

The election of Trump and the struggle ahead

November 15, 2016



1. The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States is a shocking and dangerous turn of events—not only for the U.S., but for the entire world. It is a decisive shift, representing the latest failure of center-right and center-left parties in the advanced capitalist countries in the wake of the Great Recession, opening the way for the triumph of a candidate who used right-wing populism to stoke racism, xenophobia and reaction.

Trump's electoral success on a platform of criminalizing immigrants—Muslims and Mexicans in particular—will give confidence to racist and anti-immigrant forces worldwide, such as the National Front in France, whose leader Marine Le Pen congratulated Trump and said that France would be next, and openly Nazi outfits like Greece's Golden Dawn.

Trump's contempt for women, his history as a sexual predator and his vow to severely restrict abortion will boost reactionaries who want to roll back the gains of the women's movement in this country and beyond.

His "America First" policy could sharpen imperialist rivalries and shake up Washington's alliances as the U.S. maneuvers to maintain global dominance. For certain, he will whip up nationalism, particularly on trade issues, and try to slam the door on the already paltry number of refugees that the U.S. government takes in.

Trump's campaign has already emboldened forces on the right in the U.S., including the far right, and his election will no doubt give them more confidence. We can also expect racist police who already kill Black people with impunity to regard Trump's victory as a green light for more of the same.

2. The election does not, however, represent an overwhelming turn to the right in U.S. society—and not only because Trump lost the popular vote to Hillary Clinton. Instead, we see a political polarization in which both the right and the left are growing.

The direction of politics in the U.S. will depend, above all, on building an activist, fighting left based on social movements, unions and popular organizations. The International Socialist Organization stands with working people and the oppressed who will bear the brunt of the assaults to come under a Trump presidency. We are wholly committed to the struggle to defend those facing the right's attacks and to the wider fight for justice.

3. The U.S. capitalist class and its political establishment will attempt to rein in Trump's excesses. But the Republican Party, taking note of Trump's electoral success, will no doubt also seek to normalize his politics by adapting his agenda to meet their own interests.

The U.S. capitalist class was unable to stop Trump despite overwhelming opposition within its ranks. A ruling class that stood astride the world in the mid-20th century is shot through with internal tensions, as hostile factions buy up politicians who tend to their own particular interests, with scarcely a nod to wider issues.

Without the discipline imposed by the Cold War or pressure from an organized working class, U.S. capitalists have used the neoliberal era to grab all the wealth they can, political consequences be damned. The Republicans act on that agenda openly and aggressively; the Democrats work to mediate the demands of capital with their party's working-class electoral base. Trump, recognizing that millions of people find the status quo intolerable, broke the political consensus, at least rhetorically.

Thus, the White House, once dominated by old-money ruling class figures and politicians socialized in the U.S. military, will now be occupied by a rogue billionaire. Trump, despite the comparisons some have made to the Italian fascist ruler Mussolini, more closely resembles Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian media magnate who used his money and populist appeals to impose himself on a corrupt, conservative political establishment.

4. Whatever sops a Trump administration may provide to workers, if any, will be tiny in comparison to the huge tax giveaways he's already vowed to enact. Corporate America will get the tax holiday it has long demanded for bringing back its overseas horde of cash, and a Republican-controlled Congress will seize the opportunity to roll back regulations and perhaps take aim at Social Security and Medicare.

Tax "reform" under Trump, if realized, would further consolidate the greatest economic inequality that the U.S. has seen in a century. Sections of the white working class that supported Trump would see their conditions worsen as a result, probably very dramatically. The same is true for the backbone of Trump's support in the economically battered white middle class, both small business owners and low-level managers.

This is a recipe for greater social and political discontent as the right wing overreaches, as it has so many times in the past.

5. The Trump election, based on fear and hatred, comes eight years after Barack Obama's first campaign to win the presidency, with its rhetoric of hope and change.

Taking office amid the worst economic crisis since the 1930s with a solid Democratic majority in both houses of Congress, Obama had the opportunity to marginalize the Republicans for a decade at least. Instead, the administration devoted itself to bailing out the banks and shrinking the relative size of the federal government, while workers were given very minimal assistance as unemployment and home foreclosures soared.

The Obama health care law, which could have produced a massively popular and badly needed government-centered program, instead entrenched the power of big insurance and pharmaceutical companies. Workers today are paying higher costs for a declining quality of health care after Obama's reform. On the political side, the opportunity for the Democrats to strengthen their electoral base with a signature achievement like universal health care was squandered. Instead, the Republicans got another stick to beat up on "big government" and the Democrats.

This and other disappointments paved the way for the Republican comeback of 2010, which handed control of state governments to the Republicans and ensured gridlock in Congress ever since, with the GOP winning control of the House and then the Senate. Some increased taxes on the wealthy and business and greater regulation of the banks hasn't prevented Corporate America from reaping record profits, despite the weak economy.

6. The Democratic Party's policies—from Bill Clinton in the 1990s to Obama over the last eight years—have undercut its traditional New Deal/Great Society electoral base in the working class by shrinking the size of the federal government and eliminating federal programs for the poor and vulnerable. The decline of unions—accelerated by the pro-business policies of the Clinton and Obama administrations—has further weakened and disoriented the Democrats' traditional base in the organized working class.

Led by "New Democrats" like Bill Clinton and Al Gore, the party's strategy was to build up electoral networks through urban political machines and a superficial turn to "diversity," while promoting its pro-business policies in an attempt to take over traditional Republican bases of support in the white/suburban middle class. Trump's rise in the Republican Party encouraged this strategy within the 2016 campaign of Hillary Clinton, whose leaders believed they could supplant Republicans as the first party of U.S. capitalism.

7. The Democrats' role as custodians of an increasingly intolerable status quo created the opening for a rebellion within—in the form of the Bernie Sanders campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination.

By targeting the "billionaire class," Sanders—who did not shy away from his history as a socialist—showed that millions of working people were prepared to embrace a message based on workers' rights and solidarity.

But Sanders, having abandoned his lifelong political independence to run as a Democrat, ultimately endorsed Clinton before the Democratic convention last summer. From that point on, he silenced any critique of her or the party establishment, and supported her doomed campaign theme of portraying America as "still great."

8. With Sanders silent and Clinton angling for Republican votes, Trump seized the opportunity to speak about the working class—a rarity for a U.S. presidential candidate.

Having used right-wing populism to dispatch his Republican rivals, Trump again went unchallenged in the general election campaign as he welded the economic grievances of white workers to the most reactionary traditions in U.S. politics—centrally, racism against African Americans and immigrants.

In a country built on a foundation of slavery, genocide and imperial conquest, Trump followed the path of other right-wing populists like George Wallace. He could rely on a base of support that was generally wealthier than Clinton's and Sanders', according to exit polls. But as well, sections of the white working class—including in areas won solidly by Obama in 2008 and 2012—rejected the Democrats' defense of an intolerable status quo and went for Trump instead.

9. The hard right was already energized by the Trump campaign, and it will gain further confidence now to push its agenda on immigration, law and order, and other issues.

One likely consequence is a further political polarization around racist policing. The militarization of law enforcement agencies that escalated under the Obama administration will no doubt intensify, with the use of repression against the Black rebellions in Ferguson and Baltimore and, more

recently, the Standing Rock struggle against the Dakota Access Pipeline serving as a model for cracking down.

10. Trump's victory in the presidential election comes despite his loss in the popular vote. The Electoral College—an archaic system designed at the founding of the U.S. to favor the slaveholding Southern states—gave Trump the edge. The state-based character of the Electoral College meant that the great working-class population centers, such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Houston, played no decisive role in the 2016 campaign, since they are in states that aren't competitive between the parties.

11. Nevertheless, the Democratic Party's leading circles, having cynically played to rightful fear about Trump's authoritarianism and bigotry for months, are now bestowing legitimacy on the president-elect, with calls from Clinton, Obama and others to "give Trump a chance" and unite behind him for the good of the country.

This will lead to tensions with the large numbers of Democratic supporters who were drawn to the Sanders' wing of the party. Some liberal party figures may try to respond by giving greater scope for activism. But as in the past, the liberal Democrats will ultimately seek to channel such activism into efforts to renew the Democratic Party.

The early protests against Trump's election—in contrast to the conciliatory attitude of Democratic leaders—show the potential for building a stronger grassroots resistance that could, in turn, pressure trade unions and/or mainstream liberal organizations to respond and challenge the right in some fashion.

Most important of all, however, the urgent need to fight the attacks of the right wing under Trump can connect already existing social struggles and movements in a common project of resistance, around a positive agenda for working people and the oppressed. The multiple crises created or exacerbated by a Trump presidency can further radicalize a new generation that has already been drawn to Black Lives Matter, the fight against DAPL and solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux (Lakota), immigrant rights and other movements, and the left-wing campaign of Bernie Sanders.

The ISO is unreservedly committed to the fight for democracy and justice against the reactionary agenda of Donald Trump and all those forces responsible for his victory. As part of the struggle, we will put forward the desperately needed politics of genuine hope and liberation—in contrast to the politics of despair and scapegoating on which Trump thrives—based on our commitment to achieving a socialist society in which working people control their own lives and society.

The urgent need to build political and activist organization can be felt by everyone in the initial upsurge of protest against Trump. That is the challenge before the left and organizations like the ISO—and it is the challenge we, in turn, put to all those who want to struggle against the right and for another world.

Originally posted at Socialist Worker.