Backing Biden Will Not Stop Trumpism

written by Charlie Post, Ashley Smith | October 24, 2020

Much of the United States Left is in the midst of an oddly-timed embrace of lesser evilism. They are calling for socialists to support Biden at the very moment Trump's campaign seems in crisis and headed for defeat.

Trump ranted through a disastrous debate performance, contracted COVID along with a few dozen other Republicans, and after being dosed with an unproven cocktail of drugs and steroids, has become even more unstable than usual. Not surprisingly, his poll numbers have tanked nationally, particularly in battleground states, so that now Republicans fear losing both the presidency and the Senate.

Nevertheless, key figures on the U.S. Left, including long-time supporters of independent politics, are pushing the new socialist movement not just to vote for Biden, but to actively campaign for him. Stephen Shalom's recent article, "The greater evil," is perhaps the most reasoned intervention so far.

Responding to our piece, "The lesser evil trap," Shalom challenges both the logic and evidence of our case against campaigning for Biden. Against us, he contends that the "lesser-evil strategy" has actually succeeded in stopping the greater evil, and that electing Democrats has created more favorable conditions for working class and popular struggles.

Against campaigning for the lesser evil

To be clear, our argument is *not* about what comrades do during the time it takes to cast a ballot, as Shalom claims. What we oppose is the new socialist Left, especially the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), spending its time, money, and energy, *campaigning* for Biden.

We also oppose social movements and unions working for a candidate that stands against all our demands, from defunding the police, to Medicare for All, and the Green New Deal. We should not front for "the lesser of two rapists," who promises to restore the norms of the Obama administration—wars, austerity, privatization, hostility to unions, mass deportations, and continued violence against people of color.

Unlike Shalom, we do not believe that the past eighty years provide support for the claim that electing the lesser evil will defeat the far right. In election after election, each "the most important of our lifetime," the Left has repeatedly surrendered its political independence to campaign for one or another Democrat to stop a clearly more right-wing Republican.

We have stopped organizing mass struggle, ceased educating activists about the need for political independence, and moderated our demands to promote a capitalist party. Once in power, that same

party reneges on its promises of reform, launching new attacks on the working class and oppressed.

Even worse, once we have subordinated ourselves to the Democrats, we have left a political vacuum for the Republicans, who are not scared to fight for their politics. They take advantage of disappointment with Democrats to reelect Republicans, moving the government further to the right.

Falling into this disastrous cycle today would be catastrophic, as the Trumpite Republican Party, especially it's far right base, is more radical, more nationalist, and far more dangerous than ever before.

Lesser evilism fails to stop fascism and dictatorship

Shalom counters our argument against lesser-evilism by dismissing two of the most important historical cases—in the 1930s when the strategy failed to stop fascism in Germany and military dictatorship in Spain. We believe he is mistaken to disregard the brutal lessons of this history.

In Germany, the Social Democratic Party sacrificed its class independence in order to support General Paul Von Hindenburg in the 1932 election. The Social Democrats backed Hindenburg to stop Hitler from winning the presidency, only to see Hindenburg turn around and appoint Hitler Chancellor. Lesser evilism paved the way to the greatest defeat for working people in history.

Shalom recognizes these facts but contends that there was no other viable strategy. However, as even he concedes, the working class parties—the Social Democratic and the Communist parties—could have formed a united front, electorally and in the streets, to challenge both Hindenburg and Hitler. In other words, *if they had rejected lesser evilism* they might have stopped both the lesser and greater evil.

In Spain, the Communist Party abandoned class independence and the fight for revolution to support a popular front with bourgeois parties, in order to defend the republic against Franco's military uprising. Then, in order to keep the peace with their capitalist allies, the popular front government rejected demands for land reform, workers control of production, and Moroccan independence.

These policies demoralized the forces that had defeated Franco's troops in the first months of the civil war, paving the way for Franco's victory, and bloody repression of the working class and peasantry. Confronted with this failure of lesser evilism, Shalom claims that it is an "inappropriate" precedent because we do not have a surging workers movement in the U.S. today.

Even worse, he contends a revolution in Spain could not have won anyway, implicitly giving support to the failed popular front strategy of the Communist Party. Today, amidst a growing far right, a rise in class struggle, and the emergence of a new socialist movement, the lesson that lesser evilism will not stop fascism and dictatorship is more important than ever.

The myth of lesser evils providing favorable conditions

Shalom argues that supporting the Democrats has created favorable conditions for the social and labor movements, and the Left. But, when the cases that he presents are examined closely, they demonstrate the exact opposite.

Let's start with the Black Lives Matter uprising of this spring and summer. It is true that the movement has not achieved its most radical demands—the defunding of the police and their eventual abolition. Yet, contrary to Shalom's claim that it has won only symbolic victories, the movement has caused significant cuts to the Seattle Police Department budget. And it forced the expulsion of the Seattle Police Officers Guild from the King County Labor Council. The movement has also forced the

expulsion of police from schools in several cities.

These victories were not aided by Democrats in power, but were won by *challenging* them. In fact, the movement was born out of the frustration with the failure of Democrats to stop police violence, including the murder of Black and Brown people. To build on these victories and win more radical demands like defunding, the movement will have to stage even more militant mass actions against Democratic city officials.

Distorting the role of the Democrats in the civil rights movement

Shalom also claims that the Democrats were pivotal to the dismantling of Jim Crow by the civil rights movement. He points to President Johnson signing the 1964 Civil Rights Act and deploying federal troops to protect the march from Selma to Montgomery, contending that if Barry Goldwater had been president, neither would have occurred.

The actual history does not support this narrative. The civil rights movement in the South, and later, in the big cities of the north, directly confronted the Democratic Party. The Dixicrats not only ruled the South before 1968, they had imposed the old Jim Crow in the 1890s. Their slogan was, in the words of Democratic Alabama Governor, George Wallace, “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”

When Martin Luther King Jr. led the movement north, they fought urban machines of the Democratic Party, like that of Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, who oversaw de facto segregation in everything from housing to employment. Far from creating favorable conditions, the Democratic Party was the problem.

The mass movement forced Johnson, who had long cut deals with the Dixiecrats and the Daleys, to sign the Civil Rights Act. Moreover, when Johnson sent federal troops into the South he did so to neutralize the movement, not fulfill its demands. (The Republican Eisenhower did the same against Democrat Orval Faubus in Arkansas, who had been blocking the desegregation of Little Rock schools in 1957.)

Attorney General Robert Kennedy summed up the Democratic Party approach when he met with Congress of Racial Equality leaders and tried to buy them off. “Why don’t you guys cut all that shit, freedom riding and sitting-in shit, and concentrate on voter registration. If you do that, I’ll get you tax-free status,” Kennedy said to them.

Throughout the 1960s, Democrats tried to shift the focus among movement activists away from demands for universal social programs and desegregating schools and housing, to an exclusive focus on rewinning the right to vote. The movement did not cooperate and instead staged escalating protests to win the substantial reforms of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Once activists abandoned “protest for politics” to become part of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party in the mid-1970s, the Black freedom struggle won no new victories. It has suffered the steady roll-back of past gains under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

The Democrats and the labor movement: a barren marriage

Shalom also misrepresents the relationship of the insurgent industrial unions with the Democratic Party in the 1930s. He claims that Democratic Governor of Michigan Frank Murphy played a key role in preventing the use of the National Guard to physically remove sit-down strikers from General Motors (GM) Flint plants in January 1937.

The historical record contradicts Shalom's argument. The sit-down strikes posed a particular challenge to capital; while conventional picket lines could be broken by the police and National Guard, physical force against sit-down strikers risked the destruction of expensive machinery in the plants.

It was this danger that led not only Governor Murphy, but the top executives at General Motors as well, to seek a peaceful solution to the Flint strike. The seizure of Chevrolet Plant 4, where key equipment was housed, further raised the cost of disruption for General Motors, and led to their capitulation to the United Automobile Workers.

Militant tactics that directly challenged capitalist control of the workplace led to the success of the new industrial unions—not the presence of Democrats in office. This was made clear by the defeat of the Little Steel strike in the spring of 1937.

The Steel Workers' Organizing Committee expected the Roosevelt administration and the Democratic Governors of Ohio and Pennsylvania to pressure the smaller steel corporations into recognizing their union. As a result, they opted for a completely conventional and legal strike strategy.

With no threat to capitalist property, the Democratic Governors and Chicago mayor dispatched the police and National Guard to attack picket lines. They killed several and wounded dozens more in the Memorial Day Massacre, helping to defeat the strike.

Examples of Democratic strike breaking and betrayal of promises to unions have filled volumes. This actual history affirms Mike Davis' argument that the relationship of the labor movement with the Democratic Party has been a "barren marriage."

Democrats against reform

Shalom leaves out the countless examples of when Democrats have coopted and repressed social struggles. Here are just a few.

In 1964, Johnson portrayed Goldwater as an irresponsible war-monger, ready to escalate the war in Vietnam—which Johnson himself did with a vengeance after his election. His ally, Daley, the Democratic mayor in Chicago, had no problem unleashing a police riot against anti-war demonstrators at the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

On the presidential campaign trail, Bill Clinton promised to block the North American Free Trade Act, which garnered him the endorsement of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations. Once in office, Clinton signed NAFTA, undermining unions and working conditions in both the U.S. and Mexico.

Barack Obama promised progressive immigration reform during his first presidential campaign, winning him the support of immigrant rights activists who had just organized nationwide strikes and demonstrations on "the day without an immigrant." As president, Obama became the "Deporter-in-chief," expelling more immigrants than any other president in U.S. history.

Victories can be won under Republicans

The flip side of Shalom's mistaken claim that Democrats create favorable conditions is the equally mistaken implication that victories cannot be won under Republicans. The historical record again proves the opposite.

Richard Nixon, the archetype of the anti-Communist, reactionary Republican, granted major reforms when confronted with mass struggle. The surging social movements and strike wave of the early 1970s forced him to end the Vietnam War, dramatically increase social welfare spending, establish the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Mass struggle has also scored victories from the Supreme Court, even when it was stacked with Republican appointees. Perhaps the best example is Roe v. Wade. This ruling was a response to a burgeoning movement for "free abortion on demand" that forced Republican California Governor, Ronald Reagan, to decriminalize abortion in 1967.

We should also not forget that the most "liberal" Supreme Court of the twentieth century was led by a San Francisco District Attorney, Earl Warren, who tried to jail longshore strikers in 1934. Warren oversaw the internment of the Japanese during World War II and ran as the Republican Vice Presidential candidate in 1948, promising to use Taft-Hartley against unions, and to outlaw the Communist Party. The mass civil rights movement and the struggles it inspired over the next three decades transformed Warren from a reactionary Republican into a liberal icon.

Democrats to blame for the rise of Trump

Independent mass struggles are decisive for winning reforms regardless of who is in office. They are also the main vehicle to defeat the Right. Supporting the Democrats as a lesser evil, however, has compromised those struggles in the past and will do so again today, creating space for the growth of the far right.

Why? Because the Democrats and their policies have been the petri dish for the growth of the Trumpite Right. For the past three decades, the Democrats worked with the Republicans to push through the neoliberal restructuring of capitalism, generating class and social inequalities not seen since the Robber Baron era.

Obama's response to the Great Recession made those conditions worse; he bailed out banks and corporations, and imposed austerity on workers and the poor, leading to an epidemic of diseases of despair like opioid addiction. The neoliberalism of the Democrats alienated workers, oppressed people, and downwardly mobile sections of the middle class—opening the door not only for the socialist Left, but also the nationalist far right.

Trump bolted through that door; combining opposition to the establishment with racism, xenophobia, and misogyny; offering reactionary solutions to real problems. He galvanized mostly the middle class, but also a section of desperate workers, to ride to victory in the slaveholder's Electoral College.

Backing Biden will not stop Trumpism

The left will not defeat Trump or Trumpism by supporting Biden and the Democratic Party. The Right will grow no matter what the outcome of the election. If Trump wins, which looks increasingly unlikely, he will embolden the Right as he has done throughout his term.

If Biden wins, he will not stop the Right. Despite Bernie Sander's claims, Biden is not promising progressive reforms that would rip up the roots of the Right. Instead, he intends to create a government of national unity that restores the neoliberal consensus and rehabilitates U.S. imperialism to project its power throughout the world, especially against China.

Those policies will enflame grievances that Trump—or even more reactionary figures—will exploit, to build right wing electoral campaigns and armed fascist gangs. Already, the Republican Right are

plotting subterfuge to paralyze an incoming Biden administration.

The main danger in such a situation is that the Left will not only give Biden a honeymoon, but defend him against Republican attacks, further marginalizing itself as an alternative to the two capitalist parties. That will leave the Right as the only opposition to a neoliberal regime.

For independence, struggle for reform, and fighting the Right

The tragic dynamic of this long election cycle underscores the importance of opposing lesser evilism. The Left began with unrealistic expectations that Sanders could win the nomination and push the Democrats in a progressive direction.

Predictably, the capitalist establishment united to defeat Sanders more easily than it did in 2016, and held him to his pledge to campaign for the Democratic nominee. Most of the Left have followed him to support Biden.

It is particularly tragic to see DSA leaders issue a statement calling for members to campaign against Trump (i.e. for Biden), in violation of the "Bernie or Bust" resolution passed at our last convention. While their organizing for Biden will have no impact on the election, it will encourage a new generation of socialists to adopt the self-defeating politics of lesser evilism.

They and others on the Left justify their decision on the basis that Trump is a fascist who poses a unique danger to democracy. They argue in this "exceptional case" that the Left should abandon its opposition to the Democrats to defeat a potential autocrat in the White House.

Trump may aspire to be a Mussolini and rule without the usual limits of capitalist democracy. However, most Republican elected officials, the state bureaucracy, Pentagon, CIA, FBI, as well as the majority of the capitalist class, do not support the imposition of a dictatorship.

The real fascist danger is in the streets. While the far right and fascist militias are a growing threat—as the plot by a Michigan militia plot to kidnap the state governor proves—fortunately, they are still internally divided and relatively small in number.

After an all-out national mobilization to Portland, Oregon, the Proud Boys managed to assemble only 200 people. We can defeat their ilk not by relying on Biden's deployment of the FBI—which has always targeted the Left—but by building mass mobilizations to confront them and drive them off the streets.

In order for the new socialist Left to survive, grow, and build a real alternative to the two parties of capital, we need to break with the disastrous legacy of lesser evilism. We encourage socialists not to waste their time campaigning for Biden and his party, no matter what they do at the voting booth, or on their ballot.

We must prioritize building class and social struggles, beginning by defending the right to vote and the election outcome by taking to the streets—something Democrats will oppose, urging reliance on the courts and Congress, instead. And we need to prepare *now* to confront the continued capitalist offensive that a Biden administration will lead in the coming months and years.

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