

United States: Mob takeover of Capitol highlights instability of U.S. political system

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The storming of the U.S. Capitol by an armed mob, incited by the disgruntled U.S. president, was an unprecedented incident that has rocked the political landscape in this country and abroad.

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“The world is watching!” President-elect Biden warned. And indeed it was. Venezuela’s government expressed its opinion quite graphically by pointing out that the U.S. “is suffering what it has generated in other countries with its politics of aggression.” The action also brings to mind the statement by Malcolm X in regard to the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963: “The chickens have come home to roost.”

The mob action revealed clearly to the world the instability of this country’s political system. U.S. capitalist politicians are facing interlocking social crises that they are unwilling and unequipped to solve. As a consequence, they must confront the growing distrust of their policies by their constituents, and even a profound demoralization among some sectors. This in turn has provided an opening not only for Trump-style right-wing populists but for overtly fascist groups to gain a hearing.

The mob action on Jan. 6 showed that an angry grouping, hoodwinked by Trump’s ravings that they were cheated in the elections and energized by outlandish conspiracy theories, were willing to pursue the discredited politicians even into the so-called “Citadel of Liberty,” under the leadership of far-right elements. As some of the rioters explained to reporters, “We’re taking the Capitol back!” More specifically, they hoped to stop the balloting that would affirm the Electoral College vote for Biden.

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The deep hole in which U.S. politicians find themselves is symbolized in the first place by the deranged “Commander in Chief,” who has been too fixated on his narcissistic fantasies to respond in any meaningful way to the country’s suffering in the pandemic and the accompanying economic crisis. But although Trump directly incited the rioters, just as culpable in the situation are the over 100 members of Congress who sought to trample on democratic voting rights, or what exists of them, in order to inflate their standing with the MAGA crowd and thus hopefully build their careers.

And right behind them in culpability are other politicians, equally reactionary but more sensitive to the calls by corporate capitalism for stability. They include outgoing Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell, who waited two months after the election to finally declare, “The Electoral College has

spoken.”

The way out of the morass for savvy ruling-class politicians of both major parties, at least temporarily, was blazed by the National Association of Manufacturers, whose CEO affirmed that Trump had “incited violence in an attempt to retain power,” and urged Vice President Mike Pence to “seriously consider working with the Cabinet to invoke the 25th Amendment” in order to oust Trump from the White House. Throughout the evening of Jan. 6, a line of both Democrats and Republicans went before the media to firmly take their distance from Trump.

The Democrats are trying to eke out partisan advantages from the mob takeover of the Capitol by piously invoking the sanctity of the U.S. Constitution while denouncing the action as a “coup attempt” and “sedition,” and piling heaps of contempt upon Trump and his dwindling group of supporters. But they too cannot escape the political crisis of the U.S. ruling class. The Democrats may gain popularity in the short term, but after a short honeymoon, it will become clearer to many that they have no real answers to the fundamental problems of the country and the world.

For example, the most pressing issue in the future is that of climate change—whose effects will no doubt be felt this year with another round of fires, hurricanes, torrential rains, and other catastrophes. Yet the plans of the Biden administration to combat climate change fall far short of what is needed. Moreover, the establishments are both the Democratic and the Republican parties are filled with people with deep ties to the fossil-fuel industry—who will be working to hold back any measures to curtail production of greenhouse gases.

Trump ignites the far right

It is difficult to judge at this point whether Trump and his cohorts were fully aware that their exhortations to “Stop the Steal” (a slogan supposedly coined by Roger Stone for the 2016 election) would lead the mob to try to occupy the U.S. Capitol. It is certain, however, that Trump should have anticipated that his audience, which included violent fascist and white supremacist groups such as the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers—who had advertised their attendance for weeks—would not be satisfied with a peaceful protest. Members of the crowd were carrying ladders, ropes, pipe bombs, chemical spray agents, guns, and other paraphernalia that should have made their objectives obvious.

It is impossible to believe that the White House had no advance warning of the violent tendencies of the far-right forces that were planning to go to Washington. A former intelligence official told reporters from Reuters that there were 1480 posts from accounts related to the QAnon conspiracy movement that spoke about Trump’s rally on Jan. 6 and contained references to violence. One TikTok post stated that bringing guns to Washington is the “entire reason we’re going.”

Trump and his advisors should have been aware that his words, “We’re going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue ... and we’re going to try to give them [Republican lawmakers] the pride and boldness to take back our country,” would be taken by his far-right supporters as encouragement to do what they do best—create mayhem.

This was already demonstrated after the Charlottesville Unite the Right event in 2017, when Trump complimented members of the fascist torch procession as being “good people,” and when he told the Proud Boys last year to “Stand back, and stand by.” When Trump finally broke his silence after the mob action on Wednesday, he echoed these earlier sentiments, saying that the rioters were “very special” to him, and telling them sympathetically, “I know your pain, I know your hurt.” Trump’s still loyal toadie, Rudolph Giuliani, parroted his boss in assuring the rioters, “You are on the right side of

the law and history.”

Some of the rioters entered the Capitol in costume; the man known to many as the “QAnon Shaman” wore a fur hood with horns, while others were dressed in military fatigues and other get-ups. For them, the break-in was spectacular theater. But for the more organized fascist groups, the theater had a more serious purpose. It served as a kind of rehearsal for more deadly action at such time when the ruling class might call on the fascists to enact a real coup. In that way (though certainly not in others), the Jan. 6 action is reminiscent of Hitler’s 1923 Beer Hall Putsch in Munich. Hitler was arrested and imprisoned, but the action served as a great propaganda victory for his fledgling Nazi movement. For now, the fascists will no doubt declare their seizure of the U.S. Capitol to be a victory, and use it as a recruiting tool for their reactionary movement.

Cops handle the rioters with kid gloves

Many commentators have observed the laxity with which security forces treated the mob. Photographs show security personnel creating space for the crowd to climb the stairs to enter the building; at one point, a Capitol guard is seen posing for a selfie with one of the rioters. Although several hundred vandals piled into the Capitol, breaking windows, destroying and looting artwork, rifling through office desk files, and sending Congress members scurrying for their lives into protected shelters, it appears that only about 15 occupiers were arrested immediately, with another 55 people rounded up later, at the last count. Most of the rioters were allowed to exit the building unmolested and at their own pace. It took about three and half hours for sufficient police back-up to arrive at the Capitol to begin to clear the area of rioters.

Many have also commented on the difference between the laid-back manner with which the authorities treated these right-wing rioters—who were practically all white—and the brutality with which cops dealt with Black Lives Matter protesters during the summer. During BLM demonstrations in Washington, the Capitol steps were lined with droves of federal police carrying rifles, whereas on Jan. 6 merely a handful of cops were present. Doc Rivers, the coach of the Philadelphia 76ers NBA team, pointed this out to the media: “I’m going to say what many are thinking about: Could you imagine if those were all Black people storming the Capitol, and what would have happened?”

How should we respond?

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka issued a statement while the rioters were still in the Capitol grounds condemning Trump and Republican lawmakers for enabling what he termed “an attempted coup.” Trumka said that given the fact that “the constitutional rights of every law-abiding American” had been violated, “the labor movement will not stand for it.” United Auto Workers President Rory Gamble stated in another message, “We are the United States and unite we must. I urge us all to work together to move forward and heal our nation.”

There is nothing wrong with urging “all to work together.” But missing in these statements is a concrete call to action for the ranks of labor. These top union leaders overlook the emergency need for working people to make their voices heard concerning the threats to democracy in this country. They ignore the opportunity for working people to demonstrate that they have the power to make tremendous changes in the way this country operates.

Rather than resting on their heels, the AFL-CIO and other unions could take the responsibility to call

for and to coordinate a vast united front of labor organizations, and groups supporting civil liberties, Black rights, women's rights, and other crucial social issues to demand that the democratic process be safeguarded and expanded in this country. This new labor-organized civil rights coalition could embrace the demands of the Black Lives Matter movement and mobilize to protect women's health and abortion rights from governmental attempts to curtail them.

And at the same time, the unions should mobilize their members to protest the government's inaction in providing serious relief measures for the economic crisis, enforcing strict health measures in the workplaces, and cutting the lag time in getting COVID vaccines to the population.

Gamble decries the "despicable attempt by extremists to disrupt our great republic"—and certainly, the actions by the far-right rioters were despicable. But what about the politicians who sit in the halls of Congress every day? Is it not a despicable crime when Congress readily acts to override Trump's veto in order to authorize spending billions of dollars in military appropriations—used to overthrow governments and terrorize working people in the semi-colonial world—but refuses to provide a sufficient livelihood to U.S. working people in this time of severe crisis?

Such a labor-led coalition does not have to storm and occupy the U.S. Capitol (although that step might come as a matter of course at a later time!). At the beginning, it could call marches of millions of people—in every town and city and right down Pennsylvania Avenue—to press home its demands.

As a further step, the coalition could call a representative and democratic Congress of Labor to determine what issues need to be tackled and what means are required to achieve them. It could set up committees in every workplace and every neighborhood to enlist working people to fight for what they require. And it could organize union members to participate in political strikes to provide muscle for their demands.

At this point, however, the AFL-CIO leadership shows no signs that they are willing to take action along the lines of what we have suggested above. What should working people do in the meantime? We certainly cannot put our trust in Democratic Party politicians to protect our interests. Instead, we must continue our independent protests and our organizing—and not let up one iota. After the surge of COVID-19 cases dissipates and vaccinations become widespread, we must return to the streets like never before!

The Democrats are never going to mount an effective defense against growing right-wing movements. And their inaction on stemming the multiple crises that working people must confront will only strengthen the fascist right. This underscores once again why independent working-class action is so important.

Building a powerful, self-motivated movement of working people and their allies is the best weapon against the fascists—who prey on people who are politically demoralized and lack a clear direction. We need to build committees of defense guards to protect our protests and strikes against the fascist goons, who will now be emboldened. And when the fascists and white supremacists come to town for their rallies and torchlight parades, we need to out-mobilize them with thousands of defenders of civil liberties marching with determination in the streets.

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P.S.

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