

Obama's Texas speech: Populist appeals with reassurances to big business

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On Tuesday night after his primary election victory in Wisconsin, Barack Obama, the frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination, delivered a speech to a crowd of 20,000 supporters at the Toyota Center in Houston, Texas.

In his remarks, which lasted 50 minutes, the Illinois senator appealed to two disparate and, in fact, conflicting constituencies. First, he sought to tap into and channel the mood of social discontent and frustration among voters opposed to the growth of social inequality, war and the irresponsiveness of the two big business parties. At the same time, he gave several signals to corporate America that he was committed to defending its interests in the US and throughout the globe.

In an appeal aimed particularly at young people, Obama presented his campaign as a part of popular social movement, imbued with the same “hope for change” as earlier movements that fought for independence from Britain, against slavery and for trade union and civil rights.

“If we win this election in November,” he said, “then we are going to need your help and your time, your energy, your enthusiasm, your mobilization, your organization, and your voices to help us change America over the next four years.”

The country, he added, needs “leaders who can inspire the American people to rally behind a common purpose and a higher purpose.” His travels throughout the country had convinced him “that change in America does not happen from the top down. It happens from the bottom up.”

In his remarks, Obama deliberately sought to obscure the question of class and the fact that a genuine struggle for significant social change would require challenging America's corporate and financial elite.

Although he made several references to the deteriorating conditions of working people—declining wages, rising medical, education and other living expenses, the shifting of jobs to low-wage countries—this was not presented as the product of capitalism, a social and economic system that benefits the wealthy at the expense of the working class. Instead, he claimed, these conditions were the result of “lobbyists in Washington who used their money and influence to crush good ideas” and “politicians who spend too much time trying to score political points” instead of “trying to bridge their differences so we can get something done.”

If all Americans recognized their patriotic and civic duty, Obama suggested, they could join together to make a better country. The

purpose of his campaign, he explained, was to move “beyond the divisions that have become so commonplace in our politics” and “bridge the gap” not only between racial, ethnic and generational divisions, but between the “rich and poor.” In this way “we can join together and challenge the special interests in Washington,” he declared.

How the monopolization over political life by such “special interests” as the banks, insurance companies and other giant corporations can be broken through unifying working people and the rich—rather than waging a struggle to wrench economic and political power out of their hands—Obama did not say.

In his Houston speech Obama adopted the protectionist and nationalist rhetoric of sections of the trade union bureaucracy, blaming the loss of jobs on unpatriotic companies and trade agreements that supposedly give unfair advantage to China and other countries.

“We're here,” he said, “because there are workers in Youngstown, Ohio who've watched job after job after job disappear because of bad trade deals like NAFTA, who've worked in factories for 20 years, and then one day they come in and literally see the equipment unbolted from the floor and sent to China.”

Because he is seeking the support of Mexican immigrant voters in Texas, Obama aimed his fire at China, rather than the US's NAFTA trading partner Mexico. Nevertheless, on Wednesday he won the endorsement of the Teamsters union, which has been conducting a viciously racist campaign to block Mexican truck drivers from entering the US.

Addressing himself to widespread anger over the growing chasm between the rich and the rest of the population, Obama said, “If you are ready for change, then we can start restoring some balance to our economy.... When we've got CEOs making more in 10 minutes than ordinary workers are making in a year and it's the CEOs who are getting a tax break and workers are left with nothing, then something is wrong, and something has to change.”

It would be understandable if politically inexperienced workers and young people thought such rhetoric meant Obama was an advocate of a serious redistribution of wealth and the expansion of government programs to address the social crisis. He quickly made sure that his backers in the corporate and political establishment knew he had no such intentions. “I believe in the free market,” he insisted. “We don't believe in government doing what we can do for ourselves.”

Obama, like his rival for the Democratic nomination Hillary Clinton, calls for a partial rolling back of Bush's tax cuts and setting the tax rate where it was during the administration of Democrat Bill Clinton. Obama told *Investor's Business Daily* last year that he opposes "confiscatory taxes that get in the way of economic growth." Obama offered a series of tax rebates targeted to low-income workers, families and senior citizens, which would, at most, provide an extra few thousand dollars a year to those living below or at the poverty level.

Ever since former President Bill Clinton announced the "end of the era of big government" the Democrats have preferred to offer tax rebates, not government programs, in order to deflect any accusations that they are "tax and spend liberals." Every reform proposed is therefore predicated on offering subsidies to big business, including the insurance companies in the health care plans offered by both Obama and Clinton.

In the face of the home mortgage crisis—which could threaten up to 2 million people with foreclosure in the coming year and half—Obama offered nothing in his speech but assurances that he would pass laws against predatory lending.

Referring to the decades-long decline in the national infrastructure, Obama said, "If you're ready for change, we can start reinvesting in America, in the cities. We are spending \$9 billion a month in Iraq. We can invest that money in rebuilding roads and bridges and hospitals right here in Houston, building schools, laying broadband lines, putting people back to work, employing young men and young women in our inner cities, in our rural communities. That is possible if you're ready for change."

In fact, Obama is only proposing to spend \$6 billion a year on infrastructure repair—less than the monthly cost of the war in Iraq—and an infinitesimal drop in the bucket compared to the \$1.6 trillion the American Society of Engineers says is required to bring the nation's infrastructure up to good condition.

Addressing himself to skyrocketing tuition costs for college students, Obama said, "We're going to provide a \$4,000 tuition credit [to] every student, every year, but, students, you're going to have to give back something in return. You're going to have to participate in community service. You're going to have to work in a homeless shelter, or a veterans home, or an underserved school, or join the Peace Corps."

An Obama administration not only intends to use hard-pressed young people as involuntary free labor. These plans for mandatory national service would not be restricted to civilian occupations. The proposals of leading Democrats, including Obama, for national service are bound up with attempts to alleviate strains on the military through an influx of new soldiers.

Obama sought to appeal to the antiwar sentiment of his audience, saying, "I will bring this war to an end in 2009. It is time to bring our troops home."

In fact, Obama has pledged no such thing. He had refused to state whether troops would be home by the end of his first term in 2013, and has been an advocate of "strategic redeployment" of US troops in Iraq or elsewhere in the Middle East where they could quickly be sent back in if US interests were threatened.

Lest he be seen as an opponent of American militarism, Obama stressed, "As your commander-in-chief, my job will be to keep

you safe. And I will not hesitate to strike against any who would do us harm. I will do whatever is required."

Throwing a bouquet to the military, he added, "Part of keeping you safe is maintaining the finest military in the world, and that means providing our troops with the proper equipment and the proper training and the proper rotations." Far from calling for a substantial reduction in the Pentagon's multibillion-dollar annual budget—which chews up half of the US government's spending on discretionary programs—Obama advocates an expansion of the number of soldiers and Marines.

He then got to his criticism of the launching of the war in Iraq. "Part of keeping you safe," Obama said, "is also deploying our military wisely. And the war in Iraq was unwise. It distracted us from the fight that needed to be fought in Afghanistan against Al Qaeda. They're the ones who killed 3,000 Americans. It fanned the flames of anti-American sentiment. It has cost us dearly in blood and in treasure."

Obama does not question the legitimacy of the Bush administration's "war on terror," which has been used as the cover for military expansion into the oil-rich territories of Central Asia and the Middle East. Nor does he oppose the use of military force to defend US geopolitical interests against its international rivals. His main aim is to put a new face on US foreign policy by combining military aggression—once again clothed in "humanitarian" and "internationally sanctioned" garb—with diplomacy and economic penetration.

He continued, "Yes, we will hunt down terrorists; yes, we will lock down loose nuclear weapons that could do us harm. But we are also going to lead on climate change. We're also going to lead on helping poor countries deal with the devastation of HIV-AIDS. We're also going to lead in bringing an end to the genocide in Darfur," he concluded, referring to the distressed region of Sudan, one area where Obama's foreign policy advisors plan to challenge China for supremacy in Africa.

Obama has received the backing of leading sections of the corporate and political establishment because he is seen as a useful tool to establish a more popular base of support for the geopolitical interests of the American ruling class. At the same time, his talk of unity, renewal and his status as the first African American with a serious chance to win the US presidency has attracted the support of workers and young people in the first stages of their political awakening and shift to the left.

It is impossible to combine the popular demands for an end to war and militarism with the defense of US imperialist interests. Nor is it possible to put an end to social inequality while defending the "free market" and capitalism. In the end, as the economic crisis in the US and internationally deepens, it will be the expectations of ordinary people that will be dashed, not those sections of big business that are backing Obama.



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