

The social crisis and the US elections

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There has been considerable discussion in the media about the deep social anger among working people and youth toward the entire political establishment that has found expression in the US election campaign. The broad and unanticipated support for nominally anti-establishment candidates—the quasi-fascist billionaire Donald Trump on the right and the self-described “socialist” Bernie Sanders on the left—has evoked outbursts of incredulity and ire that have only underscored the chasm that separates the entire ruling establishment from the general population.

The combination of cluelessness and contempt that prevails in top circles was summed up in early March by President Barack Obama following the release of last month’s employment report, which showed a larger-than-expected gain in payrolls for February. Saying the report was a vindication of his economic policies, which had made the US economy “the envy of the world,” Obama derided what he called “an alternative reality out there from some of the political folks that America is down in the dumps.” On the contrary, he gushed, “America is pretty darn great right now.”

He failed to mention one figure in the report that pointed starkly to the social catastrophe lurking behind the headline job number: Only 11.7 percent of the new jobs created in February were full-time. This on top of the fact that the vast majority of the new jobs were low-wage service-sector positions, many of them temporary. Employment in manufacturing and mining continued to fall.

The administration’s response to Friday’s tepid jobs report for March—which again recorded declines in manufacturing and mining and a preponderance of new jobs in cheap labor sectors, with part-time and temp positions accounting for a huge proportion of these—was similar.

Labor Secretary Thomas E. Perez boasted, “The remarkable US recovery continues... The wind is once again at our back.” Jason Furman, chairman of Obama’s Council of Economic Advisors, declared, “The private

sector has now added 14.4 million jobs over 73 straight months of job growth, the longest streak on record.”

But what kind of jobs? A new report released this week demonstrates that under first the Bush and then the Obama administrations, the whole structure of employment in America has been radically altered to reduce the status of workers to that of a super-exploited casual and contingent labor force, lacking any job security or health and retirement benefits.

The report, by Princeton University and the RAND Corporation, documents the fact that *all* net full-time job growth in the US between 2005 and 2015 was accounted for by “alternative work arrangements,” i.e., people working as independent contractors, temps, through contract firms or on-call. There were actually fewer conventional full-time positions—by 400,000—in 2015 than a decade earlier.

One particularly revealing indication of the brutal conditions facing growing sections of workers is the fact that the proportion of contingent workers holding multiple jobs has more than quadrupled over the past 10 years, from 7.3 percent in 2005 to 32 percent in 2015. Nearly one-third of people working with no benefits or job security are holding down an additional part-time or full-time job just to make ends meet.

Another report released this week, this one by the Pew Charitable Trusts, provides further insight into the conditions facing low-income workers that are fueling anti-establishment and anti-capitalist sentiment. Entitled “Household Expenditures and Income,” the study reports that housing costs for the lower third of income groups in the US rose 33 percent between 2013 and 2014, the biggest annual jump in housing spending for the 19 years that Pew has studied the question.

With spending on transportation and food also rising, 2014 became the first year studied by Pew in which median spending on these basic necessities surpassed median income. By 2014, median income had fallen by 13 percent from 2004 levels, while expenditures had increased by 14 percent.

These exposures of the social crisis follow a series of earlier reports showing a sharp increase in life span divergences between the rich and the poor and a dramatic decline in life expectancy for poor middle-aged Americans, rising death rates for both young and middle-aged white workers and a reversal of decades of declining infant mortality.

The indignation and frustration borne of such conditions are intensified by the utter complacency and indifference of the political establishment, particularly the Obama administration and what passes for the “left” in official politics, grouped around the Democratic Party.

This was on full display in an op-ed piece by economist and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman published on Friday. Entitled “Learning from Obama” and including a blowout saying, “What progressive success looks like,” the article exemplifies the outlook of the privileged and smug upper-middle class social layers that make up the base of the Democratic Party.

In a thoroughly dishonest panegyric to Obama’s economic and social policies, which he credits with creating 10 million jobs and enacting progressive health and financial “reform,” Krugman ignores the record growth of social inequality under Obama, whose policies have accelerated the process by which the share of national income going to the top 1 percent has nearly tripled, increasing from about 8 percent in the 1960s and 1970s to more than 20 percent today.

Krugman praises as working to “tax the rich, help the less fortunate and rein in the excesses of the market” an administration that has funneled trillions to Wall Street while pushing wage and pension cuts for workers (the auto bailout, the Detroit bankruptcy), reduced health benefits and increased out-of-pocket costs for millions of workers (Obamacare) and enabled the biggest banks to strengthen their grip on the economy.

Behind the lies of Krugman and others like him is contempt and outright hatred for the working class. This is commonly articulated by the “liberal” establishment and its pseudo-left hangers-on in the form of denunciations of the “white working class”—in keeping with their reactionary obsession with racial and identity politics. They either ignore the broad support for Sanders from white workers who are attracted to what they mistakenly believe or hope to be a socialist campaign, or equate it with support for Trump among more backward layers—branding it as an expression of “white privilege.”

Kevin Williamson, writing in the right-wing *National Review*, recently gave vent in unadulterated form to the

anti-working class outlook of these social layers, stating: “The truth about these dysfunctional, downscale communities is that they deserve to die. Economically, they are negative assets. Morally, they are indefensible... the white American underclass is in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles.”

Behind the crisis of the American two-party system revealed in the 2016 elections is a vast class polarization and political radicalization of the working class. Trump reflects the turn of the financial mafia of which he is a part toward fascist politics. He has been able to attract support from certain sections of the working class primarily because of the viciously anti-working class policies of Obama and the Democrats.

The many more workers moving to support Sanders are looking for a genuinely radical and socialist alternative to capitalism. They will not find it in the Vermont senator, whose campaign is not an expression of working class militancy and radicalization, but rather the response of sections of the ruling class to the danger posed by this development. His conscious aim is to preempt the emergence of an independent political movement of workers and youth and suffocate social opposition by channeling it back behind the Democratic Party.

None of the candidates in any serious way discuss the real issues before American working people—and workers all over the world: the rising danger of world war, the growth of social inequality and the movement toward dictatorship. These issues must be brought into the election campaign as part of the struggle to build an international socialist movement of the working class against war and imperialism.

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