

# The United States in Crisis

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**Colin Wilson**, website editor for rs21 (revolutionary socialism in the 21st century), interviewed **Natalia Tylim** and **Phil Gasper** in July about the upheavals, dangers and opportunities facing socialists in the US today.

*Fifty years ago, US standards of living were ahead of anything in Europe. The American dream delivered for many working people, at least white people - in terms of suburban homes, cars and consumer goods. Now real wages have stayed the same for decades, people work two or three jobs, and you have social problems like mass shootings and opioid addiction. Is there a sense of social crisis?*

**Phil** I think it plays out in different ways in different places, but it's pretty universal in both big cities and rural areas. There's a massive housing crisis. Houses have not been built at nearly the rate that would be needed over the past ten years, and so the cost if you want to buy a house is astronomical, and mortgage rates have gone up as well. That has then led to a huge rental crisis - rents have gone up 50% in many places.

You've got the issue of student loans - trillions of dollars of loans, similar to Britain, but more extreme in the US because almost everybody has to pay a lot of money to go to university and tuition has gone up and up. And with Biden's support, they changed the bankruptcy laws so that you can't declare bankruptcy and get out of your student loans. So you're stuck with them for life. You have people who are now on Social Security and are still paying back student loans. For some people the loans are \$75,000 or more. If you went to grad school, they could even be higher than that.

Student debt only that affects a certain segment of the population. Different segments of the population are impacted by different aspects of the crisis. But particularly now with raging inflation, the crisis is felt by everybody in one way or another. What political conclusions they draw from there is a different question.

Some of the issues workers faced were masked in the 50s and 60s when unionisation levels were high. You could win in the contract rights that aren't guaranteed by law, so if you're in a strong union you would have vacation days and good health care coverage and that kind of stuff. But it's not guaranteed, and union membership has fallen.

**Natalia** There's a couple of other elements to the sense of crisis just to add on. There's the baby formula crisis, which was a production issue. In order to maintain profits you have this just-in-time production situation and you only make exactly what you need. But in the context of a pandemic, this creates backlogs in pretty much every single industry.

**Phil** Two other aspects of that crisis are relevant. One was deregulation. They had to shut down one of the biggest producers in Michigan, because it had a bacteria problem. Several babies died. Why hadn't they been inspecting it for years before that? Because neoliberalism has slashed the amount of government oversight. The other issue is that baby formula manufacturing, like many other industries, is highly concentrated. There are four manufacturers in the US responsible for 75% or 80% of production. So you shut down one of the biggest producers and you immediately have a crisis.

**Natalia** If you combine that with the school shootings that have been happening - mass shootings happening almost on a weekly basis - in the US people wake up and just have this palpable sense that society is falling apart. It's visceral.

Also I don't think you mentioned the health care crisis: how many people don't have access to health care. That has been huge in the Covid pandemic. And you've had a decline in life expectancy in the last couple of years.

And there are the natural disasters that are happening more and more frequently.

**Phil** Yes, climate change is having a big immediate impact. We get forest fires in California, all along the West Coast and in the Western States - as well as in parts of the South. Heat waves can be devastating and particularly impact people who can't afford air conditioning - though of course air conditioning just adds to the problem.

The greenest city in the US is actually New York, because it's got lots of public transport and people live in a fairly compact area. But much of the rest of the country you have to drive to get anywhere. I live in a city of about a quarter of a million people, but the public transport here is terrible, so you pretty much need a car to get to work or to get to the grocery store. The Democrats have approved \$369 billion of funding for climate-related projects over the next 10 years. But their approach is fatally flawed - they are funnelling money to "green capitalism" while at the same time encouraging more fossil fuel extraction and exports.

*Returning to labour struggles for a moment, how does all this affect different parts of the US? The stereotypes are like this: there's what's become the Rust Belt, where there were good factory unionised jobs, but the factories closed down. Employers have gone to the South because there was less union organisation in the South. On the coasts you have finance and IT people who are doing fine. Presumably it's more complicated than those stereotypes.*

**Phil** The rustbelt area in the Midwest - Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and parts of Pennsylvania - they've been hit very hard by the loss of manufacturing, so that is a big part of the picture and explains why the opioid crisis has been so intense in those areas. It's a crisis of despair, basically. It's a manifestation of alienation in the US working class.

For the loss of many of those manufacturing jobs, people blame the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and it certainly played a role. But many of the jobs moved to the South, which was non-union. The biggest auto manufacturing plants in the US are now in southern states, and there have been attempts to unionise them. But the labour movement, at least in that area - the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the traditional big unions - has been very weak.

The coasts are the centre of finance, and to a certain extent IT, though information technology has looked for different places to base itself. Then there's the entertainment industry, which is great for the people at the very top.

But even traditional professional jobs have really been squeezed in the last 25 years. I'm in higher education, and there's been a huge squeeze - bigger workloads, less job security. You see that in healthcare. You see it in the airline industry with the pilots, who used to be pretty much the elite.

Nobody feels particularly secure in those in those jobs now. And then, if you're further down in the class structure, you're living paycheck to paycheck if you're surviving at all.

**Natalia** I think that's right. I think that liberals tend to focus on the experience of upper middle-class people when they talk about the bigger cities, about places like New York or California. But the level of poverty in New York is very high. One in six children is food insecure in New York City. We have the most segregated school system in the country. The minimum wage is \$15 an hour, but the cost of living is one of the highest in the US. A lot of people spend 75% of their paycheck on housing. A lot of discussion gets framed by the way the Republicans focus on the Rust Belt and the Liberals focus on the big cities.

**Colin** There's that phrase 'the fly over states', implying that these states are full of ignorant right wing Christian homophobes. But you had the teachers' strike in Virginia, and Virginia is a 'fly-over state'.

**Phil** Virginia has been shifting over the years, it's become more liberal. But the strikes in 2018 were called the Red State revolt - the states that were involved were the ones where Republicans win the state elections, but there was still this very militant working-class fightback. It doesn't necessary follow that if you live in a red state, there's not going to be a class fightback of some kind. The country is very complicated. Stereotypes don't capture the complexity of what's going on - and the left can have stereotypes as well, for example about what the Latino community or the black community is going to be like, but there are a lot of complications and contradictions within those groups. A lot of exciting stuff has happened in the US over the past few years and it doesn't necessarily happen in the places that people would have expected it to.

*The two other big changes since the long boom, and still happening, are the changes regarding first the ethnic mix of the population, and secondly attitudes to gender and sexuality. Non-Hispanic whites will become a minority around the mid-century. Men don't bring in a family wage now, if they ever did. There's increasing visibility of LGBTQ people, especially among young people. How far does the right simply want to go back to a fantasy 1950s of the long boom, white supremacy, a rigid gender binary and so on?*

**Phil** There's a lot of so-called white anxiety. Certainly Trump used this, with immigrants as the

scapegoat. You have to have a really concerted fightback against that. Otherwise it's very easy for people who are hurting economically to take the bait and think immigrants are the problem. The Democrats are very half-hearted. By and large, the Democrats pursue the same policies as the Republicans.

Things have changed enormously in terms of gender and sexuality over the past 50 years. Now we're seeing this massive backlash from the right, such as the recent overturning of *Roe v Wade*. It's devastating. That happened even though it's only supported by a small minority. The vast majority of people in the US want abortion to remain legal everywhere, but the right see this as an issue to rally the troops. And now there's a huge attack on all forms of queer sexuality, trans people and so on.

**Natalia** The far right has built a movement around their anti-abortion worldview and they've done a very good job. We're not just talking about Republicans, we're talking about proto-fascist elements. They've been able to link into a coalition with the Republicans. It's terrifying the type of money and support that the anti-abortion movement gets, compared to the trans youth movement. You can see how it fits very well into a state project of exclusion and minority rule in a way that a left vision doesn't.

There are all these right-wing tropes about the woke people trying to take over - but I think the reality is that our movements are very weak. The remnants of what was built in the 60s and 70s have for the most part been co-opted by more liberal forces and have come very much under the umbrella of the Democratic Party. They give this very facile liberal veneer to gender and racial justice without actually changing anything about the conditions of life. That leaves these movements very open to attack from the right.

Liberation movements have had such a huge impact on ideas in society - Liberals and the Democrats feel they have to pay lip service to things. But the reality is that the left has not been able to figure out how to organise, to start from where we are and build up our forces in the way that the anti-abortion movement has by being outside every clinic in this country harassing people.

The right-wing framing also shapes the discussion on the left - some discussions of oppression politics embrace this kind of anti-wokeness, which doesn't help us.

**Colin** Is part of the right wing obsession with abortion about nostalgia for the time when there wasn't a social crisis, back in the 50s and 60s, a desire just to get back to the kind of gender roles that were accepted then?

**Phil** It's part of it. It's highly contradictory as well. There's a sizable minority of people with right-wing Christian background who have taken this on as an issue since the late 70s or early 80s. Before then it wasn't a big issue even for the evangelicals. It's a long-term project. They were looking for a political issue they could use to mobilise their base and they hit on abortion, particularly around that time, when Reagan became president - and they've built on it relentlessly.

There was a big pushback, huge mobilizations by the left and to some extent liberals in the late 80s early 90s, because at that point it looked like abortion rights might get overturned. I went to some of those protests in Washington DC. I think the biggest of them was over a million people and we've seen nothing like that in the past 30 years.



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*The Republicans have been taken over by Trump supporters. What is the far right's base of support? There seem to be different groups - petty bourgeois people looking to preserve their marginal privileges in the face of the changes described in the last question; workers pulled behind them; the Christian right; and far-right billionaires like Peter Thiel, the Koch brothers and so on. Do these groups have a common agenda? Might their alliance fracture?*

**Phil** I think it's very complicated how all the disparate elements fit together, even among the small far right groups like the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys. There are differences in political positions. But right now, they're on the ascendancy, so they find ways to work together. The billionaires you've mentioned have been financing new hard-right foundations in DC. They've been setting up a whole infrastructure preparing for the Republicans taking control in Washington again. It's almost certain that they're going to win back the House of Representatives in November - the Senate is still up for grabs. Biden is looking very, very weak for 2024 - if he even runs again. Unlike ten years ago, the Republicans are now prepared to work with these essentially neo-fascist organisations on the ground.

Now, they're not that huge. You're talking about groups with hundreds rather than thousands of active members, but they can have a big impact. One of the far-right groups marched in Boston last weekend. They just showed up with a hundred people. Nobody was expecting this so there was no opposition. The cops backed off. The fascists beat up a black artist. It was just a few yards away from police, who watched and did nothing. It shows they've got confidence, but it also shows the limits of what they can do - they had to organise secretly, do it unannounced and just show up. If it had been an announced protest, there would have been some kind of response.

Will all the right-wing forces stay together? They could very easily fragment. But it's going to require opposition to what they're trying to do, and also an alternative. That could create or deepen some of the divisions. It's pretty scary looking at how far they've advanced. Absolutely, they could be pushed back, but the organisation just doesn't exist at the moment.

*What are the Republican right's political ideas and political strategy? A big part of this looks like mobilising their voters for the midterms with wedge issues like trans kids, gay people as "groomers", critical race theory in schools, gun control and so on. How far do they have a strategy for US capitalism? What strategy do the Democrats have?*

**Phil** Trump did have a kind of strategy. More nationalism, an isolationist role for the US, a more transactional relationship with allies. I don't think most of the ruling class bought into that - what they liked was the tax cuts, the continuing deregulation, the anti-union policies - they liked all that stuff, and so they were willing to go along with it.

In terms of a bigger strategy, I think they're happier with what Biden's attempted to do, which is to

rebuild relationships with traditional allies. So he's going after China in Asia right now, he's trying to build new institutions of military, political and economic cooperation. It follows from the shift under Trump - until then China was seen as a growing rival, and they were trying to hold it back, keep it in its place. Now they see that China is no longer a growing rival - it's a competitor that may displace the US. Overall the US economy is still the biggest and the dollar remains the dominant international currency, but there's been a slide. They don't know how to reverse this or how to strengthen their position. So there's quite a bit of just flapping around trying to find a strategy that will work.

Above all, the American ruling class probably just want competence. The big bastions of US capitalism will live with anybody. They probably don't want Trump back because he's too divisive and too unstable, but if they could have another Republican they would be perfectly happy, even if he came in with an utterly regressive social agenda.

**Natalia** The only thing that the Democrats have going for them is that they're not the Republicans. That is the only thing that they have. The unfortunate reality is that in a two-party system like we have, they are likely to be the recipients of left energy despite their failures.

They have done a disastrous job. Biden said 'I'm gonna take on Covid and we're going to do a better job than Trump did'. And then he's in office and claiming that Covid's over, that we're all good and everything is open. People can see through the hypocrisy. He's an especially bad politician in a party that lacks any vision, and that's still trying to recover from the blows to the neoliberal order in 2007 and 2008.

The Democrats have gotten a boost from the abortion attacks - which are unpopular overall. There are large numbers of women registering to vote in the next election. When it comes to offering actual solutions to the dismantling of legal abortion, police killings, or gun violence, they don't have any, and people know it. But until there is a visible and articulated alternative to the failed strategy of the Democrats, they will continue to benefit from people's anger in moments like these.

**Phil** What the Democrats have basically run on is that they're not the Republicans. That's the point of the January 6th hearings. Now, there have been some pretty amazing revelations in these hearings. Trump was pulling every string that he could to try and steal the election. That's important stuff because the left should defend liberal democracies against right-wing attacks of this kind. But the Democrats' position in the hearings themselves is not going to impress many people.

It would be different if it proposed policies that actually benefited people, for example if they did something serious about health care or student loans. That's something that Biden can do by himself, by the way - he's been sitting on this since he was elected. He could wipe out most of the student loans, because they are held by the US federal government. But he won't do that.

And the Democrats look pretty weak for the Presidential election in 2024. Will they find somebody else to run? Kamala Harris has been very unimpressive, particularly around the abortion issue. She could have taken a huge lead on this, but all the Democrats have said is 'send us money and vote for us', and they won't take any action right now. They are clueless.

**Natalia** I think the liberals always take a while to admit when something is wrong. When Trump was raising the alarm, or a right wing manifestation of it, Hillary Clinton's response was 'America is already great. We're good. We just gotta keep things as they are'. And then the Biden campaign that followed Trump's election kept arguing that we'd got to get back to the status quo.

*After World War Two, the US was a global superpower, both militarily and economically. After the*

*collapse of the Soviet Union it was the only superpower. Now you have the humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan, and China outstrips the US share of global manufacturing by 50 percent and is increasingly influential in Asia and Africa. How far is this driving the current situation?*

**Phil** The US was dominant at the end of the Cold War and through the 1990s. But sections of the US ruling class became more and more obsessed with the rise of China, and I think their actions are motivated in part by their desire to prevent China from becoming a global peer. Yet it turned out to be a total disaster for them because it really probably just accelerated China's rise and then the 2008 financial crisis and recession weakened the US further.

Now China has all kinds of problems and contradictions in its own economy and its own political situation. But the US definitely ended up worse off as a result of their military adventures, and I think that does provide some of the background for political developments over the past decade – the disillusionment with mainstream politics, the rise of the far right, which includes a lot of military veterans who are embittered by the defeats in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**Natalia** The one thing I'd add is that the Trump campaign in 2016 was very much centred on this question of the relative decline of US imperial might, and he really campaigned on this idea that the Bush era, the Afghanistan Iraq war, was a failure. He acknowledged things that the left would also say, but he did it in a way that the liberals would not. They weren't acknowledging that their dominance had been declining in the aftermath of the Middle East project.

That very much spearheaded this shift towards competition with China since it had become more of a centre of accumulation. The US obviously still maintains this position, but we're not talking about US sole dominance anymore. At this point Biden has essentially adopted Trump's policies around China.

In terms of how it gets understood, just in society at large, there's not a whole lot of acknowledgement or understanding of these dynamics. On the left, I think you have kind of two main ideas. One is more like tailing liberals – for example on the question of Ukraine, this idea that Biden and the liberals are going to have to intervene to save Ukraine from this evil Russia and that it's just a proxy war. And then, on the other hand, you have the dominance of what we call campist politics, the idea that the enemy of your enemy is your friend and the argument that this is a proxy war between Russia and the US and we need to support Russia in this endeavour.

**Phil** A large segment of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), or at least the vocal segment of DSA, takes that position.

*What about Bernie, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and the squad? With a Democrat president they seem to have been captured by the Democratic machine. There was talk of a 'dirty break', of people joining the Democrats, pulling people around them and then leaving – but you don't see that discussed now. What are the DSA doing? Have people got trapped inside the Democratic Party?*

**Natalia** That's a fair description, I think. The tactic of joining the Democrats became a strategy, and the strategy now is to be – for an extended period of time – inside this party playing by the party rules. And then, one day down the line that can't be specified and can't even really be talked about, they'll break when the forces are ready.

The reality is that building the Democratic Party, and doing that at the same time as you're explaining how you're independent and criticising that party, has proven very difficult. I think there's a lot that has to be assessed about how that went. I will say that I was against that strategy at the time. But in retrospect, I think there was a particular moment, where Sanders was on the

ascendancy, when something could have been built around the Sanders campaign. But it wasn't, we can't rewrite history and that moment is over. People are continuing to feel like that moment can be recreated, instead of acknowledging that something very fundamental has shifted.

I'm not saying that I have the answer to what the left has to do, but in failing to face the fact that something has shifted, DSA has found itself in a pretty deep crisis. It's not that the organisation is just going to go away. There's important work being done. But very deep divisions have become apparent about what a socialist strategy should be in this moment. Is it primarily based on an electoral orientation of having important high level members, and if so, what's the relationship of those members to a membership organisation and struggle? Or should it be based more on an orientation towards struggle and labour?

Unfortunately those debates aren't clearly stated in those ways. DSA is a very bizarre organisation that lacks any fundamental democracy, or any ability to really have these debates amongst members. It's been a very difficult situation to be a part of.

**Phil** The 'dirty break' has been all dirty and no break. It was a position that was put forward by the left of the DSA. The DSA's traditional position was always to transform the Democratic Party into a European-style social democratic party, which they never made any headway on.

Then, with the Sanders campaign, DSA grew up. They went from a few thousand members in 2015 to last year around 95,000 members. Most of those people aren't active, they're just paper members, but it gives you an indication of the growth of left-wing ideas and the numbers of people who want to identify as socialist.

As regards Sanders and AOC and the other elected representatives - some, like AOC, are members of DSA, and others are supported by DSA but not actually members. Sanders isn't even officially a Democrat. He runs as an independent, but he caucuses with the Democrats and has got closer and closer to them. So in 2016 he endorsed Clinton after he lost, and in 2020 he endorsed Biden. In the last couple years he's become one of Biden's key people in the Senate, and he's said that if Biden runs in 2024, he won't. So this just pulls people deeper into the Democratic Party, and the strategy then becomes, 'if only we can elect a few more people to City Council or the state legislatures or to Congress'. But it just deepens the connection with what is, after all, a capitalist party.

Over the past year, the DSA membership has started to drop. I think there's a lot of demoralisation. Important labour organising is happening, but the big picture is that the right is winning and the left is not and nobody is offering a strong lead. I signed up for DSA 2 years ago, but I'm not going to do it again this year - and that's probably a pretty widespread sentiment.

But things can change pretty quickly, as they do in US politics. The labour upsurge - focused around organising in Amazon, organising in Starbucks and now in a bunch of other restaurant chains and grocery stores - that was pretty unexpected. It's very much focused on service workers and logistics, very different from traditional labour organising in the US. So the shift to the left which has happened is still real.

*Two years ago there was a huge movement around Black Lives Matter, with mass involvement, radical politics with calls to defund the police, queer leadership. Now it's no longer visible, at least from Britain. What's happening in terms of campaigning/protests to defend queer people, trans people, abortion rights, racialised people etc?*

**Natalia** I don't think it's disappeared. I think it's actually been on a trajectory over almost a decade, since 2013. Every time it explodes, in terms of its consciousness, it's developing. So the Black Lives



Matter demand in its more recent iteration was 'defund the police', 'abolish the police'. It feels like the radicalization is expanding and deepening rather than closing off. But it does feel like the movement mainly exists on the level of mass, spontaneous protest and consciousness, and there have not yet been ways that different forces have figured out how to coalesce that into national organisations.

Maybe parts of the movement were co-opted into the Democratic Party, but the Democratic Party itself waged an all-out assault on the most recent Black Lives Matter protests. New York is one example - black mayors overseeing increases in police budgets, pushing back ideologically and materially on the demands of that moment.

But the reality is that we weren't going to win the demand to defund the police through one month of spontaneous protest. The challenge is how to build a movement that that doesn't have illusions in quick fixes, but which also campaigns to build around the next steps.

I think that's also true around the Supreme Court. There was a poll last week that showed that American institutions have no credibility among the U.S. public anymore, especially young people. But still people end up looking for answers and solutions from the existing institutions that they are radicalising against.

**Phil** Things go up fast in the US and then they often come down very fast as well, and there's often very little left in terms of organisational continuity. Most of the traditional far left has disappeared, or is tiny and marginal. You've got the shift in consciousness, but this vacuum of organisation. People come out in the streets and the protests are huge - but building something which is more long lasting hasn't happened yet. You tend to see either people disappearing, or the creation of NGOs - they often get quite a bit of money from liberal foundations and so on, and then that creates new tensions and new problems.

Almost everything that that does happen in the US, there's some response. There's been big protests around abortion rights, but people are still flailing around for a strategy.

*There was the chant "No Trump! No KKK! No fascist USA!" There's a long history of throwing the word fascist around. But when you have white supremacists on the way to attack a Pride march in Idaho, or the Proud Boys attacking a drag queen event in California, you have far-right homophobic Republicans at the top combining with street gangs to scapegoat minorities at a time of social crisis - it does look like 1930s Germany. But the Nazis won the support of German industrialists and the state machine because they could beat the left - and the American left is tiny - so that's different. Is it useful to ask if the USA is heading for fascism?*

**Natalia** I think the question has to be framed well. Trump did and does appeal to a fascist base. But the question is, do ground troops exist? Back then there weren't ground troops, so we weren't talking about fascism.

But there are ground troops now and they're going to keep growing, and they're going to be emboldened, especially if the left doesn't confront them and build an alternative. There is polarisation. We're talking about small forces, not imminent fascism. But I think it is built into the period of crisis that we have talked about, and it is not going away.

People said repeatedly that electing Biden was the necessary precondition for stopping imminent fascism. But actually those forces have grown stronger under Biden. I really think we need to face the fact that liberal strategy helps a fascist base to develop - especially in the absence of a left alternative. Centrist milquetoast solutions for a society that's crumbling under your feet are not

going to be compelling to people.

**Phil** There's obviously a trend to authoritarian populism, not just in the US but in many countries around the world. Something significant and major is happening. Will it resemble classical fascism and the way that it plays out? No one knows. Certainly it doesn't have to.

There are attacks on democratic rights. The Democrats in the US have been involved with that. The surveillance state has been set up and operated by both political parties. But mostly, in terms of democratic rights in the US, the attack has come from the right. They know that they're a minority, and the way they can win is by making it harder for people to actually vote. So you're going to see more of these low turnout elections and making it difficult for people to actually cast a ballot. I live in Wisconsin - when I first moved here 15 years ago, it was a slightly Democrat-leaning state. Since then, the Republicans have gerrymandered the voting districts so they have a lock on the state legislature. They get less than 50 percent of the vote, but they get close to two thirds of the seats in the Assembly and the Senate. There is now a Democratic governor who vetoes a lot of their more extreme proposals. But if the voting turnout goes down, they could get a two-thirds majority in the legislature with less than 50 percent of the vote, and that super-majority is enough to override the governor's veto. That's part of their strategy - to use these undemocratic methods. That's different from the way that classical fascism worked. It's not a one party, totalitarian system. But it does remove some of the weak but important aspects of liberal democracy.

*Is there anything else that either of you want to add?*

**Natalia** I feel like we've painted a fairly cynical view. We actually are quite doggedly optimistic about the openings that exist for the left, and we are very committed to being a part of that development. We focused on giving a snapshot of things being quite difficult right now. But the broader left, ultimately, has to come together, and there's the potential for that to happen.

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