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USA

How should the left relate to Obama?

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There is a broad consensus on leftâ€”from those who actively campaigned on his behalf, through those who sat out the election, to those of us who supported the independent candidacies of Cynthia McKinney and Ralph Naderâ€”that the election of Barack Obama represents an important opening for anti-capitalists and radicals in the US.

The election of an African-American to the highest elected office in a republic founded on white supremacy was, in itself, an important symbolic blow against white supremacy. Even more importantly, Obama's victory was a political and ideological defeat of the right. The 2008 election has raised popular expectations of the possibility of gains for working and oppressed peopleâ€”national health insurance, the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), a renegotiation of NAFTA, the expansion of civil rights for queers, women and people of color, and an end to the imperial adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Linda Burnham, the long-time African-American socialist and feminist, has made an important contribution to the analysis of the Obama victory and the strategic challenges it presents to the US left.[1] Burnham recognizes that the Obama administration has two "bottom lines"â€”the stabilization of US capitalism and the rehabilitation of the reputation of US imperialism with its allies in Europe and Japan. However, "the effective-steward-of-capitalism is only one part of the Obama story." The Obama's campaign brought together a new electoral rainbow coalition of people of color, youth, LGBT people, unionized workers, civil libertarians, and progressive urban professionals. According to Burnham, this new coalition was forged because Obama has moved the Democratic Party to the left:

[Obama has] wrenched the Democratic Party out of the clammy grip of Clintonian centrism. (Although he often leads from the center, Obama's center is a couple of notches to the left of the Clinton administration's triangulation strategies)...

Burnham excoriates those on the left who failed to support Obama's residential campaign. She dismisses these comrades as hopeless sectarians, who rejected Obama because he was "insufficiently anti-capitalist." Those of us who did not campaign for Obama are caricatured as interested only in fighting for demands that directly attack capitalist ruleâ€”abstaining from real, concrete popular struggles.

Burnham concludes that the U.S. left has three tasks in the coming period:

1. The left needs to defend "the democratic opening" created by the Obama victory. This will require a bloc with "centrists against the right" through Democratic Party electoral campaigns. Those leftists who have traditionally rejected participation in the Democratic Party's electoral activity need to abandon their sectarian purity, and work to ensure an increased Democratic Congressional majority in 2010 and Obama's reelection in 2012. This will require the left's participation in voter registration and mobilization and actively campaigning for any and all Democrats in the coming four years.

2. The left cannot abandon the task of "building more united, effective, combative and influential progressive popular movements." The gap between Obama inspired rising expectation of change and a deepening economic crisis "will likely spark new levels and forms of population resistance." The left needs to continue to organize, educate, and agitate against US imperial policies in the Middle East and Persian Gulf, for national health care and pro-working people solutions to the economic crisis, and for a real answer to the looming environmental crisis.

3. We need to build the anti-capitalist left while simultaneously engaging in alliances with centrists in the Democratic Party, and rebuilding vibrant, progressive social movements.

Burnham's claim that Obama has moved the Democratic Party "several notches to the left" of Clinton's administration is very questionable. Even more importantly, Burnham's strategy for left in the age of Obama is self-contradictory. Her first strategic priority—"an alliance with centrists in the Democratic Party to ensure a Democratic Congressional majority in 2010 and Obama's reelection in 2012"—is incompatible with her second and third strategic priorities—"rebuilding movements of social resistance and building an anti-capitalist left."

Is Obama to the Left of Clinton?

There is no question that many of Obama's voters and active supporters were well to the left of either Bill or Hillary Clinton. Especially during the primaries, Obama won support because he appeared to be left of Hillary Clinton on the wars, economic and health care policies, immigration, and a myriad of other questions.

However, even a cursory examination of what Obama himself wrote and said during the 2008 campaign revealed that he was well within the mainstream of the Clinton-Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) wing of the Democratic Party. African-American radicals at the Black Agenda Report (<http://www.blackagendareport.com/>) constantly hammered away at the huge gap between popular perceptions of Obama and his actual politics, as did the left-wing historian Paul Street in his *Barack Obama and the Future of American Politics* (Paradigm Publishers, 2008).

The record of Obama's first "hundred days"[2] only confirms Obama's fundamentally neo-liberal politics. Obama's cabinet not only includes re-cycled Clinton administration figures, but important representatives of major Wall Street investment houses and big Information Technology capitalists. The list of Obama's proposals to revive US capitalism at the expense of working people, people of color, women and queer people are too numerous to catalogue completely. Among the highlights:

- * Obama's plan to restructure the auto industry on the backs of auto workers.
- * The administration and Congressional Democrats waffling on EFCA.
- * Outsourcing the torture of "suspected terrorists" from Guantanamo to other countries.
- * The refusal to discuss revising NAFTA, and backpedaling on global environmental regulations.
- * The embrace of John McCain's proposal for immigration reform, including guest worker programs.
- * The Obama "national health insurance plan" which will provide massive subsidies to private insurers.

As the world economy either continues to stagnate or grows at extremely slow rates in the coming years, we can expect even more pro-capitalist, anti-working people policies from the Obama administration. In the absence of significant movements from below—"built independently, and if necessary, in opposition to Obama and the Democrats"—any hopes of a new "New Deal" will be sorely disappointed.

Nor is it true that those on the left who did not support Obama's campaign are hopeless sectarians who reject any partial struggles that do not directly strike at the heart of capitalist rule. This is clearly not true of Solidarity, the International Socialist Organization, the Greens, or the comrades around Black Agenda Report. While these groups differed about the importance or effectiveness of third party campaigns like that of Cynthia McKinney, none reject struggling for reforms—the end of US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, for single-payer health care, for amnesty and an easy road to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, in defense of affirmative action and social programs. We did not support Obama because neither he nor the pro-corporate, neo-liberal Democratic Party support these struggles.

Can We Build Movements and Work for Democrats?

Burnham strategy of campaigning for the Democrats, and building social movement and the left is impractical. The idea that the left should work to elect pro-corporate Democratic politicians is based on the mistaken notion that electing liberal politicians is the key to winning reforms and fighting the right. This position mistakes cause and effect. It is not the election of “lesser evil” liberals to office that opens the possibility of reforms and progressive politics. Instead it is effective social movements that can force the ruling class and its political spokespersons—both Democratic and Republican—to grant reforms. The experience of successful struggle grows the audience for left-wing, radical politics.

The left cannot lose sight of the fact that capitalism makes the class struggle a zero-sum game. Gains for working people, racial minorities, women, queers, and immigrants come at the expense of capitalist competitiveness and profitability. Reforms are won through militant mass strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins, and the like. Such struggles involve large-scale defiance of the law, and forge ties of active solidarity among working people. This experience of successful struggles for reforms is the basis for left-wing and radical politics among large layers of the population.

Historically, attempts to simultaneously build an alliance with Democratic Party centrists and build social movements have led the disorganization and decline of the movements and a shift to the right in politics. Time and time again—from the CIO upsurge of the 1930s, through the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s, to the movements against the Vietnam War—the decision of the leaders of powerful and potentially radical social movements to pursue an alliance with the Democrats have derailed these struggles.

Electoral campaigns that are not expressions of social movements actually demobilize activists. Electoral campaigns are generally top-down, bureaucratic and seek to mobilize individual voters at the lowest common political denominator. Such campaigns, no matter what sense of satisfaction people gain from seeing their candidate win, reinforce the notion that change comes from above—through the ascendance of “good leaders” to office. Corporate funded Democratic Party election campaigns can not be anything but these sorts of mobilizations.

The dynamics of social movements—where people act collectively, organize democratically from the bottom-up and come to understand the connections between their particular struggle and those of other working and oppressed people—could not be more different from those of election campaigns. Successful social movements promote radicalism because they provide the lived experience of working and oppressed people exercising their collective power.

Once the elections are over, the continued alliance with Democratic politicians requires the leadership of movements of social resistance to trim their demands in ways that will not alienate the “centrists” – watering down their demands for pro-working class, popular reforms in favor of policies that the Democratic politicians and their corporate backers find “reasonable.” Even more importantly, the alliance with the Democrats requires abandoning militant forms of

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struggle—mass demonstrations, sit-ins, strikes and other forms of social disruption.

As the movement leaders water down their demands for concrete reforms and abandon “street heat” for lobbying, electoral campaigns and other forms of “pressure politics,” the movements become weaker. Democrats and Republicans only make concessions to working and oppressed people when compelled to—when the alternative is continued social disruption and conflict. Unable to win new reforms as movement leaders abandon their source of real social power, the gap between popular expectations and real change grows feeding demoralization and disappointment. In the absence of powerful social movements, Democrats and Republicans are under no compulsion to grant reforms and are free to move politics to the right in line with the wishes of their corporate capitalist sponsors.

In recent years, we have seen this dynamic at work in the movement against the US war in Iraq. In the Winter and Spring of 2003, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets demanding no US war against Iraq. Despite the relatively quick defeat of the Saddam Hussein regime, renewed Iraqi resistance to the US occupation continued to fuel anti-war sentiment and activity in the US. Organized opposition to the war emerged among military families, veterans, active duty GIs and the ranks of organized labor at a much earlier stage than during the Vietnam War.

Unfortunately, many of the leaders of the anti-war movement—especially in United for Peace and Justice (UfPJ)—believed that they could harness this burgeoning movement to the efforts of anti-war liberals and centrists to elect Democrats to the White House in 2004 and 2008. During both election cycles, the UfPJ leadership put national demonstrations on the back burner and downplayed both the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and their opposition to the continued US occupation of Afghanistan.

Obama’s election appears to have all but destroyed the national anti-war movement. Significant funders of UfPJ, like Moveon.org, and many activists who had sustained the anti-war movement no longer see any reason to continue anti-war activism at the grassroots. For them, Obama’s election has made the war a “non-issue.” Unable and unwilling to confront the Obama administration as it retreats from its promise to gradually withdraw from Iraqi cities and its fulfills its promise to increase troop strength in Afghanistan, the UfPJ leadership is no longer in a position to act as an organizing center for national anti-war protests. As the anti-war movement declines, Obama is free to maintain US troops in Iraq and pursue new military adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The same pattern is and will be repeated by the leaderships of the labor and social movements in the age of Obama. Not wanting to alienate Obama and the Congressional Democrats, the leaderships of both the AFL-CIO and CTW have done little to publicly oppose the Democrats back-pedaling on the EFCA—with Andy Stern of the SEIU, as always, leading the retreat. The labor officials and many mainstream immigrant rights groups are abandoning the struggle for universal amnesty and a direct route to citizenship for undocumented immigrants in favor of the Obama-McCain plan. Proposals for a single-payer insurance system appear dead in the water, leaving the Democrats and Obama free to implement their “universal health care” program based on massive subsidies for private insurance companies. The list can, depressingly, be multiplied across a wide variety of popular reform issues.

Robert Reich, Clinton’s Secretary of Labor, grasped this dynamic quite well in a 2000 essay[4]:

No administration in modern history has been as good for American business as has the Clinton-Gore team; none has been as solicitous of the concerns of business leaders, generated as much profit for business, presided over as buoyant a stock market or as huge a run-up in executive pay... The Clinton-Gore administration delivered on policies that Republicans failed to achieve—fiscal austerity, free trade, and a smaller government—and Al Gore was in the lead. This confirms a pattern to American politics: Once in office, recent Democratic presidents in an era of business dominance have had an easier time moving right rather than left from where they campaigned since the Democratic base has no one else to turn to.

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The left needs to champion any and all popular demands—but refuse to water down these demands to placate centrists and liberals. We need to reach out to any and all Obama supporters who want to continue the struggle against war, racism, sexism, homophobia and for social justice—reminding them that change has come “from outside Washington”, from mass movements from below. The anti-capitalist left needs to be in the struggle, building organizations and movements that have the power to force those in power to give concessions in the form of concrete reforms that benefit working people in this country and internationally.

If the anti-capitalist left is going to take advantage of the real opportunities of the “Obama moment,” we will need to be rooted in real social struggles. We have already seen important struggles that have seized popular attention and enthusiasm—the Republic workers’ sit-down strike being the most important. We need to build support for every strike and organizing drive among workers, no matter how local and defensive. Struggles against government austerity and cuts to social services are another important arena for building alliances between public employees and working class and people of color communities—like the United Teachers’ of Los Angeles (UTLA) May 15th one day teacher-student-community day of action against budget cuts. Radicals and anti-capitalists need to rebuild the anti-war movement to press for immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Such movements cannot be summoned at will, but are the results of rising popular expectations confronting the realities of capitalist crisis and the intransigence of the ruling class. Today, the movements of social resistance are at a low point. The left needs to help build and support the “militant minority”—those who attempt to organize and struggle even when mass movements are dormant. Such militant minorities can set larger struggles in motion—struggles that can win gains and shift politics to the left. The key to the building of militant minorities and the sparking of larger struggles is the need for political independence from the corporate rulers and their political representatives.[5]

[1] <http://www.ccds-discussion.org/?p=72>. It is also available on ZNet <http://www.zmag.org/znet/viewArticle/20694>

[2] Bruce Dixon, “Obama’s First 100 Days—The Black Agenda Report Card” (April 29, 2009) <http://www.blackagendareport.com/?q=content/obamas-first-100-days-black-agenda-report-card>. Dan LaBotz, “Obama, The Crisis & The Movements” (Solidarity Working Paper, 2009) <http://www.solidarity-us.org/obamaworkingpaper>.

[3] Solidarity’s pamphlet, Bush’s War, the 2004 Elections and the Movements, pp. 16-29 recounts this history in detail. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/pdfs/2004ElectionsPamphlet.pdf>.

[4] “Why Business Should Love Gore,” American Prospect On-Line <http://www.prospect.org/print/VII/17/reich-r.html>)

[5] See Kim Moody, “Socialists Need to Be Where the Struggle Is,” The Nation (March 23, 2009) [<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090406/moody>] and Dan La Botz, “Militant Minorities,” The Nation (March 26, 2009) [http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090413/la_botz]