

A Letter from North America - 2 - “It’s been an incredible month of protests in this part of the world”

Monday 27 February 2017, by [TATE “Ernie” Ernest](#) (Date first published: 24 February 2017).

This is the second of Ernie Tate’s letters to Left Unity detailing and analysing the struggles against Trump as they emerge on the other side of the pond. As we work to build the movement here against the turn to the right in politics so too are we building stronger links with struggles and movements in the US and Canada. Ernie is a lifelong revolutionary who emigrated to Canada from Northern Ireland as a young man. In the 1960s working in Britain he was one of the most important activists of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. He has recently produced a two volume memoir of that period, “Revolutionary Activism of the 1950s and 1960s”, published by Resistance Books. Now at the age of 82 and living in Toronto he is still active and an acute observer of the political scene.

Letter to Left Unity, February 24, 2017

It’s been an incredible month of protests in this part of the world, and it’s worth describing them to give you some idea of the political change that seems to be underway. We haven’t seen anything like them in many decades and it is yet more dramatic evidence of a growing politicization of what has been until now, one of the most politically back-ward working classes in the world.

The election of Trump has certainly re-invigorated sections of the broad left. Ever since the huge women’s mobilization in Washington on January 21th, followed by the massive actions against the immigrant ban, it has been expressed in street protests, often national in scope and organized on very short notice, usually through the Internet and social media. They have become a common occurrence and are beginning to have an impact upon the broad general public. For example, newly-elected presidents normally experience a honeymoon period at the beginning of their term of high popular support, which lasts for most of the year. Obama’s polls were in the high 60% range, but not Trump’s. His are at 38%, and some polls have him even trending lower.

Trump’s ban against people from the seven Muslim majority countries, was the beginning of the current surge of protests, and they haven’t let up since. So totally unexpected and so wide- sweeping in its effects, it shocked the country as hundreds of travellers were detained at airports as they came off the planes. Thousands of angry protesters, placards in hand, swarmed airports, staying all night and demanding their release. Some of those held in custody, it turned out were returning residents who had only temporarily left the U.S. to visit the now banned countries, some were families, students, researchers, professors, including those holding green cards (which gave them the right to work in the United States). Revealing the depth and breadth of the opposition, hundreds of lawyers – north and south of the Canadian border- and mainly young, it would appear from the television

coverage – could be seen standing in groups holding placards offering free legal assistance to anyone who may have been a victim of the ban. And buoyed by the decision of the courts to place a temporary stay on the hated decree, it's highly likely that the protests will continue and even broaden, because Trump has now issued new decrees to side-step the legal challenges by seven states to the previous one.

And the popular unrest is taking new forms. One striking example can be seen in the uproar that is occurring at town-hall meetings in key Republican states during this current recess of the Congress. Thousands of constituents are storming them to protest Trump's policies, so many they are unable to gain entrance. Among their concerns are the Republican proposals to collapse the Affordable Care Act, "Obamacare", as it is known. Those who depend on it for their medical care are demanding to know what will replace it. It's been a remarkable spectacle. Despite the packing of front rows of seats with Republican supporters, wheeled out for the occasion, these meetings have erupted into a chaotic mess, near-riots, a spectacle in front of the television cameras and broadcast across the nation, as hundreds voice their outrage, often succeeding in closing them down entirely. Frightened out of their wits, many Republican Senators, who are up for re-election in 2018, have refused to hold any town-hall meetings whatsoever, sparking activists in California for example, to initiate "Where's Waldo?" campaigns to locate their "missing" representatives, who can't be found anywhere. So numerous have been the phone complaints, the Senate phone system has collapsed several times and protest groups have been springing up all over the place.

I have no doubt that the Democratic Party political operatives are behind a lot of this kind of activity and we shouldn't be surprised by that. It is to be expected as the powerful and resourceful Democratic Party machine attempts to recover from its humiliating loss and works hard to keep working class unrest within the ambit of the capitalist two-party system, which until now has worked very well for them. But at this stage, the general opposition is much broader than the Democrats, with many in it having no political affiliations whatsoever and some being very critical of that party. *The New York Times* reports that most of the opposition has been made up of independents, many of whom were at a town-hall meeting for the first time. Masses of working people are certainly getting a valuable political lesson as they go through this experience.

Commentators have likened these interventions to similar activities by the right-wing Tea Party in previous years after the Obama administration was elected, and no doubt there is an element of copying here, but it has been noted by the media that the Tea Party disruptions took place many months after Obama's first inauguration. Even sections of the ruling class have expressed criticism of the new regime, especially over Trump's proposals for more tariffs on trade. The Ford Motor Company, Microsoft and many other large Silicon Valley companies have expressed their unhappiness about this.

The latest outpouring against Trump came Monday, February 20th, on a national holiday, officially titled, "Presidents Day", but was renamed by the protestors as, "Not My President Day". Thousands poured into the centres of major cities such as New York and Chicago, blocking main thoroughfares and stopping the movement of traffic.

That was preceded the previous week by the Hispanic and Latino community, which is solidly working class and makes up 17% of the U.S. population, and which in recent years has a history of taking to the streets to protest against discrimination, declaring a national strike against Trump's enforcement of regulations which had been originally put in place by Barack Obama. "Deporter in chief", as Obama was known as, because he deported close to three million undocumented immigrants during his time in office.

A "Day Without Immigrants", the Hispanic and Latino strike was called. "Let's see them do without

us for a day!” the strikers shouted. “It’s like an Arab Spring”, stated Manuel Castro of NICE, New Immigrant Community Empowerment, which works primarily with Latino immigrants in Queens, New York. In the centre of many cities from coast to coast, the New York Times reports, it was difficult to even get a coffee, to find a shop open or to even get a meal in a restaurant, “as many cooks, carpenters, plumbers and grocery store owners”, decided to answer the strike call. Thousands left their jobs in factories, construction sites and restaurants that day to join the strike.

Hispanics and Latinos, and many others, have been galvanized into action by the sight of the authorities throughout the country, armed in military fashion, sweeping up hundreds of undocumented workers often on the flimsiest pretexts – an unpaid parking ticket, for example – for immediate deportation. Those seized, it turned out, were often a mother or father of a family that had been in the country for decades.

Conjuring up horrible images of Nazi Germany and the persecution of Jews in the nineteen thirties, many immigrants have now been forced into a life underground. “No going to church, no going to the store,” the *Toronto Star* reports. “No doctor’s appointments for some, no schools for others. No driving period—not when a broken tail light could deliver the driver to Immigration and Customs enforcement.”

Everyone who has a grievance against the government is planning a future action for the period ahead. Planned Parenthood, whose funding by the government was an issue in the election, is organizing a mass rally in Minneapolis to challenge Republican Speaker Paul Ryan.

He’s proposing a draft bill to strip the organization of millions of dollars of their funding. And in recent weeks, abortion rights activists—concerned by the threat to roll back *Roe vs. Wade*, which guarantees abortion rights, have begun to turn out in high numbers to counter the anti-abortion activists, most of whom have been loyal supporters of the Republicans and who have had the streets to themselves for this past while.

What we might be seeing in all these protests — even though the trade unions have yet to make an appearance — is the beginnings of a political consciousness in the American working class, which with all its contradictions these early days, might at long last develop to where it will break with the two-party system, break from the two capitalist parties and enter the political arena in its own name. Such a move would be truly radical, and in that light the current protests are truly historic.

Ernie Tate

P.S.

* <http://lefttunity.org/a-letter-from-north-america/>