

United States: What Is Trumpism? - A special form of bonapartism

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Among socialists and the broader left there have been a range of views about what Trump represents. These range from that Trump is an aberration and that things will return to “normal” once he is gone, to that Trump is working toward establishing fascism.

I reject the first view. Since 2008 politics in the U.S. and much of the world has undergone an important shift. There is no return.

Those who hold the latter view point to Trump’s overt racism and misogyny, his threats to unleash new wars (even nuclear war), his championing of restrictions on democratic rights, his open America First nationalism, his urging his audiences to attack protesters and reporters, his attacks on the press and so forth. Fascist ideology indeed encompasses these traits, but carries them to an extreme.

The German socialist leader Clara Zetkin, who broke with the Social Democratic Party when it betrayed proletarian internationalism by supporting German imperialism in the First World War, became an important leader of the new Communist International following the Russian Revolution. In 1923, she outlined the characteristics of fascism (as seen in Italy) and how to fight it which became the basis of CI’s analysis, developed further by Leon Trotsky in light of the rise of German Nazism and Spanish Falangism.

Zetkin’s analysis includes that fascism was inextricably tied to the severe economic crisis and ravages of the war in Europe. In both Italy and then Germany, there were massive upsurges of the workers’ socialist movements in response to the crisis, which posed the possibility of socialist revolution. But in both cases, due to inadequate or treacherous leadership, the proletariat failed to resolve the crisis by taking power and beginning to reorganize society.

This failure bred demoralization among the workers and among the impoverished middle class that looked to the working class and socialism as a way out of the crisis. Zetkin said these forces in the peasantry and other middle classes had hoped that “socialism could bring about global change. These expectations were painfully shattered They lost their belief not only in the reformist leaders but in socialism itself” and became ripe for fascist demagoguery.

The ruling capitalist class was frightened by the workers’ potential that had been revealed and began to build up the fascists as an alternative. The existence of revolutionary Soviet Russia and then of the Soviet Union was also a factor.

The triumph of fascism in Italy, Germany and Spain resulted in a reign of terror against all forms of opposition from the working class and the oppressed.

There has never been a mass revolutionary socialist party in the U.S. that could have taken power, and there is certainly not one today. The Stalinist counter-revolution finally succeeded in wiping out the last vestiges of the revolution and overthrew the USSR in 1989-91 and reestablished capitalism.

The ruling class does not need fascism in the U.S. in the current circumstances. Here I would like to make a tentative and incomplete proposal about what Trumpism is.

Trumpism and what it spawns is a grave danger today. Between regular bourgeois democracy and all its shortcomings, and fascism, there are in-between forms, such as military dictatorship. There are also a range of possible forms in what Marx called bonapartism.

Marx analyzed this in the rise of Louis Bonaparte, the nephew of his famous uncle Napoleon Bonaparte. Unlike Napoleon, Louis was a mediocre political figure, like Trump today. But, like Trump, he was a clever maneuverer and demagogue.

There are other similarities. Louis was elected president of France at the end of 1848. In February there had been a revolution against the monarchy, part of the democratic revolutions that swept Europe. In June-July in the first time in the history of capitalism workers rose up to take power, in Paris. This was crushed in blood by the army.

After, the different capitalist parties in parliament were in disarray, fighting each other and in factions within each. Louis presented himself as something like his uncle, a strongman who could cut through the disarray and set things right. After he was elected, there were three years of continuing bickering among the capitalist parties and factions. Louis maneuvered amongst them. At times it looked like he would be curtailed or even impeached, but he won out each time. The population was increasingly exasperated. Louis built up his own base in the army. Finally, conditions reached the point early in 1851 when he could stage a coup, and proclaim himself Emperor Napoleon III (Napoleon II can be ignored).

For different reasons, in the present U.S. what workers' organizations exist play little or no role in politics.

When Trump announced he was running for the Republican nomination he presented himself not only as an open racist, but as the strongman who could "make America great again." In the debates among the 17 or so candidates, he belittled, insulted and accused his rivals as weak, unable to take the bold steps needed. His misogyny was evident as he attacked one of his rivals, a woman, for her looks.

The background to his rise was the fact that the Republicans had become a white racist party, although rarely openly using racist terms like Trump did from the beginning: Mexican immigrants were rapists, drug dealers and other types of criminals. He moved on from there to Blacks, Muslims, all Latinos, foreigners (except whites) and "dog whistles" of anti-Semitism.

Also there was the fact that for some four decades wages had stagnated and sections of the middle class also suffered while the rich grew richer. Then came the financial crash and Great Recession of 2008, and the recovery benefitted the better off while the lower 80 percent continued to struggle to make ends meet. Obama was elected in 2008, but the Democrats did not do much to change these facts.

Both Sanders and Trump in 2016 tapped into this reality for the lower 80 percent, although from opposing sides. Sander raised some pro-worker reforms, while Trump used racist demagoguery to win over struggling whites. In the Democratic primary, the machine was able to smash Sanders, while Trump was able to crush the establishment Republicans, and take over the Republican Party.

In the election, tone deaf Hillary Clinton answered Trump's "make American great again" with "America is already great" while the lower 80 percent knew from experience that wasn't true.

In his nearly two years in office, Trump has intensified his racist rhetoric and actions, succeeding in intensifying attacks on immigrants, winning a partial ban on Muslim's entering the U.S., vilifying women, and everything else we are experiencing. His administration has enfeebled the Environmental Protection Agency on all fronts including measures to enhance fossil fuel production, is on a drive to privatize education, backing white Christian evangelicals' attacks on women, and much more.

He gives cover to the extreme white nationalist alt-right. Some of these groups do have fascist ideology, and some engage in violence against racial and religious minorities. Isolated individuals also are using violence, as we have recently seen in Kentucky, Pittsburgh and the pipe bomb packages. Trump encourages such violence with "dog whistles."

Fascist movements in Italy, Germany and Spain also engaged in violence. Another feature of fascism, Zetkin explained, was it is a mass movement that engages in mass organized violence against the workers' movement and the oppressed.

The present fascist organizations in the U.S. are many small groups, that squabble with each other over ideology, and especially over who should be Il Duce or Führer, as each group's leader thinks they are the one. After Charlottesville last year, many of the groups that had come together fell to back-biting over tactics - one group committed murder, which others thought was counter-productive.

Should these groups coalesce around a single leader and ideology, they would present a greater danger, even if fascism isn't on the agenda.

An aspect of Trump's authoritarianism is his demand for unconditional loyalty from those around him, not only to his policies, but to himself personally. This is why he continues to reshuffle his cabinet. He also demands that Republicans maintain personal loyalty to him, and punishes those who deviate.

Like Louis, Trump seeks to establish an authoritarian regime. Louis, referring to France's Napoleonic past, made himself Emperor. Trump looks to U.S. history, and seeks to solidify authoritarianism with bourgeois democratic trappings while greatly restricting democratic rights, with himself at the top.

I would characterize Trumpism as a special form of bonapartism. We see this developing in Europe, too. In Hungary the government of Viktor Orbán is such a government, a racist, nationalist and authoritarian government with highly controlled democratic trappings.

Marx called the motley opposition to Louis the Party of Order. Our Party of Order today consists of most Democratic politicians, some Republicans and other officials. Another self-contradictory motley crew.

We will see how this struggle plays out in the next period.

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