rights of the overwhelming majority of the people.

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