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The FBI intervenes in the 2016 election

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29 October 2016

In an extraordinary and unprecedented action, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has stepped into the 2016 presidential campaign only 11 days before Election Day, sending a letter to Congress announcing new “investigative steps” related to Hillary Clinton’s use of a private email server.

The three-paragraph letter by FBI Director James Comey to eight congressional committees on Friday is remarkably vague. It states that “in connection with an unrelated case, the FBI has learned of the existence of emails that appear to be pertinent to the investigation” of Clinton’s personal email server, which, Comey notes, he had previously told Congress was “completed.”

He states that he has agreed to “allow investigators to review these emails to determine whether they contain classified information, as well as to assess their importance to our investigation.” He acknowledges that the FBI “cannot yet assess whether or not this material may be significant.”

The obvious question that arises is why, given the fact that the FBI has no idea whether these additional emails contain any significant information relative to the Clinton email case, the agency should make them a public issue within days of the election. Media commentators noted that the letter violates a longstanding informal FBI ban on making politically sensitive announcements within 60 days of a US election.

Following the report of Comey's letter, the news media, citing unnamed federal law enforcement officials, said the emails in question were found on a laptop computer shared by Clinton aide Huma Abedin and her husband, former Representative Anthony Weiner.

Weiner is under FBI investigation for allegedly sending sexually explicit text messages to an underage girl. Abedin announced her separation from Weiner earlier this year after the latest episode involving Weiner and sexually explicit Internet activity became public.

Comey's letter was hailed by Donald Trump and Republican Party spokesmen as tantamount to an official reopening of the FBI investigation and rescinding of the decision announced by Comey in July that no charges would be brought against the Democratic presidential candidate.

Clinton spoke to the press briefly Friday evening, demanding that the FBI provide more information about the substance of what it was reviewing, including whether there was any connection to her use of a private email server. She pointed out that more than 15 million people have already voted and that many millions more will be going to the polls over the next week as early voting continues. In response to questions, she indicated that the FBI has not contacted her and that she first learned of the letter through the media.

It is at this point impossible to determine with precision the motivation behind Comey's letter and the political forces for which he is speaking. However, his attempt to present the letter as a politically disinterested response to the discovery of new information lacks any credibility.

This direct intervention into the election by the top police-intelligence agency can only be an expression of deep crisis and profound tensions within the American ruling class and the state. The election as a whole has been dominated by the growth of social anger and antiestablishment sentiment, yet it has ended in a contest between two right-wing representatives of the richest 1 percent who are despised by huge sections of the electorate.

It has plumbed the depths of political debasement on the part of both candidates—the fascistic billionaire Trump seeking to channel discontent along the most right-wing, chauvinist and racist channels; the multimillionaire Clinton relying on sex scandals and a McCarthyite attack on Trump as an agent of Russian President Vladimir Putin to bury incriminating revelations of corruption and lying and to swing public opinion behind a policy of military escalation and confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia.

The entire process has been surrounded by an aura of violence and a breakdown of public confidence in the political system. It has unfolded under conditions of deepening economic crisis, mounting international tensions and worsening crises for US imperialism around the world, i.e., the ongoing debacle of Washington's war for regime change in Syria, the signs of disarray in the anti-Chinese "pivot to Asia," the emergence of open conflicts with imperialist "allies" in Europe, particularly Germany.

The convergence of these crises is generating bitter conflicts within the American ruling class over policy questions, magnified by fears of a rising tide of social opposition at home.

Whether the intention of Comey's letter was to inflict fatal damage to Clinton's candidacy, shore up endangered Republican majorities in the Senate and House, or fire a shot across the bow against an incoming Clinton administration, it makes clear that the next administration will be mired in crisis from the day it takes office.

One former Justice Department official suggested that Comey was under intense pressure from within the FBI over his previous declaration that no competent prosecutor would bring charges against Clinton over her use of the private server. If true, this means that sections of the federal police agency are in open revolt against the candidate who may shortly become their nominal "commander-in-chief."

The FBI intervention on the eve of the 2016 election represents an acceleration of a trend in US politics that first came to the surface in the series of Republican-led investigations into the Bill Clinton administration, culminating in his impeachment in 1998. This was followed by the stolen election of 2000, when the Supreme Court intervened and by a 5-4 majority halted the recounting of ballots in Florida in order to award the White House to George W. Bush, the loser in the popular vote.

The two-party system in the United States has always been an instrument of class rule, dominated by corporate America. The unprecedented growth of social inequality over the past four decades has widened the gulf between the political system and the great majority of the population. More and more, official political life revolves around palace intrigues, in which the media and the military-intelligence apparatus play critical roles. The methods of scandalmongering, calculated leaks and political stink bombs prevail.

One thing is clear: none of these strokes and counterstrokes between rival capitalist factions has anything to do with defending the democratic rights and social interests of working people. As far as the capitalist two-party system is concerned, the American people are merely an object of manipulation, to be stampeded by demagoguery and scandal.