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The Trump coup and the rise of fascism: Where is America going?

The initial reaction, within the United States but also throughout the world, to the violent events of January 6, 2021 and their aftermath is, quite understandably, one of shock.

The inauguration of Joseph Biden as the 46th president of the United States will take place in a capital occupied by 25,000 National Guard troops, which—as noted by one military officer—is roughly 10 times the number of American troops presently stationed in Afghanistan. The political situation in Washington D.C. is such that the presidential inauguration, one of the central rituals of American politics spanning more than 200 years, will be a ceremony from which the public has been banned.

In February 1861, Abraham Lincoln—traveling from Springfield, Illinois to Washington D.C. on the very eve of the Civil War—was smuggled through Baltimore to evade an assassination plot by Confederate conspirators. But on March 4, 1861 he was able to take the oath of office and deliver his first inaugural address before a large and peaceful crowd. Four years later, during the final weeks of the Civil War, Lincoln delivered his masterful Second Inaugural Address before an immense audience.

There is nothing in the historical experience of the United States that compares with the present situation. Not only does a state of siege exist in Washington D.C. Throughout the country, state capitol buildings are closed, with state authorities fearful of violent attacks by extreme right-wing forces.

Where is America going? Trump's coup and the rise of fascism

As shocking as the events of January 6 were, the claims that the assault on the Capitol could not have been foreseen cannot withstand serious analysis. The best refutation of such arguments is to be found in the postings of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has been warning consistently of Trump's intention to establish a dictatorship—which, it should be recalled, was displayed during the inaugural ceremony four years ago. Uniformed soldiers suddenly gathered behind Trump as he delivered his fascistic harangue predicting an American apocalypse. The soldiers were just as suddenly withdrawn. The incident, largely ignored by the media, was commented on by the WSWS.

The signs of preparations for the political coup d'état—planned within the White House and coordinated with elements within the military and police, as well as local paramilitary and fascistic forces—were glaringly apparent throughout the past year. During the final weeks of

the election campaign and following Trump's defeat, the plans for a coup d'état that would overthrow the results of the 2020 election acquired a feverish character.

Comrades Joseph Kishore and Eric London will review the political situation and events leading up to the fascist assault on the Capitol in their remarks. But I would like to attempt to place the events of January 6 in a broader historical context. If we are to answer the fundamental question posed in the title of this meeting, "Where is America Going?", it is necessary to examine the trajectory of its development over an extended historical period, and, no less importantly, within the critical international context. This is, from the standpoint of Marxism, the only approach that can lead to a correct appraisal of the present situation. The main cause of the eruption of January 6 is to be found in the global crisis of the capitalist system, rather than in specifically American conditions.

The international context of events is critical for the evaluation of the significance and longer-term implications of January 6. Those who examine the fascist uprising in Washington D.C. as merely the outcome of domestic conditions, arising from Trump's personality and entirely dependent upon him, will draw very different political conclusions than will those, basing themselves on a Marxian-Trotskyist appraisal, who locate the national situation within the context of the international crisis.

No one can plausibly deny that there exists a profound causal relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic, which erupted and spread throughout the world in 2020, and the political eruption of January 2021. Almost one year ago, the *World Socialist Web Site* defined the pandemic as a "trigger event," similar to the outbreak of World War I. This "trigger event," as the WSWS predicted, has intensified and accelerated the global capitalist crisis and its manifestation in every country. The official response to the crisis—determined by economic imperatives of the capitalist system as they are refracted through the social interests of the ruling elites—has resulted in a social catastrophe that has exposed the economic, political, intellectual and moral bankruptcy of the existing social order. Across the globe, more than two million human beings have already succumbed to the virus. Within the United States, the number of dead is now rapidly approaching 400,000. Within a month's time, it seems all but inevitable that more than a half million Americans will have died of the virus.

The pandemic is not a remote event that most people are able to follow at a distance. The tragedy of so many lost lives has been compounded by a staggering level of economic dislocation. In the United States, millions of people are without jobs and are going hungry. A substantial percentage of the nation's population has been or is directly confronted with the danger of being ruined. The pandemic is a social trauma, like the two world wars, of profound dimensions and with long enduring consequences.

Americans cannot avoid the question: How could this possibly happen? The staggering incompetence and chaos that has characterized every aspect of the response to the pandemic has created a sense of national humiliation. The old stock phrases employed to glorify and aggrandize America—such as "the land of unlimited opportunity," let alone the "last best hope on earth" and the "citadel of democracy"—bear no relation to reality. In the light of the endless series of failures and lies that have characterized the official response to the pandemic, no one is surprised that the media-hyped rollout of the vaccines has degenerated within a few weeks into as another shameful mess.

The disastrous response to the pandemic and the political crisis to which it has directly led are themselves the manifestations of longer-term processes. Examined apart from broader historical and international processes, it might be possible to assess the events of January 6 as only a somewhat more violent manifestation of reactionary political and social tendencies that have always been present in the United States, whether in the form of the Know Nothings of the 1850s, the Ku Klux Klan in post-Civil War America, the numerous racist, anti-Semitic and anti-labor movements that attracted large followings in the 1920s and 1930s,

the McCarthyite hysteria of the early 1950s, the John Birch Society, and the Goldwater presidential campaign of 1964. Even taking into account the impact of the pandemic, why is the present situation fundamentally different?

The essential answer is that the global position of American capitalism has profoundly changed. The fascist riot of January 6 is itself the culmination of a protracted crisis of democracy. The malignant character of social contradictions in the United States, which finds its most diseased expression in mass poverty and the staggering levels of social inequality, is the outcome of the long-term decline in the global position of the United States.

Let us place the inauguration of Biden in a broader historical framework. It will be held exactly 60 years after the inauguration of John F. Kennedy on January 20, 1961. That inauguration occurred at the exact midpoint between the second inauguration of President William McKinley on March 4, 1901—the month of inaugurations was moved up to January only in 1937—and the upcoming swearing in of Biden on Wednesday.

William McKinley was the president who presided over the Spanish-American War, which marked the emergence of the United States as a new imperialist world power. During the next 60 years, the United States established itself as the most dynamic and richest capitalist power and passed with immense success through two world wars, on the basis of which it secured its hegemonic world position. The presidents who dominated that era were Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, who served for four terms, and in the years that followed Roosevelt's death in 1945, Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy.

Kennedy's inauguration is chiefly remembered as a well-crafted, though totally hypocritical, appeal for national patriotism. But a careful examination of the text shows that the new president's speech gave voice to deep fears about the impact of the rising tide of social revolution. If the forces of revolution were to be held back, capitalism would have to make concessions to popular discontent. "If a free society cannot help the many who are poor," he warned, "it cannot save the few who are rich." The answer to this threat was to utilize social reforms as an element of the struggle against socialism. American imperialism had to be prepared to "pay any price" to ensure the survival of "freedom"—i.e., capitalism.

However, the ability to combine the defense of the global interests of US imperialism with social reform at home depended upon the economic dominance of the United States, the central pillar of which was the role of the dollar as the world reserve currency, convertible into gold at the rate of \$35 per ounce. This essential element of the US-dominated post-World War II order, established at the Bretton Woods conference of 1944, assumed that the United States—the world's economic powerhouse—would dominate world trade for decades to come and, thereby, maintain large balance of trade and balance of payments surpluses. As long as the United States maintained these surpluses, the dollar could be universally accepted as being "as good as gold."

But even as Kennedy took the oath of office, the economic ascendancy of the United States was coming under growing pressure. The main rivals vanquished by the United States in World War II, Germany and Japan, were by then already rebuilding their economies. US trade surpluses were declining. At the same time, the ruling class was confronting substantial labor militancy as well as the growing civil rights movement, which the Kennedy and Johnson administrations tried to contain with substantial reforms. But the cost of providing reforms while waging wars against revolutionary insurgencies, particularly in Vietnam, could not be sustained. This dilemma undermined the program of social reform.

By 1971, the growing trade and payments deficits threatened to deplete the US gold reserve. The deficits were greater than the surpluses. Gold was flowing out, threatening what was then seen to be the danger of national bankruptcy. This led the Nixon administration, which had come to power in January 1969, to take drastic action. Just short of 50 years ago, on August

15, 1971, President Nixon responded to this economic emergency by ending dollar-gold convertibility.

In historical retrospect, this action marked a turning point in not only the global economic position of the United States, but also in the fate of American democracy. As long as the United States was a rising global power, whose military component was secondary to the country's economic strength and dominance, the basic thrust of American politics was of a broadly progressive character.

There was no shortage of reactionary forces in the United States—the Lindbergh movement, Father Coughlin, Gerald L.K. Smith, and later Joe McCarthy. But the growth of these malignant, reactionary tendencies was contained by the capacity of American capitalism to dole out reforms and maintain a viable social and political equilibrium. In the 1930s, as Trotsky had noted, even during the Great Depression, as serious as it was, the wealth of American capitalism provided Roosevelt space to pursue his experiments.

These experiments continued into the 1960s. Roosevelt's New Deal gave way to Truman's Fair Deal, to Kennedy's New Frontier, and then, after Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, to Johnson's Great Society. But the Johnson "Great Society" could not be realized. Under conditions of economic decline, the United States was not able to "pay any price" to defend capitalism. If a choice had to be made between "guns and butter," between the financing of a military that could wage war anywhere in the world or the funding of social reforms and a higher standard of living at home, the decision had to be for guns.

The abandonment of social reform required a turn toward increasing social repression. The trajectory of American democracy followed the trajectory of American capitalism—that is, downward.

The first really significant turn by an American president to criminal methods to undermine fundamental constitutional procedures occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Bretton Woods crisis of August 1971. Less than a year later, the infamous Watergate break-in of June 1972 took place. Republican operatives, connected to the CIA, broke into the offices of the Democratic Party at the Watergate complex. It was a criminal attempt to subvert the upcoming presidential election and it triggered a political and constitutional crisis in the United States. The Watergate hearings and the investigation led finally to the vote of the House Judiciary Committee to impeach Nixon, which was almost immediately followed by the criminal president's resignation in August 1974.

This hardly proved to be a triumph of democracy. Notwithstanding Nixon's humiliation, the trajectory of American democracy continued downward, in tandem with the devaluation of the US dollar. The attack on the labor movement escalated. And though the efforts of Democratic President Jimmy Carter to crush the national strike of coal miners in 1978 through the invocation of the Taft-Hartley Act failed, his action prepared the ground for Ronald Reagan's mass firing of 11,000 striking air traffic controllers, members of the union known as PATCO, in August 1981. The action was not opposed by the AFL-CIO and marked the beginning of the end of the organized trade union movement as it had emerged from the great industrial struggles of the 1930s and 1940s.

By the 1990s, after a wave of strikes that went down to defeat, isolated and betrayed by the AFL-CIO, the trade unions existed only as a subsidiary instrument in the corporate exploitation of the working class. Strikes virtually disappeared from the social landscape of the United States. The age of the billionaire and multibillionaire had begun. There ensued a staggering growth of social inequality, whose principal feature was the concentration of wealth in a small oligarchic elite, to a degree that had been unknown in the United States since the late 1920s.

The social counterrevolution was accompanied by political reaction, which required the rehabilitation of the most criminal of capitalist ideologies, fascism. Reagan began his

campaign for the presidency in 1980 in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where three civil rights workers—James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman—had been killed in June 1964 by members of the Ku Klux Klan. As it was well understood at the time, Reagan did not visit Philadelphia to pay homage to the civil rights martyrs but to signal his solidarity with the worst forms of American reaction. And to make sure the message was received, Reagan, during a visit to Germany in 1985, laid a wreath at a military cemetery in the town of Bitburg, where members of the Waffen SS were buried.

Just one year later, the Iran-Contra scandal directly implicated the Reagan administration in the illegal violation of a law passed by Congress. The criminal activities exposed in congressional hearings were related to the involvement of the United States in funding fascist death squads and mercenaries seeking the overthrow of the left-wing nationalist Sandinista government in Nicaragua. In the course of the congressional investigation, it emerged that Col. Oliver North, who was directing the murderous operations in Central America on Reagan's behalf, was also involved in secret plans, known as Rex 84 [Readiness Exercise 1984], for the detention of 100,000 Americans in the event of a national emergency. Open discussion of these plans was immediately blocked by the chairman of the committee investigating the Iran-Contra scandal, Democratic Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawaii.

The tendencies toward authoritarianism, accelerated in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism between 1989 and 1991, were accompanied by and served the interests of a new eruption of US imperialist militarism. The invasion of Iraq in 1991 marked the beginning of 30 years of uninterrupted war waged by the United States in the Middle East and Central Asia.

In the election of 2000, the Supreme Court voted 5-4 to award the presidency to George Bush by ending the counting of ballots in Florida. This extraordinary decision was not contested by the Democratic Party. Many of the arguments and procedures used by the Republicans to steal the election, though on a smaller scale, anticipated the methods used by Trump and the Republican Party in 2020. Justice Antonin Scalia argued in *Bush v. Gore* that there was nothing in the Constitution giving the American people the right to select the president. The state legislatures, he claimed, had the right to select presidential electors, without any regard for the outcome of the popular vote in their state. Foreshadowing the efforts of Trump to overturn the results of the 2020 election and override the popular vote in key swing states, Scalia in 2000 urged members of the Florida legislature to select electors who would cast their votes for Bush.

The theft of the 2000 election was followed by the events of 9/11, which was utilized by the Bush administration, backed by the Democrats, to invade Afghanistan and Iraq and launch, under the aegis of the “War on Terror” and the Patriot Act, the most sweeping assault on core constitutional rights in the history of the United States.

The establishment of an offshore concentration camp at Guantanamo, and then, under Obama, the targeted assassination of American citizens were further milestones in the already far-advanced decay of democracy in the United States.

Notwithstanding its efforts to perpetuate the “unipolar moment” and secure its position as the unchallengeable global hegemon, the economic condition of American capitalism continued to erode. The first decade of the new millennium began with the collapse of the bubble of the technology stocks that was fueled by the “irrational exuberance” of the 1990s. The portfolios of Wall Street investors soon recovered, as new forms of exotic speculation, such as Collateralized Debt Obligations, replaced failed and fraudulent enterprises like Enron as new means of generating staggering increases in private wealth, apart from capital investments tied to the process of production. The crisis that erupted in the financial markets in September 2008 brought the entire edifice crashing down. The salvation of Wall Street required the massive and perpetual infusion of liquidity into the financial markets by the Federal Reserve

– a policy known as Quantitative Easing. In what was to become standard operating procedure, the Congress voted overwhelmingly for multi-trillion-dollar bail-outs of Wall Street investors. The economic resources of the entire country were, in effect, placed at the disposal of a corporate-financial oligarchy consisting of a minute percentage of the population.

The horrific social implications of the modern form of financial parasitism were exposed by the pandemic. The sole concern of the government was to protect the markets, not save lives. All measures that threatened to impact negatively on the markets – such as the shutdown of non-essential workplaces and schools – were rejected. The pursuit of “herd immunity” – allowing the unimpeded spread of the virus throughout the population – became de facto the policy of the United States.

It must be kept in mind that the initial mobilization of armed right-wing mobs, which occurred in the State Capitol of Michigan in April 2020, was organized in opposition to the temporary shutdown of business that had been ordered by Governor Gretchen Whitmer. She later became the target of an unsuccessful neo-Nazi assassination plot.

If we place events in this more historically comprehensive context, it is clear that January 6 marks a new stage in a protracted process of democratic breakdown.

We have witnessed in recent days efforts by historians and journalists to claim that really nothing of great importance happened on January 6, and that everything will more or less return to normal. This dangerous underestimation of the on-going danger is based not merely on an incorrect evaluation of American conditions.

Those advancing these claims are making a mistake in their evaluation of the state of capitalism as a world economic and social system. The conditions that I am describing and with which we are familiar in the United States exist throughout the world. Everywhere, democratic forms are under siege. We see a resurgence of the right, a growth of fascistic forces. Comrade Christoph Vandreier will speak about the revival of fascism in Germany.

What is the conclusion that must be drawn from the events of January 6? They mark a new stage in the political life of the United States and the world.

Where is America going? That will be determined by the outcome of the social struggle that will unfold within the United States and internationally. The old phrase was that Americans have “a rendezvous with destiny.” That was the phrase used by Roosevelt. The reality is that Americans now have a rendezvous with history.

Where is America going? Will it go toward fascism, or will it go toward socialism? These are the alternatives that confront Americans. The path to socialism is the path of the class struggle. If democracy is to survive in this country, indeed if it is to survive anywhere in the world, it must find a new social basis. It cannot rest upon the bourgeoisie. The old classical references to bourgeois democracy have very little relevance in the present situation. If democracy is to survive, power must pass into the hands of the working class.

The outcome remains to be determined. There is nothing inevitable in history. There is a possibility for socialism. There is also a possibility for fascism. From the standpoint of objective factors, the potential for socialism is immense. Powerful economic and social forces are moving the United States and the world in this progressive and liberating direction: the globalization of the world economy, the interconnectedness of production, the powerful advances in communications technology, and, above all, the overwhelming numerical predominance and strength of the working class. These are really the critical factors that make possible the victory of the socialist revolution.

But there are not only objective forces in history; there are also subjective forces. The objective potential must be translated into a political program and mass working class political action. “Struggle will decide!” Those were the words used by Trotsky in the early

1930s. Will the world go forward toward socialism? Will it go toward fascism? That depends upon the critical question of the revolutionary leadership of the working class.

What the workers do, what those of you in the audience decide to do, is the critical issue. The *World Socialist Web Site*, the Socialist Equality Parties, the International Committee of the Fourth International can advance and fight for a revolutionary socialist program. But that program must be taken up by the working class. That program must be brought into the working class. It has to be brought to the broad sections of workers in the United States and all over the world who are looking for a way to fight but cannot find it on their own. They need to be educated in socialist theory and socialist principles. They have to be given a banner around which they can unite on a progressive basis.

So I hope that this meeting will convince you to take up the struggle, to join the Socialist Equality Party, affiliate with the International Committee of the Fourth International, and build the World Party of Socialist Revolution.

19 January 2021