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Violence, racism and the Trump campaign

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The series of violent incidents at rallies for billionaire Donald Trump is a warning of the increasingly fascistic character of the Republican front-runner's campaign.

On Wednesday, at a rally near Fayetteville, North Carolina, a supporter of Trump attacked a 26-year-old black man, Rakeem Jones, as he was being escorted out of the Crown Coliseum by Cumberland County sheriff's deputies. Jones was one of a small group of anti-Trump protesters at the event.

The attacker, 78-year-old John McGraw, punched Jones in the face, knocking him down. Afterwards, McGraw boasted of the attack. He told a television interviewer, "You bet I liked it," adding, "He deserved it. The next time we see him, we might have to kill him... He might be with a terrorist organization." McGraw was subsequently arrested and charged with battery.

At a press conference Friday morning in Palm Beach, Florida, Trump defended the attack, blaming it on the victim. "It was a guy who was swinging—was very loud—and then started swinging at the audience," the billionaire real estate mogul said. "And you know what? It swung back. And I thought it was very, very appropriate."

The attack in North Carolina was followed by physical confrontations between Trump supporters and some of the thousands of protesters who attended a planned Trump rally in Chicago Friday evening. The event was called off at the last minute. In interviews later in the evening, Trump said that if the rally had gone forward, “someone might have been killed.”

Earlier this week, when Michelle Fields, a reporter for the right-wing Breitbart.com web site, tried to approach Trump after a Florida rally, campaign manager Corey Lewandowski grabbed her by the arm and shoved her away, an assault witnessed by several journalists.

These incidents follow a pattern in which protesters at or outside Trump rallies have been physically attacked by Trump supporters, including members of white supremacist groups, and Trump security guards, or forcibly ejected by police. Last week a young black woman who brought an anti-Trump sign to a rally was attacked physically and cursed with racist and sexist epithets. Her sign was ripped up and she was frog-marched out of the rally.

Trump has repeatedly incited violence against protesters, beginning last fall but with increasing frequency once the primaries and caucuses began:

- On February 1, he told a rally in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, “If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of ‘em, would you? Seriously. Okay? Just knock the hell—I promise you, I will pay for the legal fees.”
- On February 22, at a rally in Las Vegas, Trump denounced a protester, saying, “I’d like to punch him in the face, I tell ya.” He added, “You know what they used to do to guys like that when they were in a place like this? They’d be carried out on a stretcher.”
- On March 9, in Fayetteville, he said of interruptions by protesters, “See, in the good old days this didn’t used to happen, because they used to treat them very rough. We’ve become very weak.” Shortly thereafter, the assault on Rakeem Jones occurred.

In the course of Thursday night’s Republican presidential debate in Florida, CNN moderator Jake Tapper quoted these statements and asked Trump whether he had done anything to “create a tone” that encouraged violence.

Trump blandly denied the obvious. Blaming the victims, he said the protesters had provoked his supporters. “People come with tremendous passion and love for the country, and when they see protest, in some cases... They have anger,” he declared.

None of Trump’s three remaining rivals, Texas Senator Ted Cruz, Florida Senator Marco Rubio, or Ohio Governor John Kasich, pursued the issue. On the contrary, Cruz expressed sympathy with “the frustration that is boiling over.” Rubio declared that police officers “deserve our respect,” although the question was about right-wing thug attacks.

This evasion characterized the approach of Cruz, Rubio and Kasich to the debate as a whole, in which they did little to challenge Trump’s status as the front-runner for the Republican

nomination. There was no repetition of previous declarations that the billionaire demagogue was unfit to hold office or represented a threat to democracy.

The Trump campaign represents something new and dangerous in American political life. After decades of basing its political operations on appeals to racism, national chauvinism, militarism and Christian fundamentalism, the Republican Party is giving birth to a movement of a fascistic character.

The instances in which Trump breaks with the traditional program of the ultra-right—on trade, for example, or in opposing cuts in Social Security—do not contradict this assessment. Fascist movements, as opposed to the traditional right, claim to defend the social interests of working people, but on the basis of extreme nationalism.

Trump's social demagogy and appeals to sections of white workers are given credibility by the fact that what passes for "left" in the political establishment, the Democratic Party and its periphery, has nothing but contempt for the working class. The Obama administration spearheaded the slashing of wages throughout industry when it backed a 50 percent cut in starting pay for auto workers as an essential component of its bailout of the industry. And Obama has proposed a series of cuts in Social Security and Medicare, either as part of budget deals with congressional Republicans or to finance his health care counterreform.

The "left" Democratic presidential contender, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, now centers his appeals to workers on denunciations of NAFTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, blaming foreign countries, not US corporations, for the collapse of jobs and wages. This helps legitimize the reactionary economic nationalism that is Trump's stock-in-trade. In the wake of Sanders' upset victory in Michigan, where anti-trade demagogy played a significant role, Democratic front-runner Hillary Clinton has embraced similar anti-trade rhetoric.

American politics is taking on an ever more openly violent character—the product of nearly four decades of political reaction and war. Trump did not come out of nowhere. All the crimes, at home and abroad—torture, illegal invasions and occupations, drone assassination, police violence and domestic repression—have political consequences. In the 15 years of the so-called "war on terror," permanent war has become a basic feature of American life. Militarism abroad and social reaction at home, marked above all by unprecedented levels of economic inequality, have generated increasing state violence.

This has been presided over by both parties of big business. The Republican Party has specialized in promoting every form of ideological backwardness. The Democratic Party, while carrying out the same basic policies as the Republicans, has promoted identity politics based on race, gender and sexual orientation to obscure the fundamental class divide in society, sow divisions within the working class and block the emergence of an independent political movement of working people.

Now, the entire political system is beset by a deep crisis of legitimacy. Masses of people are alienated and disgusted with both parties. This takes an initial, though distorted left-wing form in

the broad support for the campaign of Sanders, who calls himself a socialist, and a right-wing form in the support for Trump.

Whatever the outcome of the primary process, which remains uncertain in both big-business parties, the official US two-party system is headed for unprecedented political upheavals. There is a powerful class dynamic at work. Both corporate-controlled parties are moving to the right, while broad masses of working people and youth are moving to the left.

The racism and fascistic tendencies of the Trump campaign must be seen as a serious warning. They can be countered only through the development of a unified movement of the working class, breaking free of the entire two-party system and taking the road of the independent political and revolutionary struggle for socialism.