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The Revenge of Class and the Death of the Democratic Party

By Peter LaVenja
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The Democratic Party of my lifetime – the coalition of Wall St finance capital and identity-politics voters that arose during the 1980s and 90s – is dead. It has been killed, quite ironically, by the revenge of class politics – the kind once championed by the Democrats. Decades of economic misery and the hollowing-out of vast segments of the American economy, which the Democratic Party participated in gleefully, has led to the inchoate rage which found expression in the fun house mirror version of class struggle politics: Donald Trump.

Barack Obama's presidency will be seen as the high-water mark of this Democratic Party. The reign of finance capital, on the rise since the 1970's and the shift within capitalism from productive industry to the financialization of everything, grew to a point where Obama used the machinery of state to not only rescue finance capital after its 2008 collapse but to extend its rule by crushing any attempts at a left-Keynesian solution to the crisis. Occupy Wall Street, a class-conscious response to austerity politics, was exterminated by Democratic mayors under dictates from Obama's White House.

Obama's electoral coalition was driven by the professional class that had arisen to manage the various segments of the financialized economy. Since they derive significant benefits from late capitalism, the professionals eschew class-struggle based politics. What this group wants is a slow expansion of individual rights. The liberal illusion is that this gradual expansion of rights is inevitable, that progress is slow-but-steady, and more radical attempts to deal with the economic

system are unwanted or impossible. It is a perfect illusion for professionals within capitalism to have: moderate progress and no need to mention class. Capital very well accommodated itself to these demands during the Obama years and showed itself willing to incorporate same-sex marriage, marijuana legalization, etc. The point is not that these gains are insignificant – they are indeed important – but that they do little to address the larger inequalities within capitalism and have been used to split professionals from the working class.

Thus the collective trauma of the liberal class after Trump's win is very much that of a group illusion being violently shattered. Every subclass manifests ideological justifications for its position, and the wrenching defeat of Hillary Clinton – who had the full might of the media apparatus behind her – shows there are no longer enough votes to continue mining in new sectors of the identity-politics class. This class reaction to defeat is a comical extension of itself: talk of fleeing the country is only possible because they are credentialed professionals with portable skills across international borders. Working class individuals are to be left behind to resist, or be crushed by the new regime.

Indeed it was that working class of the Rust Belt that handed the Democratic Party its defeat. Trump is no savior of workers, but he understands what successful elites have from time immemorial: to win the backing of a disaffected working class means you acquire a strong base of support against other elite factions. The inchoate rage of the working class (many of whom voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012) is a product of a half-century of structural decline coupled with conscious policy decisions that decimated the workforce. Clinton signed NAFTA, Obama failed to press forward on card-check unionization rules, and none of them moved to repeal Taft-Hartley. It is also a product of post-war order that took apart class-struggle unions and attacked class struggle parties, making it nearly impossible to organize in the private sector. Until mid-century there was a healthy class-conscious culture buoyed by labor and socialist media, organizations and education. Its loss has opened a space for the rise of a right-wing that gives a distorted voice to working class concerns.

Many will point to Bernie Sanders as a rebuttal to the terminal decline of the Democratic Party's drift into the party of identity politics and Wall St. It is true that Sanders voiced a social-democratic agenda warmly received by workers and a good part of left-leaning petty-bourgeois Americans. But remember: the professional identity-politics voters in the Democrats fiercely rejected Sanders. He won states with large working class populations not tied to the professional identity-politics class, and he usually needed support from independents in open primaries to do so. Class-struggle politics can be tied to expanding personal freedoms, but it is anathema to a professional class and party whose existence depends upon the largesse of finance capital.

Class, then, has had its revenge on the illusions of the professional caste. This likely signals the terminal decline of the Democratic Party. Hemmed in by campaign donors from moving left and by the ideology of its party functionaries, there will be little room for it to maneuver in Trump's America. The capitalism of the early 21st century also prohibits a return to the classic social-democratic bargain of mid-century. While social-democratic programs like a massive public works plan for full employment, income redistribution and social programs are still possible within capitalism, but the old alliance of labor and a section of big capital will not materialize because capital no longer needs or wants to use those programs to create and sustain profits by

developing a mass of well-paid workers in production industries. Thus any group implementing reforms on the left will be immediately challenged and forced to either radicalize towards socialism or acquiesce to the demands of capital. The Democrats cannot do this and will remain boxed into their strongholds; within Congress a Sanders (or Warren) will be allowed to posture while in the minority but will not be allowed to build a platform to take the party in a more leftward direction. Trump, because he is bourgeois, will conversely be permitted to throw sops to workers in exchange for their electoral support. It is a cruel return of working class politics that cannot be won without building a radical left party capable of challenging the system at the ballot box and in the streets.