

Washington Post criticizes populist rhetoric

A shot across the bow against Barack Obama

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In an editorial Sunday the *Washington Post*, the major daily newspaper in the US capital, criticized the leading contender for the Democratic presidential nomination, Barack Obama, for stirring up “class warfare” in his recent campaign appearances.

The *Post* column begins approvingly, saying, “At his best, Sen. Barack Obama is a tribune of hope, an eloquent politician-prophet who unabashedly calls on Americans to remember that ‘we rise or fall as one nation.’ But then, it continues, citing a speech the Illinois senator gave to auto workers at a General Motors factory in Janesville, Wisconsin last week, “[T]here are moments like last Wednesday, when Mr. Obama struck some unusually sour notes in what was billed as a major economic policy address. Yes, there were the trademark invocations of ‘shared sacrifice and shared prosperity.’ But Mr. Obama’s remarks were also tinged with an angrier, and intellectually sloppier, message. We thought we’d heard the last of class warfare and populism when former North Carolina senator John Edwards bowed out of the race. In his speech, Mr. Obama quoted Mr. Edwards approvingly; he then echoed him in implying that he could pay for new domestic programs with an immediate U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and in exaggerating the “millions” of job losses attributable to trade agreements...”

The *Post* editorial followed an article in the *Wall Street Journal*’s weekend edition, entitled, “Democrats’ Attacks on Business Heat Up,” which singled out the same speech for attack. In particular, the *Journal* objected to Obama’s criticisms of trade deals with “plenty of protections for corporations and their profits, but none for our environment and our workers who’ve seen factories shut their doors and millions of jobs disappear.”

The *Journal* noted that “business groups are dismissive of the Democratic attacks,” quoting Randel Johnson, a vice president of the US Chamber of Commerce. “They should be talking about ways to grow the economy such as deregulation and lessening burdens on employers, rather than criticizing them with simplistic politically driven rhetoric,” said Johnson.

Obama, for his own political purposes, is seeking with considerable success to tap into the widespread and deep mood of social anger and political frustration among voters. In his Wisconsin speech he pointed to the widening gap between the wealthy and the rest of the American population, noting that many CEOs were making more in a day that the average worker makes in a year and that a typical family’s annual income had dropped by \$1,000 over the last seven years.

Obama’s tepid proposals for reform in no way challenge the economic monopoly of America’s ruling elite. Far from calling for a radical redistribution of wealth, Obama proposed to provide families with a few hundred dollars worth of tax credits. He calls for a \$6 billion a year infrastructure program—roughly what the Pentagon spends every three days—under conditions in which the American Society of Civil Engineers estimates \$1.6 trillion is needed to bring the nation’s roads, bridges and public buildings into good condition.

To the extent, however, that he makes an appeal to social discontent, no matter how insincerely, he raises popular expectations that neither he nor any other bourgeois politician can meet. Within major business and political circles there are concerns that any appeal to class sentiment—given the level of social tensions in America after more than three decades in which the class struggle has been suppressed—could be the proverbial match being thrown into a powder keg.

Up until now Obama has been given wide latitude by

the media to pursue the Democratic nomination. The *Washington Post* editorial and *Wall Street Journal* article are signs that the political and media establishment may well rein him in. If he fails to heed their advice to tone down the populist rhetoric, the media could turn on Obama like a dime.

There are, however, significant policy and tactical differences being fought out in the contest between Obama and Hillary Clinton. The day after the *Post* editorial, *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen wrote an op-ed piece defending Obama against criticism and arguing he would be more effective than Clinton in refurbishing the international image of the United States and thereby defending the geopolitical interests of corporate America.

In a column headlined “A Realist Called Obama,” Cohen argues that the Bush administration has alienated US allies and squandered opportunities to expand US influence in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. At the same time, he says, Hillary Clinton is too sullied by “her husband’s coterie of the world’s rich and famous, with its dubious deal-making from Kazakhstan to Colombia,” to project the image of a “U.S. renewal.”

Therefore a “realistic view of Obama,” Cohen says, “would be that he is best placed to seize and shape a new world of such possibilities. He has the youth, the global background, the ability to move people, and the demonstrated talent for reaching across lines of division, even those etched in black and white.”

Cohen says Obama would help “rebrand” America. This, he says, is crucial to advance US interests worldwide. Such “rebranding,” Cohen says, was even used by the Papacy, in the late 1970s, with the elevation of a Polish pope, John Paul II, adding, “and Poles then precipitated the fall of the Soviet empire.”

Rejecting arguments about Obama’s inexperience, Cohen says his administration would have a “tough foreign policy team” to confront Iran and other potential adversaries. At the same time, Cohen reassures the foreign policy establishment, the Illinois senator “needs to recall what he once said: ‘No president should ever hesitate to use force—unilaterally if necessary—to protect ourselves and our vital interests when we are attacked or imminently threatened.’”

Cohen makes clear that those pushing Obama’s campaign see him as a useful tool to advance the

interests of US imperialist policy.

The Obama campaign, however, seeks to conceal the contradiction between the interests of his supporters in the ruling elite and the concerns and hopes and expectations he is arousing within the electorate on the basis of vague calls for unity, renewal and change, and his identity as the first African-American with a serious chance to become president.

It is not possible to reconcile the domestic and international interests of America’s financial aristocracy with the needs of the masses of working people. The only means of ensuring a decent future for workers and young people is to break the economic and political stranglehold of the Wall Street banks and large corporations.

Should he win the nomination and be elected, there is no doubt whose hopes and expectations he will disappoint. In the face of the mounting crisis of American and world capitalism, the Democratic Party—the second party of American big business—will place the burden of the economic catastrophe squarely on the backs of working people.



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