

U.S. holds elections in conditions it would condemn in other countries

written by Collective Editorial Board

November 2, 2020



Sheriff's deputies attack a Black-led voter march outside the courthouse in Graham, N.C., on Oct. 31.

The following interview with Struggle-La Lucha's Greg Butterfield was conducted in October by members of the Collective Editorial Board, a network of communist news sites in Russia and Donbass, and published in Russian and English by the Workers' University in Moscow.

Collective Editorial Board: Is the institution of elections still working in the "stronghold of democracy," or it is just a big show?

Greg Butterfield: I would characterize it as a big, expensive show, put on for the people of the world and especially for the workers and common people of the United States, to create the façade of democracy and deflate the class struggle. What exists in the United States is essentially a one-party capitalist dictatorship with two competing factions. Julius Nyerere, the Tanzanian anti-colonial leader, said it best: "The United States is also a one-party state but, with typical American extravagance, they have two of them."

For several decades, the Republican and Democratic parties have drawn closer together, intensifying economic exploitation, austerity and war to defend their declining empire. Both parties have moved steadily to the right.

This year is interesting because this big, expensive election show is not being performed as planned. In particular, the Trump administration and the Republican Party are not playing by the accepted rules of capitalist democracy in the U.S. that in the past have allowed this performance to be staged successfully and peacefully. This is a symptom of the enormous economic and political crisis that has engulfed the capitalist system in tandem with the global pandemic.

Trump is inciting the fascist, white supremacist movement in the U.S., which is his strongest base of support, to threaten and terrorize his opponents, especially Black people and other national minorities. In many places, state and local officials, the police and other arms of the capitalist state, who have close ties to and often overlap

with the fascist gangs, are being pulled into these voter suppression efforts. Since late September, Trump supporters have been disrupting mail-in voting and early voting with intimidation tactics. There is a real fear that the armed gangs may come out to the polls on election day in some states, the same way they have come out to threaten the protests against police killings.

If any country targeted by Washington as “undesirable” held an election under such conditions, U.S. officials and the Western media would unleash a torrent of calls for regime change, sanctions or military intervention.

The Democrats are not exempt from blame, of course. Again this year, as in 2016, the Democrats did everything in their power to sabotage the Bernie Sanders campaign and his youthful supporters, who had actually succeeded in making socialism a topic of popular conversation in the U.S. for the first time in generations. Not the kind of socialism we communists mean, but still, it was a significant opening for raising working-class consciousness.

Now everyone is supposed to back right-wing, racist Joe Biden as the only viable alternative to right-wing, racist Donald Trump. Sanders has capitulated to the Democrats again, but many of those who campaigned for him have rejected this bad choice.

CEB: Do ordinary Americans believe in the effectiveness of the elections, and how actively do they participate in them? After all, the election system itself is indirect, while the choice is fixed on just two parties?

GB: Participation in the elections by working-class and poor people has always been pretty low in the U.S. compared with other countries. In the last four presidential elections it has averaged around 55 percent of eligible voters. That’s because the capitalist rulers have never allowed a real multiparty democracy to develop in the U.S. as it exists in most other Western countries. There is no mass social-democratic

party here, much less a communist one. The working class is not allowed to have even a reformist electoral party that it can identify as its own, that raises its interests and demands. The workers are always supposed to settle for the “lesser evil.” This creates a lot of apathy and disinterest in elections, and in political life generally.

Every effort to develop a progressive third party has been smashed by a combination of factors. First, the complicated, expensive process of getting on the ballot in all 50 states, which each have their own rules, often completely arbitrary and ridiculous. Second, if a party does get on the ballot, the Democrats and Republicans will mount legal challenges to get them kicked off if they feel this alternative may draw a lot of votes. And finally, after they are frustrated by these challenges, the Democratic machine is very skilled at co-opting progressive movements or politicians into its own ranks.

This system has existed more or less intact since 1876, when the “great compromise” between the Democrats and Republicans ended the era of revolutionary Reconstruction after the U.S. Civil War and repressed the struggle for Black freedom and equality. It has worked very well for the bosses.

When it comes to choosing the president, as you said, there are no direct elections. Many people around the world and even here don’t realize this. The president is chosen by the Electoral College, which was set up by the founders of the U.S. to protect the interests of the Southern slave owners. Although slavery was eventually abolished, the Electoral College was not. It continues to exist as a safety valve for the capitalist class, to make sure they have the final say.

On election day, although people think they are casting their vote for a presidential candidate, they are actually voting for delegates to the Electoral College. The Electoral College is weighted in favor of states that are smaller, whiter and more right-wing. Essentially, it is a way to disenfranchise the working class, especially

national minorities, who are concentrated in states with large populations. In just the last 20 years, two out of five presidential elections have been won by candidates who lost the popular vote: George W. Bush in 2000 and Donald Trump in 2016.

But in the past decade there has been a genuine change in the number of people who reject this game. This sentiment fueled the Bernie Sanders campaigns in 2016 and 2020, with many supporters demanding that Sanders break from the Democrats and run independently, or even form a new progressive party. And considering the high level of pressure in society to vote for “anybody but Trump” (that is, for Joe Biden), it’s significant that many people are sticking to their guns and rejecting the false choice.

CEB: Who nominates the candidates, whose representatives are they, and are there any among them whom communists need to support?

GB: Each state has its own system for selecting delegates to the national conventions of the two big capitalist parties. In theory, whichever candidate has the most delegates at the convention will become the party’s nominee. But in practice, the decision is always made from the top down by the leaders of the party and their funders. The state primary elections and delegates’ votes at the party conventions are manipulated in many ways, out of sight of the voters. You don’t get nominated as the national candidate of the Democrats or Republicans without proving your loyalty to the capitalist class and without the support of a significant section of the capitalists. And you certainly can’t compete seriously in a presidential election that costs millions or even billions of dollars without their support.

It is sometimes possible for progressive or even revolutionary candidates to compete at the local and state level, though they face great challenges and red-baiting. In New York, we have a former Black Panther and revolutionary activist, Charles Barron, who is a member of the New York State Assembly. The voters in his district in Brooklyn’s Black community are very loyal to him. He is an example of someone

who treats the electoral arena in the way Lenin prescribed, acting as a “tribune of the people” without misleading them into thinking that voting will solve all their problems. But he has to struggle to be heard and is often subject to racist hazing by the corporate media.

In the presidential race, there are two progressive alternatives on the ballot in some states: the Party for Socialism and Liberation and the Green Party. Some communists and socialists outside their own members will vote for these candidates as a protest vote. We hope that in the future it will be possible to build a united front to mount a larger-scale leftist electoral campaign.

CEB: How did the spring-summer protests affect the election race? Did they affect the rhetoric and programs of the candidates?

GB: The mass uprising and protests against racist police terror have had an enormous effect on the presidential race and other electoral campaigns. For the first time, the candidates of both capitalist parties have had to face questions about police brutality, community control, systemic racism and their position on white supremacist groups at official debates. This certainly would not have happened without the powerful protests across the country that united millions of Black, Brown and white workers and youth against police abuses.

It's ironic that Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and vice presidential candidate Kamala Harris are forced to pose as the candidates sympathetic to the Black Lives Matter movement. Both of these conservative career politicians helped to create and enforce the policies that led to the militarization of the police and mass incarceration of Black people. They can only get away with this masquerade because of the fear caused by Trump's open appeals to violent white supremacy and for more state repression. But many people, especially those who participated in the mass uprising this summer, are not fooled by them. I think that's true even of many people who will “hold their nose” and vote for the Democrats out of fear of Trump.

Our message to the working class is that, while Trump is a dangerous enemy, Biden and Harris have no solutions to the crisis of police terrorism in Black and Brown communities. The only way to end police terror is for the people to stay in the streets, to continue organizing and building the movement in our workplaces, schools and communities, and to create our own bodies of self-defense in the spirit of the Black Panther Party.

CEB: Will this year's elections be held peacefully, or is mass turbulence possible?

GB: We are preparing for the possibility of violence at the polls and afterward by fascist groups and the state, and for mass protests if Trump tries to stay in office even if he loses the vote.

Trump has said many times that he may reject the election results if he doesn't like the outcome. Trump has cast doubt on the legitimacy of voting by mail despite the pandemic and has attempted to manipulate the inner workings of the postal service to delay mail votes in key states. The Republicans are filing lawsuits in many states to try to throw out mail ballots. The U.S. Supreme Court is dominated by a far-right majority that could have the final say in these cases.

There is no doubt that the masses of the people, and the working class in particular, want Trump out. They are fed up with his appeals to racism and repression of people protesting for racial justice. They are exhausted by his refusal to take serious measures to stem the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed more people in the U.S. than anywhere else. And they are hurting from his refusing to make the rich pay taxes while millions are left unemployed and destitute by the economic crisis. Not to mention his threats to overturn women's reproductive rights and so many other gains won by the workers' struggles.

There's tremendous tension in U.S. society today. Everyone is on edge waiting to see what will happen. The media have cautioned that there may be a delay in

determining the election results, because of the large number of mail-in ballots and the legal challenges against them. If that's the case, the pot may boil over.

With the great example of the Black-led uprising against police killings earlier this year, there is certainly the possibility of mass protests if the people feel that the election has been stolen from them. At the same time, the fascist gangs loyal to Trump may lash out with violence even if Trump is clearly beaten.

Our position is that the working class and its vanguard can't stand aside in this situation. We don't support the Democrats or call on workers to vote for them, as some on the left have done. But communists have a responsibility to defend the democratic rights of the working class, especially the most oppressed members of our class, the Black people and other national minorities, whose right to vote has so often been denied. Nor can we deny the urgent danger of Trump's appeals to turn violent fascist gangs and police agencies against the people.

We are uniting with other revolutionary and progressive groups around a call to [“Occupy the streets if the November election is stolen.”](#) This coalition and many other groups are already planning for protests starting on the day after the elections, Nov. 4.

If it turns out that Trump is clearly defeated and he concedes, we will call people out to protest for the workers' demands on Biden, since we know the Democrats have no solution to the capitalist crisis and no intention of easing the repression either.

Whoever ultimately sits in the White House next year, we are convinced that the class struggle can, must and will continue to grow.

CEB: Is there any difference at all between the candidates on war and peace, and how will the victory of one or the other affect the future of the United States and Washington's foreign policy?

GB: When it comes to international policy, there is less difference between the candidates than anywhere else. Trump and Biden both represent imperialism, sanctions and war. Both are champions of U.S. domination over other countries, with only slight differences of emphasis and tactics.

Biden represents a continuation of the Clinton-Obama era, with its special emphasis on NATO expansion and subversion aimed at the Russian Federation and other post-Soviet countries. We certainly haven't forgotten the role Biden played as Washington's enforcer in Ukraine after the Maidan coup, or how he encouraged privatization and austerity and the use of militarized fascist gangs against the people of Donbass.

Trump's support in the ruling class comes especially from the oil and gas oligarchs, which accounts for his special focus on demonizing Iran, stealing Syrian oil and attempting multiple coups against Venezuela.

Both candidates agree on maintaining a war-like posture against Cuba, Venezuela, China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Both are sworn enemies of the Palestinian people. Most of Biden's foreign policy comments have aimed at outdoing Trump at anti-communism and belligerence.

CEB: How popular are communist ideas in the United States today? Which groups are more sympathetic to these ideas (Indigenous, Blacks, Latinx, Asians, etc.)?

GB: Interest in socialism as an alternative to capitalist exploitation has grown tremendously in the U.S. I would date the beginning of this change to the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011. At that time, many young people got their first taste of mass protest and a class perspective. Some of the most energetic organizers today got their start in the Occupy movement. The Black Lives Matter struggle, which first took off in 2014 and reemerged this year, and the Bernie Sanders campaigns in 2016 and 2020, deep-end that consciousness among a new generation.

Communist ideas have always had the most sympathetic hearing from the most oppressed sectors of the working class, including Black, Latinx, Asian, Arab, Indigenous and poor white workers, as well as women and the LGBTQ2S people. But today there is a small but measurable layer of young people from among these workers who are more fully embracing communism.

Right now there is not much ideological or organizational cohesion among them. Much of the pro-communist sentiment is confined to social media debates. But unlike the 1990s and early 2000s, there is now a sea for communists to swim in. Our challenge in the next period is to consolidate the growing pro-communist and pro-socialist sentiment and give it organizational form. And depending on what happens in the coming weeks and months, this work may have to be carried out under semilegal or in some cases even underground conditions.

CEB: Protests in the United States have become a regular occasion. Do they influence citizens' awareness of the idea that it is impossible to change the situation in the approved "democratic" way? While the path of "militant struggle" of the organized masses seems to be much more effective.

GB: People who joined in the militant uprising against police killings this year saw how their actions in the streets sowed fear in the hearts of their enemies and forced the state to make concessions, although many of those are already being stolen back. Last summer, a poll showed that the burning of the Minneapolis police station had more support than either of the presidential candidates!

The whole reason for the big election "show" is to push people back toward the idea that they can get what they want by following the rules of the rigged system. But so many people are now aware that it is totally bankrupt. Trump, with his maniacal and egotistical behavior and indifference to people's suffering, has torn the mask off capitalism. The bosses don't want to grant concessions to the people; they only want to take more and more from them to protect their profits.

Communists in the U.S. have difficult days ahead of us. But if we can persevere, and start finding ways to unite ourselves and our class against our common foe, there are great opportunities ahead as well.

[Russian version](#)

Source: [Workers' University](#)

