

My motive and object in all my political works, beginning with Common Sense, the first work I ever published, have been to rescue man from tyranny and false systems and false principles of government, and enable him to be free . . .

When it shall be said in any country in the world, my poor are happy, neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among them; my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars; the aged are not in want, the taxes are not oppressive . . . when these things can be said, then may that country boast its constitution and its government.

Thomas Paine

Chapter III

The Birth of Democracy and the American Experience

The term democracy comes from the Greek *dēmokrātia*, *demos* meaning people and *kratia* meaning power. Generally, democracy means power in the hands of the people. But there is a long history of democracy which reveals that in class society, the content of democracy cannot be separated from the question of which class rules. For example, the democracy of the city-states of Greece was a means to perpetuate the rule of a minority of “free men” over the vast majority, many of whom were slaves. **The modern struggle for democracy arose on the basis of the break-up of the old feudal order and the emergence of the new, capitalist relations of production emerging in Europe.**

At first the struggle against feudal repression was waged by the people. From the middle of the 14th century to the beginning of the 16th century, a series of peasant revolts were crushed in Europe. **As the old feudal relations of production were replaced by the new capitalist relations of production, the rising capitalist class was forced to fight against both the limitations of the old economic order and the old feudal state. New political arrangements were required to cement the new economic relations. The privileges of feudalism, based largely on family and heritage, were replaced by privileges resulting from commodity production, based on property and wealth. To-**

ward this end, the capitalist class was compelled to fight against the old feudal subdivisions of landed estates and for a new, popular democratic principle. Elections were to become the foundation of the emerging democratic governments, together with the formal recognition of certain democratic rights such as trial by a jury and freedom of the press. This constituted a bourgeois democratic revolution, in that the forms and limits of democracy were prescribed by the rule of the bourgeoisie. The first capitalist democratic revolution occurred at the end of the 16th century in the Netherlands, at the beginning of the era of capitalist production in Europe.

The British revolution of the mid-17th century and the American and French revolutions near the end of the 18th century, represented the height of the capitalist democratic revolution. But the capitalist class never completely championed democracy. Formal equality under the law, and formal democratic procedures were adopted, based upon various theories of natural law and natural right, applied to government. In essence, the proclamations of liberty and equality served to hide the exploitation of the capitalist class over the working class. The exercise of democracy depended first and foremost, as it does today, on the private ownership of the means of production. Obviously there was no genuine equality between employer and employed; between tenant and landlord. That is why Lenin, in commenting on the character of democracy under capitalism, stated that "the most democratic bourgeois republic is a machine for the oppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie." What changes from feudalism to capitalism is the form and means of oppression.

Democracy in content under capitalism was not extended to the ownership of property or real political power by the majority. As we shall see, there exists an irreconcilable contradiction between the ideals and the reality of dollar democracy, and the character of class society which allows a minority to rule over the majority. Democracy, therefore, cannot be separated from its class content.

It was in the U.S. that capitalist democracy was to find its fullest expression. Amidst a Europe dominated by monarchies bent on restricting democracy, the American revolution of 1776 struck a powerful blow against the declining feudal system in both Europe and the Western Hemisphere. When Patrick Henry declared "Give me liberty or give me death!", he spoke for millions on many continents fighting to break the feudal chains. The democratic struggle of the people and the struggle of the merchant capitalists broke the colonial bonds. The famous call of Thomas Paine in *Common Sense* for independence rang around the world.

Though this was a revolution led by the capitalist class, it contained a strong democratic element. Even so, it was democracy for the few. While there was some formal separation of church and state, and some restrictions on property ownership as a condition for voting, these and other measures were striking only in contrast to the old feudal order in Europe. The 500,000 Blacks, of a total population of 3.5 million, had no vote, nor did women,

Indians, nor poor whites. Because the democracy of capitalism represents the interests of the monied class, democracy is restricted in accord with wealth.

In the early days of the American revolution, considerable struggle over the character of the new democratic revolution existed between Jefferson, Paine, Adams and others, and the more conservative Madison, Franklin, Hamilton, and the first president, George Washington. But to a large extent, the entire conception of democracy in America was tied to the "city upon the hill", to the concept of commercial success and historical destiny. The conception of democracy separate from private property was unheard of. The Constitutional Convention of 1787 represented an anti-democratic victory in the sense that it placed a variety of restrictions on the exercise of people's power.

The Civil War and Reconstruction represented a final step in the consolidation of power of the capitalist class, with the defeat of the Southern aristocracy and the old feudal relations, and the beginning of the transformation of the economy into its monopoly stage. The defeat of Reconstruction in the South signaled the beginning of a new wave of anti-democratic developments.

Few cherished, let alone proclaimed, the view of democracy espoused on occasion by Abraham Lincoln. He said, "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a slavemaster. This is my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy at all." Slavery, if it is to be understood at all, must include both chattel slavery and wage slavery.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the working people stepped up their struggle for complete democracy and various advances were scored. During this period, democracy which did not threaten the property question was accepted by the capitalist class as reforms which helped to insure its rule and intensify the accumulation of capital.

Even during this period, crisis upon crisis emerged in the economy, a civil war was fought and American expansionism emerged around the world. By 1900, American territory had increased ten times over that in 1776. There were several periods of extensive repression which occurred in the midst of the general extension of democracy. During 1873-78, 1886-87, and 1892-97 attacks against the growing workers' movement were sharp.

By the end of the 19th century, the economic foundation of capitalism in the U.S., as elsewhere, was changing. The character of the political regimes reflected this change. Competitive capitalism was being replaced by the monopoly stage - the imperialist stage - of capitalism. In the U.S. huge railroad, oil and steel trusts dominated the economy. It is the domination of the huge monopolies in all spheres of life which results in the parasitic and decaying character of imperialism.

All the economic features of imperialism (the decisive role played by monopolies in all aspects of life, the emergence of finance capital and a "financial oligarchy", the export of capital, the emergence of international capitalist cartels, and the division of the world among the imperialist powers)

had their reflection in imperialism's political rule — in both foreign and domestic policy — which became reaction all along the line. Even dollar democracy was everywhere restricted. From 1889 to 1908, for example, a poll tax was introduced in the U.S. which constituted a tax, in all states, on the right to vote.

The emergence of the working class in several countries changed the struggle for democracy dramatically. As Marx pointed out, all the weapons which the capitalist class forged in its battle against feudalism were now turned against it by the rising working class. Entering a period of decay, the capitalist class becomes increasingly an obstacle to the exercise of democracy, let alone its further extension. And thus, the struggle for democracy enters a new stage: the struggle of the working class to achieve genuine democracy through achieving political power and breaking the dollar's hold on democracy.

In many countries, the development of the general crisis of capitalism after the victory of the October Russian Revolution led to a period of sharpened prospects of civil war and class struggle. On occasion, as a response to the developing revolutionary situation, or in response to various effects of the economic and political crisis, monopoly capitalism abandons the shell of bourgeois democracy altogether and resorts to fascism. While fascism is not an inevitable stage of political evolution in every imperialist country, it is a form of rule unique to the historical era of imperialism and proletarian revolution. It matures and develops naturally within the capitalist political shell.

In countless ways elected legislative authority is replaced in substance by centralized executive power. New methods of rule are evolved behind closed doors. The growth of the state bureaucracy and the military serve to limit and prevent popular participation in government and the full exercise of existing democratic rights. This is what Lenin meant in 1917 when he stated that "once capital gains control of this very best shell [the democratic republic]...it establishes its power so securely, so firmly, that no change, either of persons, or institutions, or of parties in the bourgeois democratic republic, can shake it." (*The State and Revolution, V.I. Lenin, Foreign Languages Press, p. 16*)

Continued rule by monopoly capitalism through the democratic form of government has often required extraordinary means of repression. The history of repression in the U.S., in both the competitive and monopoly stages, is long and savage. Perhaps no modern industrial country has seen more violence and terror directed against the working people and national minorities over such a long period of time. Hundreds of years of murder, lynching and abuse against Black people, that began with slavery and continues today, is without comparison.

With the beginning of the monopoly stage of capitalism, there have been major periods when the level of repression have been greatest, and when the danger of a fascist state arising appeared greatest.

In 1917-20, there was considerable repression of the anti-war move-

ment of the period, and a major anti-communist crusade, reflected in the Palmer Raids of 1919. Major efforts were made to destroy the Industrial Workers of the World and other radical labor organizations. Coming as an attempt to blunt the influence of the Russian Revolution and the founding of the new communist parties in the U.S., this repression significantly retarded the development of the working class movement.

During the 1930's, a large fascist movement flourished in the U.S. The National Recovery Act and its industrial codes constituted fascist measures and a high degree of fusion between the government and Wall Street. The American Liberty League, formed in 1936, and the candidacy of Alf Landon signaled the growing fascist movement. Widespread terror and anti-communist activity was unleashed by the Minute Men, Ku Klux Klan, White Guards, Silver Shirts, Brown Shirts and others, led by Father Coughlin and Huey Long. But the basis of this fascist tide was Wall Street and the Hearsts, DuPonts, Fords and others. Henry Ford, in fact, was an ardent fan of Adolph Hitler. During this entire period, fascism existed in semi-developed forms at home. The advent of a new imperialist world war (which the U.S. hoped would destroy the Soviet Union), the emerging revisionism within the Communist Party U.S.A. and other factors combined to relieve capital of the necessity of pursuing a fascist solution to the crisis of the Great Depression and its aftermath.

After World War II, from 1947 to 1954, repression escalated again as did the danger of fascism. Joe McCarthy spearheaded fascist reaction with the same array of right-wing, para-military organizations behind him. Repressive legislation including the Smith Act, Taft-Hartley, the McCarran Act and the Communist Control Act accelerated loyalty oaths, attacks on communists and the democratic forces and racist attacks on Blacks and other minorities. This occurred under both Truman and Eisenhower, irrespective of which political party held office. The period culminated in the merger of the AFL and CIO in 1955, which greatly weakened the rank-and-file workers' movement and sealed the domination of the skilled workers (labor aristocracy) over the trade union movement.

During the height of U.S. aggression in Indochina, in 1965-76, another period of repression and reaction set in, as the monopolies utilized the state to undermine and suppress the growing resistance movement. The activity of the FBI and CIA were stepped up, wiretaps organized and various operations launched to try and subvert democratic organizations. A wave of terror was unleashed against many Black organizations. Many were murdered, unjustly jailed and terrorized.

Today, we are witnessing a new period of massive repression building, evidenced by a steady erosion of democratic rights won over many years of struggle, the strengthening of the powers of the FBI, CIA and the National Security Administration, the escalation of police murders, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and other fascist organizations. Book burnings and anti-communist proclamations are again rampant.

In the U.S., the illusion of democracy has been a most powerful wea-

pon in the hands of the capitalist class to maintain its rule. It has been in the U.S. that the capitalist class has both fully developed the forms and promoted the illusion of democracy, while the real content of democracy — which must include popular control over the means of production and ownership of property — has never existed. It has been the democratic shell and the illusion of real democracy which has covered the brutal reality of capitalist oppression in the U.S., as well as providing the basis for the colossal accumulation of capital in the hands of a few.

Dollar democracy in America has served as a powerful weapon to undermine the consciousness and organization of the workers' movement. While the U.S. has the largest industrial working class of any country in the world, it has never developed a truly broad, independent workers' movement, capable of successfully fighting for genuine democracy for the majority.

Long ago, in *Democracy in America*, Alexis deTocqueville recognized the potential despotism of capitalist democracy when he wrote:

"I noticed during my stay in the United States that a democratic state of society similar to that found there could lay itself peculiarly open to establish despotism.... Having thus taken each citizen in turn in its powerful grip and shaped him to its will, government then extends its embrace to include the whole of society. It covers the whole of social life with a network of petty, complicated rules that are both minute and uniform, through which even men of the greatest originality and the most vigorous temperment cannot force their heads above the crowd. It does not break men's will, but softens, bends, and guides it; it seldom enjoins, but often inhibits action; it does not destroy anything, but prevents it from being born; it is not at all tyrannical, but it hinders, restrains, enervates, stifles, and stultifies so much that in the end each nation is no more than a flock of timid and hardworking animals with the government as its shepherd.

"I have always thought that this brand of orderly, gentle, peaceful slavery which I have just described could be combined, more easily than is generally supposed, with some of the external forms of freedom, and that there is a possibility of it getting itself established even under the shadow of the sovereignty of the people." (*Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville, Doubleday & Company, pp. 691-693)

In times of capitalist crisis, limited democracy gives way rapidly to repression. The extensive use of repression and violence in America has been an important factor in the difficulty the labor movement, national minorities and communists have had in building permanent, mass organizations.

The history of repression and violence in America vividly demonstrates that it flourishes irrespective of which political party — the Democrats or Republicans — has been in office. The rise of repression is a result of the objective pressures of the crisis faced by capitalism, not a result of who occupies the White House. For instance, there was a marked difference between the policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt before and after 1933, and of Dwight D. Eisenhower before and after 1954. In each case, both a Democrat and a Republican changed their orientation toward repression while in

office, in accord with the needs of the crisis, not in accord with any specific features of their party. Today, while it has been with Reagan that the fascist forces have concentrated their movement within the Republican Party, down the road the Democratic Party may prove to be a better vehicle for fascism. The illusion that any political party of capitalism is more democratic than another is a major stumbling block to the revolutionary consciousness of the working people and their organization into a political party of the working class.

But even during periods of severe repression, imperialism has not required a fascist state to maintain its rule. To understand why fascism poses a real danger today, it is necessary to understand why it has not been required in the past.

Considerable work remains to be done in order to fully understand why a fascist state has not emerged in the U.S. It can only be explained in terms of both the objective development of imperialism and the state of the consciousness and organization of the people fighting fascism.

During the 1930's, U.S. imperialism was not as deeply affected by the general crisis of capitalism as were many other countries, such as Germany. This can be explained in large measure by the fact that, occupying the center of the world imperialist system, the U.S. has had at its disposal the global reserves of imperialism to alleviate the crisis at home.

For decades the U.S. sought to maintain the status quo in the world, with itself at the pinnacle. It was not faced, as was Japan, Italy or Germany with the necessity to change the world balance of power in its favor.

The U.S. has never faced a truly revolutionary situation, in which the capitalist class is unable to rule in the old way and the working class is unwilling to be ruled in the old way. While there were periods of definite upsurge, or even a revolutionary mood which existed in the 1930's, a revolutionary situation did not arrive, and a fascist state was not required to prevent the victory of revolution, as occurred in several other countries. None of the crises gave rise to a large revolutionary movement of the majority, or capitalism's inability to rule in the old way through dollar democracy.

Vast capital accumulation has given the U.S., in the past, the ability to apply reforms and short-term economic remedies to many of the demands of the workers. Vast superprofits derived from the U.S. empire have been utilized to bribe a section of the skilled workers and win them to support the interests of capital. The economic and political reforms granted by capitalism, together with the massive ideological apparatus of the state which is aimed at sowing divisions and backward ideology among the workers, have all crippled the advance of the workers' movement.

The long tradition of democracy in America, even its illusion, have often produced vibrant anti-repression movements, and during the 1930's an anti-fascist movement which mobilized against the fascist menace.

And lastly, from the end of the 1930's until the present, a truly revolutionary, nation-wide political party capable of educating, organizing and mobilizing the workers against the illusion of capitalist democracy, for

genuine democracy and socialism, has not existed in the U.S. This is an important reason why a nation-wide, independent workers' movement has not emerged.