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The right-wing politics of Libertarian presidential candidate Gary Johnson

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One of the manifestations of the deep unpopularity of the two main candidates in the 2016 presidential elections is the unprecedented support recorded in public opinion polls for third-party candidates. The candidates for the two media-recognized third-parties, Gary Johnson for the Libertarians and Jill Stein for the Greens, have received the combined support of more than 10 percent of respondents in many recent polls, nearly five times their combined showing in any previous U. S. election.

The bulk of this growing support for third-party candidates has come at the expense of Hillary Clinton, who is widely viewed as the personification of the corrupt status quo. This trend has been particularly pronounced among young people, setting off alarm bells within the Democratic Party, which has deployed the self-proclaimed “socialist” Bernie Sanders, the overwhelming favorite among young people during the Democratic primaries, to college campuses, in order to browbeat youth into voting for Clinton, claiming that support for third parties is tantamount to a vote for Trump.

Clinton's widespread unpopularity, which has only deepened since the end of the Democratic National Convention, has not resulted in a significant rise in support for Trump, but instead a growth in support for Johnson, and to a lesser extent, Stein. Although Trump has attempted to capitalize on widespread economic distress in order to lay the foundations for a fascistic movement which would continue after the November elections, workers and young people in the United States as a whole are moving not to the right, but to the left.

It appears paradoxical that the main beneficiary of the opposition to both Trump and Clinton has been the Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson. For decades, the Libertarians have positioned themselves as the more fundamentalist free-market alternative to the Republicans, calling for the outright abolition of social programs such as Medicare and Social Security and opposing any restraint on profit-making ventures of American corporations. Support for the Libertarians in previous elections has typically come almost exclusively at the expense of Republican candidates.

In their most recent platform, the Libertarians write: “we oppose all interference by government in the areas of voluntary and contractual relations among individuals. People should not be forced to sacrifice their lives and property for the benefit of others. They should be left free by government to deal with one another as free traders; and the resultant economic system, the only one compatible with the protection of individual rights, is the free market.”

The Libertarians' economic program voices the economic grievances of some of the more economically insecure layers of the American middle class through their criticisms of the domination of the major banks and corporations. Based on conceptions which originate in the right-wing and anticommunist Austrian School of bourgeois economics, the Libertarians attack monopolistic practices of Wall Street as "crony capitalism," a "distortion" of the capitalist market introduced from without primarily through government intervention, and call for a return to "real" capitalism and free competition. This schema inverts the real relationship between the financial oligarchy and the state.

While a section of Johnson's support comes from disaffected Republicans opposed to Trump's candidacy—he's been endorsed by a half dozen newspapers, all previously aligned with the Republican Party—his support among young people, who voted overwhelmingly for Bernie Sanders in the primaries, has been even more substantial. A Quinnipiac poll in August found that Johnson was polling second among voters aged 18 to 29, trailing Clinton by only two points, 31 percent to 29 percent, with Trump polling 26 percent and Stein 15 percent.

In the highly restricted American political system, carefully controlled in order to prevent any possibility for the independent political expression of the interests of the working class, popular sentiment can only find a highly distorted and refracted means of expression. The increase in support for Johnson is not an indication that ultra-right free market politics have suddenly become popular, but is, in effect, a vote of no confidence in both of the two main candidates.

To a large extent, the Libertarian has become the beneficiary of the "none-of-the-above" vote simply because he is simply the most visible third-party candidate. Johnson, who served two terms as Governor of New Mexico as a Republican before switching his party affiliation to the Libertarians, has enjoyed the most favorable treatment by the bourgeois media, who treat him, by virtue of his previous political career, to be the most serious third-party candidate (his running mate, Bill Weld, also served as a Republican Governor of Massachusetts from 1991 to 1997). Johnson is a regular guest on television news programs, and CNN has aired two primetime Libertarian "town hall" programs.

In a break with past Libertarian campaigns, Johnson has consciously attempted to position himself between the two main candidates as the more "moderate" alternative to Clinton and Trump, a contrast from 2012, when he campaigned as a more consistently right-wing alternative to Mitt Romney. "Johnson speaks a different libertarian dialect, one that has appealed as much to Democrats disappointed by Hillary Clinton as to Republicans disgusted by Trump," *Politico* wrote earlier this month, summing up the candidate's tactical shift.

Johnson has also been able to cultivate a base of support among young people on the basis of his declared opposition to foreign interventions and government spying. He has declared, for example, that a Libertarian administration would pardon Edward Snowden.

In particular, Johnson has publicly criticized the war in Syria, to the consternation of the American media, which has been conducting an increasingly hysterical campaign for escalating the war. In a recent interview with the *New York Times*, Johnson declared that Clinton, as the Secretary of State in the initial phases of the war, "bears responsibility for what's happened" in Syria. When pushed on whether he saw a "moral equivalence" between deaths caused by the US and by the Syrian government, Johnson replied sarcastically, "Well no, of course not—we're so

much better than all that. We're so much better when in Afghanistan, we bomb the hospital and 60 people are killed in the hospital.”

The Clinton campaign has responded to Johnson by arguing, in a fashion similar to her attacks from the right on Donald Trump, that the Libertarian candidate is unqualified to serve as commander in chief. Her campaign seized upon an interview last month on MSNBC when Johnson failed to recognize the name of Aleppo, Syria's largest city and a key stronghold of US-backed “rebels” on the verge of being re-taken by Syrian government forces.

The Libertarians posture as opponents of war and government spying, even as they engage in an adamant defense of the capitalist system, the cause of both. In the sphere of domestic politics they are proponents of social policies that go even further than the Republicans, aimed at the rapid and wholesale dismantling of what little remains of social welfare programs, which could only be enacted, in the face of massive popular opposition, through mass repression. In other words, the Libertarians claim to oppose war abroad while backing class war at home.

Johnson's electoral posturing is belied by his reactionary record as Republican Governor of New Mexico from 1995 to 2003. Before running for office, he had amassed a fortune as the founder of one of the largest construction companies in the state, and as governor he quickly earned a reputation as one of the most ardent proponents of tax and budget cuts in the country. Johnson vetoed more than 700 spending bills by the end of his second term in office.

“In his first year in office he proposed \$85 million in tax cuts, including a \$47 million personal income tax cut ... he has also reduced the number of state employees by nearly 10 percent,” the right-wing Cato Institute enthused in 1998. New Mexico has long been one of the most impoverished states in the country, with the highest rates of poverty among children.

Johnson ended collective bargaining for state employees when he vetoed several efforts by the state legislature to extend a law guaranteeing it in 1999. He was also an early advocate for private school voucher programs, which has long been a key means of undermining public education in favor of the charter school industry.

In spite of his pretensions of opposition to arbitrary police powers, Johnson oversaw the first and only execution in the state since 1960 (the death penalty has since been abolished in New Mexico). He also spent tens of millions of dollars on funding for new private prisons. Today four out of the state's ten prison facilities are privately operated.

The ability of the Libertarians to capture a measure of support is due above all to the bankruptcy of what passes for the “left” in American politics. The American pseudo-left has long since abandoned any pretense of opposition to war and moved into the camp of American imperialism. Groups such as the International Socialist Organization and Socialist Alternative are now among the most full-throated supporters of American intervention in Syria.

As far as democratic rights are concerned, over the summer the pseudo-left participated in a campaign around the Stanford sexual assault case, orchestrated by layers close to Clinton and the Democratic Party establishment, whose main demand was tougher sentencing laws in sexual assault cases, a demand long associated with the Republican right. At the same time, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is smeared in these circles as a “rapist” and his supporters denounced as “rape apologists.”

The American pseudo-left articulates the interests of a layer of the upper-middle-class which has grown wealthy over the past 20 years thanks to booming stock markets, and which is no less hostile to the interests of the working class than the Libertarians themselves. They operate in a political orbit around the Democratic Party and the trade union apparatus, and aspire to a place of influence in capitalist politics, like their co-thinkers in Syriza, now the ruling party in Greece, and Podemos, the third-largest party in the Spanish parliament.

In the 2016 campaign, this has meant supporting Jill Stein rhetorically, while in practice aligning with the pro-Clinton, pro-Democratic Party efforts of Bernie Sanders and the AFL-CIO and Change to Win union groupings. Stein and the Greens have failed to win substantial numbers of former Sanders supporters, who were motivated above all by the questions of poverty and social inequality, because the pseudo-left want to avoid any challenge to the Democratic Party which might lead to charges, like those leveled against Ralph Nader in 2000, that they were working as “spoilers” who might contribute to a Republican victory in the election.

The Libertarian Party is no alternative to the Democrats and Republicans, espousing merely another variant of the pro-capitalist, anti-socialist and imperialist politics of the two main capitalist parties. The Green Party is likewise no alternative, sharing the same capitalist perspective and deliberately avoiding any genuine campaign against the pro-war policies of Clinton and the Democrats.

The substantial opposition which exists to war and dictatorship must find a genuine expression. Jerry White and Niles Niemuth, the Socialist Equality Party’s candidates in the presidential election, are running to build a new, socialist anti-war movement. The SEP insists that the fight against war is impossible without the fight for socialism, that is, the abolition of the capitalist system, which is the root cause of war, and the running of society in the interests of human need, not private profit.