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The capitalist crisis and the defense of democratic rights

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On Sunday, Austria's presidential runoff between Norbert Hofer of the far-right Freedom Party and Alexander Van der Bellen of the Green Party ended in a deadlock. Mail-in ballots will now determine whether Hofer will become the first head of state of a major European country since 1945 whose party traces its lineage to the Nazis.

Thirty years ago, the exposure of Austrian President Kurt Waldheim's previous membership in the Nazi Party ignited a political scandal. Today, Hofer's rise is part of a growing and increasingly dominant international tendency that has significant support in ruling circles. In country after country, right-wing and authoritarian forces are being mobilized to divert the anger and frustration felt by masses of people toward the traditional parties of the ruling class.

This tendency can be seen in the rise of the French National Front, the Alternative for Germany, the UK Independence Party, neo-fascistic forces in Ukraine and the election of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. Most significantly, with the imminent nomination of Donald Trump as the Republican presidential candidate, one of the two principal parties in the United States will be led by an individual with a distinctly fascist program and orientation.

Underlying the breakdown of democratic institutions is the protracted global economic crisis, the extreme growth of militarism and war, and, above all, the intensification of the class struggle.

In the Perspective published on May 21, the *World Socialist Web Site* called attention to signs of a resurgence of class struggle and a process of political radicalization on a world scale, including the strike by 39,000 Verizon workers in the US, mass protests against reactionary labor “reform” laws in France, a general strike in Greece, and strikes in China and India. The revival of class struggle, we explained, “is finding political expression in a turn by workers against all the parties of the official ‘left’ that are backed by the trade unions.”

The ruling elites feel themselves under siege from all sides. They are well aware that their policies of war and austerity are deeply unpopular and are provoking mass resistance. They are attempting to preempt this political radicalization through the mobilization of far-right forces, while creating the conditions for ever more violent and brutal repression of social opposition.

To the extent that neo-fascistic forces are able to win broader support, the political responsibility rests with the right-wing and anti-working class character of the nominal “left.” This can be seen most clearly in France and Greece. Workers and youth elected a Socialist Party government in France that has imposed emergency powers in the name of fighting terrorism and forced through a law attacking workers’ wages and working conditions. In Greece, Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left), is using riot police to implement, over mass working class opposition, the very austerity measures it promised to oppose.

In Brazil, the Workers Party (PT) government, which for 13 years loyally imposed the dictates of the global banks, has paved the way for the direct intervention of the military 52 years after an authoritarian dictatorship seized power and launched a reign of terror against workers and youth. In nearby Venezuela, the political heirs of Hugo Chavez are responding to rising inflation and plunging oil revenues by imposing a state of emergency that bans workers from striking for higher wages.

As for Trump, the ability of this billionaire businessman to win support by promising to “make America great again” on the basis of chauvinism and extreme nationalism is entirely bound up with deep popular hostility to the two-party system. In a campaign between Trump and his likely Democratic Party opponent, Hillary Clinton, it will be Trump who positions himself as the “anti-establishment” candidate against a corrupt and despised representative of Wall Street and the military-intelligence establishment.

Under these conditions, the representatives of the middle class pseudo-left are advancing the argument that what is needed is a general alliance of “democratic forces” on a capitalist basis. Typical are the comments of Yanis Varoufakis, the former finance minister of the Syriza government in Greece, who played a central role in the betrayal of the struggle of Greek workers against austerity.

In an open letter published on the *International Viewpoint* web site, Varoufakis declares, “We are at a moment in history very much like” the 1930s, with “deflation, xenophobia, hyper-nationalism, competitive devaluations, jingoism, etc.” What, he asks, “was the duty of progressives” in the 1930s? “It was... to reach across party affiliations and borders to create a pan-European movement of democrats (radicals, liberals, even progressive conservatives) in opposition to the forces of evil. I very much fear that this is our duty today too.”

In fact, the 1930s are an object lesson in the bankruptcy of the politics Varoufakis is espousing. In that decade, the Stalinist-dominated Communist parties responded to Depression, war and the growth of fascism by promoting the program of “popular frontism”—an alliance with supposedly “democratic” elements of the bourgeoisie against fascism. This proved to be a disaster for the working class. By 1940, most of Europe was under fascist rule.

In similar fashion to the Stalinist popular front of the 1930s, Varoufakis’ policy of shackling workers to the very parties that are carrying out austerity and war is aimed at precluding the development of a political movement against the growth of far-right forces that can actually win mass support. He wants a campaign for “democracy” without changing any of the conditions that have given rise to the danger of fascism. In the United States, the political forces around the Democratic Party are preparing a political movement against Trump without proposing any change to a social policy that has produced an unprecedented transfer of wealth from the working population to the financial aristocracy.

Explaining the crisis of bourgeois democracy in the period between the First and Second World Wars, the great Marxist theoretician and revolutionist Leon Trotsky wrote:

By analogy with electrical engineering, democracy might be defined as a system of safety switches and circuit breakers for protection against currents overloaded by the national or social struggle. No period of human history has been—even remotely—so overcharged with antagonisms such as ours... Under the impact of class and international contradictions that are too highly charged, the safety switches of democracy either burn out or explode. That is what the short circuit of dictatorship represents.

Trotsky based his analysis on an understanding that the breakdown of democratic forms was the product of a social and economic system in deep crisis. The task today, as it was then, is to mobilize the working class internationally on the basis of a political program directed against the source of the electrical overload: capitalism.

We call on our readers all over the world to draw the necessary conclusions. Nothing will be achieved by attempting to shore up the crumbling institutions of bourgeois rule. Two alternatives are starkly posed: either the ruling class and its economic system will drag humanity into the abyss of war, Depression and dictatorship, or the international working class will take power and reorganize the world economy on a socialist basis.