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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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19.04.2020

## *Will the Pandemic Finish Trump or Give his Régime an Escape?*



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Amidst all the talk about if the global Covid-19 pandemic will lead to an opening for socialism, or at least a reduction in the grip of neoliberalism, in the wake of capitalism's failures, a more immediate question is if there is to be a reversal of the march of the Right in electoral politics.

Elections in New Zealand and several Australian states are scheduled for later this year, as are Brazilian municipal, Venezuelan parliamentary and French senatorial elections. The results in Brazil will be of particular interest, given the disastrous administration of Jair Bolsonaro, the extreme right president who lusts for dictatorship and continues to deny the effects of the virus despite the vast numbers of people who are dying. Will Brazilians turn local elections into a referendum on their neofascist president?

To the north, the U.S. elections in November will unavoidably be a referendum on the disastrous régime of Donald Trump, who has mishandled the pandemic from the beginning. But to be counter-intuitive: Will the economic collapse triggered by the pandemic serve to save him?

Bear with me here. By any logical standard, the performance of President Trump (I still can't believe I have to put those two words together) even before the pandemic struck should have been sufficient to ensure the biggest electoral loss in history. But if logic was operative, he wouldn't have been elected in the first place, and his fanatical base is completely impervious to facts, reason or reality. Nonetheless, his base is too small on its own for him to be re-elected. Thus President Trump has consistently staked his presidency on the state of the economy, falsely claiming that the economy has been just wonderful.

For his billionaire buddies, the economy has been wonderful. Not so much for working people. The official low unemployment rate is not a realistic measure. Only working people who are receiving unemployment benefits are counted as "unemployed" in official statistics issued by countries around the world. Thus actual unemployment rates around the world are much higher than the "official" rates, generally about twice as high. A better measurement is the "civilian labor force participation rate" — all people age 16 or older who are not in prison or a mental institution. By this measure, the percentage of people holding jobs in the U.S. remains significantly below its May 2000 peak.

And if what jobs there are don't pay enough to survive on, what good is that? As a meme recently making the rounds of the internet featured a store clerk saying "Sure the Trump administration has created jobs. I have three of them!"

### **Overdue for the next recession**

The long "recovery" from the 2008 crash could not have lasted much longer. Entering 2020, the world's capitalist economies were overdue for a recession. The question is always what the proximate cause will be. A downward slide in the U.S. economy would have wiped out the single reason the Trump gang could point to for a reason to vote for the incumbent. In normal circumstances, that would almost certainly have ensured his deserved defeat.

An economic downturn has arrived, with astonishing force. The wildcard is that the downturn's proximate cause is the pandemic. Will this provide the Trump gang with the excuse that enables them to evade their responsibility? It is no stretch to imagine the

talking points once the 2020 presidential campaign resumes: “We had nothing to do with it; it was the virus; nobody could have foreseen it.” President Trump’s base will of course lap up such nonsense and it’ll be endlessly repeated on Fox News. The rest of the corporate media isn’t likely to be a big help here; it is easy to foresee endless hand-wringing pabulum asking if the downturn could have been avoided and if the administration is responsible.

In such circumstances, it is possible that the Trump gang will be able to avoid their responsibility and escape blame for an economic downturn that is likely to last for some time, particularly if a significant fraction of the vast numbers of small businesses forced to close under government orders are unable to survive. That seems likely, given that small businesses are expected to keep paying rents to landlords despite having no income and a federal small business loan program that swiftly proved inadequate. Why is it that everybody is expected to sacrifice, except landlords? And except Wall Street, of course.

If, despite the foregoing, the 2020 U.S. election turns on the economy without allowing for excuses, then the Trump gang will be finished. But if instead the state of the economy is knocked out as an issue because the Trump gang successfully portrays the economic crash as a *deus ex machina* for which they have no responsibility (which would require some corporate media collaboration), then the election will hinge on the ability of both corporate parties to bring out their base on election day, and the degree to which voters loathe the candidates.

The Democratic Party has few peers in its ability to blow elections as was amply demonstrated in 2016. Having done all it could to hand its nomination to its least popular candidate and thus run a Wall Street corporate centrist in an election in which voters were clamoring for a change, the Democratic Party national leadership decided to once again elevate a Wall Street corporate centrist.

### **The failure of the political process**

Joe Biden is not as unpopular as Hillary Clinton, but nonetheless he is emblematic of a party that is incapable of learning lessons or imagining a world not under the thumb of the financial industry. One can imagine the panic that must have set in when a few financiers casually made it known publicly that they would back President Trump if Bernie Sanders were the nominee. Senator Sanders, with his formal endorsement of Vice President Biden on April 13, has formalized the end of his campaign. Attacks on Senator

Sanders for being a “sheepdog” or any other such useless epithet, clarify nothing. He won’t have any ability to be an influence on a Biden administration, and retain any ability to shift the Democratic Party at least a little bit leftward, if doesn’t act as a good political soldier and work to elect Vice President Biden. That is hard political reality, however much either Sanders supporters or those to the left of the Vermont senator find it distasteful.

It’s once again a “lesser evil” vote for United Statesians. A bitter pill to swallow. Given the unprecedented danger of the Trump gang, it is perfectly understandable that millions who would have preferred a better choice will vote for the Democratic nominee. If popular opinion puts all due blame for the horrific death toll from the virus on the Trump régime, the Orange Tantrum-Thrower will lose, but that is nothing to count on given that the wanna-be fascist dictator has gone all his life avoiding responsibility for his actions. As already speculated above, it is conceivable that the pandemic will provide an escape card from responsibility. How much will the corporate media enable that escape and how willing will voters be to swallow it?

All the above is short-term politics. (I am assuming the November vote will be held as usual; the voting schedule is specified in the constitution.) The larger question emanates from the spectacular inability of capitalism, and especially of institutions hollowed out by neoliberalism, to cope with the Covid-19 crisis. The failure of neoliberal ideology is clearly seen by large numbers of people as never before, and, to a lesser extent, the failure of capitalism itself, not simply its most recent permutation. But observation and organized action in response are not the same.

Neoliberalism was already breaking down and seen as an ideology needing to be sent to the dustbin of history by ever larger numbers of people. Should neoliberalism be replaced by a somewhat reformed brand of capitalism, a reform that would prove short-lived, or should we properly target the real problem — capitalism itself. Reform the unreformable, or a better world based on human need and environmental stability rather than a mad scramble for private profits and ever widening inequality?

That is a question beyond any election and a question to be answered by all the world’s peoples.

CounterPunch 17.04.2020