Democrats squabble but offer no solution to war and economic crisis

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Monday's Democratic presidential debate in South Carolina, which erupted into a series of bitter personal exchanges between the two frontrunners, Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator Barack Obama, underscored two central aspects of the 2008 presidential campaign.

First, the volatile economic and social crisis of world capitalism is exacerbating political tensions in the United States and creating conditions for a political explosion. Second, the bourgeois politicians of the two main big business parties, the Democrats no less than the Republicans, have nothing to offer the vast majority of the American people, the working class.

The debate was held in the shadow of the stock market convulsions worldwide, touched off by the collapse of the US subprime mortgage market and the more general loss of confidence in the US financial system. Asian and European markets had fallen heavily, while US markets were closed for the Martin Luther King Day holiday—the occasion marked by the Democratic debate in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, sponsored by the Congressional Black Caucus.

The first question posed to Hillary Clinton was how much money her proposed stimulus plan would put in the pockets of the American people. Neither the CNN journalists who hosted the debate, nor the three candidates—Clinton, Obama and former senator John Edwards—took note of the huge disparity between the vast scale of the crisis and the pathetically small countermeasures being discussed in Washington.

Clinton simply reiterated the proposal for a $70 billion stimulus package, with a possibility of an additional $40 billion, which she made 10 days ago. Neither of her rivals bothered to point out the remarkable fact that Clinton's plan was even less than the $145 billion proposed by President Bush on Friday on the basis of discussions with congressional Democrats. Obama has proposed only $75 billion, while Edwards has not named a figure.

This pattern of offering a teaspoonful of reform for an ocean of troubles was repeated in every other social sphere addressed in the course of the debate, including the home mortgage crisis, jobs, health care, racial discrimination and rising economic inequality.

Edwards, for instance, touted his plan for the creation of "green" jobs, in efforts to repair damage to the environment, although the $5 billion he proposes would do next to nothing either to offset the destruction of jobs and the devastation of the environment by corporate America.

Clinton called for a 90-day moratorium on foreclosures, which will have no practical effect on the prospect that 2 million American families will lose their homes to foreclosure and eviction over the next two years. As she emphasized, "It's not a bailout."

This was followed by pure demagogy, as Clinton observed that a big bank caught in the mortgage crisis could "go borrow money from Abu Dhabi or somewhere. If you're a homeowner who has been at the bottom of this incredible scheme that was established, you're left holding the bag."

The next day's *Wall Street Journal* carried a report that Bill Clinton will reap a $20 million personal windfall from the sell-off of his holdings in a firm owned by billionaire Ron Burkle, with huge investments in Abu Dhabi's next-door neighbor, the sheikdom of Dubai.

In substance, the differences among the candidates were relatively small. All propose to address the crisis of affordability and access to health care by promoting private health insurance for the 50 million uninsured Americans, as opposed to any state-based or truly universal insurance program. This would provide a huge profit boost for the giant health insurance companies.

At the same time, all three reject insurance coverage for the 12 million undocumented workers ("illegal aliens"), who would be excluded from the health system until they

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become sick enough to go to an emergency room.

The Clinton-Obama spat broke out after Clinton attacked Obama from the right for allegedly failing to specify a funding source for his proposed $50 billion in new programs. Obama, clearly regarding such a charge as politically damaging to his image as a "responsible" fiscal conservative, retorted that Clinton and her husband, the former president, had made a series of assertions "that are not factually accurate," which he called "the same typical politics that we've seen in Washington."

Clinton went on to attack Obama from the "left," citing comments he made last week about the late President Ronald Reagan, and suggesting that Obama had praised Reagan's policies and ideas. She went on to reiterate a claim made by her husband that Obama, after initially opposing the war in Iraq in 2002, had swung over to agreeing with the Bush administration in 2004 and 2005, while repeatedly voting to fund the war.

This was a piece of political chutzpah, given that Clinton notoriously voted in 2002, along with most of the Democratic congressional leadership, to authorize the war, and has repeatedly defended that vote and subsequent votes to fund the war.

Significantly, however, Obama did not choose to raise her pro-war voting record, and instead brought out an attack on Clinton, clearly prepared in advance, for her role as a member of the board of directors of Wal-Mart in the 1980s, when she was a corporate lawyer in Little Rock and her husband governor of Arkansas.

This led to the exchange of insults and charges that dominated media coverage of the debate and were reiterated by the candidates themselves in appearances on Tuesday.

There is certainly plenty of ammunition for such mutual mudslinging. Clinton, Obama and Edwards, like all the capitalist politicians in the Democratic and Republican parties, are representatives of the corporate elite. They have worked for big business, advocated policies favored by big business, and, from time to time, served as direct shills for big business.

But a "debate" along these lines is a political diversion, and the massive media coverage given to these charges and countercharges serves to degrade public consciousness and cover up the fundamental class nature of both the Democratic and Republican parties. Both parties defend the interests of the financial elite and, above all, its monopoly of economic, social and political power against the working class, regardless of their relations with this or that individual capitalist.

This class unity was expressed in the debate, as it has been consistently in the Democratic campaign, in the positions of the three candidates on the war in Iraq. All three praised the performance of the US military, while criticizing the performance of the White House. None suggested that the invasion and conquest of Iraq was an act of aggression or a violation of international law. All vowed to use American troops in Iraq as necessary to defend American interests, without reference to the right of the people of Iraq to be free of foreign occupation and control. None mentioned the real concerns underlying the invasion—Iraq's vast oil resources and key strategic position in the center of world oil production.

Here again, the unwillingness of Obama to raise or criticize the votes cast by Clinton and Edwards for the war in 2002 must be understood as a calculated strategic decision. Even as both Clinton and Edwards criticized him for one or another of hundreds of votes on obscure amendments in the Illinois state legislature, Obama refrained from citing the most important vote of both Clinton's and Edwards' political careers: authorizing Bush to invade and occupy Iraq.

While claiming in this debate to advocate a more ambitious political program than Clinton, including the achievement of a "60 percent majority," Obama clearly does not want to do so by making an appeal to the vast majority of the American people who support an immediate end to the war. He does not want to be the "antiwar" candidate, not because this would be damaging in the election, but because it could arouse popular expectations that no Democratic or Republican administration could actually satisfy.

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