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Trump's victory and the debacle of American democracy

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The victory of Donald Trump in the US presidential election is a political earthquake that has exposed before the entire world the terminal crisis of American democracy. Such is the degeneration of bourgeois rule that it has elevated an obscene charlatan and billionaire demagogue to the highest office in the land.

Whatever conciliatory phrases he may issue in the coming days, a president Trump will lead a government of class war, national chauvinism, militarism and police state violence. In addition to the executive branch, all the major political institutions in the United States—including both houses of Congress and the Supreme Court—will be in the hands of the far right.

Under Trump, America will not be made “great again.” It will be driven into the dirt.

Media commentators, none of whom foresaw this outcome, fell back on now routine explanations focused on the voting patterns of various racial and identity groups. They all ignored the fact that the election became a referendum on the devastating social crisis and decay in the United States, which Trump was able to channel and direct to the right.

Who and what is responsible for the victory of Trump? First, the Clinton campaign and the Democratic Party, which were unwilling and incapable of presenting a program that could attract any significant popular support.

Clinton waged her campaign on the lowest and most reactionary level. She combined claims that Trump was an agent of Putin—aimed at creating the framework for aggression against Russia—with denunciations of the working class as racist and “privileged.”

Second, the administration of Barack Obama, elected eight years ago on pledges of “hope” and “change.” Obama won the support of large sections of the working class, including white workers, bitterly opposed to social inequality and the Bush administration’s policies of war and social reaction.

During two full terms in office, Obama presided over unending war, a historic transfer of wealth to the ruling class, and the continued erosion of the living standards of the vast majority of the population.

Obama’s signature domestic program, the Affordable Care Act, was an assault on health care packaged as a reform. In the final weeks of the election, millions of workers discovered that they are facing double-digit increases in health care costs. This was likely far more important in affecting the outcome of the election than the actions of FBI director James Comey in reviving the Clinton email scandal.

Third, the trade unions, which for the past four decades of increasing social inequality have worked systematically to suppress the class struggle and maintain the political stranglehold of the Democratic Party. They have as well assiduously promoted reactionary economic nationalism, which is in line with Trump’s own platform.

Fourth, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and those organizations that promoted him. Sanders’ craven capitulation to Clinton—the logical outcome of his strategy of channeling opposition into the Democratic Party—ensured that opposition to the status quo would be monopolized by the political right. The most significant Trump upsets came in states where Sanders had defeated Clinton by large margins in the Democratic Party primaries.

Behind all of this was the central ideological role of identity politics and the systematic effort to conceal the real social divisions within society. The relentless and obsessive focus on race and gender over the past four decades has been used to give the Democratic Party a left cover for a thoroughly right-wing political agenda at home and abroad. At the same time, it articulates the interests of the most privileged sections of the upper-middle class.

The notion that the basic divisions in society are along the lines of race and gender is not only politically reactionary, it is fundamentally false. The Democrats and Clinton were hoisted on their own petard. They not only lost in regions that are predominantly poor and white, but also suffered from a decline in voter turnout in majority black regions, as African-American workers and youth saw no reason to back the candidate of the status quo.

The coming period will be one of shock, outrage and increasingly bitter struggles. It will not take long for workers, including those who voted for him, to realize what they have in a President Trump. At the same time, the explosive divisions within the state apparatus expressed in the election will emerge in new and more violent forms.

Definite conclusions must be drawn from the experiences of these elections.

In the 2016 elections, the Socialist Equality Party and its candidates, Jerry White and Niles Niemuth, warned of the disastrous consequences of the subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party and the promotion of identity politics. We insisted that the interests of the working class—in the fight against war, social inequality and dictatorship—could be advanced only through the fight to unify workers of all races, ethnicities and nationalities in a common struggle against the capitalist system.

These warnings have been confirmed. The basic and urgent task that now arises out of the elections is the need to build a revolutionary socialist leadership—the Socialist Equality Party.