

Toronto International Film Festival 2018

Fahrenheit 11/9—Filmmaker Michael Moore clings to the Democratic Party

By David Walsh
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Michael Moore has a long history as a documentary filmmaker (*Roger & Me*, *Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Capitalism: A Love Story*) and a left-liberal supporter of the Democratic Party.

His new film *Fahrenheit 11/9* is an attempt to explain how the election of Donald Trump—a reactionary, know-nothing billionaire—as president of the United States was possible and how the American population might extricate itself from the crisis produced by his coming to power.

If Moore could provide serious and convincing answers to these vexing and pressing problems, and perhaps indicate a way out of the present situation, he would be rendering an enormous political and moral service.

Many of the issues he touches upon—the fascistic character of the Trump White House, the sharp turn to the right by the Democratic Party leadership, the Flint, Michigan water disaster, the depths of poverty in America, the epidemic of school shootings, the cruelty of the government’s treatment of immigrants, the opioid crisis, vast social inequality—are strong arguments for workers to reject the existing economic and political system and adopt a socialist program and outlook.

However, despite various criticisms of prominent Democrats—among them Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama—and the American liberal establishment, including the *New York Times*, Moore urges his viewers to retain—or perhaps regain—confidence in the Democratic Party and “to save,” as he admits, “the America [i.e., the benevolent American capitalism] we’ve never had.”

In interviews, Moore stresses that *Fahrenheit 11/9* (a play on the title of his 2004 film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and the date—November 9, 2016—on which Trump was declared the winner of the presidential election) is designed to help obtain votes for the Democrats in the midterm elections in November. He has told audiences at premieres of the new film that the upcoming vote may be the “last chance” to oppose Trump. Moore warns of the direst consequences, “If he isn’t stopped, now, in the mid-terms, with impeachment, whatever it takes ...” (*Deadline Hollywood*). He commented on *Real Time with Bill Maher*: “I’m finishing my movie and getting it out before the midterms because I want millions of people to get to the polls. We’re going to bring Trump down.”

The documentary maker advances a pitiful and misnamed handful of “progressive” Democratic candidates and politicians, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York, Rashida Tlaib in Michigan and Richard Ojeda in West Virginia, as the basis for the false and reactionary contention, in the words of one of his interviewees, that the “left” should not “give up” on the Democratic Party, one of America’s two big-business parties, but “take it over.”

Fahrenheit 11/9 proceeds in Moore’s customary impressionistic and intellectually careless manner, often praised as non-elitist and “populist.”

The film takes note of the smugness of the Clinton camp on election eve in November 2016 and the certainty of the American media punditry in

general that Trump did not stand a chance of victory. Once the unthinkable happens and the Republican candidate is declared the winner at 2:29 a.m. on “11/9,” Moore asks, “How the f--- did this happen?”

With legitimate sarcasm, Moore first suggests it must have been the work of “the Russians” and the FBI’s James Comey (whose October 28 letter announced that the law enforcement agency was reopening its investigation into Hillary Clinton’s use of a private email server as Secretary of State). By way of a side note: the little time *Fahrenheit 11/9* devotes to the anti-Russian and #MeToo campaigns, although it vaguely endorses both, indicates that Moore is well aware of how little interest the broader public has in these upper middle class obsessions.

After a brief excursion into Trump’s quasi-criminal history, his psychological perversity and the demagogic character of his election campaign, Moore turns abruptly to the Flint water crisis. He charges Republican governor Rick Snyder with poisoning the city’s citizens through the decision to draw water in April 2014 from the horribly polluted Flint River. A native of the area, Moore speaks forcefully about the tragic situation and interviews Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, the pediatrician and public health advocate, in regard to the dire effect of lead on children.

Moore, however, presents the water crisis as first and foremost a racial question, in contradiction to elementary demographics. The city’s population is approximately 57 percent African American and 37 percent white, and the scenes of protests in *Fahrenheit 11/9* reveal crowds of various ethnicities. The logic of the false claim flows from Moore’s general orientation and participation in identity politics circles, where race and gender, not social class, are treated as the categories around which society revolves.

Moore sharply condemns Snyder and stages various stunts to embarrass the governor, for example, hosing the grounds of the latter’s mansion with “Flint water” and briefly attempting to carry out a citizen’s arrest of Snyder at the Michigan state capitol. But the filmmaker omits entirely the critical role of Democratic Party officials, including State Treasurer Andy Dillon, the mayor of Flint and members of its City Council, as well as Obama appointees in the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

Later, Moore takes Obama to task for his widely unpopular May 2016 appearance in Flint, where the president sipped from a glass of water and arrogantly dismissed residents’ concern with the comment, “The kids will be just fine.” However, Moore seems primarily concerned with the harmful impact Obama’s performance had on voter turnout in Flint—and thus Democratic Party prospects—in November of that year.

The filmmaker has his ear close enough to the ground to know that a mass radicalization is under way in America. He comments that the US, in fact, is a “leftist country,” offering a series of poll figures on various issues to back up his contention. *Fahrenheit 11/9* also takes note of the

increased popularity of socialism. “Why is this not reflected” in the political process, he asks?

Moore’s response is superficial and sidesteps the central questions. He takes note of the obvious shift to the right by the Democratic Party hierarchy. Proceeding farther along this “left” path, he suggests that the Trump presidency has been “decades in the making” and points to the right-wing records of both Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. He argues that Trump “outflanked” Hillary Clinton to the left on various social issues and war during the 2016 presidential campaign, but observes that, in any event, nonvoters, 100 million of them, were the single biggest bloc on Election Day.

Moore’s voiceover continues: “As the Democrats became more like the Republicans, so did the entire liberal establishment, led by the paper of record [the *New York Times*]: catering to Big Business, minimizing social movements like Occupy Wall Street and cheerleading every war we got into, while also trying to dictate elections.”

Fahrenheit 11/9 gives far too much credit to the individual figures of Bill Clinton and Obama, whose administrations not only pushed the Democratic Party to the right but reflected the shift of the entire political establishment. The source of the reactionary turn by both big-business parties lies in the *objective* crisis of American and global capitalism. The Republicans and Democrats have tactical differences and divergent political styles, but the American ruling class is united in its determination to impose the consequences of the intractable crisis on both its economic rivals and “allies” abroad and the working population at home.

The implication of Moore’s viewpoint is that the Democratic Party’s decades-long repudiation of its reformist–New Deal past is a mere *policy* choice carried out by misguided individuals that can be corrected by pressure exerted from below. This is a reactionary and utopian fantasy.

In his voiceover, Moore argues that Obama “paved the way” for Trump and offers a partial list of the Obama Administration’s “accomplishments”: the locking up of whistle-blowers, the murderous drone program, the deportation of a record number of immigrants, enhanced surveillance, endless wars, etc. Why doesn’t the filmmaker call a halt right there? Why should any worker or anyone with a conscience support a party capable of such filthy acts? But Moore, like the entire liberal-left, can stomach anything by now.

Like the man he supported in early 2016, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, the filmmaker denounced Hillary Clinton as a warmonger in the pocket of Wall Street during the Democratic primaries, then turned around and endorsed her—helping, in fact, to channel popular anger and frustration behind Trump! Moore incorporates Sanders’ miserable endorsement of Clinton at the Democratic National Convention into his film, without comment. What comment could he offer, having chosen the same abject route?

Fahrenheit 11/9 wanders on. It contains images of the important West Virginia teachers’ strike and the March For Our Lives against gun violence organized by high school students. The scenes of social devastation in West Virginia are telling and Moore comments, “There are multiple Americas.” However, his interview with Richard Ojeda, Democratic Party politician, West Virginia State Senator and candidate for Congress, is another sham. Ojeda is a capitalist politician and former Army officer, who boasts on his website about the years he spent “fighting the war on terror” and serving “alongside the bravest men and women I have ever met.” Needless to say, Moore doesn’t question Ojeda about the bloody US-led wars the filmmaker claims to oppose.

In a move that has aroused controversy, Moore, toward the end of *Fahrenheit 11/9*, compares Trump to German fascist dictator Adolf Hitler and implies that the former may be preparing some fake terrorist incident, along the lines of the February 1933 Reichstag Fire, that will enable him to proclaim himself “president for life.”

There are great risks in the present situation and Trump’s various

references to staying in the White House after his term of office has expired are not to be taken lightly. American “democracy” is largely in ruins and the ruling class is moving inexorably in the direction of authoritarian rule. But this is not Trump’s innovation. The malignant levels of social inequality are incompatible with anything resembling democratic norms and the ruling elite as a whole is preparing to fight it out physically with the working class.

But Moore offers no serious insight into the emergence of Nazism, and in particular the roles performed by the Social Democratic and Stalinist Communist parties in Germany, who paralyzed the masses and opened the door for Hitler. To do so would point toward a fundamental truth about the present American political situation that Moore is either blind to or consciously seeks to suppress: that the greatest danger to the working class is represented by its subordination to the Democratic Party, whose relentlessly pro-corporate and right-wing policies discourage and demoralize wide layers of the population and propel a portion of them into the arms of Trump and the ultra-right.

In reality, Moore is raising the specter of Hitlerism principally to frighten his audience into voting for the Democrats in November, a cheap and tawdry tactic, which can only cause further confusion and disorientation. As we have noted before, the filmmaker’s unserious and pragmatic approach is typical “of American ‘radical’ petty bourgeois thinking, renowned for its inconsistency, lack of principle and disdain for history.”

Fahrenheit 11/9 is Moore’s attempt to make a “leftist” film. He does this under the Republicans. He was essentially silent for 8 years under Obama, whose victory in November 2008 he greeted in this fashion: “Who among us is not at a loss for words? Tears pour out. Tears of joy. Tears of relief. A stunning, whopping landslide of hope in a time of deep despair.”

The “hope” now Moore expresses near the conclusion of the work that we might “get rid of the whole rotten system that gave us Donald Trump” is empty and meaningless, in so far as he continues to support one of the *principal* props of that “rotten system,” the Democratic Party. Whatever occasional insights and striking imagery it might offer, *Fahrenheit 11/9* is false and dishonest at its core. Those who want to fight and defeat the capitalist system should accordingly beware.

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