

USA: Why the Tea Party?

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The anti-capitalist left in the United States and around the world faces a paradox. A mere five years ago, the world capitalist economy entered a new long period of falling profits, stagnant accumulation, and growing long-term un (and under-) employment. The 2007-8 financial crisis threatened a wave of bankruptcies across the capitalist world that seemed to herald a collapse of major sectors of industry and finance. The dominant economic orthodoxy—neo-liberalism—with its worship of unregulated and self-correcting markets appeared to be in ruins. Capitalist governments around the world were pumping billions into their economies to forestall an economic implosion and stimulate new investment. In February of 2009, a lead article in the mainstream U.S. magazine, *Newsweek*, went as far as to declare, “We are All Socialists Now!” [1] A Rasmussen poll in April 2009 found that only 53 percent of those asked preferred capitalism to “socialism” (government regulation of a capitalist economy), while 20% preferred socialism and a full 27 percent were unsure. [2]

Yet, it is a new, militantly “free market” populist right that has channeled much of the popular anger sparked by the economic crisis in the United States and around the capitalist world. By the end of 2009, it was the “Tea Party” right that dominated the streets, mobilizing tens of thousands to oppose Obama’s health care plan as “socialism”—despite its massive subsidies to private health insurance companies. The left, the labor movement, and movements of people of color, women, and queer people were completely marginalized, while the new right fueled a Republican sweep of the 2010 Congressional elections. In 2010, the “Tea Party” had its greatest impacts in Republican primaries and contested “swing” Congressional districts that Democrats had taken by relatively small margins in 2008. [3] The Republicans, with a substantial minority of “Tea Party” zealots committed to a new era of austerity and economic deregulation, won a majority in the House of Representatives and deprived the Democrats of their filibuster-proof super-majority in the Senate. As the 2012 Presidential campaign unfolds, candidates associated with the Tea Party—Ron Paul, Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum—scored upset primary victories against the Republican “establishment” candidate, Mitt Romney, and remain in the race in late March 2012.

Liberals and leftists have put forward a number of explanations for the rise of this militantly nativist, anti-labor, and libertarian populist right. Many have claimed that the 2010 election demonstrates the fundamental conservatism of the U.S. population. In some variants, the Obama program of change turned out to be “too radical” for most Americans, pushing them back into the arms of the Republican right. In other variants, the election of Obama was an anomaly, a temporary break to the left in a basically “center-right” country.

Has the United States Moved to the Right?

Exit poll data for the 2008 and 2010 elections does not support the claim that the U.S. population has moved to the right. The “seismic shift” in representation in the House in 2010 was the result of very small shifts in the participation of key groups in the electorate. [4] In 2008, the Democrats received a total of 54.2 percent of the popular vote, with nearly 62 percent of the electorate voting, and won 58 percent of the House of Representatives. In 2010, the Republicans won 53.8 percent of the popular vote, with only 40% of eligible voters participating, and won 55 percent of the House. An eight percent shift in an election where only 40 percent voted—a shift of approximately three percent of the total eligible voters—accounts for the Republicans’ victory.

The Republican victory in 2010 was not simply a result of the sharp fall in overall voter participation compared with 2008, but in a marked change in the social composition of the voting population. The Democrats retook the House in 2006 with only 40% of voters participating. However, who voted changed radically. In particular, several key Democratic constituencies—people of color, youth and union members—turned out in much smaller numbers in 2010. In 2008, people of color (African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, and others) made up nearly 26 percent of the electorate. In 2010, only 22 percent of voters were people of color. We see an even sharper drop in the participation of young voters. Voters under the age of 45 made up nearly half the electorate (47 percent) in 2008, but only around one-third (34 percent) in 2010. Finally, the share of the electorate made up of union households dropped by nearly one-fifth between 2008 and 2010, from 21 percent to 17 percent. Put simply, a significant portion of those who voted for Obama and the Democrats in 2008, giving them substantial majorities in the House and Senate, did not vote in 2010. In other words, we saw a return to the patterns of voter participation in the United States since the late 1970s—an electorate that is disproportionately middle class professionals and managers, white, older, and suburban.

Additional evidence that US popular opinion has not shifted to the right are polls that show consistent support among potential voters for a non-interventionist foreign policy, expansion of social services, and increased regulation of capital. [5] Recent Gallup Polls [6] have found that majorities of people in the United States have consistently believed that wealth and income should be more evenly distributed since 1984. In the most recent polls, 57 percent of those polls believed that income should be more evenly distributed, and 47 percent believed that the government should raise taxes on the wealthy. Almost two thirds of those earning less than \$30,000 annually and slightly over half of those earning between \$30,000 and \$75,000 wanted higher taxes on the rich. In sum, it was the massive disaffection of working class, minority, and young people with both major U.S. political parties that allowed the electoral victory of the Republican right and a further rightward shift in the center of gravity of mainstream U.S. politics.

Capitalist Manipulation?

An alternative argument is that the capitalist class is behind the Tea Party right and its street mobilizations and electoral victories. Many point to the role of right-wing billionaires like the Koch brothers in financing the Republicans’ assault against collective bargaining rights in Wisconsin and across the midwestern United States. [7] It is clear that broad segments of capital in the United States support a resurgent and militant neoliberalism—demanding budgets balanced on the backs of working and poor people, social service austerity, and new attacks on public sector unions. There is also ample evidence that elements of the capitalist media—in particular the right-wing Fox News—has played a key role in creating and promoting the Tea Party.[8] However, there is little evidence that capitalists lead, finance, or direct the growing populist right.

Contributions to Congressional campaigns in 2010 do not show a marked capitalist preference for the Republicans or the right. In fact, the data indicates that capitalist donors had a slight preference for Democrats in 2010. [8] Of the total of \$1,331,535,623 contributed by individual capitalists and corporate Political Action Committees (PACs), \$640,651,184 (48 percent) went to Democratic Congressional candidates. Only \$616,930,199 (46 percent) was contributed to the Republicans. Corporate PAC contributions were evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats, while Democrats received 50 percent and Republicans 48 percent of individual capitalists' donations in 2010. As of March 1, 2012, Obama has raised a total of \$137 million, while Romney, Gingrich, Paul, and Santorum have only received a combined total of \$130 million. [9] Put simply, the capitalist class in the U.S. continues to finance both Democrats and Republicans.

On practical policy issues, capital is quite willing to back the new populist right when its interests coincide, pushing for tax cuts on the wealthy, cuts to social services, and further deregulation of capital. In the context of a bi-partisan neo-liberal consensus, the issues of immigration and a willingness to risk a possible Federal credit default distinguish the Tea Party right from the rest of the political establishment. The two most important capitalist financed and led policy planning groups—the Business Roundtable and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce—have been publicly distanced themselves from the new right on these questions.

The Chamber of Commerce, which represents a broad cross-section of capitalists in the United States, welcomed Obama's 2010 budget proposal and "pledged to work with the administration, the new House majority, and Democratic legislators on the Chamber's priorities over the next year." [10] While supporting cuts to social services, including Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, the Chamber also wants to increase the Federal debt ceiling. In a message to members of the Chamber urging them to contact their Congressional representatives, Bruce Josten, the Chamber's Executive Vice President, Government Affairs, argued:

"And we are going to remind you again. If Congress fails to raise the debt ceiling, there will be real impacts, for every American. Interest rates will rise for everyone - which means higher rates for American consumers and the small businesses who drive our economy. Car loans, mortgages, and business and student loans will all be more expensive."

"Now, make no mistake; too much spending and the need for real entitlement reform has led to the debt crisis we're in today. But jeopardizing our country's credit rating and fiscal security by refusing to compromise isn't the answer." [11]

On immigration, the Chamber has denounced Arizona's anti-immigrant law and initiated action in federal court, with the support of the ACLU and various Latino organizations and Arizona business organizations, challenging the constitutionality of SB 1070. [12] The Chamber of Commerce has also joined immigrant rights groups in denouncing the Obama administration's "silent raids"—in which Federal Immigration Control and Enforcement (ICE) officials inspect employers' hiring records and force the employers to lay-off undocumented workers. [13] This is not surprising, given that many of the Chambers' members—small and medium firms in labor-intensive industries—depend upon the cheap and "flexible" labor of undocumented immigrants.

The Business Roundtable, which speaks for the largest transnational corporations, has distanced itself even more clearly from the Tea Party's most radical positions. On immigration, the Business Roundtable's agenda is quite different from the Tea Party's calls for militarizing the border, criminalization of undocumented immigrants, and mass deportations. For the CEOs of the largest transnational corporations, the immigration system is "broken" because it fails to give them the supply of "flexible" workers it needs:

"Immigration reform must address the need of American businesses to access qualified, highly skilled professionals around the globe to remain competitive. Reforms must also address the current green card backlog for our Chinese and Indian employees and include an H1-B cap that is flexible based on market needs." [14]

Like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable supports the right's call for reductions in corporate taxes and the evisceration of Social Security and Medicare,[16] but clearly opposes any attempt undermine the credit of Federal government. During a conference call on March 30, 2011, Ivan Seidenberg, Chairman and CEO of Verizon Communications and the Chairman of Business Roundtable was quite clear:

"I don't think any of the CEOs would welcome a Government shutdown. I think you have all sorts of disruptions in the value chain, the supply chain, and our government services, so hopefully that could be avoided." [15]

On April 7, 2011, the Business Roundtable issued the following press release:

"We urge the Administration and Congress to agree on a sensible budget solution in time to avoid a government shutdown. A shutdown would have negative and unforeseen consequences, including heightening uncertainty and disrupting basic business services to government agencies." [16]

The Business Roundtable sent a letter to both Republican and Democratic Congressional leaders—co-signed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and several dozen industry-based associations—calling for raising the debt ceiling by August 2, 2011. They argued:

"Raising the statutory debt limit is critical to insuring global investors' confidence in the creditworthiness of the United States. With economic growth slowly picking up we cannot afford to jeopardize that growth with the massive spike in borrowing costs that would result if we defaulted on our obligations...In making this recommendation, we remain extremely concerned about the level of federal debt and large annual budget deficits... Tough calls on U.S. spending must be made as part of a debate about the budget and we agree that restoring balance to our fiscal position will require the government to spend less and spend more wisely." [17] Obama's 2012 campaign had already raised \$46.3 million by July 2011—more than all of his potential Republican challengers combined. Approximately 40 percent of these contributions are collected by "bundlers"—wealthy individuals collecting hundreds of thousands of dollars.

A bi-partisan plan to raise the debt ceiling and preserve the credit of the U.S. state was passed despite objections from far-right Republicans in Congress. While Tea Party supporters on the right opposed any increase in Federal indebtedness and a small number of Democrats continued to demand small tax increases on the wealthy and corporations, the capitalist class was able to discipline its political representatives and avoid a U.S. debt default. The resulting cuts—especially to social services and education—will be severe. The establishment of a joint Congressional committee, whose proposals for future cuts will be subject to an "up-or-down" vote without any opportunities for amendments, will further restrict the ability of the new middle class right to oppose the demands of the U.S. capitalist class. [18]

The Radicalization of the Middle Class

In sum, the rise of a new populist right targeting immigrants, people of color, and unions during the current economic crisis is not the result of either the majority of Americans embracing its politics, or the machinations of the U.S. capitalist class. The "Tea party" represents a radicalization of the

white, suburban middle class of professionals, managers, and small business owners, who have garnered the support of a minority of white, native-born workers. [19] As Matthew Rothschild argues:

"With economic pain at the highest level ever seen by most Americans, and with minorities especially hard hit, we're seeing a revolt not by people of color, not by the unemployed, nor the foreclosed upon. Instead, we're seeing a revolt by the white middle class. It's a revolt against the very notion of a positive role for government in helping people. It's a revolt against Latin American immigrants. It's a revolt against Muslim Americans. And it's a revolt against...[a] black president... Opportunistic and right-wing Republicans, politicians, business front groups, and media outlets like Fox have ginned up the hatred." [23]

Capital is more than willing to use this nativist, racist and anti-worker movement of the middle classes when their interests coincide. However, the new right has an agenda independent of, and at points (like immigration and the Federal debt ceiling) opposed to that of capital. [20]

Clearly, the growth of the Tea Party has emboldened the still small and marginal fascist right—the Klan, White Christian militias, and the like. While there are ideological similarities between this new right and classical fascism, the Tea Party mobilizes elements of the middle class primarily as passive voters, not as armed paramilitaries attacking unions, people of color, and immigrants. [21] Paul Street and Anthony DiMaggio make a convincing case that the Tea Party was a thoroughly top-down, primarily electoral and media-fueled phenomena with none of the characteristics (membership organizations, etc.) of a social movement—including classic right-wing populist movements. [22]

Ultimately, the rise of the right in the United States—as in the rest of the capitalist world—is the product of the dual crisis of liberal (in the rest of the world social-democratic) reformism in addressing the economic crisis, and of the labor and social movements to pose a political and social alternative to the failure of liberalism. [23] On the one hand, Obama and the Democrats have failed to address the economic crisis, in particular the persistent un (and under-) employment rates that still hover in the region of 15-20 percent despite the “recovery” of the past few months. If anything, Obama and the Democrats continue to embrace neo-liberal policies—maintaining low corporate taxes, business deregulation and global “free trade,” and a federal budget balanced on the backs of the poor, working people, and the elderly. Their willingness to concede additional budget cuts, including to “entitlement” programs like Social Security and Medicare, to the Republicans to avoid a federal government shutdown and raise the debt ceiling demonstrates, once again, the Democrats’ commitment to neo-liberalism.

On the other hand, there is the inability of the labor and social movements—in particular their official leaderships—to mobilize working people in support of our own agenda. Rather than organizing for an immediate end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, single-payer health care, universal amnesty for undocumented immigrants, the defense and expansion of public education and public services, the official leaders of our movements have gone along with Obama and the Democrats’ pro-corporate agenda. Put another way, rather than giving a progressive and class direction to the growing anger over unemployment and falling living standards, the forces of official reformism—the officials of the AFL-CIO and CTW federation, the leaders of the mainstream civil rights, immigrant, women’s, LGBT and anti-war movements—have helped create the political space for the new racist, xenophobic and pro-imperialist right. The “Tea Party” is simply filling the political vacuum left by the failures of liberalism and the labor and social movements. [24]

Unfortunately, many on the anti-capitalist left have contributed to this situation by seeking “strategic alliances” with Obama, the Democrats, and the forces of official reformism. [25] Many believe that a coalition of the left, labor officials, and the leaders of the social movements can push

the Democrats to the left—to take up more progressive demands in order to mobilize disaffected workers, people of color, women, and queers to retake the House and White House in 2012. Unfortunately, the Democrats have never shifted and are not going to shift to the left to “recapture their base.” Instead, they will continue, as they have for the past thirty-five years, to move to the right to attract middle class voters and corporate donors. [26]

Across the country, Democratic state legislators and governors like New York’s Andrew Cuomo and California’s Jerry Brown have joined hands with Republicans to gut social spending, cuts taxes on corporations and the wealthy, and attack public sector unions. At the federal level, the willingness of the Obama administration and the Congressional Democrats to meet the Republican leadership “half-way” will only embolden the Tea Party right to demand even deeper cuts in taxes and spending. [27] Even before the threats of a federal government shut-down and debt-default, Obama’s Fiscal Commission issued a plan for “deficit reduction” in December 2010, including no new taxes on wealthy individuals and corporations, new regressive taxes (national sales tax, increased gasoline taxes) and deep cuts in social services, including Social Security pensions, Medicare, and Medicaid. [28] Despite the opposition of Moveon.org and other left-liberal organizations, the Democrats freely agreed to again sacrifice the living standards of its working class and poor constituents to prevent a U.S. debt-default. [29]

The Dead-End of “Lesser-Evil” Politics

Historically, attempts to simultaneously build an alliance with Democratic Party centrists and build social movements have led to the disorganization and decline of the movements and a shift to the right in U.S. politics. Time and time again—from the CIO upsurge of the 1930s, through the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s, to the movements against the Vietnam War [30]—the decision of the leaders of powerful and potentially radical social movements to pursue an alliance with the Democrats have derailed these struggles.

Today, trying to “push the Democrats to the left” or “make the Democrats fight” will not only be futile, but will actually strengthen the Tea Party right. Such calls became louder in the wake of Obama’s speech of April 13, 2011 unveiling his plan for deficit reduction. [31] Obama’s plans included a proposal for ending the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest households, severe cuts to Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, small reductions in defense spending, and smaller overall cuts in federal domestic programs than the Republicans. Backing Obama’s proposals will, again, lead the left to limit its organizing and demands so as not to confront and embarrass the Democrats.

In the name of “being realistic” we will not demand real, progressive taxation on individuals and corporations, the establishment of “Medicare for All” (single-pay health insurance), the dismantling of the military budget and expansion of public services. As we again adopt our politics to those of the Democrats, they will be free to “compromise” once more with the Republicans over cutting taxes on the rich and spending for working and poor people. With our movements further weakened and invisible, our “alliance” with the Democrats will allow the new right to remain the only voice of militant opposition to the failed policies of the Democrats. [32]

At the same time, the anti-capitalist left needs to be clear that growing disillusionment will not spontaneously lead to a left wing radicalization. [33] Clearly, in the past few months there have been some hopeful signs that there are significant minorities of working people who are looking for a class alternative to the failures of liberalism and the rise of the right. In November, 2010, Howie Hawkins’ Green party campaign for New York Governor, and the explicitly socialist campaign of Dan La Botz for Senate in Ohio raised the profile of the anti-corporate and anti-capitalist left. The

outrage of former Obama supporters like Cornell West and Keith Obermann and the surprisingly positive responses to independent Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont's attempt to filibuster the tax bill last year are also hopeful signs. Even more encouraging are the recent struggles against union busting and austerity, most importantly in Madison, Wisconsin in March 2011 and the "Occupy" movement in Fall 2011. Clearly, there are some working people who are ready and willing to fight back.

Reorganizing the "Militant Minority"

However, the experience of the struggle in Wisconsin and "Occupy" demonstrates both the possibilities and limits of working class and popular fight-back in the US today. [34] All of us on the anti-capitalist left were inspired by the sight of tens of thousands of workers, students and community people mobilizing day after day to block Governor Walker's union busting bill. The militancy and creativity of their struggle, their ability to draw in workers not directly affected by the bill (police, fire-fighters, private sector workers), and the massive mobilizations put a lie to claims that American workers are hopelessly conservative and passive.

However, the official union leaders in Wisconsin were able to keep the struggle within a framework acceptable to the Democrats. On the one hand, the labor officials accepted both cuts to public services and public worker concessions in the interest of "balancing the budget." On the other, they were able to undermine attempts to spread strike actions, like the sick-outs by Madison public school teachers, into a wider strike movement that could have defeated Walker's attack on public sector workers and services. While there were and are continuing attempts to organize rank and file union and community activists to oppose austerity and build more militant actions, their relatively small numbers made them incapable of posing an effective alternative to the labor officials and their Democratic allies.

While much broader and militant than the Wisconsin uprising, especially on the West Coast where it inspired work-stoppages (Oakland "General Strike"), the Occupy movement that swept the United States in the fall of 2011 exhibits similar limits. Although it temporarily shifted public discourse to the left—making the issue of growing inequalities between the 1 percent (capital) and the 99 percent (the rest of us) a central issue of discussion—the movement failed to win many concrete victories. In early 2012, many of those radicalized by Occupy are facing tremendous pressure from the union officials to "move from protest to politics"—abandon militant demonstrations, occupations of public space and work stoppages to campaign for Obama's reelection.

Drawing on the work of David Croteau, Sheila Cohen [35] points out that the failure of rank and file workers to effectively counter the capitalist offensive is not the result of some innate social conservatism:

"... workers agreed with almost all the radicals' demands on such issues as war, the environment, etc; the difference was that they did not see how these demands could be achieved. The study makes an important distinction between the "expressive" and "instrumental" orientations of these two groups. While radicals achieved solace from the experience of "movement" struggles per se, for workers the essential issue was not the demands, but how they would be achieved. Their reigning attitude was one of fatalism, a "Yes, but what can you do?" approach."

The root of the crisis of the labor and social movements is the long-term decline of the "militant minority"—worker and community activists who continue to organize, educate, and struggle independently of the official leaders of the labor and social movements between big struggles. There are simply too few activists with deep roots in their workplaces, communities, schools, and

universities who have a radical vision and a strategy for organizing to pose an effective alternative to the dead-end politics of the forces of official reformism. As a result, what the Canadian socialist Alan Sears [36] has called the “infrastructures of dissent”—working class and popular organizations (unions, tenants groups, immigrant rights organizations, etc.) and institutions (cultural centers, book stores, newspapers, etc.)—are much weaker than in the 1960s and 1970s.

Not surprisingly, most working people have been forced to pursue individual solutions to declining living standards over the past thirty years. [37] Put simply, workers’ capacities to fight and win have been greatly diminished. The weakness of working class and popular organizations provides a fertile ground for deepening cynicism, which opens significant minorities of working people to appeals from the populist right.

Fighting the right will require the revival of working class and popular struggles that can effectively pose an alternative to the bi-partisan, neoliberal offensive. There will be opportunities for building broad political challenges—anti-corporate election campaigns, coalitions against budget cuts and social service austerity, mobilizations against the war. However, in the absence of the experience of mass, militant, and successful struggles the audience for a broad movement against neo-liberalism will be limited. The anti-capitalist left needs to commit itself not simply to educating and agitating for alternative political programs and demands, but the long-term process of rebuilding the capacities of working people to organize and struggle in the workplace, the community, and the streets. This process of rebuilding will begin around very immediate and “limited” issues—speed-up or lay-offs in a workplace, closing of a school or hospital, or opposing tuition hikes. Only through this experience of collective organization and action against capital and the state—and some concrete victories—will be able to turn disillusionment with liberalism into left-wing radicalism.

Charles Post

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Jon Meacham, “We Are All Socialist Now,” Newsweek, February 7, 2009.

[2] “Only 53 Percent Say Capitalism Better than Socialism,” Rasmussen Reports, April 9, 2009.

[3] Christopher F. Karpowitz, et al. “Tea Time in America? The Impact of the Tea Party Movement on the 2010 Midterm Elections,” PS: Political Science & Politics (April 2011), 303-309.

[4] The following is based on CNN's exit-poll data for the 2008 and 2010 elections.

[5] D. Croteau, *Politics and the Class Divide: Working People and the Middle-Class Left* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995) for a critique of the dominance of "reactionary" ideas among workers in the US.

[6] Frank Newport, "Democrats, Republicans Differ Widely on Taxing the Rich: Majority of Americans Agree that Wealth in the US Should Be More Evenly Distributed," April 14, 2011. Similar results are found in the surveys analyzed by Paul Street and Anthony DiMaggio, *Crashing the Tea Party: Mass Media and the Campaign to Remake American Politics* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Press, 2011), Chapter 3.

[7] John Aloysius Farrell, "Koch Industries' Web of Influence," *Huffington Post*, April 4, 2011. Andy Kroll, "The Right-Wing Network Behind the War on Unions," *Mother Jones*, April 25, 2011.

[8] Street and DiMaggio, *Crashing the Tea Party*, Chapters 1 and 6. Data on campaign contributions from capitalists—or "business"—is from Center for Responsible Politics, "2010 Overview: Business-Labor-Ideology Split in PAC and Individual Donations to Candidates and Parties," *OpenSecrets.org*.

[9] Center for Responsible Politics, "2012 Presidential Candidate Fundraising Summary," *OpenSecrets.org*.

[10] US Chamber of Commerce, "U.S. Chamber President Looks Toward an Improving Economy, Promotes Plan to Spur Job Creation," January 11, 2011.

[11] "Default is Not An Option—Spread the Word," *Chamber Post: A Blog for Business*, July 21, 2011.

[12] US Chamber of Commerce, "U.S. Chamber Urges High Court to Strike Down 2007 Arizona Immigration Law," September 1, 2010.

[13] Miriam Jordan, "More 'Silent Raids' Over Immigration," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2011.

[14] Business Roundtable, "Policy Burdens Inhibiting Economic Growth," June 21, 2010.

[15] Business Roundtable, "Taxing American Corporations in the Global Marketplace: The Case for Corporate Tax Reform," April 2011.

[16] Business Roundtable, "BRT Releases First Quarter 2011 CEO Economic Outlook Survey Media Conference Call Transcript," March 30, 2011. Business Roundtable, "," April 7, 2011.

[17] Letter on Debt Limit to Congressional Leadership, May 11, 2011.]

In the run-up to the deadline on the Federal debt ceiling, capital found other ways to make clear its desire for a compromise that would preserve the credit of the U.S. state. According to the *New York Times*, [Nicholas Confessore, "New Stable of Wealthy Donors Fueled Obama Campaign's Record Fund-Raising Quarter," *New York Times*, July 16, 2011.

[18] arl Hulse and Helene Cooper, "Obama and Leaders Reach Debt Deal," *New York Times* , August 1, 2011); Michael D. Shear, "Boehner Outlines Debt Agreement," *New York Times—The Caucus: The Politics and Government Blog of The Times*, July 31, 2011.

[19] Both Street and DiMaggio, *Crashing the Tea Party*, Chapters 1 and 3, and Bhaskar Sunkara, "A Thousand Platitudes: Liberal Hysteria and the Tea Party," *New Politics Blog*, June 2, 2011, present ample evidence that Tea Party supporters tend to be professionals, well-off entrepreneurs and managers whose household incomes generally put them in the top 20% of all U.S. households.

While Alexander Cockburn's claim that the majority of Tea Party support comes from the most economically squeezed elements of traditional small business people is clearly off the mark, Dan La Botz (Personal Correspondence, June 11, 2011) has shared his initial research on the influence of Tea Party politics among a minority of white small businessmen and union and non-union workers. A *New York Times*/CBS News poll taken before the 2010 Congressional elections showed a small—less than 5 percent—shift of voters with family incomes of less than \$50,000 toward the Republicans. However, the biggest shift of almost 20 percent came from College graduates. "More Groups Blue in '08 Are Now Red," *New York Times*, October 28, 2010.

[20] In a number of writings, Paul Street and Anthony DiMaggio have argued that the Tea Party is a media-driven "re-branding" of the Republican Party. There is no question that much of the cadre of the Tea Party comes from the ranks of the Republicans, and right-wing media like Fox News has fueled its "rancid populism." However, the rise of the Tea Party does have the potential of not simply "re-branding" the Republicans, but changing its social character—from the preferred party of U.S. capital to a party of the radicalized middle classes.

[21] As Clara Zetkin, the German revolutionary socialist, pointed out in 1923, fascism—which unleashes the armed middle classes against the organizations of working people—is "a punishment of the proletariat for failing to carry on the revolution begun in Russia." ("Fascism," *Labor Monthly*, August 1923.) As we will argue below, the working class in the United States and in most of the advanced capitalist world has not only "failed to carry on the revolution" but has been in continuous organizational and political retreat for most of the last thirty years.

[22] Street and DiMaggio, *Crashing the Tea Party*, Chapter 6. While the equation of the Tea Party with classical fascism is clearly wrong, we disagree with Sunkara ("A Thousand Platitudes") who claims that "The tale of the Tea Party, full of sound and fury, may signify nothing." Sunkara systematically under-estimates the virulent, though "color-blind" racism of the "mainstream" of the Tea Party—not merely the fringe of open white supremacists. Street and DiMaggio, *Crashing the Tea Party*, Chapter 4, detail the centrality of racism to the Tea Party's appeal to white middle class voters.

[23] Our analysis of the contradictions of reformism is drawn from Robert Brenner, "The Paradox of Social-Democracy: The American Case" in M. Davis, F. Pfiel, and M. Springer (eds.), *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook*. (London: Verso, 1985), pp. 32-86.

[24] A similar point is made by Street and DiMaggio, *Crashing the Tea Party*, Chapter 7.

[25] Linda Burnham, "Notes on an Orientation to the Obama Presidency," *ZNet*, February 25, 2009.

[26] Kenneth Baer's *Reinventing Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism from Reagan to Clinton*

(Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2000) details this process in the 1980s and 1990s.

[27] Jim VandeHei and Mike Allen, "The GOP's Winning Streak," Politico.com, April 10, 2011.

[28] The National Commission On Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, *The Moment of Truth: Report of the National Commission On Fiscal Responsibility and Reform*, December 2010.

[29] Jeff Zeleny, "After Protracted Fight, Both Sides Emerge Bruised," New York Times, July 31, 2011.

[30] Solidarity's pamphlet, *Bush's War, the 2004 Elections and the Movements*, pp. 16-29 recounts this history. Sunkara ("A Thousand Platitudes") makes a compelling critique of liberal and left calls for "national unity" and a defense of capitalist state institutions against the Tea Party right.

[31] Mark Landler and Michael D. Shear, "Taking on GOP, Obama Unveils Debt Relief Program," New York Times, April 14, 2011.

[32] Our analysis does not lead us to support the strategy of some on the left for an appeal to the "base" of the Tea Party on the basis of economic populism. The upper middle class social composition of the Tea Party and their racism and hostility to egalitarian social policies would make such appeals futile. Richard Wolff, "A New Dawn for the US Left," Guardian.co.uk, June 3, 2011.

[33] Wolff, in the same essay ("A New Dawn"), predicts a resurgent U.S. left.

[34] See the excellent reports from Andrew Serantinger and others on the struggle in Madison on the Solidarity Webzine. Paul Street presents a similar analysis in "Report from North America: The Wisconsin Rebellion and its Limits in a Global Context," May Day International, May 1, 2011.

[35] "Starting All Over From Scratch? A Plea for "Radical Reform" of Our Movement," New Politics, No. 51 (Summer 2011), p. 103.

[36] "Notes Toward a Socialism for our Times," New Socialist, 63 (2008-1), pp. 4-8.

[37] Johanna Brenner, "Caught in the Whirlwind: Working-Class Families Face the Economic Crisis," in L. Panitch, G. Albo, V. Chibber (eds.) *The Crisis This Time: Socialist Register 2011* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011), 64-82.