

Letter to American Friends and Comrades

November 10, 2016



Dear Friends and Comrades,

Today is a terrible one for America and the world.

Unlike too many on the left, I've always been pro-American. Pro-American in the sense that I love and admire American culture, the the ideals of the founding fathers and the noble battle by black and white Americans to achieve Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness for **all** US citizens. Most of all, I admire the fact that America is a nation of immigrants – multi-cultural in the best sense.

Now all that appears to be at risk, with the election of a narcissistic, isolationist bigot who quotes Mussolini with approval and openly admires Putin.

Trump may not be a fully-fledged fascist, but he's certainly giving the far right a major opening. "Trump has shown that our message is healthy, normal and organic," one white nationalist leader told the *New York Times*.

Racist violence and harassment, whether or not it's driven by organized groups, is already on the rise. The past two years have seen a dramatic rise in hate crimes against Muslims, and the month before the election witnessed a spate of anti-Black incidents in Mississippi-including an African American church that was set on fire and spray-painted with the words "Vote Trump."

Now the left will have to figure out how to mobilize against the threat of a growing far right. As Dorian Bon wrote for SocialistWorker.org:

[T]he right wing can't be shrugged off as insignificant, and protesting against it shouldn't be dismissed as giving the right the attention it craves. The vile ideas of figures like Trump, just like the more developed reactionary filth of openly fascist parties, have to be named and confronted...

Equally important, the right wing's politics of despair and scapegoating have to be countered with a positive alternative—one that stands for justice and democracy, in contrast to the prejudices of the right. This is why building social movements against all the oppressions and injustices faced by ordinary people is important—not only for winning change on particular issues, but in challenging the success of the right wing that tries to exploit these conditions.

Trump, the boorish, sexist, racist tax-dodging mountebank and charlatan, has been the unworthy beneficiary of working class and middle class disillusionment with both the Democrat and the Republican so-called “establishments”. The dreadful Hilary Clinton was the embodiment of the reviled “political class” that has left blue collar rotting in enforced idleness and industrial areas turned into rust-belts. She and her Democrat fixers had privately welcomed Trump as the Republican candidate, believing him to be unelectable. The reality was that Clinton was the ideal opponent for Trump. Much of what he and his supporters said about her was sheer sexism, but some of it was true – or, more importantly, it *rang true*: privileged, out of touch, uninterested in the day-t-day concerns of working people. Ironically, the self-styled socialist Bernie Sanders would have been a stronger candidate and quite possibly have beaten the charlatan.

Richard Rorty in his last book, *Achieving Our Country*, written in 1998, presciently saw where a post-industrial USA was headed.

Many writers on socioeconomic policy have warned that the old industrialized democracies are heading into a Weimar-like period, one in which populist movements are likely to overturn constitutional governments. Edward Luttwak, for example, has suggested that fascism may be the American future. The point of his book *The Endangered American Dream* is that members of labor unions, and unorganized unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or to prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will realize that suburban white-collar workers—themselves desperately afraid of being downsized—are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else.

At that point, something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for—someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots. A scenario like that of Sinclair Lewis’ novel *It Can’t Happen Here* may then be played out. For once a strongman takes office, nobody can predict what will happen. In 1932, most of the predictions made about what would happen if Hindenburg named Hitler chancellor were wildly overoptimistic.

One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past forty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion. The words “nigger” and “kike” will once again be heard in the workplace. All the sadism which the academic Left has tried to make unacceptable to its students will come flooding back. All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet.

Populist and fascist movements build their base from the politically inactive, the “losers” who feel, often correctly, they have no voice or role to play in the mainstream political process. The sociologist Émile Durkheim warned that the disenfranchisement of a class of people from the structures of society produced a state of “anomie”—a “condition in which society provides little moral guidance to individuals.” Those trapped in this “anomie,” he wrote, are easy prey to propaganda and emotionally driven mass movements. Hannah Arendt, echoing Durkheim, noted that “the chief characteristic of the mass man is not brutality and backwardness, but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships.”

We have seen this in the UK in the form of “Brexit” and the racist carnival of reaction it has unleashed (some on the supposed “left” to their shame, even supported a “Brexit” vote!), so for me personally, the Trump victory is a second body-blow to come within a few months. Elsewhere, authoritarian nationalist populism is in power (Putin, Erdogan, Modi) or waiting, menacingly, in the wings (Le Pen, Golden Dawn, Wilders, etc).

I believe America will survive and eventually defeat Trump and Trumpism. Your democratic tradition and history of civil rights struggle is too strong to be permanently subdued by this creature. But it will take a revived left, embracing workers of all ethnicities and decent people of all classes and backgrounds, willing to take on not just the proto-fascist Trump, but the “respectable” Democrats so disastrously personified by Hillary Clinton. Joe Hill’s famous words to Big Bill Hayward have become something of a cliché over the years, but rarely have they been more apposite than now: “Don’t mourn, organize!”

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