After "Super Tuesday," dead heat in contest for Democratic presidential nomination

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"Super Tuesday," the coast-to-coast series of primaries and caucuses that brought out record numbers of voters in the US two days ago, had been seen until recently as the event that would wrap up the contest for the presidential nomination in both major parties.

With roughly half the convention delegates now chosen, Senator John McCain appears to have consolidated a nearly insurmountable lead in a badly fractured Republican Party, much of whose conservative base views him as anathema.

For the Democrats, however, the struggle between senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama continues, with the two candidates remaining in what amounts to a dead heat.

The nomination race in both parties has, although in somewhat different ways, revealed a state of internal division and crisis. Underlying this crisis atmosphere is a sense of perplexity within the American ruling elite itself as it confronts a deepening economic crisis, the consequences of the Bush administration's disastrous military interventions abroad, and unmistakable signs of a turn to the left within the population as a whole.

CNN reported that out of the 14,645,638 Democratic primary votes cast Tuesday, Clinton won 7,350,238, while Obama received 7,295,400—a winning margin for Clinton of just 0.4 percent.

What these votes translate into in terms of delegates—which in the Democratic primaries are allocated proportionately—was still unclear on Wednesday. The Associated Press (AP) reported that Clinton gained 739 Super Tuesday delegates, compared to 700 for Obama. The AP said that this would give Clinton a total of 1,000 delegates and Obama 902, with 2,025 needed to secure the nomination at this summer's Democratic National Convention in Denver.

Obama's campaign, however, claimed that its candidate had won 845 delegates compared to 836 for Clinton, giving it an overall lead of 908 to 884. (This last breakdown did not include so-called "super delegates"—elected and party officials who are not bound by the primary results).

NBC News had a third projection, giving Obama 840 delegates from Super Tuesday and Clinton 830.

Whatever the case, it is widely anticipated that following primaries scheduled over the next several days—including Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia next Tuesday—Obama will at least temporarily take a clear lead in the delegate count. It seems increasingly likely, however, that the contest will remain unresolved for weeks if not months, and that the outcome may not be resolved until the convention itself.

Underlying the meteoric rise of Obama in the polls are two related but contradictory political phenomena. On the one hand, there is unquestionably a turn by a significant layer, particularly among younger voters, towards his candidacy.

The Super Tuesday contest saw record voter turnout in many states, with the number of Democratic voters far outstripping Republicans. Notable was the leap in the youth vote. The number of under-30 voters quadrupled in Tennessee, tripled in Georgia and Missouri, and doubled in Connecticut and Massachusetts, as compared to the 2000 primaries. Exit polls indicated that Obama was the principal beneficiary of this increased participation by younger voters.

The appeal of Obama, 46, is based on a combination of his own relative youth, his ability to pose as a Washington outsider because of his relatively brief career in the Senate, and the illusion—promoted vigorously by the mass media—that the election of the first African American president would in itself signal a sea change in the political life of the country.

Significant sections of the ruling elite itself have lined up behind his candidacy—a fact reflected in the $32 million donated to his campaign in January as well as by the wave of newspaper and political endorsements he has received in recent weeks, perhaps most significantly that of Edward Kennedy, the second-longest-serving member of the US Senate and leading surviving member of the Kennedy family.

Among these layers of the political establishment, the same qualities that attract elements of a politically inexperienced electorate are seen as a valuable asset in the attempt to extricate US capitalism from its multiple quagmires and find a new means of advancing the interests of the ruling elite. They see in Obama, because of his ethnic background and status as a political newcomer, the possibility of US imperialism presenting a new face to the world and countering the near-universal hostility that eight years of the Bush administration's bullying unilateralism and war-mongering have engendered across the globe.

In a speech at his Chicago election rally Tuesday night, Obama clearly appealed to both of these constituencies. He spoke of his campaign as a "movement" that would bring "change" to America.

Pointing to issues that are radicalizing broad layers of the population, he said that while Washington was "consumed with the same drama and divisions and distractions, another family puts up a 'for sale' sign in their front yard, another factory shuts its doors, another soldier waves goodbye as he leaves on another tour of duty in a war that should have never been authorized and should have never been waged."

At the same time, he presented himself as the candidate who would transcend partisan divisions and unite Democrats and Republicans. Quoting Lincoln's famous affirmation that "a house divided cannot stand," Obama declared, "We are more than a collection of red states

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and blue states. We are and always will be the United States of America." His campaign, he claimed, was capable of uniting "Americans of all parties, from all backgrounds, from all races, from all religions, around a common purpose."

To the extent that Obama represents a "movement," it is one that promotes not any coherent program of reform or social change, but rather a form of American nationalism and civic revival that poses no threat whatsoever to the financial oligarchy that rules the US. At one point, his crowd of supporters interrupted the speech with chants of, "USA, USA."

For her part, Clinton reprised her thinly veiled attack on Obama's relative inexperience and the promotion of her own supposed qualifications, telling her supporters: "We know what we need is someone ready on day one to solve our problems and seize those opportunities. Because when the bright lights are off and the cameras are gone, who can you count on to listen to you, to stand up for you, to deliver solutions for you?"

Predictably, the mass media has focused its attention not on the politics of the race, but rather on its see-sawing closeness. Having gone into the primaries titled in large measure in favor of Obama, in their aftermath there appeared to be some pulling back and reassessing of the situation. As for the vote itself, the results were explained almost exclusively in terms of the race, gender and age of voters, and the relative appeal of the two candidates to these different demographic groups.

What goes largely unexamined are the shifts within the political establishment itself—of which the media is a part—that underlie the contest and lend it its protracted character.

That there are divisions within these circles over the choice between Clinton and Obama is apparent. Both candidates count among their top advisors key state figures.

On Obama's side is to be found Zbigniew Brzezinski, the national security advisor to President Jimmy Carter, who was one of the key architects of the CIA-backed war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan that ultimately spawned the Islamist movement known as Al Qaeda. Also advising Obama are: Anthony Lake, President Bill Clinton's national security advisor and abortive candidate to head the CIA, Larry Korb, assistant secretary of defense under the Reagan administration, and Gen. Merrill "Tony" McPeak, who was appointed Air Force chief of staff by George H.W. Bush and played a central role in the preparation of the 1991 war against Iraq.

On Clinton's side are to be found former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former national security adviser Sandy Berger, as well as Richard Holbrooke, the former ambassador to the UN and special envoy who played a major role in the US intervention in Yugoslavia.

The editors of the influential journal *Foreign Policy* commented on their web site Tuesday, "The truth is, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton agree far more than they disagree, even when it comes to foreign policy." The comment continued, "These are all relatively minor, manufactured differences (though there is definitely some tension between the two campaigns' foreign-policy advisors)."

The political content of these "tensions" remains largely hidden from the people. Undoubtedly, they involve certain differences over the strategic course to be followed by US imperialism, which will inevitably find expression in new eruptions of militarism abroad, no matter which of the current candidates enters the White House.

The "manufactured differences" referred to by *Foreign Policy* are largely over the Iraq war. Obama enjoys a key advantage over Clinton in that he was not in the US Senate in 2002, when Clinton and many other Democrats voted to authorize the Bush administration to go to war against Iraq. While after his election in 2004 he repeatedly voted to fund the war, Obama has been able to use Clinton's record to good effect in discrediting her and appealing to the broad antiwar sentiments among Democratic voters.

Looking forward, however, there are no discernable substantive differences between Clinton and Obama—or for that matter between the two of them and McCain. All of them—the antiwar rhetoric notwithstanding—envision tens of thousands of US troops continuing to occupy Iraq indefinitely.

On the question of the military, the differences between Obama and Clinton are fine indeed. Clinton calls for adding another 80,000 soldiers to the US Army. Obama would add another 65,000 soldiers, together with 27,000 more Marines.

One consideration that undoubtedly weighs on the political calculations of the ruling elite is to what extent the popular illusions generated by the Obama candidacy—however unfounded—can become a liability after the election is over. Clinton's stodgy promotion of her experience—implying merely a reprise of the years her husband was president—may be seen as less problematic.

On the other hand, the generating of such illusions, deliberately pitched to the predominant sentiment of dissatisfaction and desire for fundamental change, may also buy time for a ruling establishment that is confronted with insoluble economic, social and political contradictions.

The most urgent political question confronting working people is to not fall prey to such illusions, which are deliberately promoted not only by the corporate-controlled media, but also by such "left" publications as the *Nation*, which placed on the cover of its current issue a profile of Obama and the headline "The Choice."

Obama's rhetoric about "change" and a new "movement" cannot cover over the profound contradictions of American capitalism. If he were to be elected, the logic of this system and the interests of the ruling social layer defended by the Democratic Party would compel him to swiftly repudiate the aspirations of those who voted for him.

The only way forward for the broad masses of American working people lies in a clear-eyed break with the Democratic Party and the launching of a new mass political movement based on the political independence of the working class and the fight for a socialist and internationalist perspective. This is the alternative fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

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