

Clinton crisis exposes threat to democratic rights

By the Editorial Board
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At week's end the conflict between the Clinton White House and Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr intensified, as Starr escalated his offensive with new leaks of grand jury testimony, and Clinton officials threatened to retaliate with legal action against the independent counsel's office.

This increasingly acrimonious and public clash is the external expression of a bitter struggle within the highest levels of the corporate and political elite. Such a battle, reaching the point of a judicial putsch against the president, must reflect immense differences over what policies are to be pursued by the government, both at home and abroad.

For working people, it is not a matter of choosing sides between Clinton and Starr. Both defend the profit system and support whatever attacks on the living standards and democratic rights of workers are deemed necessary to further the interests of the corporate elite.

Nevertheless, the ongoing attempt to undermine Clinton can only mean that a powerful segment of big business believes he has moved too slowly in attacking social welfare programs and democratic rights, and is insufficiently aggressive in using US military might overseas. By means of the independent counsel, and with the assistance of the corporate-controlled media, this element is determined to either shift Clinton's policies far more drastically to the right, or remove him from office altogether.

The methods that are being employed in this operation must be taken as a serious warning of the degree to which basic democratic rights have already been eroded in America.

One need only pose the question: if methods that resemble those of a police state are being used by the independent counsel against the president—threatening witnesses with prison to compel false testimony, using

the power of subpoena to harass and terrify, entrapping and then illegally recording targeted individuals, illegally leaking sealed testimony to the press—then what methods are being used against the political opponents of the capitalist two-party system? Who, indeed, is safe from such abuses, and what does the future hold for working people who increasingly find themselves in a struggle against big business and the government to defend their living standards and basic rights?

Over the past several days Starr has expanded his dragnet, ordering Paula Jones's lawyers to turn over to his office all documents concerning women questioned in connection with the civil suit against Clinton. On the basis of a rumor that Monica Lewinsky was with Clinton last March at the Florida home of golf pro Greg Norman, Starr issued a subpoena to a West Palm Beach TV station for all related video footage.

On Wednesday and Thursday his office leaked sensational and incriminating reports of secret grand jury testimony from White House employees. The media, which has acted throughout as the sounding board for gossip and innuendo, the more salacious the better, broadcast the stories, which were immediately denounced as baseless by lawyers for the White House staff members.

The *Wall Street Journal's* web site on Thursday reported that a White House steward told the grand jury he had seen Clinton and Lewinsky alone in the White House under compromising conditions. The *Journal* subsequently changed the story, claiming the steward had made such comments to Secret Service personnel, rather than the grand jury.

The *New York Times* led its Friday edition with a report that Clinton's personal secretary told the grand jury she saw Clinton and Lewinsky alone in the White

House, but Clinton had coached her to testify to the contrary. The newspaper's source for this revelation was "lawyers familiar with [the secretary's] account" to the grand jury.

Having based its lead on unsubstantiated and illicit leaks provided by Starr's office, the *Times* then cited its own story in an editorial praising Starr and denouncing Clinton for refusing to give a full and public account of his relationship with Lewinsky. The editorial brushed aside as a diversion White House complaints that Starr has systematically leaked reports of sealed testimony to the press.

Leaking grand jury testimony is a federal crime, and, from a legal standpoint, of a far more serious character than giving false testimony in a deposition in a civil case, such as the Paula Jones suit. Witnesses called to testify before a grand jury do not have the benefit of legal counsel while they are being questioned. The promise that their statements will not be made public is the main protection they have against retaliation for their testimony.

But Starr's sprawling, three and a half year inquiry has been characterized throughout by a contemptuous attitude toward democratic rights. According to Monica Lewinsky's lawyer, Starr is demanding that his client agree to give false testimony that Clinton urged her to lie in the Paula Jones case. If she refuses, she will be prosecuted.

This is in keeping with Starr's basic modus operandi, which is that of a classical witch-hunt. First, those conducting the witch-hunt target an individual. Next they label some aspect of the individual's behavior as suspicious. Then they set out to gather evidence that this supposedly suspicious behavior involves illegal activities. They pressure others, under pain of indictment, to supply incriminating testimony against the targeted victim. Friends, family members, business associates—none are beyond the reach of the investigators.

In Little Rock and elsewhere Starr has used this procedure to threaten and harass scores of witnesses, including state employees who happened to work in the governor's office. The media, devoid of either intelligence or integrity, offers its services to spread allegations and help pressure witnesses into providing the testimony desired by the independent counsel.

In is no secret that Starr is a partisan Republican with

close ties to forces on the extreme right wing of the party, including Senator Jesse Helms and Richard Mellon Scaife. Scaife is the heir to the Mellon banking fortune who is financing a propaganda campaign charging the White House with a series of crimes, including the murder of Vincent Foster. Starr is also a millionaire corporate lawyer, who has continued his legal practice in defense of the tobacco industry while serving as prosecutor-in-chief of the White House.

This extraordinary state of affairs amounts to the existence of a parallel government, in which sections of big business and their allies within Congress, the courts and the media utilize the office of the independent counsel—an unelected official with virtually unlimited powers—to pursue a political war against the incumbent president in pursuit of their own, unstated political agenda.

A recognition of the dangers to democratic rights contained in the actions of the independent counsel is not, however, a brief for Clinton. A long and often tragic historical experience demonstrates that workers cannot defend themselves on the basis of the organizations and institutions of the capitalist class. The assault on democratic rights cannot be halted by relying on the Clinton administration, the Democratic Party, Congress or the courts.

The greatest danger is that the political crisis unfolds above the heads of the masses of working people, who are reduced to the status of passive spectators. They are prevented from intervening to defend their own interests because they remain under the political domination of the Democratic Party.

The escalating assault on democratic rights revealed in the crisis of the Clinton administration underscores the urgent necessity for the working class to establish its own independent political party.

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