

United, but with Whom? An Open Letter to Comrade Heller

By Stephen James Kerr

The following is a response to a call out by Davey Heller published on this website on October 13th entitled "March separately, but strike together! For a united front against fascism in the US! General Strike now!"

The working class in the United States is increasingly alarmed at the potential for a Trump coup d'état. It should be alarmed, for the threat is real, and it is urgent.

But the working class must also be armed with a consciousness of its own politically independent aims and interests, which can only be built upon an historical understanding of the lessons of the class struggle, and the experience of the revolutionary party. There are many signs that such a consciousness is growing.

The anti-communist 'Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation' has found in a poll that support for socialism among the US population has increased from 36 to 40 percent within the last year. Support for socialism among youth is up from 40 to 49 percent.

Workers are taking independent actions. This is of immense political significance. Teachers in the Houston Independent

School districts have staged a wildcat sickout strike. Rank and File Health and Safety Committees have been formed by educators in Tennessee, San Diego and in Pennsylvania to protect the lives of teachers, bus drivers and janitorial staff in the face of the relentless ruling class back to work drive which has cost the lives of more than two hundred thousand workers. These actions are being taken outside of, and without the approval of the trade unions to which most of these workers belong.

The World Socialist Website has encouraged, organized and supported such class conscious, independent actions for years, and has provided a political perspective through which these could be successfully carried forward. Since its relaunch on October 2nd, the website has been viewed more than 3 million times.

The recent political accomplishments of the wsws in building the growing socialist consciousness of the working class bare re-stating.



Cy-Fair teachers, staff and parents gather with protest signs at the main entrance to the district administration building against the COVID-19 teaching requirements before a Cy-Fair school board meeting Monday, Aug. 10, 2020 in Houston, TX.

Long before the crisis of the summer of 2020, the wsws detailed Trump's plans to forge a political base for a personalist far-right dictatorship. The wsws documented the fascist plot by Trump to seize power in the first week of June 2020 in an abortive attempt to declare a 'state of emergency' and deploy the National Guard across the country to quell the magnificent mass uprising of black and white workers against police violence which unfolded this past summer. The wsws was virtually alone in its serious analysis of Trump's ongoing scheme to steal the election. Only the wsws took seriously the plot to kidnap and murder the Democratic governor of the State of Michigan.

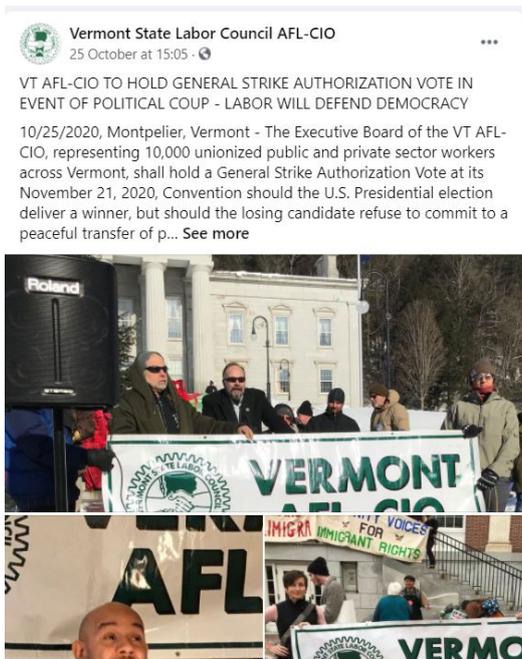
The ICFI has correctly called for an independent mobilization of the working class, taking the form of a political general strike, in the event that Trump attempts to steal the

election. It has called for a general strike to halt the barbaric back to work drive, supported by both capitalist parties, which sacrifices the lives of working class people to the imperative of capitalist profit.

The wsws has also carefully documented the total indifference of what passes for the 'left' in American and also world politics to the growing threat of fascism. It has documented the complicity of the Democratic party in this drive, to which the 'left' in the United States is almost totally subordinated. Rather than provoke a social uprising of working people in a political environment where more and more workers are open to socialist ideas, the Democrats would prefer to simply accept a Trump coup. Their political capitulation before the Supreme Court confirmation of Amy Comey Barret is a testament to their complicity.

The rapidly increasing potential for independent action by the working class on a far greater scale than anything seen in recent memory, in the face of the greatest US political crisis since the Civil War, is suddenly motivating the various trade unions and pseudo-left groups who specialize not in leading workers' struggles, but in smothering them. These groups have been virtually silent for months, but suddenly they aspire to lead a general strike!

Various trade unions and US Labour Councils [have called for a general strike in the event that Trump attempts to remain in office](#) in the fact of a defeat at the polls. Rochester AFL-CIO Labour Council, the Western Massachusetts Labour Federation, the MLK Labour Council in Seattle, Troy Area Labour Council, the Southern Workers Assembly, the Seattle Education Association, and the American Postal Workers Union Detroit Chapter, have all passed motions.



Likewise, various groups on the pseudo-left have declared their intent to carry out various actions should Donald Trump refuse to abide by the results of the election next week.

The group People's Strike, which frames the current crisis as a problem of "white supremacy, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and misogyny" is calling for mass actions. It has the support of such groups as the Green Party of New York, the National Lawyers Guild, and Extinction Rebellion New Orleans.

Other such groups include [Refuse Fascism](#), organizing based on an idealistic appeal to 'humanity' along with '[Protect the Results](#)' and '[We Count on Us.](#)'

How should revolutionary socialists respond to such developments? Should revolutionary socialists maintain their political independence, won via decades of struggle against opportunism from within and without the Fourth International? Or should they fold themselves, under the pressure of current

events, into a 'movement'? To whom should we orient ourselves, how, and why?

On October 13th you [published a call for a 'United Front'](#) based on your interpretation of the tactic employed variously by the Bolsheviks in 1917 against general Kornilov, in the 20s in Germany, France, Italy, China, and for which Trotsky urgently called in 1933 to stop Adolph Hitler's rise to power.

March separately, but strike together! For a united front against fascism in the US! General Strike now!

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I argue that your interpretation of the united front tactic is fundamentally misguided, as you are mistaking the class character of the forces to whom you have addressed your appeal. The united front is a political tactic whose goal is the building of revolutionary socialist consciousness in the working class. It is a tactical alliance between mass working class organizations, one revolutionary, and the other reformist, with the goal of winning over reformist-minded workers to a revolutionary perspective, in order to organize

and politically train the social forces necessary to defeat fascism, which are the same social forces necessary to overthrow capitalism – the working class. The historical problem which the united front attempts to solve is thus: the workers are divided between hostile parties, one ostensibly ‘revolutionary’ but set on an opportunist course, the other reformist and in the thrall of the ruling class. The united front tactic sets up revolutionary workers to demonstrate in practice to workers under the sway of reformism the superiority and effectiveness of revolutionary organizing and of revolutionary politics, to win the reformist workers over politically, in order to then form the political basis for the social force which can stop fascism, and then go on the offensive to attack capitalism itself – the proletariat under the leadership of the revolutionary party.

That is, in my view, how Trotsky conceived of the united front in the 30s. But that, in my opinion, is not the nature of what you’re proposing.

You write: *“The consolidation of a presidential dictatorship means the end of democracy and the basic rights of free speech and assembly won by the working class over the past two centuries.*

What path forward then for the US working class? The answer lies in organising for a general strike organised by a United Front of all anti-fascist forces (emphasis mine) in the US to bring down the Trump regime.”

Your call raises a number of critical issues. To what ‘anti-fascist’ forces do you refer? Your appeal is not directed at the working class *per se*. In fact, you refer to the forces I

have described above – to the trade unions and various groups of the pseudo-left. These are actually NOT social forces under the control of the working class. You mistake their appearance for their essence.

Elsewhere in your appeal you state: *“We need a united front of all trade unionists, socialists, anarchists, Marxist tendencies, and their allies in the middle class and the social movements to defend the democratic right to assemble peacefully in protests, meetings, and pickets and against the fascist militias. We need joint organising for a general strike.”*

This is a mistaken view of the united front in several ways. Firstly, it mechanically conflates the objective and subjective conditions of the 1930s in Germany with those of contemporary America. It also conflates the historical roles played variously by the KDP and SPD with today’s pseudo-left groups and American trade unions, as if they could be compared to each other by mere analogy of their relative position vis a vis an incipient far right movement.

The critical issue is this – in order to defeat fascism, the political independence of the working class must first be preserved. It is from this political independence that a social basis for the defeat of fascism will arise. *If the united front tactic has any lessons for us today, it is this lesson.* Indeed, in the reaction of the trade unions (which frankly is actually rather of a belated and pathetic character) we can see the effect of the politically independent working class actions to which I refer above. It is this independent action which is driving the trade unions, reluctantly, to make their empty statements.

For revolutionary socialists to fold themselves into such a political amalgam as you propose would be to abandon the decades long struggle against opportunism which was initiated with the very founding of the Fourth International, and which began out of Trotsky's analysis of the rise of German Fascism. Your call ignores the history of the International Committee after 1945, the history of the united front, and also the recent history I have outlined.

Has the class character of the trade unions, which for at least three decades have smothered the struggle of the working class, suddenly changed with these calls for a general strike? Can such calls, coming from organizations which have been alternatively asleep or on alert to crush workers struggles be taken at face value? You have taken an entirely impressionistic appraisal of the unions. You write:

"...the trade union bureaucracies which tie workers to the Democrats cannot be trusted. They remain silent about the growing threat of a fascist coup." But your analysis extends no further. I agree wholeheartedly with your first sentence. But the bureaucrats are not remaining silent now, and the growing calls by Labour Councils for strike action attest to that fact. To your credit, you wrote these lines before the Labour Councils made their calls.

Why exactly are the unions belatedly speaking out? What is the class character of the trade unions? How has it evolved since the 1930s, when in fact unions did constitute mass working class organizations which were the centre of the class struggle? The wsws has excavated all of this material, so I will only go into the most relevant points here.

The trade unions are speaking out because they need to get out in front of the movement in order to crush it utterly, in order to maintain their social position as the mediators between capital and labour, on the side of capital.

The trade unions are not a vehicle for the development of revolutionary socialist consciousness in the working class, but a break upon such development. They are no longer even mass working class organizations in the United States. Their changed class character since 1989 is not due to 'untrustworthy' leaders, though untrustworthy they certainly are, but to the very nature of the trade unions themselves. Trade unions are embedded within capitalism, and arise out of its process of historical development. Unions set the price of labour and *create the political conditions not for class struggle but for class peace* – between workers, whom the trade unions manage, and capitalism, for whom the trade unions are really acting in practice. Trade unions are a crucial instrument which maintain the conditions facilitating the extraction of surplus value from the working class. They are *not* an instrument to overturn that exploitation. The political crisis in the United States will only drive them more closely into the arms of the capitalist ruling class, and more fiercely against the interests of their own dues-paying members. Their political collapse followed the trajectory of the Stalinists and the pseudo-left parties which has been documented in precise detail by the International Committee since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Given this analysis, the trade unions today cannot but see the independent mobilization of workers to stop a coup d'état in the United States as a massive threat to their continued existence. So, rest assured, though they may pass this or that resolution, they will work night and day to smother the struggle, by leading it into a dead end or else by actively

sabotaging it. For security against this wager, we only have to bank on the actions of every trade union in the United States for the last thirty or more years.

You seem to have forgotten the testimony before the US Supreme Court in 2018 of lawyers for AFSCME, in a case about the constitutionality of union 'agency fees' paid by public sector workers who refuse to join the union.

From the wsws coverage at the time. The AFSCME lawyer testified that "The key thing that has been bargained for in this contract for agency fees is a limitation on striking. And that is true in many collective bargaining agreements... The fees are the trade-off. Union security is the trade-off for no strikes." If the court makes the decision to overturn prior precedent allowing states to mandate agency fees, he warned, "you can raise an untold specter of labor unrest throughout the country."

International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI)

World Socialist Web Site  **WSWS.ORG**

In the last two years alone, the US trade unions, acting in the spirit cited by AFSCME's legal counsel before the highest court in the land, have successfully sabotaged the independent struggles of teachers, auto-workers, nurses and Amazon workers. Our agency fees at work.

And that does not even touch on the mafia-like racketeering of the UAW, also documented by the wsws, and nowhere else.

But this analysis of the trade unions, to which you allude briefly, stating that the union leaders 'cannot be trusted' has been fundamentally cast aside in a panic. On the one hand they cannot be trusted. On the other, you seem to have no critical perspective on their calls for a general strike, seeming to take them on their face.

And so you write *"We appeal to the workers in trade unions to do all they can within their unions, but also to reach out to their class brothers and sisters in the non-unionised sector to build for a general strike of the entire working class."*

This indicates a fundamental misunderstanding.

Should not revolutionary socialists be appealing for unionized workers to take independent activity *in defiance* of their trade union managers, as opposed to acting 'within their unions'? Your appeal for a united front imagines that the spur to revolutionary activity in the working class will come from within the trade unions! This replicates one of the fundamental fallacies propagated by the pseudo-left, who have raised this notion to the level of a religious principle.

What happens in real life when the unions and their apologists – the very forces with whom you are advocating an alliance – get their hands on a 'general strike'? One only has to look as far back as entirely fraudulent May 1st 2020 'General Strike' at Amazon, Instacart and Target, called from the outside by the Democratic Party and its various pseudo-left apologists. Almost none of the more than one million workers employed by these firms struck, and most were unaware that a strike was even taking place. It was entirely a publicity stunt to

benefit the Democratic Party.

You qualify yourself with the statement that your call "*is not a call to support any form of electoral alliance with the Democrat Party or a vote for Biden.*"

But it *is* a call to support workers illusions in the very forces which are herding workers *behind* the Democrats, smothering strikes, and confusing the working class with various flavours of pseudo-leftism and identity politics. You write as if the 'political independence of the working class' was merely a mechanical function of a formal organizational break with the Democratic Party!

With that analysis you open yourself to any alliance with any organization which has broken with the Democrats to the 'left.' But the real story, *the history* is that these organizations long ago broke with Marxism – to the right!

The [Worker's World Party](#) was formed in the 1950s by defectors from the international Committee who had adapted themselves to Stalinism. Its founder lauded the crushing of the Hungarian worker's uprising by Soviet tanks in 1956. If there is any consistency to its politics, it is support for the trade union bureaucracy, pathetic appeals to the Democrats, and demoralized pessimism. Larry Holms, 'First Secretary' of the party, actually wrote, [in a recent article](#) that "very few socialists, if any, were considering what the working class would do, apart from voting, in response to the threat of violent fascistic attacks, and an attempted coup next month by Trump and his loyalists." Holms clearly doesn't count any socialists in his personal circle.

Socialist Alternative, the political party of Pabloite revisionism, represents the liquidation of revolutionary socialism. Founded on the flight of former Trotskyists into the arms of Stalinism in the 1950s, in the United States the party has recently promoted illusions in Bernie Sanders, and is soaked in the politics of racialism and postmodernist charlatanry.

As for building a united front with anarchists – good luck.

The building of a revolutionary socialist consciousness in the working class cannot occur through a desperate ‘united front’ alliance, for whatever purpose, with the very forces which have done nothing but subordinate the working class to the capitalist ruling class and its ideology. In making a call for such an alliance you misapprehend what the united front was – a tactic for building the revolutionary consciousness of workers *within mass working class parties*.



Image from a recent Trump campaign rally in Lansing Michigan

Effectively what you are calling for is not a united front of working-class organizations but a 'Popular Front' which entails *the subordination of the working class to hostile class forces*, and ultimately if carried through to its logical end the liquidation of the revolutionary party. Utter disaster has been the result of every such attempt.

Your fundamental issue is that you are confused by the fact that the hostile class forces to which you are attracted wear the political drag of Marxism or else of the workers movement.

An examination of the history of the united front demonstrates this.

When Kornilov threatened to drown the Russian revolution in blood in the summer of 1917, the Bolshevik Party correctly called for a united front between the various parties of the working class and peasantry, the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries. The situation between the July Days and today is so different that an attempt to draw comparisons would distract us.

However, the issue which can be compared is the relative influence within the working class of the forces to which you appeal, and the forces to which Trotsky imagined that a united front call would be directed.

Trotsky, writing in 1922 in [On the Question of the United Front](#) stated the issue clearly: "there are parties which represent a power, not only in ideas but also through their numerical and organizational strength. This is already the case with most of the communist parties. Their strength may

come to a third of the organized vanguard, a fourth, even a half or a bit more – that does not alter the situation in general. What task confronts these parties? To conquer the overwhelming majority of the proletariat. And to what end? To lead the proletariat to the conquest of power, to the revolution... What will we do during this period? Continue to fight for the conquest of the majority, for the confidence of the entire proletariat.”

Do most US workers have any confidence in the AFLCIO? I doubt it. What section of the working class seriously looks to the Troy Labour Council for leadership, or to Socialist Alternative? To ask the question is to answer it. Those people with the most faith in the ‘leadership’ of these organizations over the working class are not even, sociologically speaking, in the working class! The faith of the middle class pseudo-left in the leadership of the trade unions over the working class runs in direct proportion to their political subordination to pessimistic, middle class ideology, which leads them straight to the Democrats.

In 1932 the question of the united front was again posed, with the threatened conquest of power by Adolph Hitler in Germany. The US working class today faces a similar threat, but it faces this grave danger under totally different objective and subjective conditions.



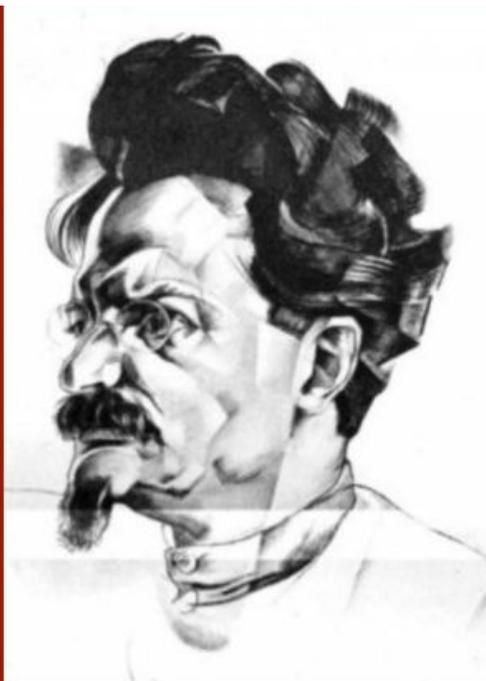
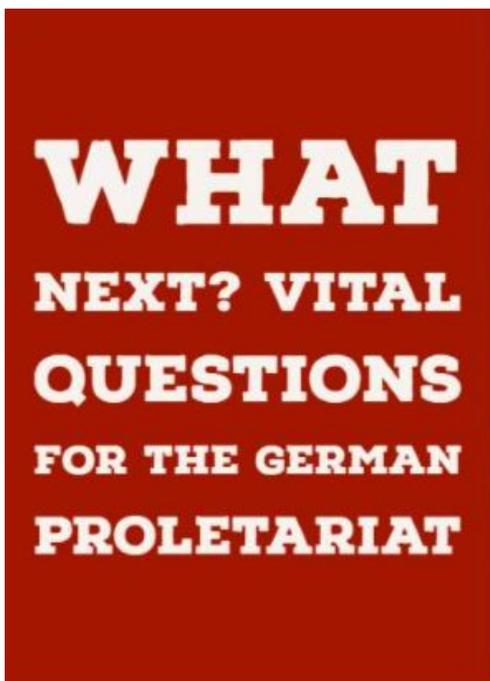
SPD (Social Democratic Party) poster from the early 1930's

In 1932 the German working class was split between allegiance to the KPD and the SPD, two mass working class parties with a combined membership numbering in the millions. The Stalinist policy of the KPD towards the SPD was disastrous. The Stalinists described the SPD, the traditional party of the German working class as 'social fascists', going so far as to support a NAZI referendum calling for the dissolution of the SPD government in the state of Prussia. The Stalinist position was that the SPD, being opposed to the KPD, were no different than the NAZIS. The KPD slogan was 'After Hitler, Us' a completely mechanical formulation. The result of the disastrous KPD policy was the destruction of more than 60 million lives in the flames of world war and barbarism.

You are likewise reacting to the current political crisis by means of a mechanical reasoning, which draws those who would follow you into an opportunistic alliance with hostile class forces which would have appalled Leon Trotsky in the same way

he was appalled by the mechanical reasoning of the KPD.

Trotsky, [in a series of polemical essays](#), called for the formation of a united front – between two mass parties of the working class – to combat the rising fascist threat. *His call for the united front was aimed at winning the membership of the KPD back to the revolutionary socialism of October 1917.* It was a fight, not just to defeat the Nazis, but for the heart and soul of the KPD and also therefore of the CPSU and of the Third International. The call was of world historical significance for the proletariat. The tactic of united action against the fascists with the SPD while maintaining the political freedom to criticize the SPD's complicity and venality was designed to win workers over to a revolutionary perspective, *and to a Communist Party recommitted to revolutionary socialism.* Having defeated world reaction, in the form of the NASDAP, this force could then go on the offensive against world capitalism.



In his essay, '[What Next](#)' he succinctly described the goals of

the united front:

“...the gist of the united front policy was in the following: the Communist party proves to the masses and their organizations its readiness in action to wage battle in common with them, for aims, no matter how modest, so long as they lie on the road of the historical development of the proletariat; the Communist party in this struggle takes into account the actual condition of the class at each given moment; it turns not to the masses only, but also to those organizations whose leadership is recognized by the masses; it confronts the reformist organizations before the eyes of the masses with the real problems of the class struggle. The policy of the united front hastens the revolutionary development of the class by revealing in the open that the common struggle is undermined not by the disruptive acts of the Communist party but by the conscious sabotage of the leaders of the social democracy.”

The days are long past when open revolutionary socialists could honestly propose a united front on the political basis outlined by Trotsky from within the US trade unions, which have been devoutly anti-communist since the founding of the AFL-CIO. The ‘leadership’ of the AFL-CIO may once have been recognized by many American workers, but decades have elapsed and many betrayals have occurred since then. Your call takes no such change in the class character of the trade unions into account. The pseudo-lefts are of no account whatsoever in relation to Trotsky’s tactics.

Further, Trotsky goes on to describe the two potential mistakes of the united front. The first involves raising the tactic of the united front around ultra-left slogans which have no resonance with the working class. This mistake is not our concern here. The second one is.

Trotsky: "The second type of perversion bore a much more fatal character. In the hands of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the policy of the united front became a hue and cry after allies at the cost of sacrificing the independence of the party. Backed by Moscow and deeming themselves omnipotent, the functionaries of the Comintern seriously esteemed themselves to be capable of laying down the law to the classes and of prescribing their itinerary; of checking the agrarian and strike movements in China; of buying an alliance with Chiang Kai-Shek at the cost of sacrificing the independent policies of the Comintern; of re-educating the trade union bureaucracy, the chief bulwark of British imperialism through educational courses at banquet tables in London..."

To which mass party of the working class and its membership do you appeal? The reality today is that there are no such mass working-class reformist parties in the United States. There is no mass revolutionary party on a misguided course. So, to whom do you appeal? There are three possibilities.

Perhaps you appeal to the working class to 'unite' with one or another of the political tendencies advocated in your social media postings, and described above. Equally possible is that your appeal is for 'left unity' – which could only ever imply some opportunist combination or other, since the organizations which constitute 'the left' in the United States long ago abandoned their former principles in order to service the ruling class. The second possibility fits neatly into the first. Or perhaps you advocate that revolutionary socialists – with a finger pointed squarely at the International Committee and the wsws – should unite with the various pseudo-left tendencies and the trade unions, in a final liquidation of the revolutionary socialist tradition?

Revolutionary socialists must do none of the above. Rather, we must fight, first and foremost for what we have been fighting for all along, the political independence of the revolutionary party, the preservation of the revolutionary socialist political tradition against opportunism, and for the political independence of the working class. It is from this political independence that a movement capable of defeating a fascist turn in the USA will arise. Such a movement will NOT arise out of 'left unity' between all of the various pseudo-left factions and the trade unions. If such a movement does arise, it will be dedicated, as soon as it gets out in front of any independent actions by workers, to calling a cease-fire, not an anti-fascist fusilade. I'm afraid to say that your call could give a left cover to such a development, and that would be tragic.

To sum up – there are no mass working class organizations today for whom the united front tactic as imagined by Trotsky is applicable, for there are no longer any mass working class organizations which can claim to represent the workers. The trade unions are no longer mass organizations, and they are politically anti-revolutionary, as opposed to anti-fascist. In the USA, they are politically subordinated to a ruling class party, not a working-class party. The pseudo-left organizations towards which you have directed your appeal are numerically insignificant and politically prostrate before ruling class ideology.

Working people in the United States face the capitalist class united only in solidarity with each other, with the international working class, and with the political solidarity and leadership offered by the Socialist Equality Party.

SOCIALIST EQUALITY PARTY

ON THE EVE OF THE CIVIL WAR ELECTION

THE BREAKDOWN OF AMERICAN
DEMOCRACY AND THE FIGHT
FOR SOCIALISM

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Workers must not rush to join the first opportunistic political combination which presents itself in the face of the fascist threat. Workers must defend all of those under attack from fascism, including Democratic governors threatened with kidnapping and extra-judicial execution, workers under attack by murderous police, immigrants and refugees hunted by ICE, and many other groups. But we must do so from a position of political independence, from a revolutionary socialist position. As such, a 'united front' with hostile class forces cannot be undertaken.