

TV celebrity Oprah stumps for Barack Obama

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Television talk show host Oprah Winfrey appeared with Democratic presidential contender Barack Obama at several campaign rallies over the weekend in Iowa, South Carolina and New Hampshire.

The events, which attracted more than 50,000 people, including 18,000 in Des Moines, Iowa and 29,000 in Columbia, South Carolina, were aimed at boosting support for Obama—particularly from women voters—and expanding his narrow lead over Hillary Clinton in the January 3 Iowa Caucus, as well as making up his deficit in the other early primary states.

The *Los Angeles Times* called the Des Moines rally a “potent hybrid of pop and politics; of hope and self-hope admonition (‘I am not here to tell you what to think,’ she said. ‘I am here to ask you to think’) peppered with subtle digs at Obama’s main opponent, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York. ‘Experience in the hallways of government isn’t as important to me as experience on the pathway of life,’ she said.”

Telling her audience this was her first venture into politics, Oprah declared, “I’m sick of politics as usual. We need Barack Obama.”

There is a farcical character to this entire performance. Obama is a conventional bourgeois politician who worked his way up the ranks of the Democratic Party by ruthlessly defending the same corporate interests and “politics as usual” as Hillary Clinton.

While expressing tactical differences with Clinton—including over her vote for the Iraq War—the Illinois senator is just as committed to the defense of US imperialism as she is. Most of Obama’s foreign policy and military advisors come from the administration of Hillary Clinton’s husband, including former national security adviser Tony Lake, former

Navy Secretary Richard Danzig and Susan Rice, the former assistant secretary of state for African Affairs.

The spectacle of a billionaire TV celebrity stumping for Obama says a great deal about the debasement of American political life and the over-arching role the media and money—not serious political debate about the needs and concerns of the masses of working people—play in the selection of a US president.

While this phenomenon is far from new, it has been greatly accentuated in the 2008 presidential campaign, which the Center for Public Integrity—publishers of the *Buying of the American President 2008*—estimates could cost \$2 billion.

As the two big business parties and their bought-and-paid for politicians have become ever more disconnected from the real conditions and aspirations of the country’s hundreds of millions of working people, election campaigns have become an exercise in media manipulation, backed up by hundreds of millions of dollars in corporate cash.

Oprah, the head of an entertainment and magazine publishing industry, has a personal net worth estimated at \$2.5 billion. The television networks and she herself have traded on her personal biography—an impoverished child born in rural Mississippi to a poor unwed teenaged mother and later raised in a Milwaukee ghetto, who became the world’s only black billionaire—as well as her charity projects in South Africa and the US, to promote various self-improvement and “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” nostrums to her audience. “The Oprah Winfrey Show” is the highest-rated talk show in US history, reaching 46 million people each week, three-quarters of them women.

With nothing of substance to offer those in attendance at the campaign rallies, Oprah sought to package

Obama as another “American Dream” come true. “I came here because I deeply believe in America,” she told the Des Moines audience. “Let’s dream America anew again by supporting Barack Obama.” In South Carolina, she invoked the memory of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, saying, “We don’t have to dream any more. We get to vote that dream into reality.”

For his part, Obama told the South Carolina audience, “I’m tired of Democrats thinking the only way to look tough on national security is to act like George Bush. We need a bold Democratic Party that’s going to stand for something, not just posture and pose.”

Of course, posturing is the essence of the Democratic Party and of Barack Obama himself. While ruthlessly defending the profit system they pose as defenders of the ordinary working people. That is why, after exploiting deep anti-war sentiment and opposition to the Bush administration to win control of Congress in the 2006 elections, the Democrats have repeatedly voted to fund the war and block opposition to the Bush administration’s attacks on democratic rights and living standards.

In the absence of any substantial political differences between the candidates, the primary contests have become a large-scale marketing campaign, with positions reviewed by focus groups and speeches and statements written and rewritten with an eye to the media and corporate backers.

In this atmosphere, celebrity endorsements are becoming increasingly important. This is particularly crucial in a short primary season, in which the nominations of both parties could be wrapped up as early as March.

The day after the Oprah-Obama tour was announced last month, the Clinton campaign announced Barbara Streisand was endorsing the New York senator’s bid for the Democratic presidential nomination.

According to a recent *New York Times* article, “The spotlight on the two entertainment icons was just the latest flurry of attention for Hollywood backers of presidential candidates. Though Mr. Obama made a splash by picking up the support of David Geffen and Jeffrey Katzenberg of Dreamworks early this year, their partner, Steven Spielberg, and Peter Chernin of News Corp. came out for Mrs. Clinton soon after, scotching any notions that her Hollywood base was deserting her.

“Since then Rob Reiner has added his name to Mrs. Clinton’s camp, while Jackson Browne and Bonnie Raitt have come out for John Edwards. And Chuck Norris, better known for infomercials than butt-kicking movies these days, has surfaced behind the Republican Mike Huckabee.”

The election process has become increasingly divorced from the population, which is moving to the left and has a sincere hunger for political “change.” In the absence of a clear class evaluation of the Democratic Party and the social interests it defends, some people may see in Obama something different, an “outsider.” With a great deal of wishful thinking, they may invest in him—as Oprah urges them to—the hope that he would not turn on them. This, in all likelihood, contributed to the substantial turnout at this weekend’s rallies.

The entire political debate in the US is carefully and narrowly defined in order to exclude any challenge to the existing domination of big business and its two political parties. Any genuine change from the right-wing status quo defended by the both parties will only be possible through the development of an independent political movement of the working class, which consciously fights for a socialist alternative to the profit system and the wars, inequality and threat to democratic rights it produces.



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