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Dawn of the Resistance

By Mark Harris
January 25, 2017



As someone once said, a lie can travel halfway around the world before the truth puts its boots on. In the 2016 presidential election, right-wing billionaire Donald Trump's lies may have carried him as far as the White House, but with this past weekend's global Women's March on Washington the truth put its marching boots on.

The mass outpouring of opposition to the Trump presidency was a remarkable and unprecedented global event. Certainly the liberal gloom prevailing in the United States since Trump's victory was given a much-needed jolt of spiritual fortitude. From Washington, D.C. to Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle, New York City, Portland, and across Europe, Australia and elsewhere millions of women and men sent the message that the reactionary, authoritarian dreams of an ultra-wealthy capitalist and his cabinet of generals and billionaires will be resisted. The message of January 21 was clear, loud, and uncompromising: women's rights and human rights will be defended.

There is deep popular opposition to the legitimacy of a presidency occupied by this toxic, twittering human smokestack of polluted right-wing demagoguery. Indeed, Trump faces widespread antipathy for his racist border wall plan, proposed Muslim registry, and planned attacks on health care rights. His history of demeaning women as some sort of patriarchal birthright, coupled with an entitled silver spoon mentality that he thinks gives him free rein to insult, threaten, and bully anyone who challenges him, evoke for many only public revulsion. For many Trump is now perceived as the ultimate concierge of corrupt capitalism, a man whose economic orientation in office will translate into angling for every possible "deal" to further enrich the super-wealthy corporate class.

Unlike former president Obama or candidate Clinton, many tens of millions of ordinary Americans are not asking everyone to give Trump a chance or wishing him "success." They're not talking about how as Americans we're "all on the same team." Nor are they clamoring to assist Trump's advisory Strategic and Policy Forum on economic issues, as many of Clinton's most influential corporate supporters are doing.

We have to "throw sand in the gears of everything," instead declares Frances Moore Lappe in a recent Nation essay. Good idea. That means escalating the defiance, escalating the resistance, stoking the fires of mass protest everywhere they smolder. The moment cries out for new political leadership, for grassroots working-class activism, and for a way out of the stagnant swamp of the corporate two-party system.

Night of the Living Election Cycle

If there is one positive consequence of the Trump presidency, it is that it signals the birth of a new era of grassroots activism and mass social protest. Where it will go remains to be seen, but when masses of people are in motion everything is possible. But what is also possible is that the very same Democratic Party "opposition" that set the stage for Trump's victory will limit the Anti-Trump Resistance to the goal of merely reinstalling the same-old, same-old Obama-Clinton brand of neoliberal corporate politics in the next elections.

That is indeed the thinking at the top of the Democratic Party. "I don't think people want a new direction," declared newly selected House minority leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) after the election. As she explained, "When President Clinton was elected, Republicans came in big in the next election. When President Bush was president, we came in big in the subsequent election. When President Obama became president, the Republicans came in big in the next election."

Talk about Night of the Living Election Cycle! What an exhaustingly lifeless view of the dynamics of social and political change. This is a vision that reduces American politics to an eternal tug of war between elite Republicans and Democrats, that can't see beyond the glare of Beltway politics, and stands mute before society's historic challenges. But what should we expect from a Democratic National Committee (DNC) that apparently feared Vermont Senator's Bernie Sanders reformist version of "socialism" more than Trump, who were more interested in anointing Clinton party nominee than even allowing a fair primary in their own party?

This DNC scenario for opposing Trump could signal short-term victories for the Democrats, in two or four years, but also a longer-term slide into even more threatening versions of right-wing "populist" authoritarianism. The problem now for the clueless Pelosi and company is this: Without political leadership that can genuinely challenge all the attendant evils of neoliberal capitalism, some far right-wing "strongman" of one kind or another could very likely dominate, define, or otherwise play a major role in U.S. politics for the indeterminate future. For the gates to right-wing authoritarianism are now thrust wide open with Trump's election. They will be hard to close if the only alternative is one version or another of corporate neoliberal politics in power.

The larger question that lingers over the political landscape is why exactly the worst major party candidate in years—a vulgar, chauvinistic, thin-skinned, impulsive, lying right-wing incompetent (there's more!)—had even the most remote chance of winning the presidency? Obviously, Clinton's tepid center-right politics offered little to inspire American voters. Even more Clinton was seen by many voters as the tired continuation of a quarter century of the Democratic Party's contribution to deteriorating working-class living standards.

The more astute among Clinton's supporters understand this. In a column just prior to the election, former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich reminds us that Democratic presidents have been in power for 16 of the last 24 years, controlling both houses of the U.S. Congress for four of those years. These were years characterized by political accommodation to a growing concentration of corporate power and wealth in the United States. Indeed, as Reich notes, both presidents Clinton and Obama failed in any meaningful way to halt the long-term decline in working-class jobs, wages, and benefits. Instead they promoted free trade agreements that accelerated the loss of manufacturing jobs, while offering displaced blue-collar workers, who once earned union wages, little in return. Nor did either do much of anything to protect the democratic right to unionize, under assault, despite campaign propaganda to the contrary. Consequently, union membership dropped from 22 percent of all workers in the early years of the Clinton administration to less than 12 percent today.

As for all those celebratory Facebook memes liberals like to post about how unemployment declined under Obama, Reich acknowledges in a Facebook commentary (Dec. 2) that the current official 4.6% unemployment rate is essentially meaningless. "Counting everyone who would prefer to work, a more accurate measure would be closer to 10 percent real unemployment," he says. Here's something else to note. The overwhelming bulk of the new jobs created in the last decade fall under the category of what a recent Harvard-Princeton study describes as "alternative work arrangements," a euphemism for temp workers, part-time employees, and contractors (without benefits). These have been invariably low or modest-paying jobs.

Tellingly, early in his first term Obama rejected advisory proposals for a far more ambitious economic stimulus initiative, lest he fail to appease right-wing Congressional Republicans. “Obama’s cautiousness, however, proved to be his undoing,” observed Walden Bello, analyst for Focus on the Global South, back in 2012. “The \$787 stimulus compromise created what would become Obama’s ‘Bridge too Far’: it was enough to prevent the situation from getting worse but not enough to trigger a healthy recovery.”

Despite the great political capital Obama rode into office, with majority Democratic support in Congress in his first two years, there would be no confrontation with Wall Street or their Republican defenders. There would be no attempt to emulate even the limited jobs programs of the New Deal era. Nor would much be done to adequately rescue foreclosed homeowners. The nation’s first Black president would prove himself in the end to be just another compromising politician content to play around the edges of the status quo. He was the man who kept Wall Street from the people’s pitchforks, as he himself once admitted, but finally couldn’t keep a racist billionaire from storming the gates of power to plant his upper-class boots on the desk in the oval office.

What to make of all this? “The unsurprising result has been to shift political and economic power to big corporations and the wealthy, and to shaft the working class,” concludes Reich of Clinton and Obama’s impotence before the historic trend of advancing corporate power. “That created an opening for demagoguery, in the form of Trump. Donald Trump has poisoned America, but he didn’t do it alone. He had help from opportunists in the GOP, the media and at the highest reaches of the Democratic Party.”

Of course, Democratic administrations were not entirely responsible for the quarter-century decline of working-class living standards. Give credit also to the Republicans under George W. Bush’s two-term presidency. But that’s the point. The relentless corporate neoliberal assault on the living standards of American workers is the result of *bipartisan* policies. No matter which major party is in power, the concentration of growing corporate wealth and wealth inequality continues its dystopian march forward.

Circumscribed Politics, Dulled Imaginations

The circumscribed nature of bipartisan politics, feet planted firmly in the slop and muck of the status quo, has a way of dulling the social imagination, making it difficult for many to even imagine what significant or even revolutionary social progress might look like.

Imagine if Obama as president had used his political power to fight for a vision of a new, single-payer public health system to guarantee every person’s right to health care? If such a system were now in place, with free public access at the point of care, how many ordinary Americans would have rushed to support a Republican know-nothing’s “plan” to return to a full-out for-profit system that turns human health into just another exploitable commodity? How many now would be complaining about the injustice of removing private insurance companies and investors from the health care system? Or, for that matter, complaining about rising premiums under the complicated mess of the Affordable Care Act?

Imagine if the president had in 2009 declared his intent to create a new federal jobs program to put many tens of millions of unemployed Americans to work, rebuilding the nation's infrastructure at union wages? Or if the nation's leader had actually walked picket lines with workers under siege, such as in Madison, Wisconsin in 2011, as Obama once promised to do during his first presidential bid? Imagine if he had provided decisive financial relief to the millions of distressed homeowners at risk of losing their homes because of unfair banking mortgage practices? Or if the president had pledged to fight for a federal minimum wage of \$15 an hour, using his White House pulpit to encourage grass-roots organizing for higher wages among all private sector workers?

What if the president had used the power of his office to resist a political climate where private corporations can routinely threaten to move to cheaper labor markets if they don't get every damn tax break they want from state and local legislators? Imagine if Obama had used his office to educate and mobilize mass public resistance to this sociopathic example of the "cost of doing business" under capitalism?

Imagine also instead of bombing seven countries, organizing global military drone assassinations, and vigorously persecuting whistleblowers who expose war crimes, the president had declared his intention to close U.S. military bases across the world, to end the era of U.S. imperial global military power, and to earmark military expenditures for expanded social programs to benefit working people?

Such vision might sound like pie in the sky, but at this historic juncture isn't it even more utopian to believe peace, social justice, and democracy is possible within the narrow limits of pro-capitalist politics? Of course, no individual president alone could implement such far-reaching social change simply by taking office. It will take independent social and political action, rooted in popular mass struggles, to ever decisively defeat Wall Street capitalism.

Utopian? Maybe. But is it less utopian to imagine Sanders and his progressive supporters taking over a thoroughly corporatized Democratic Party, revamping the party along the lines of the Senator's more or less social democratic platform? More to the point: Is it less utopian to imagine a just, democratic society under a reformed, kinder and gentler version of capitalism, as Sanders envisions?

Considering that the Democratic Party has never actually been a working-class party (except in rhetoric), coupled with the entrenched, stagnant force of the corporatized party leadership, Sanders' Our Revolution organization faces a decidedly uphill and most likely impossible battle. Admittedly, it's long been hard for many to even imagine a mass third party—a labor or socialist party—emerging in the United States. But is there another option that offers a way forward? Isn't it time now to initiate a wide-ranging popular discussion of these issues among the grassroots anti-Trump resistance?

Resist the Darkness

Writing for the *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* (affiliated with Green Left Weekly) in Australia, U.S. socialist Barry Sheppard describes Trump as a "would be

Bonaparte,” a cunning manipulator whose political power left unchecked threatens to move into outright authoritarian rule. This is a distinct possibility. Yet, paradoxically, there would have been no justice or progress either in Clinton’s election. The latter conclusion speaks to the stone-hard reality that U.S. democracy is now more form than content, a wobbly propped-up façade hiding class contradictions, social inequality, and dominant corporate power. This is capitalism in the modern age. The rights of people will never be secure as long as these contradictions remain unresolved and the power of capital unabated.

As for Trump, if he were a fictional film character created by Orson Welles or Oliver Stone to satirize modern politics, the critics would probably say he was too crude a caricature, too broadly drawn, a vulgar, cartoonish exaggeration of the modern political personality. But Trump is all too real. He is the barbarian who is now no longer at the gate. Not that barbarism is anything new in this world of ours. But in the United States it is coming home to roost now in a new way.

“The lights are going out and the time to wake up from this nightmare is today,” declared scholar Henry Giroux in the days following the election. “Forget depression, look ahead, get energized, read, build alternative public spheres, become guerrilla fighters. There are no guarantees in politics, but there is no politics that matters without hope, that is, educated hope.” There are indeed grounds for such hope, educated and resilient and determined to fight on. We saw such hope in brilliant display this past weekend on the world’s streets, led by determined, visionary women.

Think about it. Eight billionaires (five of them U.S. citizens) own as much wealth as half the world. Is that a social system that makes sense, or serves democracy? The overwhelming majority of the people are not capitalists or elitists. They are not privileged. They are ordinary people and they work for a living. Yet they are also extraordinary. Because they are the majority. They have no intrinsic interest in taking over the world or starting wars, exploiting others or using violence to protect their privileges. They also hold the key to the survival of human society, if it is to survive.

As the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said in his 1967 Riverside Church speech opposing the Vietnam War, “When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.” In that speech King also called his own government “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world.” It was an assessment that remains essentially as true today as it was 50 years ago.

In a sense, the global Women’s March on Washington represents an almost primal assertion of the people’s democratic spirit, rising from roots deeply planted in the culture and psyche of millions. The weekend protests were a profound reminder that there is one thing the world’s elites can never take away—the power of the majority to change the world. If you think this is just some Pollyannaish stab at optimism in a dark time, you are welcome to your cynicism. But history is made by those who refuse to accept social oppression and injustice, who resist adversity at all costs, and who keep fighting for justice until they’ve swept away every obstacle to the realization of the age-old dream of a world without war, economic exploitation, and social classes.

