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From monster to Mr. President-Elect: Democrats grovel before Trump

Andre Damon

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Within a day of the election of Donald Trump, leading Democrats have moved with extraordinary speed to declare their support for the president-elect.

President Barack Obama invited Trump to the White House for a friendly 90-minute meeting on Thursday. He declared afterwards that his “number-one priority in the coming two months is to try to facilitate a transition that ensures our president-elect is successful.” He added, speaking to Trump, “I want to emphasize to you, Mr. President-Elect, that we now are going to want to do everything we can to help you succeed—because if you succeed, then the country succeeds.”

Obama’s declaration stands in stark contrast to his own statements just a few days ago. Then he asserted that Trump “appears to only care about himself” and “doesn’t know basic facts that you’d need to know” to be president. He added that Trump “spent 70 years on this earth showing no regard for working people.”

That was before the Democratic debacle on Election Day. Now he declares his highest priority to be ensuring that Trump is “successful.”

Obama’s comments followed the statement by Hillary Clinton on Wednesday that she hoped “[Trump] will be a successful president for all Americans.” Senator Bernie Sanders, the

supposed socialist, issued his own groveling statement, declaring, “To the degree that Mr. Trump is serious about pursuing policies that improve the lives of working families in this country, I and other progressives are prepared to work with him.”

With such declarations, the Democrats are in effect abandoning any pretense of acting as an opposition party to a President Trump and a Republican-controlled Congress.

The proclamations of support from top Democrats are made in relation to an individual whose election clearly marks a watershed in American politics. What is coming to power is a government of the extreme right, with fascistic characteristics. There are reports that Trump wants to appoint as his chief of staff Stephen Bannon, the head of Breitbart News, an ultra-right and fascistic media outlet. His top advisors and likely cabinet appointees include reactionary figures such as former New York Mayor Rudolf Giuliani and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie.

In their rush to lend the transition of power an aura of normalcy, the Democrats and the media have maintained a studious silence about certain quite striking elements of the election.

No one is noting that a principal factor in the election of Trump was a significant decline in voter turnout. For all of the media talk of a “surge” of white working class voters behind Trump, the Republican candidate actually received one million fewer votes than Mitt Romney received in losing the 2012 election to Obama. Clinton won 6 million fewer votes than Obama won in his reelection, when the outgoing president obtained significantly fewer votes than he had received in 2008. Also virtually ignored is the extraordinary fact that Trump failed even to win the popular vote. Clinton had a higher percentage of the national vote, but she lost in the Electoral College, which involves a complex and antidemocratic apportionment based on victories in individual states. Trump will take office having failed to secure a plurality, let alone a majority, of the overall vote.

In the entire 240-year history of the United States, there have been only five elections in which the incoming president did not win the popular vote. When this happened in 1876, the Republican, Rutherford B. Hayes, became president, though he had fewer votes than the Democrat, Samuel J. Tilden. The political conflict over the outcome was so intense that the Republicans were able to hold the White House only after agreeing to the effective end of post-Civil War Reconstruction, through the withdrawal of federal troops from the South.

After a split vote in 1888, when Grover Cleveland lost to Benjamin Harrison, the winner of the Electoral Vote was also the winner of the popular vote for the next 112 years. In the 21st century, this anomaly has now happened twice—in 2000 and again in 2016. In the former case, the selection of George W. Bush as president required the intervention of the Supreme Court to halt the recount of ballots in Florida.

Had Trump found himself in the position of Clinton, he would have taken his time before conceding. His concession speech, when and if it came, would have stressed that he had won the popular vote and that “Crooked Hillary” could not claim a mandate.

The media message would have stressed the need for Clinton to be conciliatory and acknowledge that the majority of the voters had chosen Trump. One can easily imagine CNN announcing the “breaking news” that Clinton had withdrawn the nomination of Obama’s choice for the Supreme Court and invited the Republicans to name the replacement for the deceased Antonin Scalia.

But the Democrats have done just the opposite.

What is behind this universal about-face? President Obama said perhaps more than he intended when he declared Wednesday that “we have to remember that we’re actually all on one team. This is an intramural scrimmage”—that is, a test competition involving players from the same school.

The United States does not really have an oppositional political system. The divisions between the Democrats and Republicans, and between Clinton and Trump, are of an entirely tactical character. They all defend the same basic interests—those of the corporate and financial aristocracy that controls the political system.

Within this framework, the Democrats are always the more accommodating and conciliatory party, since their rhetorical references to defending the interests of working people—including by the likes of Bernie Sanders—are thoroughly vacuous and insincere. In relation to Trump and the dangers he poses, there is an element of complete complacency, which arises from the fact that the danger is not to the Democrats or the privileged social forces for which they speak, but to the working class.

The chief concern of the Democrats is to contain popular anger. Their moves to circle the wagons around Trump are above all a response to the danger they see of the emergence of popular opposition that threatens not only the incoming government, but the capitalist system itself.

Even as Obama, Clinton, Sanders and company prostrate themselves and pledge their loyalty to Trump, thousands of youth and workers are demonstrating around the country against the president-elect. These protests are only a pale and politically disparate foretaste of mass struggles of the working class that are to come.

What is critical is that the lessons of the 2016 election be drawn and all attempts to keep opposition to war and austerity chained to the political corpse of the Democratic Party be rejected. The task is not to “take back” the Democratic Party or push it to the left—the inevitable result of that false perspective has already been demonstrated in the reactionary outcome of the Sanders campaign—but to break with both parties of big business and all forms of capitalist politics and build an independent socialist and internationalist movement of the working class.