

The working class and the threat of dictatorship in the US

13 May 2019

The confrontation between the Trump White House and the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives has reached the point where House Speaker Nancy Pelosi last week declared the existence of a “constitutional crisis.” Donald Trump, she said, refuses to recognize the separation of powers laid down in the US Constitution.

She was echoed by House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler, who said: “We are now in [a constitutional crisis]. Now is the time of testing whether we can keep this type of republic, or whether this republic is destined to change into a different, more tyrannical form of government.”

There is no precedent in US history for the Trump White House’s assertion of unchecked presidential powers. He is seeking to create a personalist regime backed by anti-immigrant appeals to the extreme right. But even as they warn of dictatorship, the Democrats refuse to seriously oppose his assertion of authoritarian powers and base their opposition on the right-wing standpoint that he is insufficiently bellicose toward American imperialism’s “enemies” abroad.

Trump claims the power of the executive branch to be immune from congressional oversight. He asserted executive privilege over the entire text of the Mueller report as well as all of its supporting documents, running to millions of pages and covering the entire 2016 election campaign—when Trump was not president, and therefore not conceivably entitled to any such privilege. The House Judiciary Committee held Attorney General William Barr in contempt of Congress for refusing to turn over the documents, and Barr has also defied a subpoena to appear before the committee.

Since the Democrats took control of the House in January, the administration has declined to comply with subpoenas for documents and witnesses on a wide range of subjects, from its policy decisions on immigration to Trump’s tax returns. In effect, the White House is refusing to recognize the outcome of the November 2018 election, which gave the Democrats a majority in the House of Representatives and the constitutionally mandated power to investigate the

executive.

Even more ominous is Trump’s February executive order declaring a state of emergency on the US-Mexico border and authorizing the Pentagon to shift funds from the military to the building of a border wall, in direct defiance of the “power of the purse,” which the Constitution reserves to the legislative branch of government, not the executive.

On Friday, acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan announced that he was shifting \$1.5 billion in Pentagon funds from Afghanistan military operations to the completion of 80 miles of the border wall, on top of \$1 billion already transferred from the Pentagon budget in March.

Last week, Trump re-tweeted the suggestion by an ultra-right supporter that he extend his own term in office by another two years, canceling the 2020 elections. The Democrats and the corporate media sought to dismiss this as a joke, but it is deadly serious—and Trump followed it up by suggesting that he could hold the White House for “ten to fourteen years,” which would require multiple reelections, in defiance of the Constitution, or the cancellation of elections altogether. At a rally in Florida last week, he laughed and his audience roared approval at a supporter’s suggestion that the government “shoot” immigrants crossing the border.

Trump directs his fascistic appeal to the millions of police officers, border guards and uniformed members of the military, who constitute a powerful force in determining the balance of power in Washington.

He pushed for two years to have a tank-led parade in Washington DC to celebrate US military prowess. He regularly hails the anti-immigrant violence and repression inflicted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Border Patrol. Most recently, he has spoken of transforming the traditionally nonpolitical Fourth of July fireworks on the National Mall into a presidential address, staged at the Lincoln Memorial with a patriotic and militaristic backdrop.

Trump’s actions not only constitute “high crimes and misdemeanors,” they amount to the evisceration of the Constitution as a whole. But when asked last week whether

the Democratic Party would support impeaching Trump, Pelosi answered, “No.” She explained: “We [the United States] are one. When we make decisions and prioritize actions and consider options, that oneness that keeps us together as a nation is a compelling imperative for me and the House Democratic leadership. Impeachment is a very divisive course of action to take.”

The Democrats’ fear of “division” underscores the real causes for their focus on claims of Russian “collusion” and obstruction of justice allegations deriving from their anti-Russia campaign. Ever since Trump’s election, they have portrayed his victory as the product of “Russian meddling,” while seeking to mobilize support from within the military-intelligence apparatus among those generals and spymasters opposed to any shift in US foreign policy away from the most confrontational approach towards Russia, particularly in Syria and Ukraine.

Their greatest fear is that any effort to seriously address the democratic issues in Trump’s dictatorial maneuvers will generate a groundswell of social opposition from below. Democrats fear that if they were to challenge Trump’s power grab, he would conduct an extra-parliamentary mobilization of his far-right supporters, which would then trigger widespread counterdemonstrations in the working class and among youth, leading to strikes, university closures and violence.

This would create an opening for the massive opposition in the working class to social inequality, war and attacks on democratic rights to escape the control of the capitalist two-party system and find independent political, anti-capitalist expression.

Such a rupture of domestic unity would hamper US imperialism’s myriad foreign policy adventures abroad, including in Iran, the South China Sea, Venezuela and North Korea. As David Sanger worriedly noted in yesterday’s *New York Times*, America’s adversaries are “betting that Mr. Trump is neither as savvy a negotiator nor as ready to use military force as he claims.” Democrats have also expressed concerns about Trump’s impact on US imperialism’s image of stability, in particular among its allies in Western Europe.

The Democrats’ response to Trump repeats, on a more advanced level, the party’s response to the stolen presidential election of 2000. When the right-wing majority on the US Supreme Court intervened to shut down vote-counting in Florida and award the state’s electoral votes, and with it the presidency, to George W. Bush, who had lost the popular vote, the Democratic Party and its presidential candidate, Al Gore, capitulated to the right-wing coup. This watershed event, the *World Socialist Web Site* declared at the time, demonstrated that there was no longer any constituency for democracy within the US ruling elite.

The Democratic Party was incapable of mobilizing its supporters for fear that this would trigger a mass movement for democratic rights that could spiral out of control. Faced with the choice of mobilizing opposition from below or accepting the coup, the Democrats chose the latter.

The Democrats’ response to Trump follows the same reactionary logic.

American democracy is disintegrating. A criminal president, seeking to whip up a fascistic base of support, confronts a feckless opposition, which, in the event of a full-scale breakdown, would appeal to the military to intervene and “save” the constitutional order.

Even in the highly unlikely event that Trump were to be removed constitutionally, by means of impeachment by the House and conviction by the Senate, the result would be an administration headed by the no less reactionary vice president, Mike Pence. If the Democrats spearheaded such a transition, it would be based on a more belligerent foreign policy, in particular against Russia, and would change nothing in terms of the distribution of wealth or the fate of the democratic rights of the population.

The working class must chart an independent course to bring down the Trump administration. The answer lies in the development of the class struggle.

In workplaces and working-class neighborhoods, working people must form independent, democratically controlled rank-and-file factory and neighborhood committees that will carry out the defense of workers’ interests. The building of such committees, and the struggles that they lead, must be guided by a new political perspective: the independent political mobilization of the working class to fight for a workers’ government and a socialist and antiwar program.

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