

SOCIALIST REVOLUTION

Impeach capitalism – the whole system is guilty!

John Peterson

October 11, 2019

“Treason!” “Sedition!” “Spies!” “Bullshit!” “Fraud!” and “Civil war!” Such was the response of the presidential “stable genius” to the ongoing drama unfolding on Capitol Hill concerning impeachment proceedings against him. Trump’s hubris appears to have caught up with him at last as a sprawling investigation spills messily into the headlines. The American president is a wretched reactionary—to put it mildly—and billions worldwide are understandably delighted to see him get some form of comeuppance. But what’s behind the smoke and mirrors? Whose interests are served by this charade?

Donald J. Trump is not your typical US president. A congenital liar driven by cruel pettiness and crippling narcissism, he would rather take the system down with him than “take one for the team.” This is what animates his supporters and inspires the scorn and unease of the majority of the ruling class. As world capitalism enters its most treacherous waters ever, the American bourgeois need a “safe pair of hands” at the helm—and Trump’s diminutive digits don’t quite fit the bill. Far from helping to stabilise the situation, “The Donald’s” election and presidency have exacerbated the crisis of the system.

Due to the many subversions of popular democracy hardwired into the electoral system—not to mention the deep-seated hatred millions feel for the Democrats—they were unable to prevent Trump’s election in 2016. Since then, they have cudged their brains in search of an angle to take down the latter-day Al Capone sitting in the White House.

Despite a daily abundance of impeachable offenses, seasoned cynics like Nancy Pelosi have been wary of further discrediting the superstructure of US capitalist rule. Anxious not to unleash the pent-up anger of the American masses against the system as a whole, the Democrats have proceeded gingerly and kept things within the innocuous channels of congressional hearings, special counsels, subpoenas, editorials, and press conferences.

Finally, after the dead end of the Mueller investigation, years of hesitation, and complicated electoral algebra, a whistleblower complaint over a phone call between Trump and the Ukrainian president has triggered the beginnings of the impeachment process. But even now, they are moving at a molasses pace. As of this writing, the House of Representatives, currently controlled by the Democrats, has not voted to formally authorise an impeachment inquiry.

Nevertheless, the roulette wheel has been spun, and no one knows when or where it will stop.

Impeachment and the “will of the people”

Trump is an expert at portraying himself as the victim and of manipulating his hardcore supporters’ healthy distrust of the American elite. Despite losing the popular vote—a deficit he explains away by accusing “illegal” immigrants of rigging millions of ballots—he now claims

that the “will of the people” is being subverted by a handful of “radical far-left Democrats” perpetrating a “coup” and mounting a “kangaroo court.”

However, just like the Electoral College, impeachment is baked into the US Constitution. Intended as a protection against the abuse of power and the menace of tyranny, impeachment is, in effect, the congressional indictment of a high official for “Treason, Bribery, or other high crimes and misdemeanors.”

Since impeachment constitutes an upending of the “usual” constitutional methods of election and accountability, it is typically seen as a measure of last resort. Furthermore, just because a president has been impeached doesn’t mean he or she will necessarily be found guilty. Although the threat of impeachment is frequently wielded like a whip by political opponents, only two US presidents have been formally impeached, and both were acquitted (Andrew Johnson in 1868 and Bill Clinton in 1998).

At the US federal level, the impeachment process begins with the lower house, the House of Representatives. But the actual “trial” of the president would take place in America’s “House of Lords”—the US Senate—currently dominated by the Republicans. A two-thirds majority of the Senate is required for conviction and removal from office.

This means that 34 Senators from the 17 smallest states representing less than 10 percent of the total US population could decide the question. So unless the tide turns dramatically against Trump in the next few weeks and months, a guilty verdict seems highly unlikely—though it cannot be categorically ruled out. After all, even Pat Robertson has warned that Trump could lose the “mandate of heaven.”

Analogous in some ways to a motion of no confidence, the constitutional provision for impeachment is purposefully vague. In the interest of greater clarity, Congress outlined more detailed guidelines at the time of the Watergate scandal in the 1970s. In its view, impeachable offenses include:

1. improperly exceeding or abusing the powers of the office;
2. behavior incompatible with the function and purpose of the office; and
3. misusing the office for an improper purpose or for personal gain.

However, it concluded that not all criminal conduct by a president is considered impeachable. For example, Nixon was let off the hook for alleged tax fraud because this was seen as “related to the President’s private conduct, not to an abuse of his authority as President.” So much for the sanctity of the “rule of law!”

The “deep state”

Under growing economic pressure, and unable to rule in the old way, the divisions at the societal summit are sharpening daily. These splits and disagreements extend deep into the state apparatus itself. Like a deer caught in headlights, the ruling class is petrified by the oncoming locomotive of class struggle. Political paralysis and deadlock are the inevitable result as they scramble for a way out.

True to form, Trump and his supporters have raised a hue and cry about the so-called “deep state,” which subverts the “will of the people” by not giving the president carte blanche to do as

he pleases. But the state apparatus as a whole is far greater than any individual—even when that individual is Donald Trump. What Trump is butting up against is not a secret, shadowy conspiracy but the machinery of bourgeois rule itself.

New presidents appoint thousands of their partisans to political positions. As a result, they have some say in moulding the bureaucratic superstructure to their interests. But most of these changes are superficial and cannot uproot decades of tradition and inertia.

There are hundreds of thousands of lifelong professionals and specialists in administration who serve from one president to another. They are the real backbone of government and provide essential experience and continuity. They take to heart the idea that their role is to look out for the best interests of the US state as a whole. Trump, however, believes that what is good for Trump is good for the country as a whole and that the state exists to serve him.

This is the source of the friction and push-back. From the EPA, to the IRS, to the FBI, Trump's dismantling of the norms of traditional bourgeois rule has been resisted by career functionaries in myriad ways. Now, Trump has run afoul of elements at the highest levels of the intelligence services. Quantity has passed into quality as a growing number of high- to mid-ranking officials can no longer turn a blind eye to the egregious abuses of authority that threaten the entire edifice of capitalist rule.

Gangster-in-Chief

Like any good gangster, Trump understands that greasing palms is often more effective than breaking kneecaps. US imperialism may no longer be in a position to invade any country it wants at will, but it still has powerful means of persuasion. This is especially true of crisis-ridden countries in desperate need of a helping hand—countries like Ukraine.

Teddy Roosevelt's approach to US foreign policy was to “speak softly and carry a big stick.” The implicit threat of American imperialism's overwhelming military power was usually enough to get foreign leaders to bend the knee. A visit from the US Navy and Marine Corps was in store for those who defied Washington or hesitated. Roosevelt and other presidents before and after him used these methods to further the interests of US capitalism as a whole. Trump, by contrast, doesn't speak softly and indiscreetly waves the big stick of US power—for his personal aggrandisement.

This doesn't sit well with the professional stewards of the ship of state. In their view, the threat of war should be used judiciously—and backed up—and the promise of millions in aid, loans, trade deals, and military hardware should be couched in the language of “democracy,” “friendship,” and “cooperation.”

Trump's cavalier attitude toward buying and bullying his friends and rivals has long grated those who prefer to veil the system's sins in the manoeuvres and hypocrisy of diplomacy. But this time, Trump crossed the line. In his now-infamous call with the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, he all but directly linked various US “favours”—including \$400 million in military hardware, training, and advisors—with a politically motivated request to investigate Joe Biden, one of his chief rivals in the 2020 elections.

The call was immediately understood as inappropriate and dangerous. This is evidenced by national security staff's decision to sequester it on a server usually reserved for top-secret

communications and documents. It has since been revealed that this was not the first of Trump's calls to receive such delicate treatment. If the whistleblower hadn't persisted in coming forward through various channels, no one would have been the wiser.

The Whistleblower Protection Act, passed by Congress in 1989, is intended to protect the First Amendment rights of government workers and contractors who reasonably believe there to be "evidence of a violation of any law, rule, or regulation, or gross mismanagement, a gross waste of funds, an abuse of authority, or a substantial and specific danger to public health or safety."

According to the law, whistleblowers' identities and confidentiality are to be protected to encourage people to come forward. However, the purview of the law was to allow for oversight of mid or even high-level government officials—no one expected it to be used in a case involving the president himself.

The Department of Justice, deeply politicised in Trump's favour, was the first to receive the whistleblower complaint. Unsurprisingly, it found that there was nothing criminal to be investigated and, therefore, it should not be referred to Congress. But the complaint was also brought to the Inspector General of the intelligence services. Influential Democrats caught wind of the matter and pursued it.

Since the revelations were first reported by the *New York Times* at least one other whistleblower has come forward. Trump and his backers have worked overtime to discover their identities and to discredit their characters and credentials in advance. More than that, the sitting president bluntly implied in a private meeting that physical harm would be an appropriate way of dealing with them: "You know what we used to do in the old days when we were smart with spies and treason, right?"

Two parties—no choice for the workers

Scapegoating, deflection, and misinformation are the president's stock in trade. After first denying any quid pro quo with Ukraine, he doubled down and declared publicly that he was also considering asking China to investigate Joe Biden and his son. The murkier the waters, the more he hopes to confuse the public—and the investigators. But even influential right-wing outlets like *The Drudge Report*, as well as Tucker Carlson, the darling of the Trumpite right, have found it hard to justify the president's actions.

In a recent op-ed co-authored with Neil Patel, Carlson wrote:

Donald Trump should not have been on the phone with a foreign head of state encouraging another country to investigate his political opponent, Joe Biden. Some Republicans are trying, but there's no way to spin this as a good idea. Like a lot of things Trump does, it was pretty over-the-top. Our leaders' official actions should not be about politics. Those two things need to remain separate. Once those in control of our government use it to advance their political goals, we become just another of the world's many corrupt countries. America is better than that.

With an eye on a possible political run in the future, Carlson clearly wants to position himself as the voice of the "rational right." But at root, his criticism indicates a shift in the defence's strategy. While allowing that Trump's behaviour was "inappropriate," he also asserts that "it's hard to argue" that Trump's actions rise "to the level of an impeachable offense." In other words,

Trump did it, it was a bit outrageous—but it wasn't criminal—and the freedom-hating Democrats are making a mountain out of a molehill.

In the tedious binary of American politics, workers and youth are given only two options: support the socially liberal billionaires, or support the socially conservative billionaires. Liberals lament the oppression that accompanies capitalist exploitation, while conservatives openly embrace it. Liberals understand that at least a shred of a safety net is needed to stave off socialist revolution—paid for by taxes on the workers—while conservatives shame the poor and cynically laud the “free market”, while collecting billions in corporate handouts and tax breaks.

But both parties are for austerity, exploitation, and the capitalist market. Neither represents the interests of the working class and will do everything in their power to defend and perpetuate the economic status quo.

The liberals' case for impeachment is that Trump allegedly violated the “national interest” and his sacred oath of office. But let's be clear: both parties defend the “national interest”—i.e., the right of the US capitalists to exploit the world working class. They both uphold the patchwork piece of paper that enshrines the property rights of the ruling class known as the US Constitution.

The Democrats bemoan the “foreign meddling” that allegedly handed Trump the win in 2016—but they accept the Electoral College, the disproportional composition of the Senate, the disenfranchisement of millions, etc. And while barking up the “Russian collusion” tree in an attempt to take down Trump, they sidestep the fact that they have openly and covertly interfered in the politics and economy of virtually every country on earth for decades. As just one recent example, Hillary Clinton oversaw plenty of wars, coups, embargoes, and covert assassinations in her role as Secretary of State under Obama.

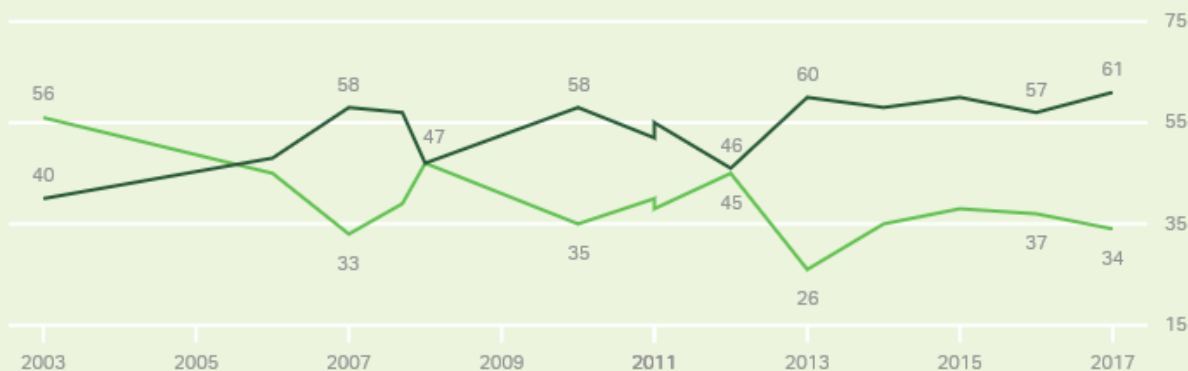
If the Democratic Party were a genuine opposition party, they would have walked out of Congress the day Trump was elected, mobilised millions of people on the streets, and called on the unions to organise an all-out general strike. Instead, they urged everyone to be calm and trust the system, to set their sights on 2020, and to have faith in the lawyers, courts, and lobbyists.

Until a viable mass political alternative is established, US politics will be framed in the same monotonous monochrome. But beneath the surface, tremendous discontent is simmering. Strikes are on the rise, attitudes towards inequality and socialism are shifting rapidly, and the potential for a new mass socialist party is greater than ever.

Few Think Republican and Democratic Parties Are Sufficient

In your view, do the Republican and Democratic parties do an adequate job of representing the American people, or do they do such a poor job that a third major party is needed?

■ % Do adequate job ■ % Third party needed



GALLUP

A recent poll by NBC/WSJ found that only one in 10 adults agree that the two-party system works “fairly well.” 38 percent of respondents think the two-party system is “seriously broken” and that the country needs a major third party—the highest number who have said so since they started tracking the question in 1995. Separately, Gallup polls have consistently found that more than six in 10 favour a third party.

A poll by the Cato Institute found that among Americans 18–29, 70 percent believe US wealth distribution is “unfair,” while 62 percent of those aged 30–44 also agree with this sentiment. An astonishing 17 percent of all Americans believe that “citizens taking violent action against the rich” is “sometimes justified.” And among those who have a “very favourable” attitude toward socialism, nearly half—47 percent—say violent action against the rich is sometimes justified.

Which way forward?

A perfect storm of “sharp and sudden changes” is converging as we barrel towards the 2020 elections. The slowdown in manufacturing is spreading to the rest of the economy. Interest rates are plummeting, and the stock markets are in turmoil. The trade war with China is expanding to Europe. Top Republicans are in rebellion against Trump’s policy change in Syria. The idea that the country is on the verge of a “constitutional crisis” is near constant. Trump has just been accused of another 26 incidents of “unwanted sexual contact” and 43 instances of inappropriate behaviour. Bernie Sanders just had a heart attack. And in an inspiring indication of where things are headed, the youth are on the move to ensure humanity survives climate change. This is the social and political lava the US capitalists are standing on even before the next economic crisis.

Top Democrats have evidently calculated that the threat posed by Trump in delegitimising the system as a whole outweighs the risk that impeachment will do precisely the same thing. It is a dangerous gamble. Trump is refusing to cooperate with the “illegitimate” process and has more tricks than a monkey in a box. Things can and will get much messier than they already are.

If he is formally tried by the Senate and found not guilty, he will gleefully proclaim his innocence and vindication, mercilessly skewering the Democrats for wasting taxpayer money and time—and he would not be wrong.

And what happens if Trump is successfully removed as president—or if he decides to drop a boulder into the Washingtonian swamp and preemptively resigns? Would President Mike Pence be a better option for the working class? Or Nancy Pelosi, or Charles Grassley, who come next in the presidential line of succession?

Most Americans are raised to view the world in terms of “black or white,” “on or off,” “for or against.” Marxists, on the other hand, have a dynamic, dialectical understanding of reality—which is contradictory and cannot always be so neatly classified. To maintain a correct orientation, we take a class position at all times. We support that which serves to increase working-class consciousness, self-confidence, and unity, and oppose that which cuts across this. We are not duty-bound to support “either” one capitalist party “or” another.

In the absence of a mass, revolutionary working-class solution, the extreme polarisation of US society will continue. The ruling class benefits when we are polarised along gender, racial, religious, and other lines such as “Democrat” versus “Republican.” They may appeal for “unity” in the abstract, but ultimately, they encourage anything that sets workers against one another instead of against the capitalists and their system. This kind of “divide-and-rule” polarisation suits them just fine.

What terrifies them is class polarisation—since the vast majority of society can be found at one of those poles. The way to cut across divisions and to unite the working class is to fight for issues that can collectively improve the lives of all workers. To achieve this, we must break out of the false dichotomy of bourgeois politics and fight for a party of our own. To paraphrase Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the British Labour Party, we need a party, not of the 48 percent or 52 percent, but the 99 percent.

Channeling the fight against Trump into the courts serves only to blunt the struggle of the working class—the only force that can stop humanity’s slide into the abyss of barbarism / Image: Flickr, Ted Eytan

The impeachment process will undoubtedly add more stress and strain to the pillars of the system. But the fundamental interests of the working class are not advanced by the farce playing out in Washington, and we can have no illusions in it. Impeachment is a “bread and circuses” distraction from the real problems affecting the majority. Channeling the fight against Trump and everything he represents into the courts and congressional hearings serves only to blunt the struggle of the working class—the only force that can stop humanity’s slide into the abyss of climate chaos and barbarism.

The institutions of bourgeois justice are structurally incapable of bringing about anything approximating justice for the world’s workers and poor. Impeachment may eventually hold Trump accountable for violating a handful of bourgeois norms. But it will not hold him accountable for the opioid, mental health, and suicide epidemics. It will do nothing for the tens of thousands who die each year due to lack of healthcare, for the homeless, hungry, or the children held in cages in deportation camps. It will not atone for the starving and bombing of

people around the world, for enabling the House of Saud's war on Yemen or Erdogan's war against the Kurds.

Trump's true crimes are against the working class, the human species as a whole, and the very habitability of the planet. He may well be tried and perhaps even punished—but who will be his judges and executioners? Capitalism is predicated on the abuse of power. Both major parties and the system as a whole are guilty of high crimes and misdemeanors. It is up to the workers of the world to carry out its sentence on this antiquated and disastrous system. We have nothing to lose but our chains, and a world to win—but we don't have unlimited time.