

USA: Swing of the Pendulum?

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THE DEFEAT OF the Wisconsin recall of anti-labor Governor Scott Walker, along with the Republican jubilation that followed, demands a close examination of the state of U.S. politics. In the post-Citizens United era, it's certainly true that unlimited Super-PAC funds from the likes of the Koch Brothers and other dark corners of "the one percent" lubricate the political machinery of the right wing's "ground game," savage media wars, lying attack ads and voter suppression campaigns.

But simply wailing about the tilted playing field doesn't really explain the right wing's game, and why its message reaches an audience among large sectors of white "middle-class" voters, i.e. mainly working people.

Make no mistake, Wisconsin revealed not only the rising power of the right wing, but even more the vacuous qualities of the Democrats who ran the same far-from-pro-labor Milwaukee mayor who'd already lost to Walker in the previous election, and the tragic absence of an independent progressive alternative. Writers Arun Gupta and Steve Horn got it right:

"Walker won because he had a vision, however brutish, and he forged a rich-poor alliance that supports it. Barrett [the Democratic candidate and Milwaukee mayor] lost because he stood for nothing, because the Democrat Party shuns organized labor, because labor retreats from street politics even when they have the upper hand and because progressives confuse elections with movements. In short, Walker's cakewalk is a microcosm of why American politics tilts further and further right year after year, and why the Democrats, progressives and unions have an endless capacity for self-inflicted wounds...the election portends deep trouble for a president and party facing an energized right in November's election." [1]

Does Wisconsin put the Republicans in the lead for the national election? This is certainly not the time to predict the outcome for November, because an awful lot is going to happen before then. But the trends suggested by the Wisconsin result transcend local and state lines.

In the U.S. economy, corporate profits are soaring while the job market stagnates — lifting the short-term confidence of the ruling class, even while leaving millions of working people sinking into misery with less and less hope and certainly less confidence in president Obama. Therein lies the material basis for the kind of politics that the Republicans count on to steamroll to power. "Rich-poor alliance" isn't quite accurate, but it is certainly shocking that polls in Wisconsin showed 38% of union households voting for Walker.

Right-wing politics, whether in America or Europe or pretty much anywhere, above all appeals to the emotions of insecurity and fear — and following the financial meltdown of 2008 and the subsequent Great Recession, gut-wrenching insecurity has hit more of the U.S. population than at any time since the 1930s.

With fear comes scapegoating, a favorite tool of the right wing everywhere and certainly a recurring theme in U.S. history. Today financial insecurity, far more than all other factors combined, causes family breakups — which right-wing and religious demagogues then blame on same-sex marriage. Bailed-out banks and corporations sit on hoards of cash, failing to lend or hire, creating a jobs hemorrhage that is in turn blamed on “illegal immigrants” and “those (nonwhite and undeserving) welfare recipients” and “rich unemployment benefits that discourage work.” This is all absurd of course, but rationality doesn’t matter.

Added to these factors is Obama’s economic stimulus program that faltered. From the beginning it was too weak to overcome the massive unemployment that exploded in the wake of the 2008 financial meltdown (to say nothing of a deep global capitalist crisis that can’t ultimately be “solved” by Keynesian methods, let alone in one country). But even this too-little attempt is condemned by the Republicans as “more government waste,” while trillions pour down the rat holes of the lost wars they started in Iraq and Afghanistan...

While the right wing mobilizes its base and organizes its lavishly funded campaign, Democrats mainly insist not only on fighting the political war on the weakest ground — refusing to defend the right of collective bargaining that triggered the Wisconsin upheaval — but on channeling real mass resistance movements into the same quicksand. Again, Gupta and Horn nail the point in the Wisconsin case:

“Whereas the recall began as a democratic, populist revolt, by the end, the politics were dictated by consultants, pollsters and advertising campaigns. Rather than spending the last 16 months organizing workers and the unemployed, building community groups, educating the rank and file on radical social history, democratizing union decision making, going door to door relentlessly and patiently explaining how unions can increase everyone’s wages and benefits, all the energy was spent on futile campaigns for Democrats who support austerity-lite policies.”

Prospects Moving Forward

As we’ve noted, a great many events will be shaping the political terrain between now and the November election, in ways that are currently unpredictable — but in a volatile political climate there are certainly prospects for fear and uncertainty to rise.

As *Against the Current* goes to press, the Supreme Court ruling on the Affordable Health Care Act (“Obamacare” as Republicans gratuitously label it) is pending. If the Court makes an ideologically-driven decision to strike the reform down completely, the likely outcome would be political pandemonium and chaos in the health care industry, as piratical insurance corporations revert to all the obscene abuses that the law partially curbs.

A recent *New York Times* article pointed to sharply declining confidence in the Court among the U.S. population in the wake of so many highly political 5-4 rulings [2]. One might speculate that the article’s timing conveys a subtle message to Supreme Court judges from a relatively liberal segment of “the one percent,” warning that a highly partisan ruling on health care reform could seriously undercut the Court’s legitimacy. In any case, we’ll find out whose political base will be energized or outraged, mobilized or demoralized by this contentious ruling on a spiralling health care crisis.

Meanwhile, the desperately fragile U.S. economic recovery will be impacted, materially and psychologically, by the European economies’ slide into recession and the fate of the euro currency. As Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal are battered into depression by European and international financial demands for savage austerity — and as the British economy is shoved into the ground by

the policies of its own government — the outcome will be decided as much in the streets as in voting booths and parliamentary debates. The narrow electoral victory in Greece of the pro-austerity New Democracy party, just before *ATC* went to press, is only a temporary pause in the crisis of the eurozone. No one believes that Greece will pay its debts or that its economy has any hope of recovery for years to come.

The U.S. right wing and Tea Party scream that the United States “will turn into Greece” if “uncontrolled government spending and debt” aren’t immediately reversed. Their targets for cuts of course don’t include the military budget, but every social gain won by working people since the 1930s — Social Security and Medicare, food stamps and unemployment benefits, workplace safety and environmental protection, banking regulation, the right to decent public education and government enforcement of civil rights laws.

Due to the special levels of economic illiteracy and pure cynical greed prevailing in U.S. politics, the rightwing program of austerity here calls not only for budget cuts that are driving state and local governments into crisis and bankruptcy, but for more tax cuts to benefit the affluent and corporate America — so-called “job creators” that aren’t investing now, partly because they don’t need to and partly because they see markets shrinking for most of what they’d be producing. The Republican (Paul Ryan) budget, anointed “marvelous” by Mitt Romney, would produce greater deficits and is probably actually intended to do so.

The Democrats’ response will, predictably, denounce the Republicans for being mean-spirited and favoring the rich — all of which is true, but less and less compelling in the absence of a serious program that addresses the fears of people whose votes the right wing seeks.

The boast that president Obama saved General Motors is old news. That he killed Osama bin Laden and wiped out more Taliban fighters, al-Qaeda leaders, civilian villagers and wedding parties than George W. Bush, and ordered more U.S. citizens to be targeted by remote-control drone strikes too, helps establish his warmaking credentials but doesn’t make people feel safer in their real lives (while his voting base thought he’d be ending wars, not expanding them).

African Americans will certainly turn out to reelect president Obama. Despite their disappointments and the horrific disaster confronting Black communities, they’re not going to renounce the first Black president after all those white men had two centuries to screw up — and they’re going to fight back against the neo-segregationist drive to keep them from voting. [3]

Some key parts of the Democratic base, however, have reasons to be severely alienated. One sector is teachers, who are under powerful assault from a genuinely bipartisan, right wing and “liberal,” lobby for school charters and privatization. This fall, a massive confrontation may take place between the Chicago Teachers Union and the nasty administration of “Mayor One Percent” Rahm Emanuel, president Obama’s former chief of staff.

Chicago is also the home base of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, a pioneer in the campaign to turn teachers from educators into robotic administrators of “data-driven” standardized tests from kindergarten on up. Such a strike, if it materializes into a showdown between labor and a Democratic administration, could have a profound if unpredictable political impact. It might rally other teachers’ unions and public and private sector workers to begin building a real resistance to bipartisan austerity policies.

The One Percent: What, We Worry?

Our concern goes beyond the electoral outcomes in November. Yes, the election matters, and we intend to discuss the critical issues and prospects in coming issues of *ATC*. But it's movements of active resistance pioneered by the Wisconsin Uprising, Occupy, heroic immigrant youth and other manifestations that will have to shape a viable future — if there is to be one — for “the 99%.” So far, these movements have raised some concern but not enough serious alarm in ruling-class circles to alter the rightward trajectory of bourgeois politics.

Back in 2008, it wasn't only the population as a whole but also Wall Street and the banks that were repelled by the failures of the Bush regime. They turned to Barack Obama to save corporate capital's butt, and he did so in style. Four years later, U.S. capital is more than happy to have a far-right Republican party exploit the fears and insecurity of so many ordinary people left marooned by a largely jobless recovery. Indeed, big capital seems curiously unconcerned by the potential scenario of a Romney presidency held captive by a Tea Party bloc in Congress, which might be paralyzed in the event of a new financial meltdown.

There are of course myriad possible presidential and Congressional outcomes, but what's more important is that the steep decline in the lives of working people in a rapidly crumbling society will continue without letup until millions of people are inspired, and the one percent scared witless, by movements of resistance — or until the decline itself produces a social explosion.

The Editors, Against the Current (ATC)

For further discussion, see Solidarity's "[The Politics of Austerity, Occupy and the 2012 US Elections](#)," available on ESSF (article 25850)

and

"[Wisconsin \(USA\): A Recall Post-Mortem](#)", available on ESSF (article 25568).

P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) n°159, July/August 2012. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://truth-out.org/news/item/9661-the-silver-lining-in-walkers-victory>

[2] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/08/us/politics/44-percent-of-americans-approve-of-supreme-court-in-new-poll.html?_r=2&hp

[3] See Malik Miah's column in this issue about the attacks on the crucial post-Civil War "citizenship Amendments" to the U.S. Constitution.