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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Barry Grey

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Democrats bring back John Dean of Watergate fame for first hearing on Mueller report

The Democratic-controlled House of Representatives on Monday held the first in a planned series of hearings on the report by Special Counsel Robert Mueller into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 US elections and possible collusion by the Trump campaign and obstruction of justice by President Donald Trump and his aides.

The hearing had a farcical character, as the Democrats have been unable to secure agreement by any Trump official to testify on the Mueller report due to the administration's wholesale refusal to comply with requests or subpoenas from the Democratic-led House for testimony or documents from current or former administration officials. That ban has extended beyond the Mueller report to Democratic investigations into the administration's attempt to add a question on citizenship status to the 2020 census, issues related to Trump's immigration policy, Trump's business affairs and other matters.

The Democrats' prospective star witness, Mueller, made it clear in his May 29 statement on his report that he did not intend to make any further public statements on the matter, and to date the Democratic leadership has hesitated to subpoena him.

Rather than seriously challenging Trump's rejection of the constitutional principle of congressional oversight—or any of his other authoritarian actions—and his de facto refusal to recognize the results of the 2018 midterm elections, which transferred control of the House to the Democrats, the Democrats have decided to proceed with hearings that have the character of political theater.

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John Dean testifying before the House Judiciary Committee Monday [Credit: C-Span]

Thus, they chose Nixon-era White House Counsel John Dean, who played a key role in the Watergate crisis and forced resignation of Nixon, as their main witness on Monday. Dean, a CNN contributor, is a vocal critic of Trump and has called for his impeachment. He was joined at the witness table by three former US attorneys, two Democrats appointed by Obama and one right-wing Republican.

Last month, both Attorney General William Barr and former White House Counsel Don McGahn refused to comply with House Judiciary Committee subpoenas to testify and provide documents relating to the Mueller report.

The administration continued its stonewalling last week. The Justice and Commerce Departments rejected a subpoena from the House Oversight and Reform Committee for documents and testimony relating to the census, and Trump ordered his former communications director Hope Hicks and McGahn's former top aide Annie Donaldson to refuse to testify or supply documents to the Judiciary Committee.

The Democrats are preparing resolutions in the House this week authorizing committee chairmen to file civil court cases aimed at compelling compliance with subpoenas. The House Oversight and Reform Committee, chaired by Rep. Elijah Cummings of Maryland, may also seek votes by the entire House to hold Attorney General William Barr and Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross in criminal contempt. A contempt resolution, however, is virtually unenforceable and would have little practical effect.

Just prior to Monday's hearing, Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler of New York announced that the Justice Department had agreed to provide the committee with some of the Mueller probe documents it had requested. As a result, Nadler said, his committee would not proceed with plans for a vote by the entire House on Tuesday to hold Barr in criminal contempt. It was not clear whether the planned vote on McGahn would go ahead.

The right-wing basis of the Democrats' opposition to Trump was on full display at the hearing. Nadler opened the hearing by citing Mueller as an authority on the supposed massive intervention of the Russian government in the 2016 election in favor of Trump—an unsubstantiated narrative that was fabricated by the US intelligence agencies and has been the focus of the Democrats' demands for a more aggressive posture toward Russia as well as a harsher crackdown on oppositional views on the internet.

Claiming the “Russian military launched a concerted attack on our political system,” Nadler implicated WikiLeaks in criminal activity, saying, “They [Russian military intelligence officers] stole private information, and then released that information through fake online identities and through the organization WikiLeaks.”

This theme was repeated by the Democratic former US attorneys who testified. Joyce White Vance, former US attorney for the Northern District of Alabama, said, “Mueller was investigating an attack on our democracy by a hostile foreign power, and on multiple occasions, the president tried to thwart it, curtail it, or end it completely, either by removing the special counsel outright or interfering with his ability to gather evidence.”

Barbara McQuade, former US attorney for the Eastern District of Michigan, all but accused Trump of aiding and abetting Russian efforts to undermine US national security. She told the committee: “The obstruction described in the report posed a risk to our national security because it was designed to prevent investigators from learning all of the facts about an attack on our country by a hostile foreign adversary... By seeking to curtail the investigation, President Trump attempted to limit our country's understanding of how Russia attacked our election, which would also diminish our ability to detect and defend against future threats.”

In his leadoff testimony, Dean pointed to parallels between Trump's actions and the efforts of Nixon to obstruct the investigation of the Watergate special prosecutor. He compared, for example, Trump's firing of FBI Director James Comey in May of 2017

with the 1973 “Saturday Night Massacre,” when Nixon fired Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox.

Implicitly urging the House Democrats to launch impeachment proceedings against Trump, he said: “In many ways the Mueller report is to President Trump what the so-called Watergate road map... was to President Richard Nixon.” He added that Mueller “has provided this committee with a road map.”

The Democratic leadership has to date refused to initiate impeachment proceedings for fear that they would bring to the surface an unprecedented crisis of constitutional rule in America, to which Trump might respond by appealing to his fascistic base and the military brass to resist arms in hand. During the 2016 election, candidate Trump suggested that his supporters look toward a “Second Amendment solution” in the event of a Clinton victory.

The Democrats further worry that impeachment would weaken the ability of US imperialism to carry out its aggressive and militarist agenda around the world, which they fully support.

Above all, the Democrats fear the likely response of the American working class, which is already prosecuting its struggle against austerity and social inequality with a sharp increase in strike activity and a growing interest in socialism. The Democrats, no less than the Republicans and Trump, are petrified by the prospect of a social eruption from below that would escape the control of the two big business parties and the pro-capitalist trade unions.

Even in the unlikely event that the Democrats impeached Trump in the House and the Republican-controlled Senate convicted and removed him from office, the result would be his replacement by the equally right-wing vice president, Mike Pence.

The spectacle of the Democrats’ McCarthyite-style anti-Russia campaign combined with their complicity in Trump’s fascistic attacks on immigrants and moves toward dictatorship underscores the necessity for the working class to conduct the struggle against the far-right Trump administration by refusing to support the Democrats or any other faction of the ruling class and mobilizing its independent strength industrially and politically against the capitalist system.

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