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The 2016 elections and the crisis of American democracy

Joseph Kishore

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The 2016 US elections mark a new stage in the deep and protracted crisis of American democracy. Political parties that have been in existence for well over a century and a half are breaking apart. New political alignments are emerging, and an extremely dangerous type of politics, in gestation for an extended period of time, is erupting to the surface.

In the aftermath of the Democratic and Republican national conventions, Donald Trump's standing in the polls has declined significantly, particularly in key battleground states. From prominent sections of the Republican Party and allied media there are complaints that Trump is not running a traditional race capable of winning office. There are mounting demands that he change course.

The editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* wrote this week that if the Republican leadership “can't get Mr. Trump to change his act by Labor Day,” it “will have no choice but to write off the nominee as hopeless and focus on salvaging the Senate and House...” As for Trump, the *Journal* declared that he needs to “decide if he wants to behave like someone who wants to be President—or turn the nomination over to [his vice presidential running mate] Mike Pence.”

What is most remarkable is how little Trump appears to be concerned with either the poll numbers or the increasingly strident complaints from the leadership of the party he nominally heads.

The Republican candidate on Wednesday responded to the complaints from the *Journal* and others by organizing a shake-up of his staff along precisely the opposite lines from those demanded by his Republican critics. He effectively demoted his current campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, and appointed Breitbart News head Stephen Bannon to run the day-to-day operations of his campaign. In bringing on Bannon, the *Guardian* newspaper wrote, Trump “shook free the last vestiges of political supervision...with the appointment of a maverick...likely to favour his freewheeling style.” It is a “middle finger to the Republican establishment,” read a headline in the *Washington Post*.

More significant than issues of style are the political implications of Bannon’s selection. Breitbart News is at the center of the right-wing gutter press, the network of blogs and talk radio programs that promote the foulest, most nationalist, militarist and fascist politics.

A report published in the *Daily Beast* on Wednesday pointed to Breitbart’s connections to white supremacist organizations like VDare, the National Policy Institute, Alt-Right and American Renaissance. Andrew Breitbart, the founder of Breitbart until his death in 2012, is reported to have approvingly called Bannon the “Leni Riefenstahl of the Tea Party movement,” referring to the Nazi propagandist and filmmaker. According to the *Post*, Bannon has encouraged Trump to run as an “unabashed nationalist.”

Bannon recently made waves when he defended former Trump campaign manager Corey Lewandowski against accusations that he assaulted one of Breitbart’s own reporters, Michelle Fields. Breitbart has since been transformed into what amounts to a campaign web site for Trump.

Trump’s evident disinterest in the opinions of prominent Republican officials is in line with a political orientation he has developed in the course of his campaign. He is calculating that there is a reservoir of social anger and frustration that can be channeled, on the basis of vague denunciations of the “elite,” in an extremely right-wing direction. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in March, following a string of Trump primary victories on Super Tuesday, “It was only a matter of time before one or another right-wing demagogue would recognize the political potential of an appeal to the economic and social insecurity of millions of people.”

Whether or not he wins in November, Trump is creating the basis for a fascist and nationalist movement, focused on attacks on immigrants, anti-Islamic hysteria, calls for “law and order” and demands for an end to all constraints on the police and military. This movement will persist after the elections, with Trump or some other demagogue at its head.

In this connection, it is significant that Trump is increasingly raising the charge that the elections are rigged in favor of Clinton and the Democrats, with the clear implication that a Clinton presidency will be illegitimate from the start.

In the final analysis, Trump speaks for a section of the ruling class that is well aware of the crisis of its economic and political system, and the growth of social opposition, and is preparing more authoritarian and violent methods of rule.

Trump represents a serious danger for the working class. However, his ability to gain a hearing among certain oppressed sections of the population is due above all to the bankrupt and reactionary character of what passes for “left” politics in the United States. Trump’s denunciations of “crooked Hillary,” his attacks on the media, his broadsides against the “political correctness” of the liberal elite are meant to tap into a deep well of hostility to the Democratic Party, magnified after seven and a half years of the Obama administration.

Over the past month, the *World Socialist Web Site’s* characterization of Clinton as the candidate of the political status quo has been ever more dramatically confirmed. She now has the explicit or implicit backing of everyone from neoconservative Republicans such as Iraq warmonger Robert Kagan, to top intelligence officials such as former CIA heads Michael Morell and Michael Hayden, to the Obama administration, the entire trade union apparatus and former primary challenger Bernie Sanders. To this list must be added major hedge fund billionaires and most of the media.

A Clinton presidency would represent an alliance between Wall Street and corporate America, the military-intelligence apparatus, and the upper-middle class layers that adhere to the Democratic Party on the basis of the politics of race, gender and sexual identity. The focus of a Clinton administration would be a vast expansion of US military interventions, particularly in the Middle East and against Russia, as well as an intensification of the Obama administration’s anti-Chinese “pivot to Asia.”

The Democrats and the media are seeking to turn the elections into a mandate for war, even as the vast implications for the population of the United States and the world are covered up. The Clinton campaign has centered its criticisms of Trump not on his fascist policies, but on his alleged ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin and his unsuitability, for both political and psychological reasons, to serve as US commander in chief.

The nature of the Clinton campaign—particularly in the unprecedented intervention of top intelligence and military officials—in its own way expresses the crisis of bourgeois democracy. The program she is preparing requires an escalation of the assault on the working class and a further dismantling of constitutional forms of rule beyond what has already been implemented by Bush and Obama.

In the 2016 elections, processes that have been developing for some time are coming to a head. It is now sixteen years since the theft of an election by the US Supreme Court brought George W. Bush to power, an event that was preceded by an impeachment campaign against Hillary Clinton’s husband based on a manufactured sex scandal.

The 2000 elections were followed by the attacks of September 11, 2001. 9/11 was used to justify the “war on terror,” which brought the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the wars in Libya and Syria and a new war in Iraq, the Patriot Act and domestic spying, Guantanamo Bay, CIA torture and drone assassinations. A quarter century of war—going back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the proclamation by the first Bush administration of a “New World Order”—has led to an immense growth in the power and influence of the military and intelligence agencies.

Underlying the crisis of democratic forms of rule is the long-term decay of American capitalism, accompanied by a process of financialization and the rise of a new aristocracy that has accumulated unimaginable levels of wealth by means of parasitism and speculation. Social inequality is at record levels, and a large majority of the population confronts some combination of unemployment, economic insecurity and poverty-level wages.

The basic trajectory of popular sentiment is to the left. Recent polls confirm the undeniable fact that millions of people view the entire political system, including both Clinton and Trump, with hatred and contempt. The widespread support for the Sanders campaign in the Democratic primaries showed that broad sections of the population are looking for a way to oppose the domination of the banks and corporations over economic and political life. The outcome of Sanders' campaign—which the WSWS anticipated and repeatedly warned against—has ensured that this sentiment finds no political expression.

Whatever the outcome of the November election, the crisis of American democracy will intensify. The greatest danger facing working people is that they are not politically organized and they are not conscious of the tasks they confront. The presidential election campaign of the Socialist Equality Party is aimed precisely at developing the independent political organization and consciousness of the working class.

The dangers before workers in the United States and internationally will not be resolved through tactical maneuvers or wishful thinking. What is required is an uncompromising political struggle, based on the understanding that the political crisis is a reflection of the crisis of the entire capitalist system.

The candidates of the SEP—Jerry White for President and Niles Niemuth for Vice President—are advancing a socialist and internationalist program that represents the interests of the working class and prepares it for the struggles that lie ahead.

The *World Socialist Web Site* speaks each day to tens of thousands of readers. Events have proven the correctness of the perspective and program of the Socialist Equality Party. The time has come to draw the necessary political conclusions. We say to all our readers who recognize the dangers and the need to fight for socialism: Translate your convictions into actions.

The building of the Socialist Equality Party is the most urgent political task. Now is the time to join the SEP and support its election campaign.