Organizing Against Trump: An Interview

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He spoke to Workers' Liberty about the challenges facing the left in America under Donald Trump's presidency.

What is Donald Trump's presidency likely to mean for the American working class?

Nothing positive, of course. Trump's populist rhetoric, his frequent invocation of "forgotten Americans," was never anything more than bombast. He's assembled the most oligarchical cabinet in American history. It's true that the American ruling class overwhelmingly preferred a Clinton victory but the Trump victory hasn't led to a great clash of interests within that class – yet. Few capitalists are happy with Trump's appeals to protectionism. But they have no choice but to deal with Trump…and they will make their peace, but not totally on their own terms. For example, the health care industry does not want the American Care Act ("Obamacare") overturned, particularly the private ho

spitals. In part this may explain why the new American Health Care Act being pushed by the Congressional Republican leadership is more "Obamacare lite" than a full overturning of Obamacare.

The Republicans see their dominance of both chambers of Congress and the executive branch as their chance to implement "right-to-work" laws across the whole country, at least in the private sector. As *Labor Notes* recently put it, these laws will "codify freeloading, making it optional to pay for union representation," which would starve the unions of revenue. In the context of the generally terrible labor laws in the U.S. this is a particularly awful development and few American unions, particularly at the national level, are at all prepared for it. The response by some union tops to Trump's victory has been especially appalling. Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO, responded to Trump's recent speech before Congress by saying it was "one of [Trump's] finest moments" and giving him credit for the end of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, never mind that the TPP was already moribund before Trump took office. Teamsters General President James Hoffa Jr. praised Trump for having "taken the first step toward fixing 30 years of bad trade policies" and for "executive orders today that will advance the construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline and the Dakota Access Pipeline, creating thousands of good union jobs." The building trades union leaders are particularly friendly with Trump for the same reasons, though of course those "thousands of good union jobs" will be very temporary, never mind the pipelines' ecological impact or the lack of acknowledgement of American

Indians' persistent, justified struggle against the DAP. It really is reminiscent of Samuel Gompers and the old AFL all over again. And it will do nothing to revive organized labor, which represents a miniscule portion of the U.S. working class. It also doesn't help when Randi Weingarten, head of the American Federation of Teachers, is hobnobbing with billionaire Betsy DeVos, new education secretary and a noted opponent of public education and teachers' unions.

Trump's domestic agenda is austerity mixed with at least some degree of protectionism. His promises to protect what there is of a "safety net" in health insurance – Medicare for the elderly, Medicaid for the poor – were completely empty. He intends to slash the federal government's workforce. And of course he's promised to deport three million undocumented immigrants in his first year. This is logistically impossible but we can be sure he will "ramp up" the deportations that were a staple of the Obama presidency. Some unions are defending targeted communities but not enough of them. Probably the most inspiring act by a union against the Trump administration's Islamophobic, anti-immigrant agenda was the Taxi Workers Alliance's one-hour strike at the international terminal at New York's JFK Airport on 28 January, in solidarity with the giant protest that erupted in response to Trump's first attempt at a "Muslim ban."

What will be the key strategies and perspectives for organising against his administration, particularly on issues like race, gender, and climate?

Direct action is essential, however possible and wherever possible, particularly by those of us who aren't – except as workers – notably part of Trump's "hit list." This is absolutely necessary to protect undocumented immigrants from ICE and people who "look Muslim" from Trump's white supremacist fan club. Persistent pressure on elected Democrats to oppose the entirety of Trump's agenda is already happening and while Trump's Cabinet nominees are still winning their appointments, there's now less capitulation by Democrats than there was earlier. Democratic mayors who pledge to make their cities "sanctuary cities" have to be forced to keep their promises.

Of course we've already seen the gigantic women's march and the "day without a woman" in response to Trump's sexism, his inadvertent admission to being a sexual predator, and his opposition to abortion (however insincere that last declaration may be). Even if the current empty Supreme Court seat is filled by a Trump appointment this year it most likely won't make a difference regarding reproductive rights. It all depends on whether another Justice retires or dies on the bench. Legal abortion is almost a thing of the past in the U.S. as it is.

As to climate change, Trump has famously said that he considers it a hoax dreamt up by the Chinese, and the new head of the Environmental Protection Agency is a climate-change "skeptic." Trump not only loves oil pipelines but the dying coal industry. Here I simply don't know what is to be done because even the most militant direct action is unlikely to be successful. Local governments may be able to effect some change if they're forced to do so. But "late capitalism" is an ecological nightmare and no reform under it will be sufficient to stop humanity from speeding toward the precipice. If there was ever a case for the global socialist revolution, impending eco-cide is it.

What's happened to the movement around Sanders? Are the people who went to his rallies still engaged in politics in any permanent, organised way? If so, where?

Millions of people supported Bernie Sanders but as of yet there's no organization with which all of these millions are involved. A "political action organization" called "Our Revolution" emerged out of Sanders' presidential campaign; it engages in educational and electoral work but it isn't structured as a political party. The organization's 501(c)(4) designation prevents Sanders from playing a role in the organization because he's an elected official.

Similar entities like “Justice Democrats” (a political action committee) and “Brand New Congress” (same) have also formed, but they seem to be completely election-oriented and represent more attempts to replace all elected Establishment Democrats (those who obviously represent the ruling class) with Sanders-style social democrats who eschew funding from big business.

It’s important to note that these groupings aren’t internally democratic dues-paying membership organizations – they’re not really attempting to found a “party within the Democratic Party,” certainly not with plans of splitting the Democrats in order to found an independent working-class party as – in a sense – your Labour Party emerged from the Liberal Party.

However, I’ve also seen an online petition to “Draft Bernie for a People’s Party.” I’d be extremely happy if this led to Sanders declaring the need to form a nationwide independent party of the left but I doubt this will happen, as he seems to now think that the only way to create such a party is by taking over the whole of the Democrats, or at least to make a serious attempt to do so. The failure of Keith Ellison to become the chair of the Democratic National Committee indicates just how difficult that would be – at the “commanding heights” the neoliberals are in charge and I don’t see that changing.

That said, “Berniecrats” – many connected with Our Revolution – just essentially took over the California and Washington State Democratic Parties. So we’ll see what develops. I sincerely hope they don’t end up capitulating to the dominant, ruling class wing of the Democrats.

What's happening more widely on the American left? The DSA appears to be growing, quite rapidly. What about other far-left organisations? Is there any prospect of a new party or proto-party formation emerging out of the growth of the DSA?

Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) started growing significantly in 2015 once we became involved in the Sanders campaign. It really was a godsend for us – he brought terms like “democratic socialism” and “political revolution” into the political mainstream, and if one types “democratic socialism” into an online search engine, voila, there we are. And then suddenly after the Trump victory unaffiliated leftists started signing up in droves. We had around 7,000 members before November 2016 and now have around 18,000 members.

I didn’t expect this at all – but of course, I didn’t expect a Trump victory either. I wish it hadn’t taken a Trump presidency for this to happen, but when so many people – most of them under 35 – are now paying dues and want to be actively involved in building DSA, it gives me hope for the future. Even the mainstream media has taken notice; when, for example, hundreds of people show up at general membership meetings in Brooklyn, New York, the bourgeois press has no choice but to make note of it.

It’s hard to tell where all these new members are ideologically, but if one were to poll our entire membership I’d say that DSA is somewhere between the left edge of social democracy and what the historian Christopher Phelps once called “the rational wing of revolutionary socialism.” Under current conditions I can live with that, particularly since there’s nothing that prevents Marxists from promoting our political perspectives within DSA. There’s no leadership clique trying to muzzle us. I’m especially glad to see a number of current and former members of the Marxist group Solidarity joining DSA – it says good things about our political trajectory.

I gather that the International Socialist Organization (ISO, formerly aligned with the British SWP) and Socialist Alternative (aligned with Peter Taaffe’s Socialist Party) have also grown substantially though not to the degree that DSA has. It’s perfectly fine that there are multiple socialist groups in the U.S. though I find it very annoying when some of them attempt to “poach” new DSA members at

our events (this is the modus operandi of certain Trotskyist organizations). Thankfully the ISO doesn't do this (anymore) and we're friendlier than we once were.

But unfortunately we're not on the verge of creating a new mass socialist party. Yes, there's now a revival of American socialism (finally!), but not to the degree where DSA could form a party that would attract the attention of the entire U.S. electorate. For one thing, American socialists are still disproportionately white and male. This means that if we want to run candidates with a chance of winning elections then it's particularly important to develop candidates who have "street cred" with constituencies, particularly constituencies of color, beyond our membership. They'd have to be not just leaders of DSA but DSA members who are also leaders of tenants' rights organizations, union locals, organizations fighting against police violence and our "criminal justice" system, etc. Plus we'd need significant union support at the national level for Congressional campaigns, and even the politically best unions – the ones that supported Sanders against Hillary Clinton in Democratic presidential primaries – don't seem inclined to support fully independent political action.

Individual DSA members do run for office (and sometimes even win!). And of course a mass socialist party is a necessity in the U.S. and we should say this often. But even now we can't just found one with the hope that the toiling masses will suddenly join in great numbers. (The sad truth is that very few membership-driven, member-financed and internally democratic political groups remain in the U.S. – DSA is an anomaly in that regard.)

How does Trump's election affect international perspectives? An entente between American and Russian imperialism hugely complicates the "two-camp" worldview a much of the Stalinist and Stalinist-influenced left still maintains. What are the prospects for building a third-camp politics of international working-class solidarity?

The apologists for Russian imperialism are mainly confined to far-left groups whose outlook derives from the late Sam Marcy – Workers World Party, Party for Socialism and Liberation – as well as a few semi-famous individuals and the more Stalinoid, ostensibly-Trotskyist sects. On the other hand, most liberal pundits and elected Democrats seem to be looking for "Russians under every bed" in a bizarre replay of the 1950s minus Joseph McCarthy or the Communist Party USA. I think most American socialists understand that Vladimir Putin is in no sense our friend. Obviously he presides over a far-right, reactionary regime. I also gather that most of the top union officials are following the Democrats' belief in a Great Russian Conspiracy that helped Trump become president.

Of course socialists should be declaring "Neither Washington nor Moscow, nor Beijing, nor anywhere else," so to speak. But building a truly internationalist working-class politics is very difficult when most U.S. unions remain sectionalist and nationalist and not particularly interested in whether or not there's anything approximating a labor movement in Russia, or in the "spontaneous" strikes that have repeatedly broken out in China, winning significant concessions.

In Britain, the response from some on the left and in the labour movement to Brexit (in some ways our "Trumpism", although not quite on the same scale) has been to argue that socialist politics should triangulate to accommodate the concerns of nationalist-inclined working-class voters – such as by ending free movement arrangements with other European states and reducing immigration. AWL has opposed this, arguing instead that the left needs to understand but ultimately confront, not accommodate to, the nationalist and protectionist world views of which some sections of our class have become persuaded. Is there a similar debate in America? What policies can the American left offer that address the social grievances of disaffected working-class communities while simultaneously challenging racism and nationalism?

The debate over “triangulating” seems to be confined to American liberals and partisan Democrats who appear to think that addressing income and wealth inequality or addressing “identity politics” are mutually exclusive things. Some even say that struggling white workers who voted for Trump because he spoke to their desperation, while Clinton said nothing, deserve to have their health insurance taken away. This is a far cry from the quasi-social democratic liberalism of decades past and helps to explain why “liberalism” is increasingly a swear word even among American democratic socialists.

But even smart left-liberals understand that racism, sexism, bigotry in general often express themselves in “economic” ways in the U.S. Counterposing an economic populism which would supposedly only appeal to working class whites (false on its face) to clear opposition to racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc. is, as my friend and fellow DSA member Michael Hirsch would put it, “a mug’s game.”

Adolph Reed is totally right when he says that “Black and other nonwhite working people have been disappeared into categories of ascriptive identity, as have their female and LGBTQ counterparts” and that leftists must be “crafting a politics based on recognition that the identity shared most broadly in the society is having to or being expected to work for a living and that that is the basis for the solidarity necessary to prevail and, eventually, to make a more just and equitable society.” That doesn’t mean we should ignore or dismiss the particular oppressions that women, racial “minorities” and LGBTQ people face within the American working class. Far from it. Sanders’ popularity – he’s currently the most trusted elected official in the U.S. – should indicate that fighting for an immediate program of far-reaching social-democratic reform does not require making concessions to racism and nationalism. Nothing should prevent us from addressing the needs of all American workers without “privileging” any particular sector of the class. Solidarity within the U.S. working class that transcends our “ascriptive identities” is the only basis upon which a social-internationalist workers’ movement can be built.

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