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Learning From Trump: How Progressives Can Become The Party Of Change



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

Politically, this is surely a strange and disturbing time, but one of its oddest, most discouraging features is to watch Donald Trump operate as an agent of systemic change while his panicky opponents try to defend an obsolescent status quo. Like Franklin D. Roosevelt's right-wing enemies, they cry for help from the courts to prevent an activist, mission-driven president from violating established political and moral norms.

Help! Trump is using all his presidential powers, including some that he may not constitutionally possess, and has reduced Congress's role to that of a cheering section.

Help! Trump is slashing the federal bureaucracy, closing Congressionally created agencies, and throwing lots of good people out of work.

Help! Trump is changing U.S. foreign policy, redefining enemies and allies, and cuddling up to dictators.

Help! Trump is putting pressure on the press, the schools, and the cultural establishment to adopt conservative nationalist cultural values.

And so on. All these charges are arguably accurate, but what they really amount to is an allegation that Trump and his cohorts are politically serious actors – representatives of a mass movement for change – who are committing the ab-normal act of doing what they promised they would do if they took power. As the Democrats’ cries for help mount to the skies, it is unclear whether what they are complaining about is the *content* of the MAGA program or Trump’s disrespect for established *procedures*.

If the basic objections are procedural, then one needs to ask whether the Democrats understand how American presidents beginning with F.D.R. vastly extended presidential power and reduced the role of Congress and the States – and more generally, how programs of systemic reform alter old-school constitutional norms. But if their basic objections are to the right-wing content of MAGA’s program, then we need to ask what left-wing content they are proposing as an alternative to it.

In fact, the relationship between the procedural bent of most anti-Trump criticism and the absence of any serious leftist content seems undeniable. Allegedly “progressive” Democrats such as the anchors and guest politicians on CNN and MSNBC can’t stop talking about Trump’s and Musk’s anti-Constitutional, authoritarian, proto-fascist activities, but it does not seem to have entered their minds that MAGA is actually about as fascist as the New Deal was socialist. Both movements represent relatively radical attempts to reform the American system without changing its essential capitalist and republican nature. MAGA’s program is a vile combination of Hayekian, pro-oligarchy economics, ethno-nationalist politics, and fundamentalist religion, but it is the ideology of a mass movement. That movement cannot be combatted and defeated by centrist Democrats preaching old-time Constitutionalism or “progressives” whose idea of a leftist socioeconomic program is to raise the minimum wage. The real beauty of the MAGA movement, its Achilles heel from a leftist perspective, is its naked class basis. American oligarchs and their foreign comrades are predictably lining up to support Trump, not only, as simple-minded liberals like to say, because they are afraid of retribution, but also because they love the idea of slashing corporate tax rates, doing away with burdensome regulations, and crippling labor movements. (Some also love tariffs, while others count on their ability to obtain “exceptions”). So, how do you win a class war? Here’s how: you unite the workers and small entrepreneurs against the great capitalists and their kept politicians. Then you take power electorally and do exactly what Trump is doing, but in reverse: you reform the system to empower working people and subordinate capital to labor.

MAGA's skill has been to divide the working class by setting those in older industries against college-educated technical and "professional" employees, many of whom work in the public sector. Tragically, with tens of thousands of public workers losing their jobs thanks to the Trump/Musk cuts, working people in private industries have shown little or no empathy for them. Many of them have been convinced by MAGA ideologues that government workers are overpaid, over-educated parasites constituting another selfish interest group. A workers' movement with any guts, intelligence, and knowledge of Marxism will understand that the opposition's main task is to unify the members of a divided working class, and that this will require offering a genuinely radical, anti-oligarchical program that will benefit all the sectors of that class.

How socialist this program needs to be is a matter TBD, but at the very least it will require significant changes in existing capitalist norms. For example, one recent suggestion that is certainly worth considering is a proposal to reverse the *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision, which has produced a flood of corporate contributions to political campaigns. This seems a fine idea, although one could go much farther in limiting the private financing of political campaigns. But considering it immediately reminds one that the Democratic Party raised more money from billionaires in the last two presidential elections than the Republicans did. This is the basic problem that, above all, has frozen the Democratic Party in its current supine position. To the extent that the anti-MAGA movement remains a "rotten bloc" that attempts to unify workers with oligarchs, it will fail to awaken the kind of class consciousness needed to counter MAGA's strategy of "divide and rule."

If one asks why the Democrats have not campaigned for a Congress that could reverse *Citizens United*, the answer is that the oligarchs are not interested in ending a system of legal bribery of candidates which has served them quite well. Similarly, why has that party's position on military spending and the military-industrial complex been so weak and mealy-mouthed? In large part, because there is no way most great capitalists will agree to limit their role as the world's leading producer of weapons and delivery systems. Again: why won't the Democrats consider putting a 100% tax on income and wealth over a certain very high level? A: Because the rich won't stand for it.

All this strongly suggests a need to learn from Trump. Let me ask you this: if serious pro-working-class progressives took power, wouldn't we challenge the procedural norms that prevented us from regulating political campaign contributions, slashing military expenditures, and expropriating superfluous private income and wealth? Wouldn't we eliminate the oligarchy's preference for private enterprise over public interest work? Wouldn't we

empower working people at local and national levels to make many of the economic decisions now monopolized by Big Business? And wouldn't we use presidential power to the extent possible to achieve these goals?

Trump, Musk, and their fellow oligarchs are in power now because, as they love to say, they are "strong" and their opponents are "weak." But their real strength, politically speaking, has not been in the sort of macho male posturing that they often display. Its real source is their ideological seriousness, their conviction that, in time, they could win mass support for their ideas, their willingness to spend some time in the wilderness developing a program, and their ability to build a mass movement to put the program into practice. Because most of these ideas are fundamentally, irretrievably defective, their failure to satisfy the needs of working people seems inevitable. But this failure will only make the need to reform and revitalize our system more acute.

I don't worry as much about what Trump & Co. may do over the next few years as what will happen when they fail. At *that* point, if there is not a movement representing the whole working class, one with a credible program to solve the problems of social inequality, political passivity, and personal alienation, we will be in serious trouble. The time to start building that movement is now – and we can start by taking a page from the book of our class enemy.

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