

Notes (United States): The Democratic Party, the threat of fascism and the socialist future

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August 26, 2020 — *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — Here are notes about the here-and-now, and about the future, enhanced by discussion with friends.

Contents

- [What Trump is and what he is](#)
- [Defining fascism](#)
- [Dislodging Trump - or not](#)
- [What the Democrats represent](#)
- [Perhaps there is no socialist](#)

Several stark realities stare us in the face. As I reflect on them in the summer of 2020, I do so from the standpoint of those in the United States who want to see a democratic, humane, socialist future. What I see includes: the immediate awfulness of Donald Trump's Presidency; the coronavirus pandemic made so much worse by that Presidency; the dramatic economic downturn which was already brewing but has now surged forward with the pandemic; the heightened racist/anti-racist conflict; and the looming environmental catastrophe that threatens to engulf our planet within the next two decades or so. Also, we are facing the threat of fascism.

What Trump is and what he is not

Let us begin with the extreme destructiveness and dangerous threat posed by the most reactionary elements of the ruling class gathered around the demagogic, self-absorbed, bigoted, bullying phony in the White House. Those who shrug this off as being no worse than anything we have experienced before are not facing reality.

On the other hand, those denouncing this self-absorbed bully as a fascist are quite wrong - because fascism is not simply a label to use against very bad politicians, even those as bad as Trump. Fascism is a morbid and potentially horrific reality that is germinating and growing stronger within our society. To say we are experiencing a fascist regime now deflects our attention from what might actually develop soon. The threat of fascism has, however, been strengthened by Trump's bigoted demagoguery, by his coddling nascent fascists, and by his flirtation with tactics and conceptualizations that are at the core of full-blown fascism.

Another thing that Trump is not is the representative of the capitalist class. That class - whose most powerful elements encompass less than 5% of the population - is not a monolith. Those who are capitalists are concerned with maintaining big businesses which ensure their wealth, but they have different notions on how best to accomplish this. They are reliant on (and generously supportive of) full-time political experts and politicians, although in some cases they themselves are actively involved.

As a class they are intolerant of those who pose a threat to the capitalist system, but they are disunited over the best way to advance their interests in the present political context. Some are more inclined toward tolerance of dissenters and protesters, and toward offering them at least partial concessions, in order to absorb them into an order that will maintain the capitalist status quo. Others see this as a slippery slope that is best avoided. In certain cases, such conservative resistance is fairly flexible and moderate; in other cases, it inclines toward being rigid and extreme. In times of crisis, some are even willing to gamble on a self-absorbed bully, or even a fascist.

Defining fascism

Since the term “fascism” is thrown around and utilized (over-utilized) in various ways, it makes sense to define how it will be used here.

Fascism means more than reactionary politics, more than bigotry or bullying or authoritarian policies. It includes such things – but historically it has involved the coming-together of such politics and policies with a comprehensive anti-democratic ideology, nurtured by powerful economic and political forces, which connects in an organized way with the psychology and enthusiasm of masses of people, establishing its domination in society’s political life through force and violence – at first through organized paramilitary groups, ultimately through state institutions. It has crystallized in combat against those who many perceive as “outsiders” – in some cases left-wing working-class movements pushing to end their oppression from traditional or capitalist hierarchies; in some cases marginalized racial or ethnic groups struggling for their human rights.

Social and economic crises generate left-wing and human rights upsurges, and along with this also generate upsurges in what we are defining as fascism.

Dislodging Trump - or not

There is absolutely no way to dislodge the bullying phony in the White House and his enablers and allies except through a Democratic Party victory at the polls this November. Anyone who denies this is delusional. Anyone who says it really doesn’t matter is, as already suggested, not facing reality. Saying this is not the same thing as saying that one should therefore campaign for or vote for the Democrats. It is just taking note of the reality.

The result of a Democratic Party victory will be a partial reversal of some of Trump’s most destructive policies. But it will by no means whisk away the multiple problems we face, including the threat of fascism. This threat has been strengthened by some of what Trump says and does, but it has been growing independently, and will continue to grow independently, of Trump.

The result of a Democratic Party defeat will most likely be a continuation and acceleration of Trump’s most destructive policies, which will also help to intensify the multiple problems we face, including the threat of fascism.

An essential element in this U.S. variant of fascism-in-the-making is racism, which has been a key element in the evolution of the United States since its very beginnings. Throughout history we can see that every struggle against racism generates anti-racist solidarity and anti-racist gains – but also racist backlash, with concerted efforts to more strongly develop racist ideology, rhetoric, and organization. Sometimes anti-racist gains have pushed racist reaction under the surface, but it should be obvious to everyone paying attention that racist reaction has never been eliminated from the U.S. reality.

In 2020 we have been living through the immense promise of the spontaneous anti-racist mass upsurges in the wake of the police killings of George Floyd and others. This was not planned or organized or coordinated by any substantial organizations on the Left – there are no such organizations anymore, just fragments and husks and disoriented clusters. As with the nationwide Occupy Wall Street movement, as with the earlier incarnation of the Black Lives Matter movement, as with the Million Woman March and the #MeToo movement, as with the various local labor insurgencies, there is no revolutionary or socialist force having the capacity to outline and mobilize around a strategy for positive social change.

There is, of course, Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) with 70,000 members, a significant reflection of today's radicalization and hardly a mere husk or fragment. But it contains within itself a diversity of political standpoints and is held together by a very weak organizational structure. It seems more likely to fragment under the pressure of events than to somehow and suddenly provide the political clarity, the organizational coherence, or the earned authority to provide the strategy or leadership needed to lead the struggle forward. The bottom-line is that we do not yet have the kind of organization that is so badly needed.

The amazing anti-racist upsurge has been so momentous that it has shaken our society to its core, crystallizing and giving voice to an anti-racist consciousness that has broken past previous barriers and challenged the status quo more powerfully than anyone ever expected. In contrast to the Occupy movement and earlier Black Lives Matter movement, there are clear demands, the most popular having truly revolutionary implications: the escalating crescendo of demilitarize the police, defund the police, dismantle the police. To the extent that this movement wins the hearts and minds of more and more people, in multiple ways it pushes back both the power of Trump and the threat of fascism.

Yet both Trump and the would-be fascists have been engaging in their predictable counter-mobilization. In this, they are able to draw on a limitation of the mass upsurge – the raising of potentially revolutionary demands that the movement does not actually have the strength or organization to implement.

There are, of course, some elements in the new Black Lives Matter movement that are advancing demands that can be won in the here-and-now (punishing specific police officers guilty of murder and violence, creating civilian review boards to establish some element of “community control” at least through a certain level of accountability, etc.). Elements in the movement reaching for such achievable changes are able to connect with reformist forces in the Democratic Party who can assist in making it so. But it is the revolutionary demands that address the underlying, systemic dynamics which – despite an accumulation of well-meaning reforms – have continued to generate racism, authoritarianism, and violence in police departments throughout the country for many years.

Understandable frustration, rage, and angry self-expression have often been predominant in the protests, but by themselves these are incapable of bringing about desired changes, whether reformist or revolutionary. What is missing, to a significant degree, is an effective strategic orientation capable of actually getting us from the “here” of the problems we face to the “there” of solutions to the problems.

To the extent this is so, the result will be disorder without resolution, with eventual weariness and demoralization among protesters. At the same time, “law and order” demands from Trump and others will find resonance among many frightened people. A significant element in the mix can be found among the police departments throughout the country, whose layers of recruits over the years and whose very traditions and sub-culture seem to nurture a quasi-fascist network that can easily come together with armed “militia” networks of far-right militants. Trump has been making noises that go in the direction of suspending elections and securing his continued power through

declarations of “national emergency,” etc. Of course, there are also powerful forces resistant to such stuff. They fear that Trump being allowed to go too far could result in a social explosion whose outcome is uncertain.

There is a fluidity in the balance of forces we can see in society.

Working against the Trump regime are multiple factors: the deepened and expanded anti-racism within our country; the understanding by many that Trump has badly mishandled the coronavirus plague; the growing perception that he is organically connected with greedy rich people; the growing economic crisis that his boasts and promises have failed to reverse; and more. The polls indicate Trump is in serious trouble.

On the other hand, the other day a radical-minded student complained to me about her mother. The mom is a recently retired nurse who was a leader in her union local and avidly supported Bernie Sanders in 2016. Subsequently she has become a firm Trump supporter, absolutely distrusting the Democratic Party and all it represents. This story does not seem completely out of kilter – I sense some Trump support among some of my neighbors in the predominantly white working-class district that I live in.

Yet there is much of the working class around me that sees Trump for what he is and knows him as an enemy. The only path for getting rid of him is to vote for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. And many will do so.

What the Democrats represent

The Democratic Party has been helped powerfully by the mass radicalization that has been unfolding in the United States. The resulting developments have taken its elected representatives, not to mention its corporate-liberal leaders and controllers, by surprise. But the Occupy movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, the socialist-oriented campaigns of Bernie Sanders and others, have all combined to give a leftward tilt to the political mainstream, and this has pushed back what seemed a right-wing Republican Party juggernaut in U.S. politics, to which the corporate liberals had themselves been previously adapting (for decades).

Many who hoped that socialists and “genuine progressives” might somehow tear the Democratic Party from the grip of its corporate-liberal elite now acknowledge this was out of line with reality, but the radical ferment has certainly given the party new life. Many protesters and radical activists also feel there is no place for them go than to the place where so many of them have now ended up: inside an unapologetically pro-capitalist party (with an imperialist foreign policy), sporting an array of half-measures that “speak to” but for the most part cannot actually resolve the crises of our time.

The term “imperialist foreign policy” is not polemical hyperbole or a throwaway line. Serious analysts such as Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin have demonstrated that the capital accumulation process is inseparable from economic realities within capitalist society and also the foreign policies of major capitalist powers, the U.S> very much included, to the detriment of majorities among all the peoples on our planet, including ourselves. Those on the Left cannot afford to avert their attention from this central aspect of today’s reality.

It is very likely that the Democratic Party, if it controls the Presidency and the Congress, will coordinate a far more effective effort than was attempted by the Trump regime to end the death-grip of the coronavirus. It is possible that they will be willing to place, once again, more substantial taxes on big business in order to ensure funds for a social safety-net to prevent the unemployed and the

poor from suffering as much of the indignity and inhumanity as perpetrated by the Trump regime. They may raise the minimum wage, push for some kind of police reform, and push back against some of the right-wing's racist policies. There will be more positive rhetoric and policies on behalf of women, gays, the environment, etc. All to the good.

On the other hand, they will be unable to control the business cycle related to the current economic downturn, and will be unwilling to put the human needs of the working-class majority before corporate profits of the wealthy elite. The police departments will remain as a bulwark of the capitalist order, more than likely still permeated by authoritarian and racist policies and ideologies. Economic injustice intertwined with racial injustice will persist, as will militarism and war, and a form of globalization that enhances the wealth and power of the very rich at the expense of the rest of us, all around the world. There will be no enactment of a genuine Green New Deal to guarantee good living standards for all while ending the corporate-capitalist devastation of the global environment. The climate crisis will get worse, as will so many of the other problems afflicting us.

The corporate-liberalism of the Democratic Party – amid declining living conditions and multiple crises – will be once again discredited. Increasingly distressed, frightened, desperate people will urgently seek solutions to the problems they are facing. The only “practical” alternatives available by substantial forces will be those offered by demagogic right-wingers, some of whom may be far more disciplined, consistent, and effectively fascistic than what we are experiencing today.

And then the later stages of the climate crisis will close in on us.

But what of the socialist future that some of us have hoped for, believed in, talked about, and – to the best of our abilities – struggled for? Most of my life has in some way been devoted to this, as have been the lives of people I have known spanning three earlier generations.

Perhaps there is no socialist future

We have little to show now except words, whether sectarian backbiting or stimulating panel discussions, whether “practical-minded” reformism or revolutionary posturing and sweeping rhetoric.

From what scientists are telling us, we have less than two decades to do better than that, to create a coherent and strongly organized left-wing movement where none exists now, a movement capable of mobilizing millions around a program that will bring a fundamental power shift from the wealthy elites to the laboring majorities.

It has seemed to me that the hope for the future will be a serious struggle for a genuine Green New Deal (in contrast to a diluted phony version) that – without genuinely lethal compromises – will provide what we need for a livable environment and decent living conditions for each and every one of us. This is central to the ecosocialist Green Party campaign for President and Vice-President of Howie Hawkins and Angela Walker. After the November 2020 elections it could become an essential rallying-point for the broader Left.

This makes sense in terms of actual human needs and a guarantee for humanity's survival. It necessarily goes in the direction of putting human need before corporate profits, establishing democratic control over our economic policies and resources, in a way that will make more and more sense to increasing numbers of people, with a potential for building a mass movement and power-shift – especially as environmental crises continue to accumulate and intensify.

Perhaps there is something better to do that we can actually do. We can debate, argue, and devote ourselves to words – or just shrug with a laugh. But we are running out of time. And as Bertolt Brecht once put it: Because things are as they are, they will not stay as they are.

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P.S.

- Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal. August 26, 2020:
<http://links.org.au/united-states-democratic-party-threat-fascism-socialist-future>