

USA: Biden promises to "build back better"

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Most of the world's political leaders are rejoicing over the replacement of Donald Trump by Joe Biden. They have hailed it as a comforting reassertion of American Democracy, after four years of disruption of the international institutions that manage the increasingly conflicted interests of the major imperialist powers.

Trump's achievements included refusing to take any serious measures to combat the covid-19 pandemic either at home or abroad. As a result, the US death toll has already reached 400,000, while suspending US membership of the World Health Organisation took away 20 percent of its total budget.

Then there was leaving the Paris Climate Agreement and the unilateral exit from the Iran Nuclear Deal. Those who rely on the 'world policeman' found his overtures to the Chinese and North Korean dictators alarming. The same was true of his 'deal of the century', dumping the two-state solution for Palestine while recognising Israeli settlements, even though the latter only exposed a de facto situation.

While many people across the US and around the world are celebrating his humiliating departure, Trumpism still dominates the Republican Party from the base upwards.

An NBC survey taken after the January putsch reveals that 28 percent of its voters said Trump's words and actions on that day actually reinforced their support for him. Only 5 per cent said they now regretted their support, and two-thirds said their support had not changed. Only 11 percent held Trump responsible for the violence, whilst about half placed responsibility on 'social media companies' and 'Antifa'.

One hundred and ninety House Republicans voted against Trump's impeachment for inciting insurrection. Only 10 joined the Democrats to pass it. Also 45 GOP senators voted against an impeachment trial, enough to block the two-thirds needed to convict. This, despite the most flagrant violation of the US Constitution in its over two hundred years' history.

The defeated incumbent's two months of trying to overturn the November election result, culminating in his followers storming Congress to stop the President Elect from taking office, was an end quite typical for him. On Inauguration Day, Washington was an armed camp with 26,000 national guards deployed, 5,000 of whom will stay till mid-March.

For all Biden's appeals for unity and healing, the Democrats will face obstruction and sabotage of their legislative programme, just as soon as the dust of 6 January has settled. The GOP will be hoping to recover control of the Senate in the midterms in November 2022. True, a handful of senators and representatives have broken ranks and this could ease his legislative programme for a bit, though they will doubtless use the filibuster to maximum effect, forcing cuts in spending programmes and rotten compromises on social and civil rights issues.

However, the adventure failed because no serious element within the state machine, the judiciary, the legislature or the military, would countenance a coup d'état and therefore, even had it succeeded in its aim of dispersing or taking hostage the senators and representatives, it would still have fallen into the social void. For a real coup to get anywhere, a part of the state repressive apparatus must side with it and the rest remain neutral.

Those who marched to the Capitol and stormed it, however, and whoever was responsible for the ludicrously inadequate protection of the Capitol, fully intended to coerce the latter and unconstitutionally leave Trump in power, that is, to carry out a coup d'état. In the end, it turned out to be a miserable putsch.

However, given the Republicans' control of so many state governorships and capitols, and a right wing majority in the Supreme Court, Biden's famed skills as a negotiator will be much in demand and the more radical parts of this programme will be under attack from day one.

Faced with a vocal left wing in his own party, he will need the pretext of Republican obstruction to head off demands for Medicare for All or a Green New Deal. Those who think the axis of politics is pressing Joe to the left are heading in exactly the wrong direction.

Biden the Saviour?

Biden now comes into office posing as the saviour of democracy, the preserver of the republic and the restorer of constitutional order. He has pledged to take up the issues neglected by Trump: tackling America's rampant covid-19 epidemic; addressing the climate catastrophe, rising unemployment and poverty; repairing the healthcare system; and restoring the US leading position in the world. In addition, he has promised to deal with police racism, immigration, and the decaying infrastructure.

The stimulus plan includes a payment of \$1,400 to each individual, aid to cash strapped states and local governments, extending unemployment benefits by \$400 a week, funds to help schools and universities reopen, more child tax credit, access to quality and raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour.

His programme is certainly long on promises. On his website you can read about 'higher wages, stronger benefits, and fair and safe workplaces' and a pledge to 'strengthen unions and worker power' by 'including the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act, guaranteeing card check (subscription deduction at source), union and bargaining rights for public service workers' and affordable health care.

The Senate, with only a one vote (Vice-President Kamala Harris' casting vote) majority for the Democrats, can prove a real obstacle to the more far-reaching promises Biden has made. Without a super majority of 60 out of 100, the filibuster can block legislation. This in itself is undemocratic but the Senate itself is a grossly undemocratic body; two senators represent each state, no matter the size of its population. California's 39 million people get the same voting strength as Wyoming's 578,000.

In terms of promises, however, this will doubtless appear to millions as the most far-reaching programme since the 1960s. Depending on the successful rollout of vaccination and testing to control Covid-19, it will probably give Biden a 'honeymoon' and is the basis for an interval of unstable equilibrium until the next crisis appears on the horizon.

Of course, revolutionary Marxists have the task of pointing out the inadequacies and weakness of Biden's measures:

'Healthcare for all' but not free at the point of use and therefore not for all

Relief for those in danger of losing their homes, but not cancellation of their debts

A halt to Trump's Wall and concentration camps for immigrant kids, but not an end to deportations.

After all, Barack Obama deported more 'illegals' annually than Trump did. And probably, despite Kamala Harris and Joe's praise for Black Lives Matter, there is unlikely to be any serious attempt to expose the racism of the police departments or end impunity for killer cops, let alone 'abolish' them.

Biden's administration is largely made up of right wing Democrats drawn from the Obama and Clinton administrations. At the Treasury, there is Janet Yellen, with a record as a neoliberal and free trader; at the State Department, Anthony Blinken, serial supporter of US military interventions; at Commerce, Gina Raimondo, venture capitalist investor in private healthcare and an opponent of single payer schemes; and, as Attorney General, Merrick Garland, endorsed by the police unions.

Despite appointing John Kerry as Special Envoy for Climate Change, this administration will not develop a truly radical programme for a green industrial revolution. Nor will there be anything on the scale of FDR's New Deal when it comes to an infrastructure building programme. Whilst he has stolen some of the terminology of Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, it would require a massive campaign by the unions, the black and other communities of colour to initiate a substantial move in this direction.

The big issue of 2020, the continued police murders of black people and others, has not been solved. Despite symbolic gestures by Biden, like Obama he will do little or nothing.

Action programme

The response of the labour movement to Biden's promises should be to draw up its own objectives and prepare to fight for them by mass mobilisations and industrial action. Only such class independence of the Democrats could force Biden to meet some of his obligations.

In no sphere would this be more necessary than when it comes to workers' rights: the right to organise, to a union contract for all workers, etc. Here, lobbying congress will not do; these rights are only won on the industrial battlefield, though they can be recognised in law.

The resources to pay for a living wage and Medicare for All would require massive inroads into the wealth of the billionaires, starting with the 400 richest Americans, whose combined wealth, according to Forbes' rankings, equals that of the poorest 64 percent of American households. Expecting a party of Wall Street and the billionaires to do this is just fooling the unemployed youth, black and minority communities and the trade union movement.

The task is to organise, starting from the base, in a fight for an action programme of measures that can solve the crises in public health, education, housing, personal debt, the environmental catastrophe, but not forgetting the murderous racism of the police and the New Jim Crow prison system.

Last, but not least, it is vital to revive the mass anti-war movement of the early 2000s whenever there is a move towards new wars of intervention, whatever human rights nonsense it is disguised in.

Then there is the struggle of labour for workers' control over safety measures, for a major uplift in wages, health and pension rights. Recently, a strike in New York City, by the Hunts Point warehouse workers, won their demand for a \$1 per hour wage increase. The Chicago Teachers, too, are shaping up for action. This shows that the class struggle will revive, especially when lockdowns relax.

All these fronts of struggle need to find a focus in building a fighting workers' party, a party of class struggle, by breaking free of the Democrats. The rapid growth over the last five years of the Democratic Socialists, DSA, and victories for 'democratic socialists' on Democratic tickets, indicates a growing openness of youth, workers, people of colour to the idea of socialism. Yet the DSA is afraid of making a

clean break with the second party of US imperialism.

At this year's DSA Convention, forces that have already pushed the organisation toward greater independence need to work hard to replace the strategy of a 'dirty break' with the Democrats, that is, no break at all. Alongside this, goes the need for an openly anti-capitalist programme. Otherwise, the party will remain a poor imitation of European reformism, lulled into passivity by electoralism and democratic illusions.

Instead of waiting four years for the whole gamut of the undemocratic character of the US Constitution to be revealed, DSA's locals need to prioritise building united fronts to fight against white supremacists, aiding union recruitment and organisation drives, campaigning for women's right to abortion facilities.

All these issues and more need to be combined into a programme of action that sees socialism as the total replacement of capitalism, won by revolutionary workers' action.

The DSA is already 70-80,000 strong and growing. To complete its transition to a party of the working class, it should open its doors to new fighters, break decisively from the Democrats and fight for a revolutionary anti-capitalist programme.

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