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United States

The Ultra-Right Pot Boils Over

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The appearance of right-wing mobs at town meetings organized by Democratic Party representatives to discuss the proposed health-care reform has set off alarm bells, in particular because of the blind fanaticism of the right-wing protesters and their threats of violence, including armed violence. These outbursts show many features of historic fascist developments—and on a scale as yet unseen in the United States.

The campaign of right-wing rallies against the town meetings organized by Democratic Party congressional representatives is a new phenomenon in American history, at least in living memory. Lynch mobs and witch hunts are, unfortunately, not unprecedented in American history. And the current right-wing rallies resemble both in the mentality they express. But never before have such mobs been mobilized by a major capitalist political party against the elected representatives of another, or associated so much with threats of armed violence against bourgeois democratic institutions.

These right-wing mobilizations against the town meetings are an extension of the so-called Tea Parties organized ostensibly against the threat that the Obama regime would increase taxes. On July 16, the Huffington Post reported: "Catherine Crabill, the Republican Party's nominee for Virginia's 99th District in the House of Delegates, gave a speech at a recent Tea Party event suggesting that Second Amendment rights could be used to defend the anti-tax movement. The strange assertion was picked up by Virginia political blogger Not Larry Sabato.

"'We have the chance to fight this battle at the ballot box before we have to resort to the bullet box,' Crabill said. 'That's the beauty of our Second Amendment rights ... Our Second Amendment rights were to guard against tyranny.'" Participants in the rightist mobs at the Democratic Party town meetings have also cited the Second Amendment as a resort if they were prevented from shouting down the speakers.

The Huffington Post reported Aug. 9: "An official with the AFL-CIO, a federation of labor organizations, passed on what he described as a 'pretty direct threat' to those union hands who were showing up to balance out anti-Obama demonstrations being waged at local Democratic forums.

"'I will be going to a local town hall this weekend, all you union members BEWARE!' an emailer wrote at 9:40 Saturday morning. We will be waiting for you. better make sure you have arrangements with your local ER. today is the day when the goon meets the gun. see you there.'" This threat was traced to Georgia in the deep South, where a majority of the population, according to recent polls, either denies or disbelieves that the president of the United States is an American citizen.

This threat was not an isolated one. Union officials complained of being deluged with threats. The most brutal one came from Wisconsin: "An official with the SEIU said she had received 50 such emails, including the following one, which was edited to make suitable for publication. "'You socialist f---s have the nerve to say stop the violence at the town hall meetings when they weren't violent until you p---ies showed up because your n----- leader obama said to?????? When we have ours in Racine, Wi, I want you there. I want one of your little b----- to put his hands on this Marine. I want one of you to look or talk to me wrong. I'll be the last thing your ignorant faux bodyguards will remember for a very long time. You can f---ing guarantee that."

Shock jocks and scare stories

The Ultra-Right Pot Boils Over

The right-wing mobilizations have been encouraged by a plethora of scare stories about the proposed health care. This is not the first time that such tactics have been resorted to by the vested interests in the health-care business. But today, this propaganda has taken on the character of conspiracy theories, the wildest being that the proposed legislation calls for "death panels" that would decide whether old or handicapped people would live or die.

In recent times, conspiracy theories have been the staff of life of right-wing groups who claim that they are preparing to defend American sovereignty against a takeover of the country by immigrants or by the United Nations. Such conspiracy theories were a feature of Nazism, such as the claim that the Jews were plotting to take over the world. Conspiracy theories have sprung up like poisonous mushrooms in recent years. But this is the first time one of them has been endorsed by leaders of a major capitalist party, such as Sarah Palin or Republican senator from Iowa, Chuck Grassley.

The town meeting mobs have been incited by an ultra-right publicity apparatus with a huge following, the Fox TV network, TV talk-show hosts like Sean Hannity, Glen Beck, Lou Dobbs, and radio "shock jocks" like Rush Limbaugh. For example, on his Aug. 3 show, Sean Hannity trumpeted the following response to the town meeting mob assaults: "This is what's going to stop this. You are. You're gonna make it happen."

He went on to say: "Now, so far at these town hall meetings, you're doing terrific. You're standing up to these bureaucrats. You're standing up to their phony platitudes, talking points, and bumper stickers. The polls are now turning against Obama, [House Speaker Nancy] Pelosi, and [Senate Majority Leader Harry] Reid, so now they're bringing out their own pollster to lie to you and find out a way how they can win the PR battle, and they're telling them that they've got to attack the insurance companies."

Other right-wing talk-show hosts, Jim Quin and Rose Tennent, cheered the mob on their broadcasts: "You still have time to scare them to death." On Aug. 3, they repeatedly broadcast a recording of a female protester at a town hall event. Tennent cheered the woman on: "Woohoo! Go girl! Yeah! Owwooo!"

One TV right-wing rabble-rouser publicist urged his audience to "join the mob." This constellation of right-wing broadcasters emerged in the 1990s in association with the so-called Republican Revolution, fed essentially on a backlash of older white male resentment against the reforms of the 1960s that they saw favoring women and colored minorities over them. Now this echo chamber of bigotry has turned into a machine of political agitation.

This is another feature of the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, a mass gutter press, the "boulevard papers" in France, and the "Blätter" (rags) in Germany. The rightists claim that the great majority of the mass media have a liberal bias, and therefore this right-wing constellation is needed to restore the balance. But the fact is that the big press is all controlled by the corporations and serves their interest. The so-called liberal newspapers have to maintain some credibility for thinking people. That is not true of the right-wing media. They simply reinforce the prejudices of bigots and are now whipping them into a frenzy.

The right-wing publicists inciting the town meeting mobs have also generally supported conspiracy "Birther" theories that Obama is not really an American citizen, despite the fact that there is irrefutable proof of Obama's birth in Hawaii. No evidence can shake the conviction of the "Birthers," however, because it is really rooted in racism. That is why it is most widely held in the South, where only a minority accept the fact of Obama's citizenship.

In the 2008 presidential elections, the white vote was overwhelmingly Republican—88 percent in Alabama, for example. Overall, it seems that a majority of Republicans are not convinced that Obama is really an American, but by far the largest concentration of this is among white Southerners.

On July 28, AP reported: "Fox News Channel commentator Glenn Beck said he believes President Barack Obama is a racist. Beck made the statement during a guest appearance Tuesday on the "Fox & Friends" morning show. He said Obama has exposed himself as a person with 'a deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture.'"

Likewise, on July 20, Beck declared: "You should be afraid [because] the president is remaking America. He's just not remaking it the way you thought he would. He's just remaking it into a place that's a whole lot crappier. Kind of a hybrid between France and Venezuela. ... He's taking the beacon of freedom and turning it into an apologetic, hey, what can you do for me, wannabe European, spread the wealth, socialist wonderland." Actually, the World Health Organization ranks France number one in health care and the U.S. 37th on their list.

Economic dislocation and the racist backlash

Prominent signs waved by participants in the town hall mobs are "Stop socialism," and "We want our country back." It is clear that health care is not really the basic issue for the town hall mobs. The real issue is the historic decline of white supremacy.

As Cenk Uygur wrote in the Aug. 10 Huffington Post: "But this isn't about health insurance. It isn't even about health care. You think those people are really this animated about having less health care options and making sure it costs more for them and their family? No, this is visceral for them. And it has nothing to do with their perceived choices on health care. This is about the sinking feeling in their stomach that they are losing power in this country—losing control. That the reigns [sic] of power are slipping out of their hands and they don't know what to do about it, except yell, really loud."

The emergence of an activist ultra-right coincides with two fundamental historic changes in the United States: the decline of the American economy and the erosion of the white majority. In some key states, such as California, whites are already in a minority. In 30 years, if the current demographic trends continue, whites will be in a minority nationwide. The Republican Party, despite some token Black faces up front, is almost exclusively a white party. It is therefore led to make up for its declining numbers with increased activism. And its appeals to the frenzy of right mobs and their paranoia can promote developments outside of parliamentary politics.

In the Aug. 7 Huffington Post, James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute, wrote: "Behind all of this discontent, of course, are real problems. The economic crisis in America did not just begin with the collapse of the financial sector in the fall of 2008. For years now, the US economy has undergone a steady transformation. The loss of our manufacturing base has resulted in dramatic social dislocation evidenced by the collapse of many once prosperous and stable communities. As factories closed, not only were jobs lost and economic security threatened but people were forced to move, neighborhoods died and families were at risk.

"All during the 1990's, despite gains on Wall Street, many middle-class Americans were squeezed. Real incomes declined, costs of health care, education and basic commodities rose, resulting not only in a declining standard of living for many, but, for the 1st time in American history, a significant portion of the middle class began to question whether their children would be able to achieve the same economic status as their parents.

"The trauma of 9/11 and Katrina presented a double jolt, shaking to an even greater degree American's sense of security and their confidence in the government's ability to perform.

The Ultra-Right Pot Boils Over

"Add to this a nativist/racist current, fueled by large numbers of immigrants from the south [undeveloped countries] and fear of new foreigners (especially, after 9/11, Muslims) and the persistent presence of anti-black sentiment, and you have the ingredients of the lethal brew that is now coming to a boil."

The right-wing mobs at the town meetings have been mostly older white people. (All the participants interviewed by the media have been classical petty bourgeois types, small businessmen, salesmen.) The unemployed youth and brutalized ex-military men that have historically represented the physical threat of far-right or fascist activism have not been much in evidence in public demonstrations. But since the victory of a Black presidential candidate, the numbers of the still small paramilitary militia organizations have begun to grow significantly.

Moreover, a private army formation that grew up in the era of right-wing political dominance, Blackwater, has been exposed as a sort of Murder Incorporated (see *The Nation*, Aug. 4). Gun sales have increased sharply, and there has been surge of death threats against Obama.

All these phenomena point to the stormy weather that the historic changes that are coming to pass threaten to generate. Such crises in developed countries have led to the rise of fascism in the past. The town hall rallies of the right and the role of the right-wing media, along with the gun talk of the rightists, indicates that the cultural medium for it exists likewise in the United States.

A constellation of organizations have emerged that could be the building blocks for a fascist movement. However, although a similar (though much stronger) ferment arose in France and Germany, for example, in the 1920s, it did not lead to the imminent threat of a fascist takeover until the economic and social crisis reached the point that the big capitalists became convinced that they needed drastic measures to maintain their basic interests.

That situation is far from existing in the United States at the moment. The capitalists face no serious threat to their interests. They dominate the political stage completely, and the workers' and social organizations are very weak. Still, it is notable that the right-wing town hall rallies included anti-union threats, and the only organizations that were able to come to the defense of the right of free speech in these meetings were the unions. This was certainly not unnoticed by the right. The union leaders and trade unionists in general need to think about it also.

Of course, the historic fascist movements had collectivist programs, whereas the American rightists today preach extreme individualism. But in the past, fascists have talked out of both sides of their mouths. Hitler was a Social Darwinist more than a German nationalist. When Germany was defeated, he did nothing to try to limit the disaster, proclaiming that if the Germans had been defeated it proved that they were not the fittest and therefore they had no right to survive.

The town meeting rightists show similar contradictions. They claim to be exercising their right of free speech when they suppress free speech, to be defending the rights of the individual when they impose mob rule. Their attitude to the state can change fundamentally when they control it. They claim to be anti-tax, for example, but support the magnification of the U.S. military.

The rightist denunciations of Obama as a fascist or Nazi are nothing but empty name-calling. The purveyors of such insults obviously have no idea that these terms more closely describe themselves. They also claim that they are exercising free speech when they suppress the right of free speech of others. One protester was so ignorant as to say that Nazi Germany had cradle to the grave state health care—and look at what that led to! Actually, Germany's state health system was instituted by Bismarck at the end of the 19th century as a measure intended to head off the rise of the socialist movement.

Capitalists fear backlash against ultra-right

Capitalism on occasion finds the need to back fascist-type mobilizations without being compelled to completely replace the bourgeois "democratic" framework with a fascist state. In recent times, sizable neo-fascist movements have existed in a number of European countries where there is no indication that capital is moving toward a permanent fascist option or that the ultra-right parties are ready to organize fascist-type activism. The contradictory character of these developments is indicated by the fact that they have been chronically divided between an outright fascist wing and a far-right parliamentary wing. But they have been useful to capital as a means of intimidating the left.

For the time being, the rightist mobilizations at town meetings have faded from the news. One of the major reasons for this is that the Democrats have changed the organization of the sessions to make it more difficult for the rightists to overwhelm them or to use them as a platform. But the rightist constellation has made its demonstration of force.

Of course, the Obama administration may have been happy to have an excuse to retreat. Its reform proposals were never more than weak and contradictory. It, like the right, serves capitalism but merely offers to do so in a more flexible way. But some sections of capital, as indicated in the last conflict over health-care reform, are not convinced that flexibility is necessary. They have now been using the rightists to keep Obama on the "straight and narrow."

At the same time, however, the extreme rightists are worrying some politicians in the Republican Party and threatening to cause divisions there. Most importantly, it is possible that the aggressiveness of the extreme right will provoke a backlash among working-class and democratic minded people. That is the last thing that capital wants, and if it happens the support for the ultra-right network could begin to dry up pretty quickly. Glen Beck's denunciation of Obama as a "racist" has already cost him major sponsors.

On one level, it seems in fact that the sort of backlash the capitalists do not want has begun. The violent language and agitation of the ultra-right, supported by the Republican Party leadership and their bankrollers in the health-care corporations, have made Obama's attempt to justify concessions to the drug and insurance industries with the pretense of seeking bipartisan consensus appear ridiculous.

The New York Times columnist Frank Rich wrote, for example, in an op-ed piece Aug. 22: "Should Obama fail to deliver serious reform because his administration treats the pharmaceutical and insurance industries as deferentially as it has the banks, that would be shameful. Should he fail because he in any way catered to a decimated opposition party that has sunk and shrunk to its craziest common denominator, that would be ludicrous."

Paul Krugman pointed out in a column in The New York Times on Aug. 20 that disillusionment with Obama had been building up for a long time: "A backlash in the progressive base—which pushed President Obama over the top in the Democratic primary and played a major role in his general election victory—has been building for months. The fight over the public option involves real policy substance, but it's also a proxy for broader questions about the president's priorities and overall approach."

The last straw for progressives, Krugman wrote, was the Obama's administration's backing away from the "public option" in the health-care bill. In fact, polls indicated that support for the proposed health-care reform dropped precipitously without the "public option" being included. But Krugman also explained that the "public option" had deflected the thrust for a single-payer system, which is the only real alternative to the present system. The progressives had been fobbed off with a vague "public option" and were now furious that even that looked as if it was going to be dropped.

The Ultra-Right Pot Boils Over

The outcry of disillusionment clearly frightened the Obama regime into claiming that it had no intention of abandoning its "public option" (though a fake, tax-the-poor version) and if necessary it would pass it without a single Republican vote.

However, the backlash against the Obama's administration's sounds of retreat on the "public option" highlighted the weak and contradictory character of the so-called health reform it is offering. The outcry has revived demands for a single-payer system. And it indicates that the only way a real health-care reform can be achieved is by building a mass independent movement for a single-payer system that will not be subordinated to any bourgeois politician.

The threat of the mobilization of an army of right-wing fanatics to oppose any social reform and intimidate the organizations that defend the interests of the masses can only be countered by reorganizing and reenergizing the mass social organizations. In this conflict, the AFL set a good example, the first of this type in many years, by sending out instructions about how to defend the town meetings and organizing monitors to defend them, as also did the SEIU. Even though the union mobilization was done in defense of bourgeois politicians (the stock in trade of the bureaucratic officialdoms), it was an essential response to the threat of the activist right.

In the coming period, the unions will have to relearn how to defend themselves and the rights of the people they represent. They also need to pursue the ultra-right wing into its ultimate lairs of backwardness and bigotry in the South and the West. Workers in those areas need to be organized, and there is no doubt that the unions will face physical threats if they pursue organizational drives there. It is a shame to leave the poor people who live in these areas (where the rates of the uninsured are the highest in the nation) to the local right-wing demagogues.

The rightist outbursts should have shown even the union bureaucrats the writing on the wall. It is also necessary to build protests against the incitement to hatred of the right-wing media rabble-rousers and to expose their disinformation. The coming months will show how necessary it is to begin thinking about organizing self-defense for gatherings and organizations that the rightists hate. Even the Democratic Party has had to think about it.

It is also necessary for socialist organizations to give increasing attention to educational activities on the nature of fascist movements— not just the examples of full-fledged fascism in Germany and Italy but the incipient fascist movements that arose in France, Britain, and even the United States in the 1930s. Socialist Action has already begun to do that.