

An Election in Hell

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The United States is moving toward a national election in the midst of a collapse of world civilization. It is a disaster of an unknown duration, consisting of the covid-19 plague and the economic collapse it has triggered. Meanwhile the catastrophe of climate change continues to loom over everything. Whatever issues were previously important, the overwhelming concern now is how President Trump and his Republican Party have been dealing with the crisis. As any fair-minded observer will agree, their response has been disastrous.

The reaction of people on the Left has varied. Liberals take it for granted that they will vote for Democrat Joseph Biden for president to defeat the vile Donald Trump. Many, perhaps most, former supporters of Bernie Sanders, the self-proclaimed “democratic socialist,” agree. Holding their noses, they will vote for Biden, although they will not “endorse” or “campaign” for him, they say. Others will not choose between Biden and Trump. Of these radicals, some (particularly those close to anarchism) will not vote at all, while others will cast a protest ballot for Howie Hawkins of the Green Party.

I am not going to argue here about what individual leftists should do about voting. I do not much care. The votes of a small number of radicals, out of millions, will not have an effect either way. This is especially true for most voters who live in “safe states,” where the outcome is foreordained. (I live in New York State, where the electoral college votes are guaranteed for the Democrats.)

The real question is what radicals should advocate be done by progressive voters and organizations. What should the unions be doing about this and other elections? How do we suggest the African-American community should act? Latinx communities? other communities of color? LGBTQ groups? environmental organizations? feminist groupings? These forces are the base of the Democratic Party (which, like the Republicans, does not have a membership as such). Their organizing, mobilizing, get-out-the-vote activities, phone banking and donations of money have been essential to the functioning of the Democrats. Should they continue this strategy? Should they attempt to build a new, third, party? Or should they quit the electoral process altogether for a strategy of demonstrating, organizing, occupying and striking? As a revolutionary anarchist, I advocate the last.

President Trump

The United States is the richest and most powerful nation on earth, even if its relative power has been declining over the past decades. Its economy was highly profitable during the decade-long recovery from the Great Recession. It was “profitable” for the upper classes, not so much for most people; but there was a relatively high employment rate, even if jobs were shaky and low-paid. Economists, both conventional and radical, had been saying for years that the prosperity was brittle and vulnerable to a shock. Now we have had the shock and the capitalist economy has collapsed.

Worst of all, public health and the economy have been in the hands of a completely incompetent government – ruled by Donald Trump, a narcissistic, ignorant, fool, lacking all empathy let alone common sense. His stupidity and weak self-confidence make him disdain all scientific advisors. Vast numbers of people have died due to his inability to organize an appropriate response to the plague.

It is tempting to see Trump as an accidental freak. Then, when he is voted out, things will return to “normal.” This is exactly how Biden presents matters, but it is dangerously misleading. Trump is solidly supported by his party despite his compulsive lying. Republican governors are as dangerously ignorant as Trump in regard to health care and other issues. About 40% of voters support Trump no matter what he does. Big business, while never wild about Trump, likes much of his, and his party’s, policies: enormous tax cuts for the rich, deregulation, reactionary judges, etc. These “conservative” forces will not go away, even if the Democrats take over the White House and both houses of Congress. They will be a constant threat – and a temptation for the Democrats to compromise with, as they have repeatedly done in the past.

This is not to say that Trump or Trumpism is “fascist” (or “neo-fascist”) as many do. Undoubtedly, there are fascist traits in this administration and its supporters (including a crazed minority which does identify as Nazis). Trump is authoritarian, refuses oversight by the legislative branch, sneers at the courts, attacks and denigrates most of the media, and undermines the professionalism of the executive branch. Against the states, he declares that he has “total” power. He whips up his supporters with nativist and racist rants. He panders to the most right wing and hysterical part of his base and refuses to directly criticize the outright fascists.

For all that, he does not have an independent organization of violent gangs, such as Hitler’s stormtroopers or Mussolini’s fascisti. And he can be voted out of office, which no fascist would let happen. He might wish to be president-for-life, but the military, political and business establishments will not let him. They are not (yet?) at a crisis where they might accept this, nor would they want such a ditzzy incompetent as ruler.

Sanders the “Socialist”

Many radicals had high hopes for the Bernie Sanders campaign. He called himself a democratic socialist and advocated a “political revolution.” The Democratic Socialists of America went all out for him. And Sanders did astonishing well for a “socialist.” He won in a number of states, getting a great deal of support from young people, from workers, and from Latinx. However he was never going to be allowed to win the nomination (let alone the presidency). The Democratic establishment pulled together all the “moderate” candidates and made a bloc behind Biden. Sanders was never able to win the African-American vote (especially older people). A similar steamroller ran over the other “progressive” candidate, Elizabeth Warren. The capitalists were, if anything, even more hostile to her than to Bernie, due to her history of backing strong regulation of banks and other businesses. She had to go.

In any case, Sanders was never much of a “socialist.” He did not call for the expropriation of any section of big business. He did not propose to replace corporations with a non-profit cooperative system of production. His model of “socialism,” he repeatedly stated, was the Nordic (Scandinavian) countries or the U.S. New Deal. That is, capitalist, market-driven, profit-oriented economies with government regulation and a high level of social welfare. Whatever the virtues of this program, it is inadequate to deal with the fundamental crises which the system is facing.

None of the socialist leaders who backed Bernie discussed the dismal history of socialist governments that were elected to office. There was Mitterand in France, Allende in Chile, and recently Syriza in Greece, Lula’s Workers’ Party in Brazil, Evo Morales in Bolivia, not to mention the current woes in Venezuela. These and many other examples (the various Labour Party govern-

ments in Britain) show that it doesn't end well for socialists to be elected to take over a capitalist state and its capitalist economy. The socialist regime may be undermined by the established state bureaucracy or by the ruling rich's control of the economy (such as an investment "strike"), causing enough chaos that the regime is voted out, or the regime is intimidated into accepting the capitalists' demands (Syriza), or, if "necessary," the socialists are overthrown by the military or fascist forces (Allende). Even if Bernie had been elected, very likely he would have been stymied in his progressive programs, making him ineffectual. As anarchists have long argued, we cannot reach socialism (however defined) by using the state.

What is significant is that a large minority of the U.S. population is attracted to "socialism," while others were willing to support a "socialist," whether or not they agreed with the label. To the extent that young people put a clear meaning to the term, they have been taught to mean reformist state socialism. But the possibility of attracting them to revolutionary anarchist-socialism is there.

Joe Biden

Joseph Biden was an uninspiring politician who lost two earlier tries at the presidential nomination. His memory was poor and he was prone to "gaffes," which are worse now in his seventies. He told lies to look good (such as claiming to have been arrested for trying to see Mandela in South Africa). For such reasons, he did poorly in the early stages of the nomination process and was outshone by younger, more inspiring "moderate" candidates. His only strengths were his name recognition, the image (true or not) that he had the best chance of beating Trump, and that he had been Barack Obama's vice president. But the Democratic establishment decided that the "moderates" had to rally around one person in order to keep Bernie out. They decided that Biden was good enough. All the other "moderates" capitulated to him. Eventually even Warren, the "progressive," and Sanders, the "socialist," did so too.

Supporting a "lesser evil" means admitting to yourself that you are supporting an "evil," which is psychologically hard to do. So many liberals are trying to persuade themselves that Biden is really not so bad, even pretty good. They note his progressive words, his appeals to Sanders' and Warren's bases, his admitted changes in political stances. As he had once made friends with segregationist Democrats and reactionary Republicans, now he was trying to make up to liberals. How sincere any of this is is impossible to say. After all, an opportunist may swing left as well as right, so long as it is not too far left.

I am not going to go over the record of Biden as pro-corporate business, pro-military intervention, pro-racial inequality, misogyny, and generally pro-status quo. (For a full record, see Nathan Robinson's *Current Affairs* article, "Democrats, You Really Do Not Want To Nominate Joe Biden.") Just for example, after pushing Bill Clinton's repressive crime bill through the Senate in 1994, Biden cheered, "The liberal wing of the Democratic Party is now for 60 new death penalties [and] ... 125,000 new prison cells"! While Biden talks a good game about the climate crisis, he was part of an Obama administration which vastly increased fracking and other forms of carbon energy production. As the radical Kevin Zeese says,

Biden is someone who has been on the opposite side of every issue I have worked on for 40 years – the drug war, mass incarceration, racist police enforcement, marijuana prohibition, the Iraq War, militarism and every war of my lifetime, student debt,

climate change, energy policy, racism, and desegregation, shrinking Social Security, corporatism... I can't think of anything significant that I agree with him on. (April 17, 2020; Actiongreens email discussion)

Zeese said he will vote for the Green Party candidate.

The only real argument for electing Biden is that he is not Trump. It is that Trump, while not a fascist, is not simply another bad Republican. That he is something way outside the box, whose politics intersect with a freakish personality to be exceptionally dangerous in a time of extreme crisis. Many respected radicals have made this claim.

However, it is also true that the Democrats have had their part in creating Trump and Trumpism. Look again at the historical record. Reactionary Republican presidents have repeatedly been followed by moderate Democrats, who have been followed by an even worse reactionary Republican. Again and again. Nixon by Carter by Reagan-Bush by Clinton by Bush by Obama by Trump. In no case has electing Democrats led to the end of the right-wing Republican threat. The Democrats play the "good cop" and the Republicans play the "bad cop." Neither party is able to cure the ills of capitalism, which has repeatedly driven sections of the population toward the only other alternative offered by our two-party political system.

The Way Out

The pandemic was created by global semi-monopoly capitalism, with its intersection of urbanism, industrial agriculture and wild nature; its global production chains and travel; its weakened public health services; and its nation-states. With its unrelenting drive for quantitative growth, profit and accumulation, capitalism had to upset the ecological balance between humans and the rest of nature. Capitalism is the virus. Continuation of capitalism will only lead to more pandemics, climate catastrophes, economic crashes and disastrous wars. What strategy leads to a revolution for a non-capitalist, cooperative, participatory-democratic and ecologically balanced society?

Historically, the main progressive advances in politics have come from direct action outside the electoral system. The great strikes of the thirties gave us unions and won the benefits of the New Deal. African-Americans destroyed racial segregation and gained other benefits through massive civil disobedience and "riots." The war in Vietnam was opposed through huge demonstrations, draft resistance and rebellion in the military. Gay liberation was fought by the Stonewall "riots" and Act Up civil disobedience. Women's liberation developed in the context of all these popular struggles. And in every case, the movements died down or were tamed when they turned to working through the Democratic Party in elections.

Even under conditions of the plague, people have been self-organizing. There have been strikes by Whole Foods, Instacart and Amazon workers to demand better health protection and more time off. There have been labor actions by poultry, auto, sanitation and warehouse workers. Unionized nurses have been forceful in protesting shortages. Bus workers in Detroit bargained for fare-free bus service. Workers at GE demanded repurposing jet engine factories to make ventilators. Car caravans demanded a moratorium on rent. There has also been mutual aid organizing for people to help themselves and each other, given the failures of the government and big business.

How long the coronavirus plague will last, of course I do not know. I expect the economic collapse to last a good deal longer and the climate crisis to worsen whoever gets elected. Whatever happens in this election (and it would say something positive about the U.S. people if they reject Trump), progress depends on more mass action in the streets, the schools, the offices and the workshops. Only this could lead to a revolutionary reorganization of society.

Reference: Robinson, Nathan J. (2020). "Democrats, You Really Do Not Want To Nominate Joe Biden." *Current Affairs*. www.currentaffairs.org/2020/03/democrats-you-really-do-not-want-to-nominate-joe-biden

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