



***BIDEN - SIX
MONTHS IN***

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After Biden's election was declared, thousands were dancing in the streets, but millions more limited themselves to a sigh of relief at Donald Trump's defeat. Very few were excited by Biden himself. In fact, his election campaign generated so little enthusiasm he barely won against Trump, despite Trump's consistently dismal approval ratings and disastrous inaction around the Covid pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the left also voted for Biden because he was not Trump, but vowed to keep fighting his administration from day one. None would have described his administration as 'transformative'.

Yet that word is being used today, in reaction to his reversal of some of Trump's more egregious policies, and especially at the scale of his economic stimulus and several unrealised proposals. Noam Chomsky, for example, has declared himself pleasantly surprised by Biden's domestic policy proposals, although his foreign policy is just as dangerous as his predecessors'. Yet the two are closely intertwined and aimed at upholding both US imperialism and the American ruling class.

### **A new New Deal?**

Around Biden's 100th day in office, the press was full of articles comparing him to Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal. AFL/CIO union head Richard Trumka and even the democratic socialists Bernie

Sanders and Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez praised the plans, with Sanders' campaign manager citing an 'investment in working people ... not seen since FDR'.

More headlines met his proposed \$6 trillion budget for 2022 (Trump's budget was 4.8 trillion). If it all passed, spending was projected to rise over the next decade from 22.7 per cent of GDP to 24.5 per cent. This would still leave the US with a proportionately 'smaller government' than most other rich countries. But the component parts are not guaranteed. While the Covid-19 relief package was narrowly passed by congress in March, a larger infrastructure and climate plan was gutted without a fight, and other discretionary spending looks to be facing the same fate when congress reopens in September. The pro-union PRO Act would be a positive step for workers, but its chances of passing the senate are slim, especially without the union pressure outside congress which pushed Roosevelt in the 1930s. Other progressive promises have already been dropped.

It is true the scale of spending has gone beyond the austerity consensus upheld in the Obama-Biden administration, but those who think we are seeing the end of neoliberalism will unfortunately be unpleasantly surprised.

Before examining the details of Biden's policies and the reasons behind them, it is useful to glance back at who he is and at the American context.

### **The Democratic Party and Joe Biden**

The US has two capitalist parties, the Democrats and the Republicans. When sections of the ruling class have different strategies for responding to crises, the parties can be used to negotiate these divisions in government. Nonetheless, they both remain committed to the capitalist order. The Democratic Party has an additional role: to absorb workers' discontent into the system and derail social movements.<sup>2</sup> We are seeing both these processes now.

Joseph Biden is a creature of this bipartisan state apparatus. Over the years he has become the personification of compromise and insider politics. Biden's long history of being socially, economically, and politically conservative can only be given a glancing mention here.<sup>3</sup>

He rose in Delaware politics by allying with a white middle-class movement against busing to integrate public schools. In the senate, he was proud of friendships with segregationist Southern Democrats and known for ‘reaching across the aisle’ with conservative Republicans. He boasted that ‘on fiscal matters I’m a conservative’, and he was right. He spent over thirty years advocating for cuts to Social Security.<sup>4</sup> In the 1980s he helped move his party from New Deal liberalism towards Reaganomics,<sup>5</sup> and later voted for a Republican balanced-budget amendment and the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act’s banking regulations.

He was instrumental in crafting the Clinton-era crime bill which spent extra billions on police and increased sentences and death penalties. He voted for the Iraq war, and helped draft disastrous neoliberal programs for central America.

When considering a run in 2008, Biden admitted, ‘I may not be what the party’s looking for. I may be too “muscular” on foreign policy. I may not be “pure” enough about abortion rights. I may not have been “energetic” enough about gay marriage’.<sup>6</sup> He began his 2020 campaign telling wealthy donors that, in his vision, ‘nobody has to be punished. No one’s standard of living will change, nothing would fundamentally change’.<sup>7</sup>

### **What has changed?**

So why did Biden start his term being called surprisingly progressive?

In part, it was because his predecessor was an unusually incompetent, unpredictable and divisive president, a racist who openly sympathised with the Far Right. For many, any move away from all that was a relief. And for the ruling class, though Trump’s tax cuts were duly appreciated, they preferred overall to have a stable government and a concerted approach to dealing with the pandemic. That is, as long as they could still force their employees back to work. Biden filled that role.

Biden quickly rejoined the World Health Organisation and the Paris Climate Accords. He signed many executive orders repealing Trump’s decisions, such as the prohibition on transgender people serving in the military and the ‘Muslim travel ban’. He also

brought back most of the hundred-plus environment regulations that Trump had cancelled.

Much of that was expected, along with a return to the liberal-faced austerity seen under Obama. Yet Biden, with a more conservative political background, has already spent more and signalled more liberal policies than Obama. He told Bernie Sanders he wanted to be ‘the most progressive President since FDR’, but confessed to conservative *New York Times* columnist David Brooks that ‘progressives don’t like me because I’m not prepared to take on ... a socialist agenda’.<sup>8</sup>

Brooks’s conclusion from the interview was that Biden’s values and policies are the same as always; it’s ‘the scale that is gigantically different’. In a way, he is right.

Neoliberalism is not just about austerity. It is about protecting the market. Biden’s spending is directed at subsidising private industry during a crisis, not expanding the public sector. Right now, a program of austerity would lead to bankruptcies of indebted corporations, spreading through the system. To maintain profitability, they need continued stimulus. Corporations also want the state to pay for the infrastructure they use.

### **Pushed to the left?**

Understanding the needs of the ruling class can help avoid a misconception by some on the left that Biden is somehow adopting ‘our ideas’. On his inauguration, *Jacobin* published an article on Biden’s ‘surprisingly progressive’ initial moves, saying he had been pushed by the left to do so.<sup>9</sup> Pramila Jayapal, Democratic chair of the progressive caucus, claimed ‘progressives won the conversation’.<sup>10</sup> But the entreaties of the existing left did not push Biden into coming up with trillions of dollars. To say so would be to ignore the power needed for the working class to win battles against the bosses in congress.

Politically, Biden does have an eye on ‘the Squad’, the new progressive congresspeople aligned with Sanders. But they are a small minority and lack power inside congress. When Biden told his rich backers that ‘nothing would fundamentally change’, the phrase was prefaced with a friendly warning that massive inequality ‘ferments [*sic*] political discord’ and needs to be quieted down.<sup>11</sup>

So, some policy headlines are designed to incorporate and quiet activists, as is traditional in the Democratic Party. But the basic ideas of the left (class politics and active opposition to market dominance, inequality, and the racism systemic to American capitalism) are ideas he is going out of his way to defeat and cover over.

### **Domestic agenda**

The first thing on Biden's agenda was to get the country up and running. Trump's disastrous denial of the Covid-19 pandemic probably won Biden the election and was where their differences were initially the sharpest. But Biden also benefited from Operation Warp Speed, set up under Trump to come up with vaccines. He was the steady pair of hands business wanted overseeing the vaccination program and getting Americans back to work. He pushed for reopening schools before most teachers had gotten vaccinated, supported by the leadership of the teachers' unions who undercut their members' resistance. His Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has not issued the binding regulations urged by unions.

For Biden's first few months, the US continued stockpiling vaccines, keeping them from needy countries—including the AstraZeneca vaccine, which was not approved for US use. Only in June, after an outcry and the example of China and Russia's 'vaccine diplomacy', did the US decide to distribute 25 million doses overseas. Yet it would take 11 billion doses to vaccinate 70 per cent of the world's population. What is needed is the rights and technology assistance to set up vaccine manufacturing around the world.

At home, as Zenei Triunfo-Cortez, president of the California Nurses Association and National Nurses United, pointed out, 'The pandemic exposed the failures of the fragmented, profit-driven American health care system'.<sup>12</sup> The Democrats will not even whisper about a socialised healthcare system, and Biden has refused the 'Medicare for All' national health insurance program pushed by Bernie Sanders and others; even the promised 'public option' has been dropped.

Instead, Biden has adopted proposals from health insurance lobbying groups that funnel billions of

dollars of public subsidies for private health insurers. This may increase the amount of people with insurance but will not eliminate charges for patients, and is still significantly more expensive for the government than a national healthcare program.<sup>13</sup>

### **Silent on abortion**

Americans will have to fight to protect abortion rights. The conservative Supreme Court is scheduled to reconsider *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 decision that legalised abortion nationwide. This year, over 500 restrictions on abortion have been introduced around the country, and twenty states are poised to make it illegal if the court overturns that decision. Biden disliked *Roe v. Wade* when it was passed, telling a reporter, 'I don't think that a woman has the sole right to say what should happen to her body'.<sup>14</sup> He later consistently voted against federal funding for abortion. While he now publicly supports *Roe v. Wade*, he has said little about the subject, and as of this writing has not uttered the word 'abortion' as president.<sup>15</sup> Abortion-rights groups are pushing behind the scenes for the president to adopt a federal preclearance requirement for state abortion laws, and to make the 'abortion pill' mifepristone available around the country.

Unfortunately, the women's marches that confronted Trump quieted down as their leadership turned to getting out the vote before the election. While rightly livid at Trump, they were silent about Biden's role in undermining Anita Hill in her testimony about sexual harassment from supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, and silent about accusations against Biden.<sup>16</sup>

It was a massive women's movement in the early 1970s that pushed the Nixon Supreme Court to legalise abortion. An administration committed to a woman's right to choose could have used its platform to encourage mass protests in advance of this decision.

### **Black Lives...**

In January, Alicia Garza, a founder of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, said, 'Now I think the expectation is that this administration will deliver'. By Biden's 100-day mark, the Black Lives Matter Global Network aired a television ad saying, 'We are the people who elected Biden. It's time

he started acting like it'. BLM activists' requests for a meeting with the president were ignored, as was the legislation proposed to transfer funds to funding community programs. Instead, congressional Democrats have proposed the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, which makes some adjustments at the Federal level of questionable effectiveness but actually increases money for the police. Biden has spoken in favor of that bill, but gave it little attention compared to other priorities, leading George Floyd's sister to boycott a White House meeting with Biden on the first anniversary of her brother's death. Most BLM organisers oppose this act for its reliance on failed solutions. As national director Karissa Lewis said, it 'requires that police be the fixers of their own problems'.<sup>17</sup>

Biden's stance is not surprising given his responsibility for the 1994 Clinton crime bill, which disproportionately affected Black Americans, with mandatory minimum sentences—a large contribution to the New Jim Crow of mass incarceration. At the height of the BLM demonstrations, Biden suggested police should 'shoot 'em in the leg instead of the heart'. Unlike Trump, he did say Black lives matter, and even called during his campaign to 'stop transferring weapons of war to police forces'. However, as a BLM campaign points out, 'the flow of military equipment to police ... has accelerated under the Biden administration'.<sup>18</sup>

### **New camps for immigrants**

While demonstrators chanted 'Abolish ICE' (the hated Immigration and Customs Enforcement), Biden issued guidance giving their officers more discretion on operations, which the American Civil Liberties Union called 'a disappointing step backward'.<sup>19</sup>

Biden had earlier brought parts of the immigration-rights movement to his side with the proposed US Citizen's Act, outlining an eight-year-long path to citizenship for millions of undocumented immigrants. The act is written with an eye on the declining birthrate and bosses' need for low-paid, steady labor. It pairs that limited amnesty with more high-tech enforcement measures at the border. There has recently been very little movement around this act, and given the present deadlock in the senate, it is probable it will be broken up and more progressive aspects watered down or eliminated.<sup>20</sup>

While repealing some of Trump's vicious anti-immigrant orders and defunding his unfinished wall, the administration has maintained a closed border, expelled over 170,000 people, thrown over 19,000 children into a network of camps, and pressured Mexico to bar migrants on its southern border. 'The United States will continue to enforce our laws and secure our border', said vice president Kamala Harris in Guatemala this June. Opting to channel Donald Trump, not the Statue of Liberty, she told migrants: 'Do not come. Do not come'.<sup>21</sup>

### **False hopes for the environment**

Biden fulfilled his promise to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement as soon as he came into office, although we should remember what a betrayal that inadequate and non-binding agreement was in the first place. While he reversed scores of the over 100 environmental regulations rolled back by Trump, he refuses to ban fracking, which he links to jobs. Biden announced a stop to the granting of new leases for drilling on Federal lands, but that accounts for less than 10 per cent of drilling, and he has issued 500 permits for leases already in the works on Federal lands.<sup>22</sup>

It was a great relief when he cancelled the controversial Keystone XL pipeline after years of highly visible protests. But the massive Line 3 pipeline still being constructed in Minnesota carries the same environmental impact. The planned Sentinel Mainstream offshore oil export terminal would load two million barrels of crude oil a day onto tanker ships in the vulnerable Texas Gulf Coast. If we are to save the climate from disaster, all this oil needs to be left in the ground.

After receiving an F from the environmental Sunrise Movement during the primaries, Biden rethought, and said in 2020, 'I want young climate activists ... to know: I see you. I hear you'. He then unveiled a plan for spending \$2 trillion in his first term to combat climate change and environmental racism by incentivising renewables and energy efficiency. This led Sunrise to campaign for Biden.<sup>23</sup>

As president, Biden pledged to cut emissions by 50 per cent by 2030 (from peak 2005 levels), but then folded the climate plan into an 'American Jobs Plan' of \$2.26 trillion in infrastructure and climate

spending—since slashed in half. While the proposal went beyond previous plans, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez rightly noted that the richest country in the world could afford \$10 trillion for environmental priorities, as outlined in the Green New Deal. But the problems went beyond scale. The administration stressed that the private sector would lead the fight, with government in a ‘supportive’ role. This led to objections from 145 environmental organisations, who demanded the Biden administration help stop ‘the flow of private finance from Wall Street to the industries driving climate change around the world’.<sup>24</sup> The Center for Biological Diversity slammed the ‘industry-friendly plan’ that ‘squanders one of our last, best chances to stop the climate emergency’. They joined other analysts concluding the proposals ‘won’t even come close’ to meeting the stated climate goals.<sup>25</sup> Even the *Economist* concluded that for the incentive-rich plan to succeed, ‘Mr Biden will need a stick amid the feast of carrots’.<sup>26</sup>

General Motors is happy to get Biden’s help in building a new fleet of electric cars (alongside its gas-guzzling SUVs), but neither are working to decrease American car culture, impose emission reductions, or make the necessary mass investment in sustainable public transportation. What Biden will not do is admit that what is good for General Motors—or any of the fossil fuel corporations—is not good for the world.

But further betrayal was to come. When met with Republican objections, Biden fell behind a conservative compromise plan cut to \$1.2 trillion over the course of eight years which dropped the clean energy standard and included no major renewable-power programs. Analysts say it now specifies less for its clean energy projects of electric vehicles and electric grid modernisation than for the fossil-fuel supporting infrastructure like roads, bridges, and airports. This led Alexander Sammon of *American Prospect* to write, ‘Doing nothing would be better than enacting what’s currently on the table’.<sup>27</sup> The Sunrise Movement resumed demonstrating, chanting ‘No climate, no deal’ while blockading the White House at the end of June.

### **An economic rescue?**

While paper proposals on immigration or the environment may not amount to much in the end,

much of the initial surprise at Biden’s actions was due to the sheer scale of proposed spending.

The \$1.9 trillion Covid stimulus package, dubbed by Biden the ‘American Rescue Plan’, passed in March, in a still devastated economy. It included \$1,400 stimulus checks (watered down from a promised \$2,000), hundreds of billions in extended unemployment benefits, a major but temporary child tax credit, and aid to state and local government as well as small businesses. It also provided \$160 billion for the long-overdue national program of vaccination and testing. But this one-off package was still a little smaller than the \$2 trillion CARES package passed under Trump.

Trump’s attempt at quantitative easing—with the Federal Reserve pumping money into the system by buying Treasury and even riskier corporate bonds—largely ended up in bosses’ pockets as executives used it to buy back stocks rather than hire and expand.<sup>28</sup> Biden’s turn was not quite as one-sided in funneling money to the rich, but it too was designed not to take on the big businesses profiting from the pandemic. Over 150 senior executives at major companies wrote to influential congress members urging Biden’s plan be passed.<sup>29</sup>

One part of the original proposal quickly dropped was an increase in the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour. This would have lifted millions out of poverty and was one of the few planks to be permanent, or to take money from the employers. Its elimination without a fight is a warning about the fate of other significant reforms.

While that \$1.9 trillion Covid-19 relief bill was almost entirely deficit financed, the \$2.3 trillion American Jobs Plan was to be paid for. There was to be a small tax increase on people making over \$400,000 a year. While Trump had cut corporate taxes from 35 per cent to 21 per cent, Biden proposed a partial reversal to 28 per cent. This is hardly ‘transformative’, as corporate tax revenues and rates are at their lowest level in generations. It still drew more admiring comments from the establishment left, until it fell apart. Rather than rally popular support, Biden let it be known that he was ‘prepared to compromise’. His overriding aim is still political stability and ruling-class consensus. When successive

offers to water down the plan attracted no Republican votes, he switched to supporting the compromise infrastructure plan that totaled \$1.2 trillion over eight years (with only \$579 billion in new spending) and took out most of the climate measures. This was concocted by a bipartisan handful of conservative senators. It also removes more than \$200 billion to increase affordable housing. Most tellingly, the tax increases for corporations and the rich were completely eliminated. This despite a Quinnipiac poll which found public support for the proposed infrastructure bill was even higher when linked to raising corporate taxes to fund it.<sup>30</sup>

Among the ways it is now claimed the plan would be paid for is through appropriating funds allocated to extended Covid unemployment, which right-wing state governments have blocked, and expanded public-private partnerships and ‘asset recycling’, unfinished Trump schemes for sell-offs and privatisation.<sup>31</sup>

‘Neither side got everything they wanted in this deal’, said Biden, quickly reverting to type, ‘and that’s what it means to compromise’.<sup>32</sup>

With the senate split 50/50 on partisan lines, a few conservative Democrats, like senator Joe Manchin of the coal state of West Virginia, are playing a key role. Progressive congresspeople have largely fallen in behind Biden in the name of unity. While Sanders and a few Democrats have condemned this process and the bill as ‘pathetic’, it is not clear if they will vote against it. AOC joined the Sunrise demonstration outside the White House. But for the most part, neither the progressive congresspeople nor the union leaders have expressed any interest in showing their opposition by mobilising with others outside the supposed halls of power.

### **But will it work?**

From the above we can draw a number of conclusions. Biden has been forced by the crisis to temporarily work at a larger scale than the neoliberal austerity budgets of his immediate Democratic predecessors. But the administration will not be as transformative as much of the hype suggests. Biden remains firmly committed to restoring political ‘stability’ and faith in the status quo. Biden’s largess is not aimed at shifting power or resources to the

working class, but at responding to the needs of capital.

It is also important to note how maintaining the role of the US as the world’s foremost imperialist power is central to Biden’s domestic plans. White House chief of staff Ron Klain said that the country needs to invest more in infrastructure to ‘beat China in the global economy’ and become more ‘globally competitive’.<sup>33</sup> Ashley Smith recently called Biden’s strategy one of ‘Imperialist Keynesianism’.<sup>34</sup>

For now, the question remains: Will this even work on its own terms of supporting stability, profitability, and growth?

### **Limits to Keynesianism**

The positive comparisons of Biden to Roosevelt are based on the mistaken idea that it was the latter’s New Deal that brought the US out of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Roosevelt created jobs through the Works Projects Administration and gave limited support to farmers and the unemployed (though often leaving out Black workers) in the hope of creating demand to improve the economy. He also started the welfare state with the introduction of Social Security. Of course, he was forced to act by a working-class upsurge with both communists and socialists on its left flank. It was often these strike waves that improved workers’ conditions, with the government running to catch up and keep things under control. Publicly, Roosevelt railed against big business bosses in a way Biden will not, but privately he wrote: ‘I am the *best friend the profit system ever had*’.<sup>35</sup>

The New Deal certainly brought welcomed relief for some, but did not end the depression. There was even another dip in the 1937 ‘Roosevelt Recession’. It was the destruction of capital throughout the Great Depression, followed by the employment generated by re-armament, that enabled the recovery. The even greater destruction of capital during World War II established the conditions for the unusually long boom that followed. This became apparent when systemic crises re-emerged in the 1970s and Keynesianism fell out of favor.

In short, it was the highly unusual situation of the long boom (combined with stronger unions) that



created the situation of the Keynesian consensus, not the other way around. Without them, whatever policy changes or emergency measures might be called for now remain part of the so-called neoliberal era.

### **The economy today**

The roots of the problem go way beyond the sharp Covid-19-related economic crisis. Underlying this is the low average rates of profit during the long, anemic recovery from the 2008 recession. While there have been major ups and downs, the Marxist economist Michael Roberts and others have shown an overall decline in profitability over the last half century.<sup>36</sup>

The government interventions of 2008 and 2020 have made many financial and other corporations dependent on state action. They have understandably had to drop some of their instincts for small government and austerity.

In the US, one in five established companies cannot meet their debt servicing costs from current profits, the so-called ‘zombie firms’, surviving on repeated short-term loans. Over 200 of the largest American corporations joined the ranks of zombies during the first nine months of the pandemic, racking up another \$1 trillion of debt. Low interest rates and quantitative easing can keep most ‘too big to fail’ undead from toppling, but will not make them create productive investment or new jobs.

Parenthetically, this is one important part of a bifurcated economy, with uncounted thousands of small businesses permanently going under during the pandemic while a few high-tech giants like Google or Amazon have amassed mountains of cash. Amazon brought in \$5.8 billion more in 2020 than in 2019, with an 84 per cent increase in profit. Moderna Inc. was one of the zombies last November, but now its vaccine has turned four of its bosses into billionaires. As Susan Watkins pointed out, the checks sent out in the American Rescue Plan are dwarfed by the \$4 trillion that accrued to the top 1 per cent in 2020, largely through rising stock prices.

The Covid recession will not be a simple V shape, bouncing back to how things were before, but neither is it an L shape. With initial stimuluses passed, vaccines distributed, and retail and schools reopening,

spending is back up and employment numbers are improving from the abysmal depths of last year but are nowhere near where they were before. And levels of inequality continue to rise. Given the underlying conditions, it is unlikely this growth will continue for too long.

It is not the amount of money available but the opportunities for profit that fuel investment. Propping up zombie firms postpones the crisis until later, when it could be even larger. No one expects the massive emergency spending measures seen under Trump and Biden to keep going. Now the markets are worried about temporary shortages and rising inflation if the spending continues, and also what will happen when the spending stops.

In a reversal of what happens in normal recessions, the Fed’s buying spree meant total commercial bankruptcies were about 15 per cent lower in 2020 than the year before. Under normal capitalist crises, it is the selective bankruptcies and destruction of capital, accompanied by vast misery, that set things up for a future recovery. Now the zombie firms have been left standing like dominoes.

### **Foreign policy**

With the US’s share of world GDP declining over the last fifty years to be rivaled by China and the EU, American imperialism still leans on leveraging its unsurpassed military might.

Biden’s secretary of state Antony Blinken has repeatedly promised to uphold and defend the ‘rules-based order’. This does not include the arms-control agreements still unsigned by the US, its imposition of unilateral sanctions, or the US’s support of Israel’s blatant flouting of international law. More substantially, it begs the question of what rules and who makes them.

Where Trump was fond of saying ‘America first’, with its fascist overtones, Biden has replaced it with ‘America is back, ready to lead the world’.

As the *Foreign Affairs* journal put it: ‘Trump’s “America first” populist nationalism has cut deeply into the foundation of American foreign policy, weakening long-standing alliances, and withdrawing from a range of international agreements and organizations that it founded’.<sup>37</sup>Biden wants to



rebuild alliances to better isolate its rivals.

His budget includes \$715 billion in military spending, \$9 billion more than Trump's already escalated budget of last year. Against the advice of cooler heads, he is going ahead with a bloated multi-year \$1.7 trillion nuclear modernisation program, including plans for a dangerous new intercontinental ballistic missile. This amounts to a new nuclear arms race, this time with China.

Biden's foreign policy (described by an aide as 'China, China, China, Russia') is dominated by worries of a growing China interfering in US global hegemony. One of the frightening parts of the last presidential campaign was watching Trump and Biden try to outdo each other on anti-China rhetoric. Biden has packed his cabinet with old-time China hawks from the military industrial complex.<sup>38</sup> Biden's *Foreign Affairs* article, 'Why America Must Lead Again', argues that the US needs to get 'tough with China' and its subsidised, state-owned enterprises.<sup>39</sup> All his domestic programs have an eye on this inter-imperialist rivalry.

Tellingly, the new administration has so far repealed none of Trump's tariffs against China. They have applied a new style to the economic saber rattling and are working harder to include European and other partners in an anti-China front. While neither the Pentagon nor Biden wants a war with China, Biden has stepped up the US's patrols of destroyers in the Taiwan Strait and run other provocative maneuvers in contested Asian waters.<sup>40</sup>

In announcing the pull-out of US troops from Afghanistan, Biden revealed, 'We have to shore up American competitiveness to meet the stiff competition we're facing from an increasingly assertive China', adding that the shift to new battles would make the US 'much more formidable to our adversaries and competitors'.<sup>41</sup> The Afghan conflict always had more symbolic than material interest for the US, and has become a reminder of the limits of US might in the 'forever wars'. The US is retaining the ability to interfere there in other ways.<sup>42</sup>

As if to demonstrate that the forever wars were not over, a month into his term Biden ordered US airstrikes against facilities in eastern Syria used by Iranian-backed militias, killing a reported twenty-

two people. Again in June, he bombed bases in Syria and Iraq, lowering the bar for the use of US force. Despite expectations, Biden has still not cancelled the inhuman embargos on Iran.

Biden brags of being a 'stalwart supporter' of Israel, despite its crimes. He did not reverse Trump's moving of the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and is not only continuing the \$3.8 billion a year in unconditional military support but also approved the sale of \$735 million in precision-guided weapons to Israel weeks before the May attacks on Gaza. During those attacks, he offered no criticism of Israel's deliberate targeting of civilian homes, media and infrastructure, which killed 248 Palestinians, but repeatedly defended 'Israel's right to defend itself'. The US blocked UN security council statements in support of de-escalating the violence four times, finally calling for a cease fire already brokered by Egypt as resistance grew.<sup>43</sup>

While Biden might prefer a less belligerent tone from Israeli leadership, he and the US establishment will always back up Israel over Palestinian resistance. This is not because of a pernicious influence of an 'Israel lobby' but because of the essential role Israel plays for US imperialism in the oil-rich region. 'If there were not an Israel', Biden explained, 'we would have to invent one to make sure our interests were preserved'.<sup>44</sup>

When it comes to Cuba, as Elsie Labott concluded in *Foreign Policy* after six months, 'Biden's policies are effectively a continuation of Trump's'.<sup>45</sup> While the Obama administration started to roll back economic restrictions on Cuba, the Trump administration made over 200 decisions to revive and strengthen US sanctions, contributing to worsening shortages of food and medicine.<sup>46</sup> 'We stand with the Cuban people', President Biden pronounced after the July demonstrations broke out there.<sup>47</sup> Although eighty house Democrats had called on Biden to repeal Donald Trump's 'cruel' sanctions, Biden added more, and treasury secretary Janet Yellen said in a statement, 'Treasury will continue to enforce its Cuba-related sanctions, including those imposed today, to support the people of Cuba'. US socialists should support working-class anti-austerity demonstrators against government crackdowns in

Cuba and Iran as well as at home while continuing to oppose US intervention. The first step is demanding an end to crippling US sanctions.<sup>48</sup>

### **A socialist alternative**

On Biden's election, the Democratic representative and member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez noted that 'in any other country, Joe Biden and I would not be in the same party, but in America, we are'.<sup>49</sup> Soon after, she was praising his actions and saying how surprised she is that he has taken on a progressive agenda.

During the first 100 days, Ocasio-Cortez, Sanders, and others had their criticisms of Biden's programs, but all fell behind the proposals in congress. Where the conservative Democrat Joe Manchin seems to be a determining factor in an evenly divided senate, Biden has relied on the votes of the left for all his major spending plans, despite their critical tweets about losing the \$15-an-hour minimum wage. The inter-party warfare predicted for after the election has not materialised.

While a handful of members of the Squad—recently elected congress members on the left of the Democratic party—have been critical of Biden's airstrikes in Syria, they did not reach out to antiwar groups or call for protests, and the whole thing was quickly forgotten.

But around the country, huge protests did develop from the ground up over the Israeli actions in the West Bank and the bombing of Gaza in May, and members of the Squad like Rashida Tlaib were even sharper in their condemnation of Biden. Recently, Sanders wrote that 'there will be no bipartisan bill on infrastructure unless there is also major legislation that addresses the existential threat to our planet of climate change'.<sup>50</sup> Socialists should build on these fissures in opposing Biden, and help build movements independent of the Democrats.

The spectacular growth of the DSA in recent years has been a positive development. Some are active socialists in their workplaces and many others active in specific campaigns. But the overwhelming direction of the organisation, coming from its leadership, is to organise local election campaigns

and lobby officials, almost all of them within the Democratic Party. A majority of the DSA are in line with its traditional perspective on pushing the Democrats more to the left. This is a strategy that has been tried over and over again, resulting in the disarming of social and working-class movements.

In a glaring example, the DSA did not orient towards the Black Lives Matter rebellion or pull its weight there. The Black Lives Matter protests over the years, and especially since the murder of George Floyd, have brought something like 26 million people into the streets, transformed people's thinking about race and policing, and revived militancy in many areas. Many DSA members went to the demonstrations, but largely as individuals, not organised to bring a socialist analysis to the fight or to use the example of BLM to transform the DSA in an activist direction.

The DSA, who worked hard for Sanders, were right in not endorsing Biden in the election, even if a majority of their members voted for him against Trump. They were right in seeing a difference between the Democratic mainstream and a candidate who called himself a socialist, and focused on the obscenity of rising inequality. But there is another distinction even more important: that between a conception of change confined to elections and what happens inside bourgeois government and one based on the self-activity of the working class.

A President Sanders, or Cortez, would still be subject to the same pressures and objective limits as Biden is. Without massive pressure from outside Washington as well as in the streets and workplaces, what they could realistically get done might not go much further than what Biden will accomplish.

With the recent diminishing of Covid cases and the spread of vaccination, businesses are opening up and feeling an unusual shortage of workers, Average workers' pay has inched up. If the US left can connect with this mood to build the solidarity and confidence to support industrial action, we will see a power for change greater than the plans of Biden's or the progressive elected officials to his left.

### **Conclusion**

Neither Biden nor his Republican opponents have a solution to capitalism's booms and busts. We could

easily see a return of brutal austerity, either under Biden or his successor. There is a large section of the ruling class, including most Republican legislators, who still look to that method. We are already seeing restrictions on voting rights, as well as the use of racism and even Far-Right methods to divide the working class and repress opposition. A postponed and larger recession could bring the Far Right to the fore. They need to be opposed now.

The US left must work in broader coalitions, working with many still giving Biden a chance, to confront the Far Right when they attempt to intimidate communities and build. But we must also grow the independent, revolutionary left.

We must also be internationalists, opposing US military interventions around the world and the ways Biden's economic plans are tied to world dominance.

At home, police violence continues, economic inequality continues to widen, and as the Covid-19 crisis recedes in the US, the heat waves, floods, fires, and crop failures of climate change are already intensifying. We should fight for each reform, but on a class basis. It is up to socialists to show how these problems arise from a capitalist system which prioritises profits over human needs and how to fight for an alternative. In that fight, Biden, and the Democratic Party, are on the other side.

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