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Social inequality and the disintegration of the American middle class

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The implications of the changes in American social life indicated by the findings recently published by the Pew Research Center on the sharp decline in the number of middle-income households are enormous. The data revealed that, by Pew's definition, middle-income households for the first time no longer constituted the majority of American society.

The figures are remarkable. The share of the national wealth accruing to middle-income households, the study reported, was 43 percent in 2014, down from 62 percent in 1970. The median wealth of middle-income households has fallen by 28 percent over the past decade and a half. The share of income going to upper-income households has risen from 29 percent to 49 percent over the same period.

The Pew report is only the latest in a series of studies pointing to the malignant class divide in American society. The US economy has been transformed over the past four decades entirely to the benefit of the corporate-financial aristocracy. Only the very, very rich have prospered. America is now a full-blown plutocracy.

The great majority of the population has experienced an unrelenting deterioration in income, benefits and conditions of life.

The very poorest have suffered the most. Many survive on next to nothing. One in 50 Americans has no income at all and lives on food stamps. Fifty million people are food insecure on an annual basis. Fifteen million people in the US earn \$10 an hour or less. In terms of purchasing power, the annual income of a minimum wage earner has declined by 32 percent since 1968.

A “fair day’s pay” and a “decent job” are things of the past for most of the population. Workers in industry, union or nonunion, have been pummeled in recent decades. The experience of the autoworkers, whose starting pay has been halved and benefits eviscerated, is one of the sharpest expressions of a generalized process.

A sizable portion of what was once considered the solid American middle class, as the Pew data suggests, faces increasingly precarious and straitened circumstances: managers, administrators, technicians, health care professionals, high-tech workers, office workers of every type and description.

To provide only a few examples of some of the once better-off groups:

The Coalition on the Academic Workforce reports that as of 2009, 75 percent of the instructional workforce of nearly 1.8 million in two- and four-year institutions of higher education in the US “were employed in contingent positions off the tenure track... Although most faculty members serving in contingent positions hold a master’s degree or higher and almost all hold at least a baccalaureate degree, their earnings are not remotely commensurate with their training and education.”

One commentator refers to the “growing proletarianization of legal careers.” He continues: “Little by little, the professional in the liberal tradition leaves the scene. The legal professional is increasingly an employee—of the state as a judge, a prosecutor, or a public defender; of large business; or of a law firm.” Another speaks of physicians’ “loss of political, economic, and cultural authority.”

The ruling elite in the US and its apologists in the media and the trade unions have been peddling the myth of the “great American middle class” since the 1950s. This was part of the struggle against the influence of socialism. One cultural commentator notes that the fact that the American middle class was large and would continue to get larger “was one of the nation’s proudest achievements” and was “also ammunition against communism.”

At the height of American capitalism’s affluence, a host of shallow, self-serving observers proclaimed the failure of Marxism. Ben Wattenberg, an author and commentator associated with leading Democratic politicians in the 1960s and 1970s, smugly claimed that contrary to Marx, “the American working class...became the middle class.”

Stewart Alsop, a *Newsweek* columnist, commented in 1969, “Something has happened in this country which, as any good Marxist will tell you, can’t happen...the proletariat has become bourgeois.”

This line of reasoning, of course, was also the basis for “New Left” protest politics and remains a staple of the pseudo-left today.

The argument that America was a middle class-dominated society was always a lie, even at the height of the postwar boom, concealing the brutalities of the class struggle. Now such claims stand completely exposed by the course of social evolution.

Marxists have long analyzed these developments and foreseen their consequences. Almost exactly 17 years ago, on December 21, 1998, in response to the impeachment of Bill Clinton, the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board posted a statement, “Is America drifting towards civil war?” The statement argued that the crisis in Washington arose “from an interaction of complex political, social and economic processes,” and that bourgeois democracy was “breaking down beneath the weight of accumulated and increasingly insoluble contradictions.”

The editorial board pointed, above all, to “the proletarianization of vast strata of American society, the decay in the size and economic influence of the traditional middle classes, and the growth of social inequality, reflected in the staggering disparities in the distribution of both wealth and income.” Large numbers “of white-collar, professional and middle management workers have been affected by corporate downsizing and restructuring, with their salaries, benefits and job security dramatically eroded.”

The WSWWS statement continued: “The unprecedented degree of social inequality imparts terrific tensions to society. There is a vast chasm between the wealthy and the working masses that is hardly mediated by a middle class. The intermediate layers which once provided a social buffer, and which constitute the main base of support for bourgeois democracy, can no longer play that role.”

This analysis was absolutely correct, and more than a decade-and-a-half of ever greater appropriation of the national wealth by the top fraction of the super-rich, under both the Bush and Obama administrations, has only imparted greater ferocity and bitterness to those “terrific tensions.”

The seismic socioeconomic shifts have objectively and decisively undermined the basis for bourgeois democracy. It is a commonplace that a stable middle class is the necessary foundation of any parliamentary system.

As part of the general unraveling, the American ruling elite has itself undergone a transformation. It relies more and more for its wealth and privileges on financial swindling and manipulation. A relatively small section of the upper-middle class has also benefited from the stock market bonanza and other forms of parasitism.

Ruthlessly determined to defend every penny of their ill-gotten gains, the ruling elite and its political representatives in the two major parties have moved dramatically to the right. The American establishment, openly in some cases, more discreetly in others, is actively working to establish authoritarian, police state dictatorship. This reactionary drive goes hand in hand with militarism and a policy of endless global warfare.

The rise of a fascistic element is personified by the ignoramus-billionaire Donald Trump. His xenophobia and occasional populist demagoguery are part of an effort to channel the outrage and fears of desperate, unstable sections of the petty-bourgeoisie, in particular, in a deeply reactionary direction. The emergence of such a tendency is a serious warning to the working class, against whom its blows will ultimately be aimed.

The polarization of American society into a fabulously wealthy elite, at one end, and broad sections of the population who depend on a wage (at best), at the other, sets the stage for convulsive struggles. The Pew statistics and all the figures on deepening social inequality lead to one overwhelming political reality: there is no reform solution to the crisis of American capitalism.

The putrefaction of American capitalism is producing not only Trumps and Carsons, and, for that matter, Obamas, it is preparing a mass revolt by the working population. What is becoming an open rebellion of autoworkers against the companies and the union, behind which stands the state, belongs to the same historical moment. The bourgeoisie offers poverty, dictatorship and war. The working class will find a way out of its impasse through revolution.