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USA: The Illusion of Democracy

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The United States of America has been under one-party rule since its birth at the drafting of the Constitution. This document was drawn up by a small group of men (the founding “fathers”) representing four major economic interests – money, public securities, manufactures, and trade and shipping. In the conclusion to his classic work *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, Charles A. Beard reports the results of his extensive research:

The Constitution was essentially an economic document based upon the concept that the fundamental private rights of property are anterior to government and morally beyond the reach of popular majorities... The Constitution was ratified by a vote of probably not more than one-sixth of adult males... In the ratification, the line of cleavage for and against the Constitution was between substantial property interests on the one hand and small farming and debtor interests on the other (pp. 324-5).

This illustrates an already existing class division in the early U.S. population.

Inequality, with the monied minority on top and in control, is the essence of capitalism. With the ratification of the Constitution, this class-stratified system was protected by the supreme law of the land.

What became the United States was land taken by conquest from the indigenous red-hued peoples who had lived there doing no harm for thousands of years. The concept of “legal” conquest was subsequently upheld by the United States Supreme Court. The U.S. is reputed to believe in the “rule of law” – as determined solely by those who rule.

What happened in Wisconsin

The recently elected Republican governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin had campaigned on balancing the state budget. On February 11, shortly after taking office, he introduced the “Budget Repair Bill” into the State House. As this was a fiscal bill, the state legislative rules required a designated quorum for passage. The bill included a provision that would have stripped public service unions of collective bargaining rights as well as reducing pension benefits, raising the payroll contribution, and freezing wages. The police and firemen’s unions – which, incidentally, supported Walker’s campaign – were exempted from the loss of collective bargaining rights.

During the four days between the introduction of the bill and the scheduled vote, the contents of the bill were made public through the media and social networking sites and – as in Egypt – thousands of people showed up in Madison (the state capital) to protest. Emboldened by the public outcry, the Democratic representatives fled the state in order to block the quorum required for a vote.

The main target of the protests was inclusion of the issue of collective bargaining rights in a fiscal bill, with the intent to abolish collective bargaining for public sector workers altogether. Governor Walker repeated ad nauseam that collective bargaining is a fiscal issue. Over the next three weeks, thousands and thousands of protestors gathered in the fiscal temperatures. The crowds grew and grew as the public sector employees were joined in solidarity by private sector workers (both union and non-union), farmers, and students from the University of Madison and across the state. This was shaping up into something like class war.

Indiana Deputy Attorney General Jeff Cox suggested that riot police should “use live ammunition” against the protestors (Newsweek, March 7). He was fired for saying this and later he claimed he had been joking. Be that as it may, there are no doubt some nuts who took him seriously. Like Sarah Palin’s posters showing opponents in the crosshairs of a rifle, such remarks foster an atmosphere of growing violence and intimidation.

During these weeks of protest, the public service unions made all of the financial concessions demanded by Walker. They were willing to accept the bill provided that the collective bargaining prohibition was removed. But this was not acceptable to the governor.

Then Walker hit upon a procedural ploy. On March 9, the State House recessed. On March 10, the State House reconvened for a “special session” under the Good Cause rules so that the Budget Repair Bill could be reintroduced without its fiscal components. The only substantive provision now remaining was abolition of the collective bargaining rights of public service unions. The bill was passed by a committee of seven in the morning and sent to the State Senate, where it passed that same afternoon. The governor signed the bill into law on March 11. It turned

out that collective bargaining was not after all a fiscal issue, as Walker had so long and so loudly insisted it was. And so the bill became part of the rule of law, as determined by those who rule.

On March 12, farmers drove their tractors into Madison to demonstrate solidarity with the protestors.

The Budget Repair Bill embodies an attack on the working class that will have enduring and cascading consequences. It will not only dissolve the formal solidarity of organized workers but also weaken the organic solidarity of labor in general by intensifying the competition for jobs. Workers will no longer have the protection offered by unions. Now accomplished in one state, de-unionization will be imposed in others.

Destroying public radio and television

At all times, but especially during a downturn in the trade cycle, the Republican Party tries to cut government funding of National Public Radio (NPR). Now, with the federal government facing a budget crisis, they are trying to zero-out the line item that allocates \$950 million per year to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which finances NPR and the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) – that is, public radio and television.

At some point during the week of February 6—11, conservative Republican “sting master” James O’Keefe assembled a group of fake “Moslem donors” supposedly eager to contribute \$5 million to NPR. Arrangements were made for a meeting between this group and NPR fundraiser Ron Schiller. O’Keefe is the guy who brought down ACORNE – a low-rent and public housing community organizing group that often conducted drives to register poor people as voters – with a clandestine video and made similar trouble for Planned Parenthood.

O’Keefe set up his hidden video recorder to tape Schiller’s meeting with the “donors.” He was recorded denigrating the TEA (Taxed Enough Already) Party as xenophobic, racist, and fascistic and saying that “NPR would be better off without government funding.” The video was shown on Fox News on March 7. Ron Schiller was “let go” by NPR that same day, while Vivian Schiller (no relation), president and CEO of NPR, tendered her resignation on March 8. The island queen was cast into the volcano to appease the gods of conservatism, who always refuse to be appeased.

On March 9, Stephen Moore, a staunch self-proclaimed conservative, said on NPR’s Diane Rehm Show that “we have to prioritize things” by cutting NPR funding from \$450 million to zero and turning it into “National Private Radio” in order to reduce the federal deficit. One of the other guests on the show replied that even if NPR were zeroed out 200 times it would only reduce the federal deficit from \$4.7 trillion to \$4.6 trillion. Although NPR does not have corporate advertizers, it is supported by corporate underwriting. It is also true that it is culturally elitist. Nevertheless, NPR is the only news source that is expanding its content and coverage and has a growing audience. It provides the most reliable U.S. news coverage on the radio dial and gives its listeners more than one side on most issues. We need critical thinking based on a broad range of information in order to decide what to believe (provisionally) and what not to believe. So as well as Governor Walker’s blow to worker organization, we also face a threat to workers’ knowledge and understanding.

If you want to oppose funding cuts to public broadcasting, the website to go to is www.170millionamericans.org.

Florida's new governor

In Florida, newly elected Republican governor Rick Scott took up office on January 2. Before spending \$78 million of his own money on a campaign to win a job that pays \$133,000 a year, he was CEO of the Hospital Corporation of America and without admitting guilt paid the federal government \$1.7 billion to settle claims that he had defrauded Medicare of sums estimated to total \$7 billion.

For comparison, let us note that under Florida's Grand Theft Statute simple robbery without a weapon is a third degree felony, punishable by up to 5 years in prison, if the amount stolen is between \$300 and \$20,000, or a second degree felony, punishable by up to 15 years in prison, if the amount stolen is between \$20,000 and \$100,000. If the amount stolen is more than \$100,000 – and I am still talking about unarmed robbery – the theft counts as a first degree felony, punishable by up to 30 years in prison. Now \$7 billion, the amount stolen by Scott, exceeds \$100,000 by a factor of 70,000. How long a sentence should he have received? I leave you, the reader, to figure out the answer as an exercise in elementary arithmetic.

To return to reality, the reality of our class-divided society – Scott was never charged with a crime and never spent a single minute in jail. Instead, he was elected governor of Florida! The lesson is crystal clear. If you are going to steal, then go for the jackpot. Do it on a truly gigantic scale.

Governor Scott's mantra was that government should be run in the same way as a business. On March 10, he got his Corporate Tax Reduction Bill passed in the State House and Senate. Thereby he drastically cut corporate taxes; indeed, he boasts of his intention to eliminate corporate taxes altogether in Florida. On the same day, he announced that he had saved Florida taxpayers' money by cutting \$3 billion from the state education budget. This means switching to a four-day school week!

In 2010, the Florida Supreme Court ruled that it is unconstitutional not to allow gay couples to adopt children. But in February 2011, speaking on Florida Public Radio, Governor Scott declared that "a child should be raised by a traditional mother and father and because I was elected governor my opinion is policy."

Scapegoating Moslems

On March 10, Republican Representative Peter King of Long Island convened House committee hearings on "the radicalization of American Moslems." King proclaimed that he was defying political correctness in view of the ongoing threat to national security presented by home-grown American Moslem terrorists. According to an NPR report, 165 U.S.-born or naturalized Moslems have been detained, arrested, or convicted of planning or carrying out acts of sabotage or "terrorism" on American soil. King's hearings are really a publicity stunt to scapegoat the

Moslem minority in the United States. In Germany, Hitler too used a religious minority – the Jews – as a scapegoat and “evil” foil.

What is the thread that connects all these developments? One clue is that Scott Walker, Rick Scott, and Peter King were all supported in the 2010 elections by the Tea Party. The corporate media portray the Tea Party as an organic grassroots movement that arose to “take our country back.” But the Tea Party is just another instance of business as usual – a propaganda front group for wealthy capitalists such as the Koch Brothers, Dick Cheney, Dick Arney, and Grover Norquist.

Well, we can’t “take our country back” because we – the working people of America and the world – never had a country in the first place. We are a class without a country. Nor do we want or need a country. What we need is control over our own lives. We need control over the means of life, so that we can produce for ourselves cooperatively instead of slaving for the owner class and then having to buy back from them the fruits of our own labor. In the present order of things, we produce far too much that is not needed and is harmful to the environment and to our own well-being – just to generate profits for our bosses. Of course, Ronald Reagan was right when he said that government is not the solution. Socialism is.