

Challenge for the Left, Launching a Movement against the Washington Status Quo

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As Biden enters office, the left must properly reflect on what has been perhaps the most contemptible administration in US history, to launch a movement of our own against the bipartisan neoliberal and imperialist hegemony.

Though some aspects of the US's democratic deficit like racially targeted voter suppression have admittedly marginally disadvantaged the Democrats, the two major parties share equal blame for the degeneration of the US into an outright one dollar, one vote plutocracy. So much so, that in several of the last few elections Democratic Party presidential candidates received more in campaign contributions from Wall Street than their Republican rivals.

Trump successfully tapped into widespread disaffection with this status quo by portraying himself as inherently free from the shackles of special interests since he is purportedly a "self-made" billionaire. Of course, from the stacking of his administration with corporate insiders to his enactment of pro-business deregulatory policies, Trump has shown himself to be every bit as beholden to special interests as any of his predecessors - if not more so. But in a prevailing culture that has been deeply vulgarized and in which every manner of conspiracy theory has been normalized, Trump was nonetheless able to present himself as the champion of ordinary people, which translated into an electoral college victory in 2016 and winning of over 70 million votes in 2020 (the second largest amount ever cast after those cast for Biden in the same election).

Trumpism, therefore, is not - as the Democratic Party portrays it - some kind of aberration from an otherwise noble past. Rather, it is an inevitable consequence of the Democratic Party cozying up to corporate interests just as much as their Republican rivals, offering only a slightly watered-down iteration of the Republicans' "free" market economic policies at home and imperialist interventionism abroad. This failure to offer a real alternative allowed Trump, a far-right faux populist who appealed to people's desperation, to fill a void as a did the fascist movements of the

1930s did in Italy and Germany.

One factor makes Trumpism distinct from outright fascism. Under the traditional fascism of the 1930s, the capitalist class was allowed to keep its profits but voluntarily ceded a degree of control over economic decision-making to the state in exchange for the state using its power to crush unions and any other mechanisms that provided worker protections and a counterbalance to the power of capital. Trumpism admittedly has not gone this far. But this is simply because capitalism is not currently undergoing a crisis comparable to that of the 1930s when fascism first flourished. Therefore, the capitalist class does not at present have the need to compromise in this manner. And for this reason, the corporate and other private interests that line the pockets of the status quo politicians (who Trump built his political persona criticizing), in a bizarre irony, ended up preferring Trump. After all, they get all of the crushing of social protections and workers' rights with none of the compromise. Furthermore, such a person can hoodwink large swathes of the beleaguered masses into supporting a solidification of the corporate capture of the state while getting them to think they are somehow supporting the opposite.

We are now likely to witness the cycle repeating itself. As soon as Biden enters the White House, he will return Washington mostly to business-as-usual. And that business-as-usual was, of course, what led to Trumpism in the first place. Like his predecessors Obama and Clinton, he will pay lip service to the small progressive wing of his party and its naïve supporters who think the Democratic Party can somehow be reformed from within. What they miss is that corporate and billionaire backers that bankrolled Biden's campaign now expect a return on their investment. And if he fails to follow through, he and his party will no longer receive their backing, spelling oblivion for his and other establishment Democrats' entire political careers as well as the party itself.

Some claim the incoming Biden administration can be pressured into adopting large swathes of Bernie Sanders' policy platform via the mass mobilization of social movements. According to this argument, this would ideally be modelled on the mobilizations that went alongside Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidency and ultimately resulted in his administration's set of 'New Deal' reforms. But this notion is flawed on a number of levels.

First of all, perhaps the most central part of this mobilization was the US's then-powerful labor movement, which included a number of radical unions such as Industrial Workers of the World. But after World War II, these were crushed under the boot of red scare hysteria and subsequently eclipsed by more conservative unions such as the AFL-CIO. Even this more conservative labor movement has suffered a protracted decline, with unionization rates in the private sector hovering at historic lows.

Secondly, since the (then much poorer and less industrialized) 'solid South' consistently supported the Democrats, the party had a naturally much larger coalition on which to build broad support for radical public policy. Following the Republican capture of the South via its 'southern strategy' and the relocation of industry there following widespread adoption throughout the region of so-called 'right to work' laws, this condition no longer holds.

But thirdly and most importantly, the mobilization that led to the New Deal operated in much different conditions vis-à-vis the corruption of the political system by money. In the 1930s labor unions and progressive organizations formed a much larger part of the Democratic Party's donor base compared to today. Over the decades, the Democratic Party has increasingly morphed into the party of Wall Street and Silicon Valley rather than one that represents the interests of the working and middle classes.

Meanwhile, the erratic and unpredictable nature of the Trump administration has made the

traditional Washington foreign policy establishment uneasy and thereby turned the Democrats into the standard-bearers of neoconservative interventionism. This establishment's most senior godfather, Henry Kissinger, has spoken approvingly of the prospect of Biden becoming president. Naturally enough, Biden's cabinet is already shaping up to be a veritable who's who of US imperialism.

The inevitable question of 'what to do?' then arises for those of us who oppose the status quo and still hold out for the possibility of an alternative to this bipartisan hegemony of endless war, ever-rising inequality, ever-diminishing civil liberties, rampant environmental degradation, and the crushing of the few small vestiges of social protections that still remain.

For my part, I sense three tasks for the fractured left. First, we must staunchly resist the temptation of cooption into the graveyard of progressive social movements that is the Democratic Party. Second, we should end the much overstated, though nonetheless damaging, sectarian skirmishes within our own ranks and instead join together to launch an ecumenical grassroots movement for change. This should include the building of third parties - at first at the local level in order to form a foundation on which to build. There have already been encouraging signs of this happening both within the US and internationally. Green parties in Europe, for example, have achieved power in some countries as junior partners of a coalition government. Here in the US, Socialist Alternative member Kshama Sawant has served as a member of the Seattle City Council since 2014. Finally, we must commit to a long haul without illusions of a quick victory if we are to ever stand a hope of overcoming the capitalist/imperialist mode of human organization that, if not replaced, will ultimately lead to our destruction.