

USA: Resistance Stirring Again

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IN 1968 THE worldwide explosion of struggle, from the battlefields of Vietnam to the streets and factories of France and Czechoslovakia, opened a new opportunity to challenge the capitalist system. In the United States, the Civil Rights struggle against racism sparked a wave of radicalization and struggle to challenge a whole host of American capitalism's inequities — from its war in Vietnam to its sexism, homophobia, and class exploitation.

After a long period of isolation in the wake of McCarthyism, the revolutionary left began to build parties to challenge the system. Revolution was in the air. The international capitalist class contained and rolled back that upsurge. For the last three decades, the U.S. establishment waged a bi-partisan class war to cut workers' living standards and reverse many of the gains won in the 1960s. U.S. imperialism recovered from its Vietnam defeat and restored its economic, political, and military dominance of the world system.

Mainstream politics swung dramatically to the right beginning with Carter and subsequent long winter of the Reagan and Bush administrations. While American workers rejected the legacy of Reagan and Bush Senior by voting for Bill Clinton in 1992, the new administration betrayed its promises to put people first and in fact expanded the class war at home with NAFTA and the imperial project abroad with increased military interventions from Haiti to Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

In the wake of the collapse of Russia's empire in Eastern Europe, the United States stood atop the world system as its sole superpower.

Crisis of the Left

The revolutionary left that emerged from the last rebellion went into crisis. The ruling class offensive broke the movements of the 1960s and class-consciousness declined making building revolutionary organization a challenging proposition of swimming against the stream.

Moreover, some of the revolutionary left's illusions in Mao's China or Stalin's Russia compounded the objective difficulties. The disillusioning reality of Mao's alliance with U.S. imperialism in the early seventies and Russia's imperial collapse in 1989 spelled the death knell of whole swaths of revolutionary organization. Many revolutionaries abandoned Marxism, accepted the market, and in the United States retreated into the rightward-moving Democratic Party.

But history, contrary to the proclamations of the capitalist class, had not come to an end. Toward the end of the nineties, our rulers' class and imperial wars sparked a new radicalization in opposition to the depredations of the Clinton Administration and U.S. capital. Three pivotal struggles expressed this new radicalization and opened a possibility for rebuilding the revolutionary left.

The 1997 United Parcel Service strike galvanized popular opinion behind the Teamster's slogan, "Part Time America Doesn't Work." The emergence of the global justice movement in the 1999 Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization brought student activists and trade unionists together to resist corporate globalization. This growing radicalization expressed itself in the 2000 Nader campaign that began to develop a political alternative to the two capitalist parties.

After stealing the 2000 election, President Bush Junior, widely referred to as the global village idiot, tottered about with almost no credibility. A new era seemed ready to dawn.

The Bush Administration used the tragic attacks on 9/11 and the wave of patriotism to reverse this challenge. With the near-complete support of the Democratic Party, he escalated class at home and imperial war abroad. He granted massive tax cuts for the rich and imposed all sorts of draconian attacks, from "No Child Left Behind" to the Patriot Act and a wave of racial profiling of Arabs and Muslims.

The orgy for the right and rich happened just as the recession and weak recovery devastated workers throughout the Midwest as its manufacturing base hemorrhaged jobs.

Through his so-called War on Terror, Bush aimed to resolve the mounting difficulties American imperialism confronted in the Middle East. Bush hoped to use the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq as the first in a series of regime changes to culminate with the most important one in Iran. The U.S. ruling class planned to re-order the Middle East on its terms, to control potential imperial competitors like China who had sought to develop independent access to the region's vital energy reserves.

Confronted with Bush's cynical manipulation of 9/11, the emergent global justice movement collapsed, both because of an inhospitable environment and because it was unable politically to connect the struggle against corporate globalization to the struggle against war and empire. Much of the left and most liberals drew apocalyptic conclusions that a new McCarthyism had swept into power.

Many in fear and desperation turned against Nader and fled into the Democratic Party, which save for isolated individuals had become Bush's cheering squad or remained silent.

Revival of Struggle

In reality, Bush's 9/11 consensus had merely papered over the contradictions of American capitalism. U.S. capital's war at home had built up a host of grievances inside the working class that were bound to disrupt the wave of patriotism and stir a new and far deeper radicalization.

Moreover, Bush's new aggressive imperialism abroad was destined to spark opposition around the world from the rebellion against Washington's neoliberal free trade deals in Latin America to the

resistance to occupation inside Iraq. Bush's popularity was temporary; it was built on sand.

The Iraq war itself would provoke the crisis that undid the Bush administration. While much of the left and liberal forces failed to mount much opposition to the war in Afghanistan, Iraq was so obviously a war of imperial aggression that it provoked both domestically and internationally the largest movement against a war before its start.

The movement quickly collapsed into demoralization, however, when Bush ignored world opinion and protest and staged the invasion of Iraq. Liberal leaders of the movement compounded the collapse when they corralled the movement behind pro-war Democrat John Kerry in the 2004 Election.

A combination of struggles and events opened a new radicalization and opportunities for the left in the United States. First and foremost, the Iraqi resistance, however dubious some of its politics, trapped the Bush Administration in a new Vietnam-style quagmire, increased U.S. casualties, undermined domestic support for the war, and put a halt to U.S. plans for further wars in the Middle East. Iraq has become the biggest crisis in the history of U.S. imperialism.

The first shoots of the new opposition found expression in Cindy Sheehan's stirring protest in Camp Casey near Bush's gentleman's farm in Crawford, Texas.

Then Hurricane Katrina leveled New Orleans. Like an X-Ray, it exposed the class and race inequalities of American society. The Bush administration was caught with its pants down. Knowing full well the severity of the storm and the fact that tens of thousands were trapped in New Orleans, Bush and his cronies did nothing, abandoning working class and especially Black people to the storm. Ruling class contempt for poor people was on full display. Even reporters wept in disbelief at Bush's neglect of the Black people of New Orleans.

By late 2005 the Bush administration was reeling. The Republican right's attempt to ram through the draconian Sensenbrenner Bill against undocumented workers spurred the immigrant working class into new stunning resistance.

This oppressed section of the U.S. working class provides labor central to countless industries from agriculture to meatpacking. Outraged, an assemblage of forces came together to organize massive protests on May Day 2006 that shut down LA, Chicago, and many other cities across the country. Immigrant workers paralyzed whole industries including LA's shipping port in illegal strike actions. A sleeping giant had awakened and flexed its class power.

The Iraqi resistance, Katrina, and the immigrant rights struggle have broken the spell of 9/11 and opened a new period of radicalization and emergent struggle. An enormous shift left has happened in public opinion. Bush's popularity plummeted to 23%, the electorate voted against the war in the 2006 election dethroning the Republicans in Congress, and the Republicans seem headed for a big defeat in 2008.

Those voting for the Democrats express both raised expectations for reforms like an end to the war in Iraq and national healthcare as well as frustration with the tepid proposals and actions from the Democratic Party.

Potential Turning Point

We thus stand at a pivotal moment for building a left to help guide the developing struggles. We are

now with the stream of mass consciousness. But we face major challenges at the very same time. We are very much hampered by the consequences of the past defeats — the shrinkage of mass organization especially unions, the lack of confidence among workers to fight, and the decline of the revolutionary left.

These weaknesses shape the subjective ground on which we fight, affecting ideas and movements. While consciousness has dramatically shifted our way, it is also mixed and uneven. Now 70% oppose the Iraq war, but not always for left wing reasons: A significant percentage does so for Islamophobic or isolationist reasons.

Similarly, while a majority is sympathetic to immigrant rights, only a minority is for unconditional legalization and full civil rights for immigrant workers. The weakness of organization and confidence also holds back struggle.

Thus we have proto-movements against the war, for immigrant rights, amongst the oppressed, and in the workplace. They are just at the beginning of being built, and tend to express themselves in episodic flashbacks of resistance. It will take a great deal of organizing and political development to turn them into the sustained struggles necessary to score victories.

The revolutionary left has thus both an opportunity and responsibility to organize the leading edge, the radicalizing minority amidst this broad shift in consciousness and emergent struggle. We must organize that minority into a force to win arguments, learn and embody lessons from the struggle, collaborate with all forces in building mass organization, and help raise the class combativity and consciousness in the various proto-movements.

We have to build an alternative to the Democratic Party that, while it has been pushed from below in a liberal direction, is thoroughly committed to capitalism and empire. We need to eventually organize a revolutionary workers party to collaborate with all forces committed to progressive struggle, builds the left in movements, and argues for workers revolution as the only means for overcoming capitalism horrors.

We are very much at the beginning, but one full of urgency and possibility, the biggest opening for the left in decades.

P.S.

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<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/738>