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While Populists Take Workers for a Ride –

U.S. Rulers Switch Horses in Midterm

George W. Bush described the November election as a “thumpin’,” and it was. We have to admit to a certain pleasure in seeing the sneer wiped off the face of this mass murderer and unmitigated hypocrite. The Republican defeat was the first big electoral shift leftward in the U.S. since the 1960’s. The tragedy is that the Democrats who capitalized on the changed mood will inevitably betray all those – in the U.S. and across the world – whose hopes have been raised.

National elections are a forum for the various factions of the capitalist ruling class to sort out their differences, using the electorate as a sounding board for their contending agendas and leaders. The vote reflected mass anger over the deadly war in Iraq and the economic hardships that so many face: insecure jobs, inadequate wages and unaffordable health care. But at the same time it also signaled a shift in views within the ruling class itself.

Much of the ruling class had concluded that the Bush administration could not overcome what it sees as the incompetence and corruption that had led to disasters: the looming defeat in Iraq and the Katrina horror. Katrina was a monstrous crime against Black and working-class people, but for the rulers it was above all a public relations catastrophe. In bourgeois eyes, Bush had become a truly lame duck.

That American imperialism faces a monumental crisis of ruling-class leadership was shown not only by the mounting level of attacks on Bush from establishment figures and the media, but in the typically capitalist way: money. In a vicious, smear-laden campaign, the Democrats matched the Republicans in the tons of corporate funds received. By way of comparison, in the 2002 midterm election corporations gave the Democrats a bit under

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Devastation in New Orleans and Iraq. U.S. imperialism means mass murder at home and abroad.

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Where We Stand:

Immigrant Workers and the Democratic Party Hoax

The massive demonstration in Los Angeles last March, and the even greater outpourings across the nation on May Day, put the immigrant working class on the center stage of American politics. The upsurge was largely spearheaded by undocumented workers. Union leaders, along with the mouthpieces of various agencies that specialize in "immigrant advocacy," all had to admit one thing: the powerful displays of militancy were neither foreseen nor created by them. These misleaders then proceeded to collude with Democratic Party politicians to try to squelch the enormous momentum that had been created.

First, they peddled the notion that "comprehensive reform" – as advocated by the Democrats as well as Bush himself – was the answer to the attacks on undocumented workers. This is a grand fraud perpetrated on the masses of undocumented workers and their allies. *Any* reform coming out of Congress will be full of repressive and divisive measures. The immigrants' misleaders only ask that a small carrot be included along with the big stick. (See "Democrats and Republicans, Enemies of Immigrant Workers," in *Proletarian Revolution* No. 78.) Serious demands like full amnesty, let alone genuine equality for all immigrant workers, will be the last things found on their agenda.

Another treacherous diversion was the suppression of mass action in favor of a pro-Democratic electoral push. Nothing has ever been won by people of color or the working class in this country without massive struggle. The superexploitation of Black, Latino and immigrant labor is a cornerstone of U.S. imperialism's strategy of securing profits. No nifty legislation is going to stop this as long as imperialism and capitalism exist.

ANTI-IMMIGRANT ATTACKS

Revolutionaries always warn that reliance on the Democratic Party is a deathtrap for movements of struggle. And in the case of undocumented workers, forced to exist on the edge of American society, the deadly consequences can be immediate. In 2006, violent border patrols continued unabated – raping, beating and murdering countless victims. For those who make it across, the desperate daily battle to survive just begins. And for those who get to work here, the norm is an insecure job under virtual slave



Families of arrested workers confront armed government thugs at a Swift plant raided in December.

labor conditions. Meanwhile, the risk of deportation remains unabated. And all this would continue under whatever "compromise" the Democrats and Republicans may come up with.

Workplace raids escalated throughout 2006. On December 12, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) police raided meat packing plants owned by Swift & Co. across six states. This operation, touted as the "mother of all raids," was designed to be the biggest single roundup in this country's history. Over 1300 mostly Mexican workers were grabbed on the ominous-sounding charge of "identity theft." The size of the raid was matched by its recklessness. In an often-repeated scene, agents in SWAT uniforms burst into the plant in Greeley, Colorado with hundreds of handcuffs. Workers were bussed off incommunicado to unnamed detention centers and stripped of all rights to communicate with families or legal aid.

Out of all the summary arrests, at most 220 indictments on criminal charges, including spurious claims of "identity theft," have been executed. Many of the arrested workers have already been deported to Mexico. Most of the others, arrested on "administrative" charges, spent weeks in jail under harsh conditions. The

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No Justice, No Peace, No Profits!

Stop Racist Police Terror!

This article was distributed as a leaflet by the League for the Revolutionary Party at several protest rallies and marches in December against the police murder of Sean Bell in New York City's borough of Queens. It has been slightly edited.

Once again the cops have killed an unarmed, innocent young Black man, this time in a hail of 50 bullets. The death of Sean Bell the morning of November 25, along with the critical wounding of his two friends, Joseph Guzman and Trent Benefield, was not just “unacceptable” and “excessive,” as Mayor Bloomberg put it – it was murder. And since then the cops have continued to terrorize the southeast Queens communities where Sean lived and died, hunting for a mythical “fourth man with a gun” to pin the blame on for the crime that only they committed.

The Queens shooting is by no means an isolated incident. Everyone remembers the torture of Abner Louima and the murders of Amadou Diallo and Patrick Dorismond under the blatantly racist Giuliani. But there have also been police killings under the “sensitive” Bloomberg, including Alberta Spruill, a DC 37 worker who died of a heart attack when cops raided her Harlem home, and Ousmane Zongo, an unarmed West African, in 2003; and Timothy Stansbury, a Black teenager, shot on the roof of his Brooklyn apartment building in 2004.

It is almost always people of color, and it is not only in New York. On November 18, Michael Smith was shot and killed by Chicago cops for allegedly not identifying himself. In Atlanta on November 21, 88-year-old Kathryn Johnston was gunned down by narcotics police officers on a search. In Los Angeles in mid-November, an Iranian student, Mostafa Tabatabaiejad, was handcuffed and stun-gunned when he was racially profiled and refused to show identification. He, fortunately, was not killed.

WHY RACISM?

Racism is not just at work when it comes to the deadly behavior of police. It is a tool that keeps people of color down in every walk of life. Economic hardship is spreading. Full-time jobs are replaced by low-wage part-time jobs; union jobs by workfare. Health care, education and other services are being slashed. In a society dominated by a small number of big capitalists who profit by exploiting a vast working class, the rulers must keep the masses down; they hide the class nature of the system by dividing and conquering the masses. Racism is key. As tough conditions worsen, more police brutality is used to try to keep oppressed people of color in a permanent state of intimidation.

While Black and Latino workers are slammed hardest, white workers are also hit. The bosses and their government whip up racism with the lies that Blacks, Latinos and immigrants are taking away jobs. Turning workers against each other is their way of forcing down the wages of everybody and also preventing united mass action by the exploited and oppressed against the system. White workers are turned against workers of color; workers of color are turned against each other. Racist attacks have multiplied under the so-called “war on terrorism,” which especially targets people of color abroad and at home.

Some apologists for the police are trying to say that it was not an issue of race because four of the five cops who took part in the shooting were Black and Latino themselves. But on the one hand, the officer who fired 31 of the 50 shots was white; on the other, this wasn't the first time that Black cops have been used against their own people. The real point, of course, is who the police target. It was young Black men in a working-class club who were attacked, in stark contrast to what happens in upscale clubs frequented mainly by whites.



LRP contingent at march protesting racist murder of Sean Bell, New York, December 16, 2006

CAN THE POLICE BE REFORMED?

The killing of Sean Bell cries out for justice and a mass struggle against cop brutality. But the same old plans for police reform being pushed from various quarters are frauds.

Much of the Black political leadership in Queens accepts Bloomberg's expressions of sympathy and his wrist-slap criticisms of the cops. They have pledged to wait for the results of an investigation by the Queens District Attorney, hoping to keep protests quiet. They could be waiting a long time, since as of December 4 the D.A. hadn't yet interrogated the five cops!

More militant talk has come from City Councilman Charles Barron of Brooklyn, who calls for the resignation of Police Commissioner Kelly and a federal investigation. The group “100 Blacks in Law Enforcement” is calling for a special prosecutor, pointing to the tight relations between D.A.'s and the cops. They are part of the same corrupt “justice” system and should know.

The Rev. Al Sharpton, who in the past has led mass protest marches against police killings, is sticking to a moderate role, asking that the city show “moral outrage” and that cops be “held as

accountable as anyone else.” Sure. He stood silently with Bloomberg at a press conference two days after the shootings, providing protective cover while the billionaire mayor appealed for calm.

The truth is that neither an independent prosecutor, a new police commissioner nor a federal investigation will bring justice. As we have noted, racist police brutality is built into the capitalist system, to maintain its regime of oppression, exploitation and imperialism. What’s more, because the police serve the system, the government will never deal out real punishment to its own cops.

Prosecution of police officers for excessive use of force is extremely rare. In New York, only three cops have been convicted for on-duty killings since 1977. Diallo’s killers, who pumped 41 bullets into him, were exonerated. Dorismond’s were not even indicted. And after September 11, 2001, the ruling class began seizing every opportunity to give a green light to racial profiling and police terror. The courts overturned the guilty verdicts against the cops who assisted and covered up the torture of Abner Louima. Even if some of Sean Bell’s murderers are eventually indicted, there is little chance that the penalties will fit the crime. Anti-racist fighters should read our pamphlet *Fight Police Terror!*, written during the struggle to win justice for Diallo. It exposes in detail the failure of all the phony police reform schemes across the country.

WHICH WAY FORWARD?

Politicians of all colors keep reforming the cops – and the cops keep killing innocent people. The cycle has to stop!

While police terror against the working class, people of color above all, can be fought now, it will exist as long as the capitalist system lives. We in the League for the Revolutionary Party (LRP) believe that a fighting working-class movement – in which Black and Latino workers and youth take the lead – is the way forward to end police terror and racism once and for all. We believe the goal is to overthrow capitalism, which requires building a revolutionary working-class political party. Such a party, independent of all pro-capitalist leaders, fights in the interests of the whole working class to unite the working class by waging an uncompromising struggle against racism.

Even though the working class is not now convinced that revolution is necessary, the fact is that people, all of us, learn and raise our political understanding through the course of struggle. And those struggles can be successfully built and developed today. Cops can be forced to retreat. A mass movement against police brutality can be built.

Mass action is the key. There are key concrete steps that revolutionary-minded people should band together and do to start turning this situation around. Hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people turn out for protests – but there should be hundreds of thousands. To maximize our forces, we must take the fight against police terror into the working class’s most powerful organizations, the unions. Union leaders have barely lifted a finger to mobilize the ranks of workers in the struggle against police brutality. In cities like New York, unions represent large numbers of Blacks and Latinos, both U.S.-born and immigrant, who face the reality of police brutality directly.

But like the Democratic politicians, today’s union leaders are tied to the capitalist system and fear mass action even by their own members. They have been silent about the shooting of Sean Bell and his friends. And when they do open their mouths, it will be to advocate the same old reforms like civilian review boards, more Black and Latino cops and a special prosecutor for police brutality and corruption in New York – that’s what they’ve done,



Protest leader Al Sharpton (right) gives protective cover to Mayor Bloomberg and Police Commissioner Kelly at City Hall appearance.

repeatedly, in the past.

A year ago the transit workers’ union, TWU Local 100, went on strike before Christmas against the bus and subway bosses to stop the attacks on their pensions and health care. The pro-capitalist union leaders caved in before the strike could win, but the strikers had shown the power that workers have to shut the city down and bring the capitalists to their knees. And the strikers had won the support of their fellow working people across the city, despite the great inconvenience it brought them.

NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE, NO PROFITS!

Just imagine the effect if this union and others vowed to shut down profit-making in the city to show our outrage at the murder of Sean Bell! We have to start advocating, in the unions as well as the community organizations, the need not only for rallies but for a *one-day general strike*. And if revolutionary and militant Black, Latino and anti-racist white workers take the lead, more workers will follow.

Politicians like Sharpton say: “No Justice, No Peace.” But this can mean little more than noise which eventually dies down. Even riots triggered by police brutality, like Los Angeles in 1992 or Cincinnati in 2001, were unable to win substantive gains because they didn’t hit the capitalist ruling class where it hurts most. But the unions in this city have the power to mobilize masses of workers and spread a strike call; that would be the most effective protest against police brutality possible.

We say “*No Justice, No Peace, No Profits!*” When there is a cop atrocity like what happened to Sean Bell the city should be shut down! A general strike, based on the power of workers to shut down the economy, is the opposite of the passive civil disobedience and consumer boycotts forever being called by reform liberals – and forever accomplishing nothing.

The impact of such an action in New York City would not be limited to the struggle for justice for Sean Bell. It would inspire workers and anti-racists all across America and the world. Once the working class sees that capitalism’s atrocities can be fought, millions of workers, who now feel too weak to achieve real changes, would begin to see that they have enormous power. Then workers and oppressed people would see the possibility of a new society not ruled by the bosses and their hired racist hit-men, a socialist society governed by and for the working class. ●

Morales/Shakur Center at CCNY under Attack

A student center at City College of New York (CCNY) is under political attack from the gutter press, the cops and the City University (CUNY) administration because of its name.

As a result of the successful CUNY-wide student protest against tuition hikes in 1989, the City College group that initiated the struggle was given permanent use of a centrally located office room. They named it the Guillermo Morales/Assata Shakur Community and Student Center, after two former CCNY students who had become political prisoners as fighters for Puerto Rican independence and Black liberation.

Their backgrounds in brief: Morales was a member of the FALN, a Puerto Rican liberation group that took responsibility for several bombings in New York and nearby in the 1970's. Shakur had been a member of the Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Army. She had been charged with several bank robberies and other crimes, but was acquitted every time. Then in 1973, when she and two comrades were driving on the New Jersey Turnpike and were pulled over by state troopers, shooting broke out. Assata's companion, Zayd Malik Shakur, was killed by the cops; Assata was wounded. She and the other comrade, Sundiata Acoli, were caught and arrested. A cop who had arrived at the scene ended up dead, shot by persons unknown.

Assata and Sundiata were charged with both killings, even though defense witnesses who proved that she had not fired a gun were unchallenged by the prosecution. In an atmosphere of hysteria, they were convicted by an all-white jury and sentenced to life-plus. Later, both Morales and Shakur escaped prison and ended up in exile in Cuba; Acoli remains a political prisoner. Shakur has since been officially labeled a dangerous terrorist, and the U.S. government has offered a \$1 million bounty for her capture.

The Center, ironically directly beneath the office suite of campus security, has remained under the control of radical student groups since 1989. A large sign with its full name and pictures of Morales and Shakur has been hanging outside the room above the door all that time. There have been various hassles over the years, including a still-pending lawsuit against the College for setting up a disguised surveillance camera covering the room entrance.

On December 12, the *Daily News*, the second-most scurrilous rag among major New York tabloids, ran a page-one photo



Student activist center sign was forced down by police, media pressure.

of a young Black woman with a gun under the headline "DISGRACE!," complaining that the sign over the student center has been named after the notorious cop killer, Joanne Chesimard, Assata Shakur's given name. An inside headline read, "'Terrorist' Lauded at CCNY." Other bourgeois media joined in the garish coverage. And although the City College administration at first said it would not intervene, CUNY Chancellor Goldstein demanded that the sign be removed, and the College capitulated. The next night the sign was surreptitiously taken down by the authorities, and the students from the Center were told that they would be disciplined if they put it back up.

The College's new-found concern about this "terrorist" in their midst is especially hypocritical, since they repeatedly bestow honors upon Colin Powell, a CCNY graduate who has had a distinguished career involving planning mass slaughters in Panama and Iraq, covering up of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, and lying (as he has now admitted) to the U.N. over Saddam Hussein's invisible weapons of mass destruction. Most recently CCNY has proudly announced a \$10 million grant

to the Colin Powell Center for Policy Studies on campus.

The timing of this media-provoked scandal is significant. It comes amid weeks of protest against the police murder of Sean Bell in a barrage of 50 bullets, and seems clearly designed to undercut the anti-police sentiment growing in the city, especially among Black people. The obvious intent is to make killer cops look like heroic victims. That would go some way to explaining why the focus has been on Shakur as opposed to Morales, who under normal conditions would be the more obvious choice for an "anti-terrorist" campaign. But Shakur's "crime" involved cops, so she became the designated hit-person.

One of the vilest comments came from Patrick Lynch, head of the police "union," the PBA. He said, "It's outrageous that any student body would honor someone like Joanne Chesimard. Joanne Chesimard is a cold-blooded murderer. She is a cockroach!" Lynch also defended the killer cops in the Sean Bell case, stating that "the amount of shots were not excessive."

Lynch was the "labor leader" chosen by Transport Workers Local 100 president Roger Toussaint to chair the rally he held last summer before he went to prison for a week over the transit strike a year ago. Toussaint, who has been highly visible in the marches against the Bell shooting, has not seen fit to denounce the multiple racist insults of his "brother unionist."

There have been several meetings and rallies at City College to protest CUNY's blatant violation of its own past agreement, student rights and free speech. The Center has filed a new lawsuit. Defenders of the Center are planning a forum and a teach-in for the start of the new term in February. Contact the Center at 212-650-5008 or the LRP for further information. ●

Hands Off the Morales/Shakur Center!

LRP/COFI website

Features basic documents of the LRP/COFI in English, German, Russian and Spanish, as well as statements, leaflets and news items to help keep readers informed of our activities.

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Midterm

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\$250 million while the Republicans got almost \$350 million. In 2006, the amounts had doubled and essentially equalized: both parties received something over \$600 million.

IMPERIALISTS' DILEMMA

“Debacle” is an apt term for what the American bourgeoisie sees has become of its once-hailed march into Iraq. Then there is the defiance shown by the rest of Bush’s “axis of evil,” North Korea and Iran, in the face of mighty U.S. imperialism, while the previously “destroyed” Taliban rises again in Afghanistan. To top it off, Israel, America’s junior partner and closest friend in the Middle East, was humbled by Hezbollah in Lebanon – a humiliating blow to the U.S. and to imperialism in general.

Iraq is the immediate problem to be dealt with, and there is no good way for the imperialists to both cut their losses and maintain the dominant presence in the Middle East that had drawn them there in the first place. U.S. forces have already occupied Iraq for over three and a half years, longer than they fought during World War II. But the ruling class has only lately understood the depth of the swamp they are sinking in. (See our article, “U.S. Imperial Authority Cracking,” in *Proletarian Revolution* No. 77.) From the outset of the war, we predicted that Iraq would become a quagmire for U.S. imperialism and that bourgeois “democracy” was impossible there. We wrote in *PR* 71 in 2004:

The U.S. empire now faces an insoluble dilemma in Iraq. It cannot withdraw without seriously endangering its hegemonic position as the world’s top imperialist power and its dominance over the Middle East. On the other hand, it can not stay in Iraq without greatly escalating its bloody attempts to suppress the masses, thereby abandoning the invasion’s vital goals of pacification and stabilization.

Since then the dilemma has only become more acute.

As with Vietnam in the 1970’s, the ruling class will sacrifice a particular losing war in order to preserve the imperialist system as a whole. But then the world economy had just been through a quarter-century boom, and the statified capitalist USSR – the backer of the Vietnamese National Liberation Front that had defeated the U.S. – helped prop up the world capitalist system by keeping revolutions from spreading or even occurring. Today, the post-World War II capitalist boom is long over, and the USSR is defunct. The danger imperialism faces from defeat in Iraq, of both international chaos and economic crisis, is far greater.

DEBATING THE IRAQ DEBACLE

Right after the election, ruling-class hopes were pinned on the heavily promoted Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan collection of hotshots chaired by Bush Senior’s right-hand man, James Baker. But even after the release of the Baker report, all the strategies offered remain riven with contradictions. Consider some of the current proposals:

- Sending in more American troops, which would strain further the already stressed-out military;
- “Redeploying” some forces to bases in or near Iraq, which would leave combat in the hands of the divided, weak and actually untrainable Iraqi army;
- Asking for assistance from neighboring countries, including the Iranian and Syrian governments that the U.S. despises and threatens.

The Baker report at least dispensed with any notions of an



Marines kick in door of Iraqi home. U.S. occupation is hated by Iraqi population.

American victory or of a pro-imperialist Iraqi democracy. It described the occupation as “grave and deteriorating” and emphasized there was no guarantee against failure. It also set the stage for blaming the Iraqis if the country blows up in an all-out bloodbath.

Meanwhile, Bush and his crew are staked to maintaining the occupation. Dismissing Defense Secretary Rumsfeld was an implied promise to change course, but the main change they want is to fatten Rumsfeld’s famous “lean machine.” As we write, they have announced a “surge” of 20,000 additional troops for Iraq but have not made clear how they will use them.

One proposal for extending the war is to eliminate the Mahdi militia of the militant Shi’ite cleric and Iraqi nationalist Moqtada al-Sadr, a mainstay of the current wobbly prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki. The Sadrist have battled the Americans in the past, and an assault on them now could trigger a far greater mass uprising in Baghdad and a threat to the U.S. supply lines running through Shi’ite strongholds south of the capital. Since it would further divide and weaken the Shi’ites, it was opposed by the top Shi’ite religious leader, Ayatollah Sistani.

An alternative use for more troops is the “80% solution” of militarily smashing the Sunni-based resistance (Sunnis are about 20 percent of the Iraqi population). This would enrage Iraq’s Sunni neighbors like Saudi Arabia and Egypt and would likely internationalize the sectarian civil war. A more likely variant on these proposals is to attack the Sunnis and the Sadrists in turn, which would invite an even greater regional explosion. No wonder many prominent military figures, including Colin Powell and several top U.S. generals in Iraq, oppose any increase in U.S. forces.

An even more murderous possibility, for Iraq and the region as a whole, is an alliance with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, etc. for an all-out war against the Shi’ites. A tacit bloc with Israel would allow it to bomb Iran’s nuclear facilities and re-assault Hezbollah in Lebanon, while U.S. and British troops in Iraq would smash the Shi’ite militias. The risk of region-wide turmoil would be enormous, but the imperialists may be desperate enough to try such a plan.

The Democrats rode the wave of anti-war sentiment, but they are divided over what to do. Some favor Bush’s “surge”; others – like some Republicans – denounce it. They agree only on the public relations task of seeing that Bush gets all the blame, so they struggle to dredge up a viable scheme for withdrawal before the 2008 elections while maintaining a semblance of regional stability. As with Bush, their top priority is to protect America’s super-power status, and therefore, like Bush, they have no real solution.

THE DOMESTIC FRONT

Even though exit polls showed that the war was the chief electoral issue, deepening fears about economic security also played a key role. And Democratic politicians appealed to workers' economic worries by cautiously tying them to the Washington scandals about fat-cat lobbyists and crooked corporations. They also introduced minimum-wage resolutions in six key states, which all passed easily. In the end, the election sent to Washington a slew of Democrats proudly calling themselves economic populists.

Many workers who had previously been drawn to the Republicans, or had declared themselves to be independents in the center, moved to embrace the Democrats. But the shift is still confused enough to allow the populist demagogues to make only vague promises of modest changes.

On the economy the dominant capitalists are trying to avoid even small steps in the direction the electorate wanted to go, much less the major changes that workers yearn for. The fact is that the U.S. ruling class faces dangerous economic conditions itself. The boasts of American economic triumph by Wall Street and Washington cannot disguise concrete crises like the mounting public and private debt and the financing of the economy by foreign capital. The long-term hollowing out of U.S. industry recently hit the headlines: General Motors has ended its 80-year streak as the world's largest auto maker. The inexorable drive to raise the rate of profit in the face of capitalism's long-term stagnation demands yet further attacks on working-class benefits, wages and jobs.

That is the reason for the deepening economic gulf between the capitalists and the working class and the decline of wide swaths of the middle strata as well. The capitalists need to roll back even further the gains made by workers during the post-war boom and by Black people in the upheavals of the 1960's. Their problem is to figure out how to maintain the assault on workers' livelihoods, in contrast to the increasing mass demand for relief.

The Democratic leadership is promising a short list of small improvements: raising the minimum wage, ending some corporate tax breaks, cutting interest rates on students loans, and allowing Medicare to negotiate discounts on prescription drugs. There is no chance that they will address the real crises of jobs, incomes, pensions and health care. But, reflecting the growing tide, there is now a wing of populist Democrats that is pushing hard for something more on the economic front, at least rhetorically.



Successful strike by immigrant workers in Smithfield, NC (see p. 2). Independent working-class action and a break from all bourgeois parties is the way forward.



New Virginia Senator James Webb. Bourgeois populist worries about class war.

THE RISE OF ELECTORAL POPULISM

Right after the election, the mainstream media claimed that most of the newly elected Democrats were actually conservatives. And while a few of them are indeed social conservatives, most have mixed views on issues like "family values," women's rights, gay rights, etc., like most of their party's politicians. However, on bread and butter issues these politicians were actually talking left.

Party leadership remains in the hands of the so-called moderate wing of the Democrats, including the Clintonites who spent their time in office in the 1990's slashing away at gains of workers and the oppressed. But the worsening economy guarantees that the populists will become a growing force, especially if the mass unrest does not produce an independent working-class movement.

Populism is one of the most loosely used and abused terms in American politics, but it has a real substance. A primarily rural and small-town movement in the 19th century, it has added a more urban (and suburban) character in the 21st. It reflects the outlook of distraught labor aristocrats and other middle-strata people who are being pulverized by a beleaguered economy. Another big difference is that today's populism is not a mass movement; at least not yet. It is a mass sentiment coupled to the electoral stance taken by an expanding corps of politicians.

Populists speak to the "common man" and "the average American" in terms of their need to fight an attack on the "middle class," a term used to engulf a variety of different social strata. By not addressing the working class as a distinct class with a distinct material situation, populists attempt to effectively connect with the feelings of workers while submerging the basic class divide in society.

The post-war economic boom saw a great expansion of the middle strata, in large part recruited from upwardly mobile workers. The more privileged labor-aristocratic occupations, including unionized skilled manual workers, were able to obtain income and benefit levels approximating those of upper-level white-collar managers and professionals. Some poorly-paid workers also had hopes of moving up. This was an immense source of stability for capitalism, but it is one that the system can no longer afford. The unrelenting attack on the workers and the deterioration of large sectors of the middle layers are eroding the system's mass base of support. The collapse of the "American Dream" of becoming and staying middle-class has led to a massive change in outlook in the U.S.

Populism caters to this mass anger and anxiety by championing the struggle of the "people" against the big corporations

and the rich and calls for a fairer balance between rich and poor within the capitalist system. The most conscious populist in the current bunch is Virginia's Senator-elect James Webb. In a post-election statement in the *Wall Street Journal* on November 15, Webb made the electoral populist case in the form of a warning to the ruling class:

The most important and unfortunately the least debated issue in politics today is our society's steady drift toward a class-based system, the likes of which we have not seen since the 19th century. ... America's elites need to understand this reality in terms of their own self-interest ... If it remains unchecked, this bifurcation of opportunities and advantages along class lines has the potential to bring a period of political unrest.

Webb uses "class" in the false populist sense of rich versus poor, but his awareness of the potential of an explosion is significant. He is telling the ruling class that economic concessions are vital if they wish to avoid mass upheavals not confined to the ballot box. But such talk itself remains troubling, even frightening, to many capitalists, and it has created conflicts within the Democratic Party. The electoral gains it brought have to be balanced against dangerously raising hopes in the Democrats' large working-class, Black and Latino voting base. In the 2000 presidential campaign, Al Gore's poll numbers went up when he threw out a few demagogic populist ideas, but so did complaints from his fundraisers. This year, given the demand for political change within the ruling class as well as the swelling of popular anger and fear, more Democrats seized on the risky populist theme.

THE POPULIST TRAP

For all its appeal to "middle-class working men and women," populism represents no solution for the plight of the workers, the poor, the oppressed or even endangered petty-bourgeois elements. By the outset of the 20th century and the dawn of the imperialist epoch, populism had lost its progressive aspects and turned into a reactionary barrier to socialist class struggle. Racism and national chauvinism became more prominent features. Even in its left-



Public opinion now demands rapid withdrawal from Iraq. But Democrats as well as Republicans defend imperialist need for U.S. domination of Middle East.

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most forms, it performs a huge service to capitalism by teaching – in contrast to Marxism – that inequality, war and exploitation are not inevitable under capitalism.

Today's electoral populism, a response to the growth of mass discontent, urges in the name of "the people" that workers follow left-talking bourgeois politicians instead of engaging in mass struggle against the ruling class. As Webb makes clear, today's populism aims to head off a class upsurge, not promote it.

However, the populist Democrats will not be able to achieve reforms to any real degree. Their protectionist talk of raising labor standards abroad as part of trade negotiations is meant to end "free trade" agreements, not to seriously improve the conditions of super-exploitation in India, China, Mexico and elsewhere. But that will not stop the outflow of jobs. While cosmetic changes can be made to the corporate welfare state that the populist rail against, a major cut in governmental subsidies to the private sector would cripple the competitive abilities of American capitalists in the world market. Likewise, providing a large number of secure jobs would run up against the capitalist system's need for a reserve labor army of unemployed workers. Only the threat of mass struggle could achieve such a gain. In sum, populist politicians can promise or hint at change, but delivery is incompatible with the system they defend.

The Republican agenda seeks to divert mass anger away from economic woes by beating the drums for patriotism. The populist Democrats are just as wedded to re-channeling mass anger through their own nationalist prism, which is ultimately militaristic as well as protectionist. For example, Webb – an ex-Marine – has opposed the Iraq war in a way that reflects a widespread sentiment in the officer caste, namely that it was an unnecessary adventure that heavily dented the armor of

the imperialist killing machine.

The mass of American workers want out of Iraq because they hate that blood is being shed in a hopeless cause that doesn't benefit them one iota. They may be terribly confused over how this will be achieved, but the yearning for a way out is unmistakable. Post-election polls continue to show that a majority of voters want a rapid withdrawal. But America's rulers – populist politicians included – demand a “responsible” settlement that will avoid further devastating blows to U.S. imperialism. Again, the hopes the Democrats raise are incompatible with their system.

POPULISM AND RACISM

As usual, Black people who voted went heavily Democratic. In Virginia, their 85 percent vote for Webb was decisive for his victory (and therefore for the Democrats' majority in the Senate), since he lost substantially among white voters. Yet during the campaign, all the Democrats glaringly avoided issues of race. For example, they paid little attention to the continuing neglect of the victims of Katrina (and downplayed the facts of racial oppression when the disaster was mentioned) – even though this issue had done so much to wreck Bush's reputation. The populists welcomed the votes of Blacks but muffled their needs in the interests of a fraudulent “unity.”

There was a major shift in the Latino vote towards the Democrats, a negative reaction to the House Republicans' openly racist Sensenbrenner bill that called for criminalizing undocumented immigrants, as well as to growing economic pressures. But the alternative bills the Democrats supported contained some pseudo-reforms but were no less punitive. (See our articles on the immigrant rights struggle in *PR 78* and this issue.) Nothing approved by the capitalists' politicians will come close to the immigrants' demand of full amnesty. In fact, immigrants will be the first to be betrayed by the Democrats, including the populists. They are the most immediate targets of the capitalists' continuing efforts to divide and conquer the working class. Marshaling other sectors of the “people” – worried about being undercut economically – to see “foreigners” as their enemy is a necessary accompaniment.

In this regard, it should be noted that the economic populists are sometimes labeled “Lou Dobbs Democrats,” after television's most strident and well-known populist. For all his anti-corporate rhetoric, Dobbs' appeal to the “middle class” of working men and women is aimed directly against the most oppressed. Anyone who has heard his diatribes night after night against “the massive invasion of illegal aliens” knows he is a rampant nativist and racist. Undocumented immigrants for him are bearers of not only low-paid labor but also terrorism and diseases who are turning the country into a landscape “littered with languages not English.” This is not yet the line of today's economic populist politicians, but Dobbs embodies the direction of populism's hostility to working-class solidarity.

THE FUTURE OF POPULISM

Today's electoral populism will inevitably falter. As the

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Pseudo-Socialist Electoral Politics

Many so-called socialists habitually prop up capitalist politics. Some, like the Democratic Socialists of America and *In These Times*, long advocates of working within the Democratic Party, have embraced the economic populists. Others try to stay clear of the Democrats but support instead the middle-class, pro-capitalist Green Party. In this election, Todd Chretien of the International Socialist Organization and David Sole of the Workers World Party even ran as Green Party candidates for the U.S. Senate in California and Michigan.

The ISO in particular argues that the Green Party, like the 19th-century Populists, is a useful vehicle for breaking working-class people from the Democrats. In this spirit they loyally build a non-socialist stage. Chretien's campaign statements barely mentioned that he was a socialist. He spoke out against the Iraq war but scrupulously avoided citing U.S. imperialism. He attacked the Democrats and Republicans for various positions but not for being capitalist parties.

One Chretien idea “to dramatically improve our society” was to switch the Iraq portion of the annual military budget, \$100 billion, with the education budget of \$67.7 billion. The \$32.3 billion produced by the above budget switch could create 660,000 “decent jobs with union rights.” This scheme is completely utopian for the imperialist U.S., and has nothing to do with the traditional socialist slogan, “Not a penny, not a man” for the bourgeois military. We suggest that since their candidate was proposing a \$60-plus billion Iraq war budget, the ISO ought to correct its standard chant, “Money for Jobs, Not for War,” to “A Little More Money for Jobs, A Little Less for War.”

class struggle heats up, many of the Democratic populists will move to the right, while others will try to accommodate to the mass actions in the factories and the streets in order to mislead them. History demonstrates that the pro-populist socialists are preparing the entry of the poisonous populist demagogues into the bloodstream of the coming movements. (See box above.)

If the populists succeed in preventing the emergence of a working-class leadership for the upcoming mass struggles, they will lead them back into the Democratic Party graveyard. The growing role of the bourgeois populists and the class-collaborationist “socialists” shows that the crisis of working-class leadership is even greater than the crisis of bourgeois leadership. During much of the 20th century, counterrevolutionary Stalinism and Social Democracy used the weapons of populism and popular frontism, and thus undermined class consciousness around the world. Now that the struggle of the masses here and abroad is beginning to re-emerge, the task of re-creating a Marxist leadership can only be accomplished in the struggle for working-class independence.

Genuine communists fight side by side in the coming mass struggles with fellow workers, helping to dispel illusions in populism. We do so in order to expose leaders who are wedded to the defense of capitalism at the expense of the masses they claim to defend. We fight for Black and Latino liberation and full immigration rights: working-class unity will only occur if white workers recognize they can never be free if their brothers and sisters of color are not free and equal. Likewise we oppose all imperialist interventions and champion the need for internationalism to unify the working class across borders. We intend to prove in struggle the need for the working class to dump its illusions in the ballot box, in populism and in capitalism itself. ● January 13, 2006

Immigrant

continued from page 2

identity theft charge is intended to stifle sympathy and to criminalize immigrant workers whose only real “crime” is that they need to work so that they and their families don’t starve to death. It is meant to cover a campaign of terror against immigrant workers, who are actively seeking means to fight back against their exploiters and their wretched conditions.

But the genie is out of the bottle. Immigrant workers have learned the potential of their collective power, as evidenced by the demonstrations last spring. And despite repression and the betrayals by their leaders, they have continued to resist on a number of fronts.

On November 17, over a thousand workers, largely Mexican, walked out of the giant Smithfield Packing Company plant in Tar Heel, North Carolina, the world’s largest hog slaughterhouse. The immediate cause was the firing of about 75 undocumented workers by the company, on the pretext that the bosses had “discovered” problems with their social security numbers. (Such claims have been on the rise by companies and the government, mainly in union and pro-union plants.) After a few days, Smithfield management caved in and granted the workers’ major demands. This victory stands as a potent reminder of what can be gained by workers’ mass action.

Mexican workers have a specific history of struggle in the U.S. And with their growing militancy and centrality in the American economy, they and other immigrant workers are now the most promising and inspiring sector within the American class struggle. It is their potential to spark the wider class struggle that the bosses and the government fear the most.

The revolutionary workers of the LRP join with our immigrant

fellow workers and all who support them in outrage against the relentless attacks. The enemies of immigrants are waging an active war, and they must be stopped. A mass defense can be built – but only if politically conscious workers fight against the treacherous politics of the current leaders.

The way forward must include a struggle in all the mass organizations, especially unions with large numbers of immigrant workers, for a return to serious mobilizations now. *All* anti-immigrant measures must be stopped. We propose fighting in the unions and elsewhere for a perspective of preparation for immediate widespread protest strikes against workplace raids when they happen. The only way to stop raids and other acts of provocation against immigrant workers is by unleashing the power of the working class. A movement led by immigrant workers can show other workers that their real interests lie with a united mass struggle – rather than allowing the bosses to turn workers against each other. In this spirit, we hope to convince more and more fellow workers of the need for a general strike against all the capitalist attacks.

Immigrant workers suffer special oppression but also face a problem shared by workers in general. The proletariat has tremendous objective power, but an array of entrenched misleaders of various stripes stands in the way. Above all, politically conscious workers have to band together to build the foundation of the revolutionary party – so that imperialism and capitalism can be overturned once and for all. ●

Stop ICE Workplace Raids! Amnesty Now!

Equal Rights for Immigrants!

Workers and Oppressed People Unite!

Build the Revolutionary Party of the Working Class!

Re-Crete the Fourth International!

Socialist Revolution Is the Only Solution!

The Impasse of “Left” Populism in Quebec

This article was written by a correspondent in Montreal.

Autumn 2005 witnessed a contest for the leadership of the pro-independence Parti Québécois (PQ), something which had not happened since 1985 when the PQ’s founder, René Lévesque, resigned. The contest ended on November 15, 2005, the anniversary day of the PQ’s first taking of power in 1976. The working class had no real stake in this race. All the candidates swore fidelity to the dogmas of imperialist capitalism and to anti-worker policies.

Shortly after this leadership contest, in December 2005, the Liberal Party government of Quebec led by Jean Charest adopted the special Bill 142. This very repressive law unilaterally imposed a new contract on public sector workers and prohibited any work stoppage by the workers until the expiration of the contract.

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This was a severe defeat for the Quebec working class. The responsibility for it falls on the trade union bureaucrats, who refused to lead a unified struggle against the attacks by the Charest government and who rejected calls for a general strike coming from the militant base of public sector workers. The workers remained divided throughout the struggle, and its responses were dispersed and very weak – half-day strikes, symbolic demonstrations and the boycott by teachers of extracurricular activities. Only three ministries undertook long strikes – the Ministries of Justice and Revenue, and the Quebec Automobile Insurance Society – and they abandoned their pressure after a few weeks because of their isolation. All this showed once more the treacherous role of the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucrats who stand at the head of the mass organizations of the working class.

THE PQ HEADS RIGHTWARD

André Boisclair, the new head of the PQ, aspires to push his party further to the right by adopting policies that are even more neo-liberal and anti-working class than usual. He dreams of following the anti-social offensive initiated by his predecessors at the head of the PQ, Lucien Bouchard and Bernard Landry, and amplified by Jean Charest. Boisclair camouflaged his aims behind pedantic and technocratic language. He criticized only half-heartedly the Charest government’s Bill 142, and even refused to promise to abolish it should he win the next election.

At a meeting in September 2005 with students of CÉGEP

(institutions for general and occupational education between secondary school and college), Boisclair said frankly that introducing exemptions from school fees at the university level would mean more benefits than costs for the Quebec state! That is a logic typically and completely capitalist, worthy of Bush, Blair, (Canadian Prime Minister) Harper and Jean Charest. We must not forget that the Parti Québécois already tried in 1996 to increase education costs for Quebec university students, which triggered a massive and combative student strike.

The PQ, as a pro-capitalist party, is in no way an alternative to the Liberal Party of Quebec. Its criticisms of Charest's cutbacks have in any case been seen as hardly credible by workers, students and all those who struggle against the anti-working class policies of the Liberal government.

Within the PQ, union bureaucrats have formed a group called Unionists and Progressives for a Free Quebec (SPQLibre), in an attempt to provide a left and slightly "socialist" cover for the PQ. Despite SPQLibre, the Quebec working class can never forget that the PQ is a bourgeois party which has always favored an independent capitalist Quebec linked to New York financiers, and that the many draconian cutbacks carried out by this party were hardly errors of judgment but rather the result of the capitalist economic crisis, which the bourgeoisie wants to make the workers pay for. It is very easy to make lovely promises and to adopt "progressive" positions when in the opposition. But when in power it is another story.

The PQ's several terms in office are very instructive in this regard. One only has to remember the brutal attacks against the Quebec public sector workers in 1982-83, which easily matched those perpetrated by the most right-wing governments elsewhere in Canada. In 1996 the PQ put forward a "zero deficit" policy that mandated the complete elimination of governmental budget deficits by savagely cutting social programs and public functions and eliminating more than 15,000 jobs.

NEW POPULIST PARTY FOUNDED

The alternative is not to be found even with the new "left" party created in February 2006: the fusion of the Union of Progressive Forces and the Citizens Option, the two main organizations of Quebec's reformist left, took the name Québec Solidaire (QS). This is a left populist party which systematically avoids any reference to the working class or socialism in its declaration of principles, in order to "appeal broadly" and to be accepted by the bourgeois media.

The founders of QS are nostalgic for the social-democratic capitalism and the welfare state of the period of the "30 glorious years," 1945 to 1975. They do not understand that capitalism is in full economic and social crisis and that it is necessary for it to mount an all-out attack on the social gains of the working class. In the newspaper *Le Devoir* of February 6, 2006, a spokesperson of the QS, Françoise David, who had been a member of the Maoist group *En Lutte* in the 1970's, stated that there was no question of the new party belonging to the far left and that the concepts of proletarian dictatorship and "violent" revolution were immediately rejected, no doubt to be more "credible" in bourgeois eyes.

Concerning the Quebec national question, while declaring itself in favor of sovereignty for Quebec, QS maintains a certain ambiguity, no doubt in order to win the "left" federalists of the New Democratic Party, who are increasingly trying to gain a footing in Quebec. It is necessary to defend resolutely and passionately the right of Quebec to self-determination, including the right to secession and to form an independent state, while also combatting Quebec nationalism and the desire of the bourgeois independentists of the PQ and the Quebec Bloc to make themselves

the exclusive exploiters of "their" working class.

The Clarity Bill promulgated in 2000 by the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien was a serious attack against Quebec national rights, since it allowed the federal government to insert itself into the formulation of the referendum question and to determine how big a majority is necessary for declaring Quebec independent. A recent financial scandal, which uncovered a massive diversion of money toward public agencies close to the Liberal Party in order to finance campaigns for Canadian national unity, shows the willingness of the Canadian state to prevent at any cost the legitimate right of Quebec to self-determination. The big-nation chauvinism of English Canada, which is dominant in the Canadian state and therefore even more dangerous than the narrow nationalism of Quebec, is poison for Canadian working-class unity against English- and French-speaking capitalists.

At its last convention at the end of November 2006, QS adopted an electoral platform of 25 propositions. This is a profoundly populist program, which again avoids any reference to socialism and which is not at all centered on the working class. It is a grocery list which simply stands for "improving" capitalism by giving some crumbs to the workers. It calls for among other things raising the minimum wage to \$10 Canadian per hour (about \$8.75 U.S.), increasing social benefits to cover "essential needs," more public housing, longer vacations, abolition of the anti-union laws introduced by the Charest government, gradual reduction of university fees, a program of struggle against homophobia and violence against women, etc. On the economy there is no mention of the statification of the means of production. It demands only the nationalization of the wind-energy sector and setting up a public pharmaceutical company. It is safe to say that this is far from a program of transitional demands like that formulated by Trotsky in 1938 for combatting decadent capitalism.

There is nothing about international questions in the QS platform. However, last September QS took a position for the withdrawal of Canadian imperialist troops from Afghanistan. But there is no mention of this in the electoral program.

Most discouraging in all this is the enthusiastic support given to Québec Solidaire by a wide variety of pseudo-Marxists, including the Mandelites of Gauche Socialiste, the Cliffites of Socialisme International (SI) and the Stalinists of the Communist Party of Quebec. Gauche Socialiste is known, like the United Secretariat internationally, for its categorical rejection of the Trotskyist program of international proletarian revolution and for its support for every popular frontist coalition that presents itself in opposition to the "traditional" parties, like the PQ in Quebec or the Socialist Party in France. For its part, SI holds that the "another world" movement and the anti-war movement are more important than the working class, and it rests its hopes on all the new "left" reformist parties emerging in the world: the Workers Party in Brazil, the WASG in Germany, Respect in Britain and now QS in Quebec. As for the Quebec Communist Party, its goal is to set up an anti-monopoly coalition with "progressive" elements of the ruling class. All these groups share the wish to "reform and humanize" capitalism as well as their constant support for bourgeois parliamentarism, all the while painting their positions with a pseudo-Marxist gloss. Their political line is an obstacle for the working class, just like the "realism" of the QS.

That is why it is necessary to break completely with *all* the parties of the bourgeoisie, left as well as right, and work passionately and tirelessly for the construction of a Leninist-Trotskyist workers' revolutionary party which aligns itself with the continuity of the October 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the Fourth International founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938. ●

Mexico

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Independence Day. How then did it get away with the murderous assault on Oaxaca and the imposition of Calderón by the end of November?

The missing factor was a revolutionary working-class leadership that would fight for a national struggle by workers and peasants across the country. The high point of working-class struggle was achieved in Oaxaca. But when it was threatened by a head-on federal attack, López Obrador – the most powerful national figure who many workers and peasants looked to for leadership – refused to mobilize nationally or even to send contingents from the capital to Oaxaca. He was pushed to call a national convention, but he and the PRD disbanded the protest camp in Mexico City and did not organize any more mass actions even close to the scale of the earlier protests. The Oaxaca militants paid in blood for his treachery.

Why did López Obrador hold back the mass struggle even at the cost of his own chances of coming to power? The answer is that his and the PRD's claims to represent the interests of the masses are lies. The PRD is not a party of the working class: it is a capitalist party dominated by former elements of the old authoritarian regime of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) who favor granting more concessions to the masses in order to avoid struggles that threaten the system.

López Obrador and the PRD misled the working class with populism – rhetorically championing the poor within the bounds of a nationalist perspective that ties them to the ruling class and guards the fundamental interests of capitalism. This was summed up in his main campaign slogan: “For the good of all, the poor first.” But the interests of the masses cannot be reconciled with those of the capitalists and imperialism; maintaining unity with the ruling class can only come at the expense of the masses' demands and struggles. Thus López Obrador rallied millions into the streets to fight for his political power, but when those struggles threatened to grow into a confrontation with state power, he preferred to see the struggle disbanded and Calderón take office. In the absence of a revolutionary leadership able to show the way forward, the mass struggle was beaten back.

Revolutionary Marxists oppose populism and fight against the danger of populist illusions among the working class. As long as it is tied to López Obrador, the working class will not be able to fight for its true interests against its capitalist class enemy. That is why the central task of class-conscious workers must be to build their class's vanguard revolutionary party, dedicated to leading all the masses' struggles forward to workers' socialist revolution in Mexico and around the world. Toward this end, revolutionaries must participate actively in all mass actions that mobilize workers in struggle, to fight for the interests of the working class and expose López Obrador and the PRD's pro-capitalist populist program. The PRD's grip on leadership holds back the struggle of the masses and must be broken.

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OAXACA AND THE NATIONAL STRUGGLE

The events in Oaxaca show the potential for mass struggles to break from the grip of the PRD. The teachers' union's pro-PRD leadership saw the strike as part of López Obrador's electoral campaign. In addition to raising demands to improve teachers' wages and working conditions, it also called for raising the state's minimum wage; thus it drew wide popular support. When the state government sent thousands of police to attack the teachers' occupation of a large part of downtown Oaxaca in June, the masses responded with a fury. The police were driven out and two days later, a march of over 300,000 people – well over half the city's population – showed the struggle's overwhelming support.

With the struggle having grown way beyond the teachers' union, organizations supporting the struggle met the day after the march and launched APPO as a new mass organization. APPO and the teachers' union then organized control of the city, setting up barricades, occupying government buildings and taking over several radio and television stations. The central demand now became political: the ouster of the repressive state governor, Ulises Ruiz. But APPO's program did not call for a working-class alternative to the hated governor.

As time dragged on and the struggle failed to spread nationally, a government counterattack became inevitable. It need not have been this way. The leaders of the teachers' union, as well as the leadership of APPO, played their role in the defeat of the Oaxaca struggle. They attempted to end the struggle with rotten compromises, but were rebuffed by the ranks. The APPO leadership in particular promoted a pacifist approach that left the masses unprepared for the government's armed assault.

But the fate of Oaxaca was ultimately determined in Mexico City, where the struggle remained under the control of the PRD. The masses mistakenly thought that the PRD represented opposition to the capitalist attacks and saw the electoral fraud as cheating them of their victory. Their democratic right to have their votes counted and the result honored, even though they mistakenly wanted a capitalist candidate, had to be defended. Their illusions in López Obrador and the PRD, and indeed all their illusions that their interests could be secured without overthrowing the capitalist system, had to be exposed in the only way possible – on the basis of the masses' own experience of struggle, along with explanations and warnings from revolutionaries.

THE NEED FOR A NATIONAL GENERAL STRIKE

Had a genuinely revolutionary communist party existed in Mexico it would have energetically participated in the huge campaign of protests against the electoral fraud, without giving an ounce of support to the bourgeois PRD (just as it would have opposed any support to the PRD in the election itself). It would have joined in the mass opposition to the electoral fraud and the struggle to bring down the Fox government and to prevent Calderón from taking office. It would have fought for the best way to unite the struggle to win its aims by calling for a *National General Strike* under the key slogans "Down With Fox/Calderón!" and "Defend Oaxaca!"

The struggle to bring down the Fox government and prevent Calderón from taking office would have obviously raised the question of who would replace them. The masses would have presumed, and desired, López Obrador. Revolutionaries would have argued against giving him and the PRD any support whatever. Instead, it would have been necessary to treat the struggle as open-ended, with the PRD's ascension to power not a foregone conclusion. Since the PRD would do all it could to avoid coming to power by means of mass action, it could have been exposed in the masses' eyes in the course of the struggle. On this basis the



Federal police with assault rifles and riot shields advance against Oaxaca protesters October 29, 2006.

fight could have advanced beyond support for the PRD, had there been a leadership in place capable of taking it forward.

Revolutionaries would have called for building workers', peasants' and indigenous councils to best organize and lead the struggle, arguing for them to become organizations of alternate power, like the soviets of the Russian revolution, vying with the capitalist state to run the country. This was, after all, clearly the dynamic of the struggle in Oaxaca, which went well beyond the limits the PRD wished to contain it within. Thus revolutionaries would have coupled their calls for a national general strike under the slogan "Down With Fox/Calderón!" with the slogan "For Workers', Peasants' and Indigenous Peoples' Power!"

A national general strike was key for mobilizing the working class's power – to cut off the capitalists' profits. Revolutionaries would have fought for the general strike to take up the masses' key economic demands as well, such as "Down with the Abascal Project" (the government's proposed anti-working class labor law reforms), "Down with NAFTA and the Plan Puebla Panama" (imperialist free-trade agreements), and demands for wage raises, jobs and social services.

Revolutionaries would have fought for every union to join the national general strike. Even though most of Mexico's unions are PRI-dominated corporatist unions, there was great potential for calls for a general strike to win widespread support in their ranks. Many workers in such unions already hate the PRI. The Fox government's anti-working class attacks, and the workers' desire to fight them, have already driven some pro-PRI union leaders, like miners' union leader Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, to break from their former role as pro-government loyalists and ally with pro-PRD union leaders to oppose the labor law attacks.

Struggles by other unions also held the potential to break from the corporatist stranglehold of the PRI. In particular, 45,000 sugar mill workers (a huge industry in Mexico) launched a nationwide strike on November 16 for wage and pension demands, only to have their strike suspended eight days later by the pro-PRI bureaucracy – which promised to start the strike again on January 20 (conveniently after Calderón's inauguration) if their demands were not met by then.

Marxists understand that the organized industrial working class is strategically central to the struggle against capitalism. But the pro-capitalist bureaucrats at the head of the industrial unions – whether they have corporatist ties to the institutions of the state, political ties to the PRD, or are formally independent – are all loyal servants of the capitalist class. It is an absolute crime against the working class that, at the same time that Oaxaca was

under military attack in November, the bureaucratic leaders of the unions did nothing to link their struggles to the defense of Oaxaca. A national general strike would have overcome the isolation and division of struggles which weakens all workers' struggles. Fighting within the industrial unions for a national general strike would also have necessarily meant fighting for revolutionary leadership of the unions to replace the treacherous existing leadership.

As for the PRD, the protest marches and tent camp it promoted were designed precisely to avoid massive action and to end the struggle if it went too far. Revolutionaries would have demanded support for a national strike from all the masses' popular leaders, including López Obrador and the PRD. But we would have openly warned that these bourgeois leaders would rather not take power than risk mobilizing the masses in a way that would threaten capitalist state power.

Importantly, the example of Oaxaca and countless other struggles in Mexico confirms the threat of violent counterattacks by the capitalist state in the face of mass struggles. Indeed the entire history of the class struggle teaches the fundamental lesson that the working class must arm itself to defend against the armed repression of the class enemy. Thus revolutionaries will spread the call for every popular organization to form self-defense squads. In the course of a national general strike, such defense squads would need to link up and become coordinated as a nationwide workers' militia. Such an armed force would hold the potential to become the backbone of a future workers' state.

OPPORTUNISM AND SECTARIANISM

There are many Mexican organizations that label themselves revolutionary socialist. Unfortunately, most of them express a cynical lack of confidence in the working class's power and its ability to learn in the course of its struggles; thus the only possible outcome they could see was to place the PRD in power. Many "Trotskyist" groups have adopted a policy of class-collaborationist opportunism that would send the great Russian revolutionary Trotsky spinning in his grave.

For example, El Militante (The Militant), the Mexican section of the International Marxist Tendency and one of the largest organizations in Mexico calling itself Trotskyist, not only called for the election of the bourgeois candidate López Obrador; they constitute a tendency inside the PRD itself.

Overt capitulation to the bourgeois PRD is the most obvious problem in the Mexican left. But the most advanced workers' search for working-class independence and revolution is not



Marchers fill Oaxaca highway November 5, 2006 to protest Gov. Ruiz's claim that the struggle is limited to "one avenue."

helped by groups that proclaim class independence but indirectly capitulate to the political dominance of the PRD through a sectarian methodology toward the struggle. A case in point is the Grupo Internacionalista (GI), affiliated with the Internationalist Group (IG) in New York. Under the guise of avoiding political support for the PRD, the GI completely opposed the mass protests of millions against the election fraud, saying that the mass strike and uprising in Oaxaca and the mass protests in Mexico City were "counterposed quantities," the latter being nothing more than "political rallies" for the electoral campaign of López Obrador and the PRD. (See the Oct. 7 article, "GEM: Caboose of the Mexican Popular Front" and the Nov. 10 article, "Oaxaca Is Burning: Showdown in Mexico," on the IG's website for these and subsequent quotations.)

The GI/IG is wrong on all counts. The mass strike and uprising in Oaxaca and the mass protests in Mexico City are both expressions of the masses' desire to fight against the decades of capitalist austerity attacks the Mexican government has inflicted. The main difference was the PRD's success in controlling the anti-electoral fraud protests. President Fox did not make the extraordinary retreats of cancelling the State of the Union address and the Independence Day ceremony because of López Obrador's bourgeois electoral campaign – he did so because the anti-fraud protests represented mass outrage throughout Mexico and the threat of a broader social explosion.

To say that the mass protests in Mexico City were nothing more than political rallies for López Obrador is a one-sided and therefore false description. There is a constant tension within the mass movement between the electoralism of the bourgeois populist leaders and the demand for mass action from the movement's base. López Obrador understood this – that's why he closed down the mass protest on his behalf.

The Oaxaca teachers' union leaders and the APPO leaders, who are mostly PRD supporters (as the GI itself has pointed out), also began the Oaxaca strike movement with the aim of supporting López Obrador's election campaign. The difference was that in Oaxaca the mass base broke through the limits their populist leaders tried to put on the struggle, whereas in Mexico City the populist leaders stayed in control. It was the duty of revolutionaries to participate and intervene politically in the anti-fraud movement to fight for its mass base to break through the limits imposed by the leaders, just as the mass base of APPO and the teachers' union did in Oaxaca.

Indeed, the GI takes sectarian abstention to dizzying heights. They oppose work in the PRI-dominated unions in general because of their state links, and apparently refused in particular to even attend the millions-strong anti-electoral fraud protests to distribute their own literature and argue for their perspective. This has no place in the Bolshevik tradition. In Russia, when the Tsar used the secret police to set up workers' organizations to hold back workers' growing militancy, Lenin advocated revolutionary work inside them to promote struggle against the capitalists and the Tsarist government. When this movement, under the leadership of police agent and priest Father Gapon, culminated in a peaceful march of 200,000 workers carrying religious icons and begging the Tsar to support them, Bolsheviks participated – under their own banner, with their own program. The Tsar's "Bloody Sunday" attack on the march triggered the 1905 revolution, and Lenin's only complaint was that the Bolsheviks in St. Petersburg were not more involved from the beginning!

HOW TO COMBAT THE PRD, AND HOW NOT TO

The IG/GI also raised the slogan, "Down with the PRI, PAN and PRD!" Compare this to the slogans we propose: "Down With

Fox/Calderón!” and “No Political Support to López Obrador or the PRD!” The point is that even though the PRI, PAN and PRD are all bourgeois parties and the working class must oppose and break from all of them, it is outrageously wrong to equate the PAN and PRI with the PRD – to equate the murderous leaders of the repressive government with the bourgeois misleaders of the mass opposition to the government. The same method would lead to equating the Chilean butcher Pinochet with the mass misleader Allende whom he ousted and had killed in 1973.

The GI admits that the repressive PAN and PRI leaders are hated by the masses in a way that the PRD leaders are obviously not. But the GI argues, for example, that the PRD should be held “co-responsible” for the repression in Oaxaca, because PRD state legislators in Oaxaca joined the PRI and PAN in calling for federal police. True, but the GI doesn’t mention that PRD leaders were compelled to demand the expulsion of those PRD legislators from the party. The legislators’ actions threatened to undermine workers’ illusions in the PRD, so the leaders condemned their own legislators to preserve workers’ illusions in the PRD as a whole.

Just telling workers about the crimes of the PRD is not enough to change their consciousness. Revolutionary Marxists must combine such propaganda with active participation and intervention in mass struggle, raising demands on López Obrador and the PRD to expose them in practice. (The GI’s method of avoiding the mass struggle because it is tainted with bourgeois politics is parallel to the IG’s rationalist method of teaching consciousness from outside, analyzed in depth in our article “In Defense of Bolshevik Military Policy” in *PR* 78.) Revolutionary consciousness doesn’t descend from on high. It has to be fought for in the class struggle by the advanced layer of workers, in direct counterposition to the pro-capitalist misleaders.

THE LESSONS OF OAXACA

The experience of Oaxaca shows how the masses learn radical political lessons in the course of struggle. Even though the teachers’ union leaders wanted the strike to support López Obrador’s presidential campaign, the strike’s demand to raise the minimum wage for all of Oaxaca mobilized so much mass support, in particular from indigenous people, that the struggle got out of the control of the union leaders. The mobilization of broader layers of workers, peasants and indigenous people made it possible to repel the police attack, take over the city and create the new mass organization APPO. The ranks of the teachers’



Oaxaca protesters try to resist federal police truck at barricades October 29, 2006.

union and APPO then had the power to reject a series of unacceptable compromises in September and October that the leaders accepted. After the federal police invasion of Oaxaca, the union and APPO leaders advocated a pacifist response, but their masses of supporters resisted as militantly as possible.

The Oaxaca struggle also carries a vital lesson for the most class-conscious vanguard layer of the Mexican working class. It is important to note that the APPO leaders have held back and misled the struggle almost as much as the teachers’ union leaders did. The mass ranks of the union and of APPO had the consciousness to reject the compromises but did not see an alternative leadership they had learned to trust. That allowed the leaders to continue to maneuver and compromise the struggle – above all, it allowed the teachers’ union leaders to manipulate the union voting process and force through a vote in favor of ending the strike just days before the invasion. Although large numbers of teachers did not return to work, the vote to end the strike divided and weakened the struggle.

It is not enough for the ranks to put pressure on their leaders, reject their proposals and oppose their decisions, although this is often a necessary experience. The vanguard workers must present a real alternative. That means making the top priority the building of a revolutionary working-class party, whose cadre are dedicated to fighting in the unions and in mass organizations like APPO to win fellow workers to its banner. ●

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Mexico City's central plaza in July: supporters of Andrés Manuel López Obrador demand a vote recount.

by Jeff Covington

Mexico in 2006 was rocked by an explosion of mass struggles, triggered by decades of capitalist austerity attacks that have devastated the living standards of the country's workers, peasants and indigenous people.

The upsurge began with a wave of strikes by miners and metal workers in the spring. In July, blatant electoral fraud in the presidential election gave victory to the openly pro-imperialist Felipe Calderón over the populist candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Massive protests took place in Mexico City: millions marched demanding justice, and a huge tent city was set up in the central square during all of August and half of September. The extraordinary mass movement compelled López Obrador's Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) to convoke a "National Democratic Convention" on September 16, which declared him the legitimate president.

The wave of struggle reached its political peak in the impoverished state of Oaxaca. A strike by tens of thousands of teachers in May and a government counterattack in June triggered a mass uprising that seized control of the city of Oaxaca for months.

However, the movement was not prepared for the repression that hit. The military cracked down on Oaxaca on November 25: six supporters of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) were killed and over 150 arrested. State and federal forces have killed at least 20 people over the course of the struggle, and over 30 more have been "disappeared" – abducted or killed. Six days after the crackdown, Calderón took power December 1, and one of his first acts was to arrest on sedition charges Flavio Sosa, a top APPO leader and former head of the PRD in Oaxaca.

The killings and arrests in Oaxaca, along with the imposition of the Calderón government, are bitter setbacks. Nevertheless, the

new government's weakness was apparent at Calderón's inauguration. In addition to thousands protesting outside, brawling between PRD legislators and those of Calderón's National Action Party (PAN) forced Calderón himself to sneak in the back door of the Legislative Palace.

Across Mexico, labor struggles by industrial unions such as the miners and the sugar mill workers have continued. So have the struggles of indigenous peoples, such as the Mazahua women who occupied and shut down the plant that supplies water to a quarter of Mexico City in December to demand water, electricity, and roads for their villages. In Oaxaca, APPO has held further mass marches in December, despite the government's repression.

Another wave of mass struggle is sure to break out in response to the even harsher economic attacks that Calderón is preparing. Calderón's announcement of 10 percent salary cuts for himself and other top officials is just a cover for the austerity his government plans to implement to satisfy the demands of its imperialist financiers in the United States. Calderón informed a leading group of private capitalists that there will be difficult political and economic times ahead and that he will have to take "measures that can be classified as unpopular."

BOURGEOIS POPULISM VS. WORKERS' REVOLUTION

Just as the leaders of the capitalist class and state are preparing to carry out fresh attacks, so the most class-conscious vanguard of the working class must prepare to lead the struggle against them. It is urgently necessary to learn the lessons of 2006. The hated government was so weak in September that outgoing president Vicente Fox did not dare to deliver his State of the Union address or to show his face in Mexico City for

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