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USA

Facing the Long J6 Riot

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TRUMP'S JANUARY 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol didn't begin on that day, of course. It was prepared by the outgoing president's feverish "stolen election" lies and bumbling lawsuits and cultish rightwing and social media disinformation in which a sizable sector of the Republican voting base has ensconced itself in a reality-free parallel ideological universe. More important, the J6 pseudo-insurrection didn't end then either.

The United States' slide toward a potential massive political and constitutional crisis makes a looming backdrop to the present terrible unfolding season of uncontrolled wildfires, floods and a coming catastrophe of housing evictions — by the hundreds of thousands — amidst the resurgent COVID-19 pandemic.

January 6 was a lavishly televised and videoed coming-out party for the likes of the Proud Boys, Bougaloo Movement, Oath Keepers, Three Percenters and the rest of the far-right militia network, ranging from comic-opera types to seriously dangerous armed and organized groupings. Some of those who stormed the Capitol thought they were truly "insurrectionists" in a mythical patriotic cause. We know from the account of General Milley of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that Trump was fantasizing about, if not operationally planning, a military coup and "emergency" to stay in office.

Information emerges by the week of Trump's criminal moves to manipulate and corrupt the Justice Department and Supreme Court, state election officials and his own vice-president to cancel his election loss. But as reactionary as many of those players are in their own right, most aren't unconditional Trump-cult loyalists, and no way were the institutions of state going down in his bunker. Yes, January 6 was a vicious, violent and potentially murderous white-nationalist riot that might have gotten even worse, but hardly a proper coup. Ask the people of Burma (Myanmar), or Chile (1973) or Haiti (1991, 2004) or Honduras (2009) to tell you what a real coup looks and feels like.

To what extent the plotters and/or patsies of January 6 will be seriously prosecuted — and their enablers in medium-and-high political places exposed — remain open questions. But we're seeing now that January 6 wasn't a one-day thing but a long riot, which has continued in gerrymandered, rightwing-controlled state legislatures by other, frankly more effective means.

These of course are the voter restriction, suppression and intimidation laws cascading through dozens of states not by conspiracy but essentially in the glare of daylight, even if some of them are passed and signed into law in the dead of night. Meanwhile the six-person rightwing Supreme Court majority, which we'll now call WSCOTUS for White Supremacy Court of the United States, has signaled in the Arizona case that it's prepared to uphold the destruction of the Voting Rights Act. (For some discussion see "America's Political Crisis: Dead Center Can't Hold" posted at <https://solidarity-us.org/>, June 29, 2021.)

The Threat within the System

What's actually at stake here? President Joe Biden laid it on a bit thick in his July 13 speech calling these laws "the biggest threat to our democracy since the Civil War." That conflagration was a contest between rival social systems, which ultimately couldn't be resolved by compromise (despite decades of attempts) because of the slave system's threat of westward expansion.

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Nothing of that sort of conflict is happening in today's free-market capitalist America, obviously. But African-American legislators and civil rights activists are quite right in calling out the threat of "Jim Crow 2.0," recalling the era following the end of post-Civil War Reconstruction in an infamous post-election "compromise" in 1876 that destroyed most of freed people's social, political and economic gains in the South.

But Biden's overheated "Civil War" rhetoric contrasts with his complacent assurance that heroic voter registration and turnout activism will overcome state voter-suppression laws — so no urgency to remove the filibuster on federal voting rights legislation. Angry activists have accurately warned that it's not feasible to "out-organize" voter-suppression once it's entrenched in law.

In fact, voting rights in the United States were more or less assured only in the relatively brief historical period from the passage of the historic 1965 law until 2013, when Chief WSCOTUS Justice Roberts began dismantling it on the pretext that the election of Barack Obama meant that "America has moved on," and hence federal pre-clearance of voting rules changes in southern states was antiquated.

Now the emboldened WSCOTUS majority, through Justice Alito, decrees that Arizona's law making it harder for rural Indigenous voters is perfectly OK because it doesn't actually "prohibit" them. That's the whole point, of course: a more sophisticated Jim Crow 2.0 doesn't require making it impossible for African-American or Latinx or poor communities to vote, only harder, more inconvenient and potentially nastier (with rightwing "poll observers" in Texas menacing them, for example).

In a closely divided and polarized two-party setup both at state and national levels, with tiny majorities in both houses of Congress and with the anachronistic Electoral College's ability to install a president who's lost the national election by millions of votes, strategically placed vote suppression can turn the party of an electoral minority into semi-permanent ruling status — with potentially disastrous results for democracy, for basic rights, even for the stability of the system itself.

Here's why: the longtime traditional preferred political organ of U.S. big business, the Republican Party, has morphed into a peculiar amalgam of plutocracy, white supremacy and Christian nationalism. With amazing cynicism, its leadership has embraced, enabled or passively accepted the mythos of the Trump cult. In the process this party has become a virulent mutant somewhat along the lines of the militantly racist German AfD or French "Rally," which in those countries are considered too toxic to be allowed into national government.

On the legislative level, today's Republican Party has replaced traditional "bipartisan" negotiation with near-total obstructionism when it doesn't hold the levers of power and raging-bull-in-a-China-shop methods when it does — huge tax cuts for corporations and the rich putting the country on the path to bankruptcy, vicious attacks on abortion rights, destruction of unions, packing the courts with reactionary cadres, ecocidal deregulation, and now of course wiping out the protections of the Voting Rights Act.

But in a decreasingly white-majority country, it's a party whose ability to govern nationally increasingly depends on restriction and suppression of nonwhite voters.

The Democratic Party, on the other hand, by now is at least tentatively supported by most of the "mainstream" of the ruling class. Corporate America on the whole recognizes at least the desperate need for serious infrastructure (both material and human) investment and at least some efforts at things like climate-change mitigation and immigration reform. But how actively this politically indolent ruling class, having become so fattened by its wealth, is prepared to intervene to preserve the system's longer-term stability is a complex question that will require deeper future discussion.

The Democratic Party of course, whatever its “pro-gressive wing” might want, remains firmly committed to maintaining — and handsomely profiting from — the U.S. imperial mission to rule the world. The latter is an obvious remaining pillar of “bipartisanship,” but the elites generally recognize that Trump’s America-First antics and romances with Russia’s President-for-life Putin and North Korea’s Kim Jong-un damaged Washington’s global standing.

As the Democratic voting base increasingly depends on communities of color — while the much-discussed “suburban vote” remains a hotly contested arena — Democrats need voter access and turnout to expand, just as desperately as Republicans need to curtail it. In this sense, the January 6 riot wasn’t a one-day incident but a point of transition from the Trump presidency and the 2020 election to a chaotic new political dispensation with an outcome very much in the balance.

What’s at Stake

The left and socialists in particular obviously can’t be indifferent to the outcome of this political war. We advocate the expansion of democracy, not only in guaranteed rights and ease of voting but abolishing the overwhelming difficulties of ballot access for third parties, the truly antiquated slave-relic Electoral College, lifetime Supreme Court appointments and so much more beyond the scope of the present brief discussion.

Many of these anti-democratic institutions and pro-ce-dures, including the Supreme Court, were established precisely to protect the wealthy and privileged from the threat that democracy posed to their power. Together with the entrenched two-party system, which has played a big role in hampering the emergence of independent working class politics, these measures greatly enforced the “stability” of a setup that’s powerfully served the elites through wars, depressions and social upheavals including militant labor upsurges and the Civil Rights revolution.

Today from within the system itself, these very institutions, e.g. the anti-democratic filibuster in the U.S. Senate — itself the most unrepresentative elected body in the more-or-less democratic world — are ironically but ominously becoming weapons of a far-right party threatening that stability.

The uncontained wildfire of voter-suppression state leg-is-lation, protected by the Republican Senate filibuster against federal voter protection and by WSCOTUS against constitutional challenge, raises the specter of minority-party Republican “state capture” of both houses of Congress in the 2022 midterms — crippling the Biden administration’s hope for any legislative agenda — and the White House in 2024. That could happen even if the Republican candidate massively loses the national vote, and regardless of whether the aspiring fuhrer Trump is that candidate.

Even without such an extreme outcome, the necessity of serious infrastructure investment — and climate change prevention and mitigation, inadequate as the Biden program is in that regard — is blunted by the filibuster-induced coma of the U.S. Senate. We discussed this in our previous editorial statement (“Infrastructure: Who Needs It?” in ATC 213). As we go to press, the smaller “bipartisan” bill has cleared procedural Senate obstacles while complicated maneuvers continue over the ten-year \$3.5 trillion Democratic package.

On the face of it, the fate of voting rights seems to depend on West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin. But deeper forces are at work. It’s possible for those of us on the left to welcome the truly heroic defiance by the Texas Democratic legislators who left the state to deprive their state legislature of the quorum for enacting massive vote suppression, while we insist that the capitalist and imperialist Democratic Party itself is very much part of the problem.

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The left needs to point to the underlying factors that brought about this political crisis long before it crystallized in the insanity of the Trump presidency and the “long January 6 riot” in its aftermath. These developments are the fruits of decades of mainly bipartisan neoliberal and “free-trade” policies that have eviscerated workers’ rights, made the corporate ruling class obscenely rich, spawned a new sector of plutocrats capable of financing extreme rightwing initiatives, and exposed large sectors of the U.S. population to massive insecurity and impoverishment.

No wonder that a considerable sector of white workers as well as middle-class people have been attracted to the racist lies that are now the core of the Republican appeal. The political crisis cannot be resolved in a progressive direction unless the U.S. labor movement is rebuilt on the basis of a popular social justice program and above all, rank- and-file energy and democratic power.

Above all, that goal is where the energy and strategic thinking of today’s socialist left must be, whether in our unions or communities or anti-racist mobilizations. Let’s remember that this is not only a time of rightwing menace, but also a moment when popular resistance movements and anti-dictatorship struggles are exploding globally. In the United States there’s a revival of interest in socialism, even if organizations of the revolutionary left coming from the struggles of the 20th and early 21st centuries are at low ebb.

Both the viciously reactionary Trump phenomenon and the Bernie Sanders upsurge; both the emboldened rightwing militias and the magnificent movements spearheaded by Black Lives Matter, Water Protector activists and immigrant rights fighters; these are all products of the long-developing crisis of a deeply unequal, exploitative and racially unjust society. Grasping that dual reality is the beginning of confronting a dangerous moment

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