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From Pittsburgh to Brazil

Antisemitism and Fascist Violence

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29th October 2018

Retrieved on 2020-04-11 from blackrosefed.org

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

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“We Will Outlive Them”

As humanity faces the seemingly insurmountable threat of looming fascism, we must celebrate the survival of our peoples and those who gave their lives to struggle against it. We honor our ancestors when we stand in solidarity with racial, religious, sexual, and gender minorities around the world, but not when we sacrifice the safety of others for our own. Fascism is an ancient foe, one that Jews have attempted to escape through nationalism and militarism. The Israeli state’s disregard for victims of antisemitism is incredibly clear as members of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s ultra nationalist Likud party blame the victims in Pittsburgh for their own deaths because they dared to welcome Muslim refugees. Instead, those who immediately stood in solidarity with the massacred congregants were the Muslim community of Pittsburgh.

Racism and apartheid will never keep us safe and the policies of the Israeli state have created unlikely alliances between real anti-semites and Jews. The anti-Muslim bigotry of Netanyahu and his allies is so extreme that they actively “inspire” white supremacists like Richard Spencer with their anti-refugee and apartheid policies, such as the recent “Jewish Nation State Law” which officially legalized racial apartheid. Their reaction to antisemitism truly pales in comparison to the violence they inflict in our name on innocent Palestinians.

To build a future without fascism, we must honor the tradition of our socialist and internationalist ancestors, and fight where we stand, to defend all our communities from those who would prefer to see us burn. As the old Yiddish song that Polish Jews sang as they stared down their executioners goes, “We will outlive them.” We must fuel revolutionary anti-fascist movements with this spirit of collective memory to honor the sacrifice and resilience of all victims of fascist violence around the world.

Antisemitic violence has spiked dramatically in the United States with 2018 being the largest single year increase on record since 1994. From desecrations of graveyards to the massacre of eleven worshipers at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, this confluence of bigotry and white supremacist fervor exemplifies a growing global wave of fascist violence which endangers us all.

When the Pittsburgh shooter Robert Bowers screamed “All Jews must die!” as he opened fire Saturday morning, he chose his targets not only out of antisemitism – a theoretical core of white nationalist ideology – but also for the reason that the synagogue worked with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, an organization which honors our people’s history as refugees by helping displaced people all over the world. This tradition of solidarity, often called “*tikkun olum*” or “repairing the world,” is part of the reason Jews have historically played important roles in revolutionary struggles against capitalism and fascism around the world.

Antisemitism at the Heart of White Nationalism

Often though fascism and antisemitism are both terms widely misunderstood on the Left; in order to offer a liberatory alternative to the barbarism of capitalism and white supremacy, we must first define these threats. In its most essential form, fascism is organized reactionary political violence, with defining features such as extreme nationalism, misogyny, authoritarianism, anti-communism, and racism. Yet, fascism is not simply state repression or a fixed ideology, but rather a dynamic process which requires popular violence from below to seize power.

Antisemitism is at the heart of fascist ideology in its contemporary form, which is often called white nationalism. As anti-fascist researcher Eric Ward emphasizes, without coming to terms with “the centrality of antisemitism to White nationalist ideology,” the

Left will fail to understand how white supremacists fuel their virulent racism and xenophobia. Antisemitism operates differently from other forms of oppression, which disempower their victims based on poverty, racialization, or colonized status. Antisemitism instead thrives on an illusion of power and privilege, which deflects blame from the system of capitalism itself onto individuals. Jews have historically acted as middlemen for capitalists, as landlords or bankers when denied the right to other employment, farming or ownership of land. It is no coincidence that feudal and early capitalist societies chose Jews to embody the most obvious symbols of capitalist oppression. As April Rosenblum defines it, “Antisemitism’s job is to make ruling classes invisible. It protects ruling class power structures, diverting anger at injustice toward Jews instead.” Jews have always provided a convenient scapegoat for capitalists, as a presumably all powerful and wealthy group whose privilege can be discarded at any time. Sephardic and Mizrahi communities have a more complex relationship to white supremacy, as they face both antisemitism and overt racism and colonialism. Not all Jews are white, but even white Jews can lose their whiteness.

Fascism and Failed Revolutions

To envision the relationship between fascism and antisemitism from a different angle, we should remember the words of Jewish Marxist philosopher Walter Benjamin that “every resurgence of fascism bears witness to a failed revolution.” In other words, when institutions of the left like political parties and movements fail to mobilize the revolutionary potential of the moment and to provide a real alternative to the constant crises of capitalism this paves the way for reaction. This was true regarding the Social Democratic Party in Weimar Germany and applies to many other Left parties today. In these situations, reactionaries shift the blame towards Jews, immigrant populations and other marginalized communities.

Benjamin’s insight is prescient and incisive in understanding the rapid ascendance of Jair Bolsonaro to the Presidency of Brazil. After 14 years in power from 2002 to 2016, the commodity boom which gave the class conciliation approach of the Workers’ Party (PT) breathing room had come to an end. As waves of austerity measures, worker strikes, street rebellions and subsequent repression ensued, the alienation of the PT’s base set the stage for the right-wing to use a corruption scandal to engineer a parliamentary coup and remove PT President Dilma Rousseff from power and jail the popular former PT President Lula de Silva. With disillusionment in the political system becoming widespread Bolsonaro, formerly an isolated and minor figure, was able to rise in popularity by presenting himself as a savior. Conveniently Bolsonaro also received support from figures such as former Trump operative Steve Bannon and the Koch brothers.

Bolsonaro is not only a bigot, homophobe, misogynist, and militarist, but is a true adherent to fascist ideology. Marginalized Brazilians realize they are in grave danger; as the founder of São Paulo’s annual gay pride parade put it, “It’s as if the gates of hell have been opened – as if hunting season had been declared.” This comment is not hyperbolic in a year of constant political violence targeting socialists, feminists, LGBT community members, and Afro-Brazilians. Many fear Bolsonaro’s brazen bigotry and public support for extrajudicial killings will launch a new era of brutality and genocidal violence, a prescient fear in a fledgling republic only 30 years from its last dictatorship. Indeed, the new President promises a “cleansing never seen before in Brazilian history” and torture and civil war on an unprecedented scale. Unlike Trump, whose lacks a cogent fascist ideology, Bolsonaro draws on a historic tradition that lost power but never truly disappeared.