

Obama speaks in Detroit: rhetoric versus reality

Jerry White
20 June 2008

Barack Obama, the Democratic Party's presumptive presidential nominee, addressed a large rally at Joe Louis Arena in Detroit Monday night. Experiencing one of these events firsthand gives you a clearer picture of the political tightrope the Obama campaign is walking, raising limited expectations with its populist rhetoric on the one hand, while pursuing policies that are entirely acceptable to corporate America and Wall Street on the other.

With its constant and amorphous reference to "change," along with appeals to the idealism of the younger generation, the campaign has attracted significant support. After nearly eight years of war and social reaction under the Bush administration, the idea of "change" is indeed popular.

The Detroit rally attracted some 20,000 people, including large numbers of college students and professionals, along with sections of workers and working class youth. The crowd, many of whom waited hours to get into the arena, was made up of all races and numerous ethnicities. A significant number of people from the metropolitan area's large Arab community attended.

Several people we spoke to, particularly African-Americans, said they wanted to be part of "history" by supporting a candidate who could become America's first black president. Indeed, for many in the audience, Obama's multi-racial background was symbolic of their ideal of a society without racial oppression and ethnic divisions. "Obama represents everyone. He has part of all America in him. That's what America is supposed to be all about," an older white woman worker from Ohio told this reporter.

To a great extent this is the most valuable asset the Illinois senator possesses. He has been groomed by powerful sections of the political establishment to put a new face on American capitalism, both for foreign policy purposes as well as on the domestic front.

Political rallies in the US have long been carefully stage-managed affairs, aimed at preventing any embarrassing and spontaneous intervention from the audience. From beginning to the end the Obama rally was a tightly scripted television spectacle, varying in tone from a rock concert to a sporting event, and even a political rally.

A soulful rendition of the national anthem by a local singer was followed by blaring Earth, Wind and Fire and Stevie Wonder tunes on the PA system and the appearance of popular Detroit Pistons basketball player Chauncey Billups. Young campaign staffers urged audience members to "join the movement," take part in voter registration drives and use their cell phones to receive text message updates on the campaign.

Everything was aimed at creating the image of a popular movement, while the campaign organization maintained tight control. Audience members were given large cardboard letters spelling out "Change" or "Obama" while handwritten signs were discouraged and, according to some audience members, some were confiscated by campaign staffers in order to control the "message," particularly before the television cameras.

Campaign organizers went so far as to handpick the faces that would

appear on camera behind the candidate. In an incident widely reported, staffers invited small groups of professional-looking young men and women of Middle Eastern descent to sit behind the stage, but then excluded two Muslim women because they were wearing headscarves. One was reportedly told that because of the "political climate," it was not good for the woman to be seen on television with Obama.

Hebba Aref, a 25-year-old lawyer from the Detroit suburb of Bloomfield Hills, later told Politico.com, "I was coming to support him, and I felt like I was discriminated against by the very person who was supposed to be bringing this change, who I could really relate to."

Michigan's Governor Jennifer Granholm, the first official to speak, did her best to promote the fiction that the Democratic Party was leading some kind of insurgency against the reactionary policies of the Republican administration. "I'm excited by change" and "mad as hell about what Bush has done to Michigan." She, of course, accepted no responsibility for the social disaster in the state nor placed any blame on the Democratic Party, which has controlled Detroit—the nation's poorest big city—for decades.

Former vice president and 2000 presidential candidate Al Gore gave the major introductory speech, endorsing Obama and calling on Democrats to overcome the bitter divisions during the primaries and rally around the party's selection. He posed the upcoming election as a historic opportunity to save the planet from environmental destruction, end the war in Iraq and defend constitutional liberties.

A telling exchange with the audience came after Gore's insistence that the campaign be conducted with "respect for the Republican nominee" was met by loud boos. "No, no!" implored Gore, who referred to Obama's insistence that John McCain's record of "bravery in war and as a prisoner of war" in Vietnam made him deserving of respect.

As the WWSW has recently noted (See "McCain and Vietnam: Revising history to pave the way for new wars"), such praise is not only a short-term electoral tactic, i.e., protecting Obama from Republican attacks for his lack of military experience, but also a justification and preparation for new war crimes.

Gore compared the Obama campaign to the 1960 presidential candidacy of John F. Kennedy. "I know what [Kennedy's] inspiration meant to my generation and I feel that same spirit in this auditorium tonight building all over this country this year. I feel your determination after two terms of the Bush-Cheney administration to change the direction of our country."

The mythologizing of Kennedy and the comparison to the Obama, a consistent theme of the campaign, has had some effect, particularly among young people who have little knowledge of history.

One young man, in his late 20s, told this reporter after the rally that he was supporting Obama because he "reminded me of Kennedy." He was unaware that the younger generation's enthusiasm in response to Kennedy's election in 1960 had largely been transformed by the latter part of the decade into disaffection and bitter opposition to the Democratic Party for its role in directing the war in Vietnam—a war that Kennedy had

played a key role in escalating.

Gore concluded by presenting Obama as the harbinger of a great political renewal in America. “Many people have waited for some sign that our country is awakening once again. How will we know when a massive wave of reform and recovery and regeneration is about to take hold and renew our nation? What would it look like if such a change were beginning to build? I think we might recognize it as a sign of such change if we saw millions of young people getting involved for the first time in the political process. ... If we saw it coming, we’d recognize it by the words ‘Hope’ and ‘Change.’” It could be seen, he said, in the rise of a new young leader who said, “We’re not a red-state America [Republican] or a blue-state [Democratic] America. We are the United States of America.”

Leaving aside the false and recurring claim that Obama would be the great uniter of all races and social classes, this demagoguery is aimed at concealing the fact that far from being a vehicle for social change, the Democratic Party has provided the Bush camp with the key support it has needed at every critical juncture over the past eight years. This has included Gore’s own capitulation to the hijacked election of 2000 and support for the so-called “war on terrorism,” which facilitated the launching of two wars and the undermining of democratic rights.

Obama’s own speech was punctuated with efforts to tap into the anger of workers and young people over falling living standards, social inequality and the continued war in Iraq. He has sought to win the presidency, Obama said, because he felt, what Dr. Martin Luther King had referred to as the “fierce urgency of now.”

Across the country, he said, there was a “quiet desperation,” referring to struggling single mothers; 47 million people without health insurance; young people unable to afford college; and workers losing their jobs, along with their pensions, health care and dignity. “Children in Chicago and Detroit,” he continued, “have lost all hope that they will be able to choose their own destiny. The same disaffection exists in the barrios, Indian reservations and the hills of Appalachia,” he said.

He said he would restore hope in the American dream and close the gap between those who had benefited from the economy and those who now felt their children’s lives were going to be worse than their own.

John McCain proposed to expand Bush’s tax breaks, Obama said, which had only benefited the rich, with the greatest benefits going to those making \$2.8 million a year. The Illinois senator turned to the audience and asked who was making that much money. He was answered with howls and cheers.

Of course, he could have more honestly answered his own question by raising his hand and asking Al Gore to do the same. Obama made \$4.2 million in 2007, while Gore, who left the White House with assets of around \$2 million, is now estimated to be worth \$100 million, having invested \$35 million in hedge funds last year alone.

Obama speaks for and is part of the social layer that has enriched itself over the last several decades at the direct expense of the working class. Before the rally a \$2,300 a plate fundraiser was held for Obama, where the candidate hobnobbed with the upper crust in a city where one of out three people live below the official poverty rate and social misery thrives at Third World levels.

His populism is aimed at corraling the popular political shift to the left within the confines of the Democratic Party and its pro-capitalist politics. He received loud applause when he remarked that the Iraq War was costing \$10-12 billion a month and “that money could be spent in Michigan putting people back to work.”

Obama made it clear he was not against American militarism, the occupation of Afghanistan, and Bush’s so-called war on terror. “We are a nation at war, in fact, two wars. One that we have to win against the ruthless killers that attacked us on 9/11, against al Qaeda and bin Laden, a war in Afghanistan that has to be won. We are also in a war in Iraq that

should never have been authorized and waged; a war that has cost us thousands of lives, billions of dollars and has not made us safer.”

Operating entirely within the framework of the interests of American capitalism, both within the US and internationally, Obama proposes measures that involve only tactical adjustments from the Republicans’ policies, generally of a cosmetic character.

On the domestic front, he promotes the illusion that the interests of Wall Street can be reconciled with the interests of “Main Street,” i.e., working people, by improving the global position of US corporations through a combination of tax cuts and subsidies. (See “Populism and plutocracy: Obama speaks to the *Wall Street Journal*”).

Obama’s talk about closing the gap between “winners and losers” in the economy is entirely empty. He proposes a relative pittance in tax rebates and government spending to encourage private investment, an amount that would have no significant impact on the monumental social need that exists. In other words, the “change” constantly referred to turns out to be nothing more than “small change,” mostly nickels and dimes, for the working class, while the wealthy elite continue to pocket vast personal fortunes.

The large turnout at the Detroit rally is a contradictory phenomenon. There were, of course, the professional representatives of the Democratic Party, a layer of minority businessmen and various corporate types, and no doubt union officials. There were also, however, large numbers of young people, professionals, and a section of workers, many of who are going through a first experience with politics and are still susceptible to illusions in liberalism, identity politics and the Democratic Party.

In a good many cases, people know better, but are caught up in wishful thinking and media hype and convince themselves that anything would have to be better than Bush and the Republicans.

Tombi Stewart, a young Detroit Public Schools teacher, told us, “Just look at the audience; it’s a microcosm of what America is. There are certain institutions that make decisions—to build jails, to go to war—to keep us down. Some people say that Obama will just be a black mask to keep things as they are, but I hope he’ll speak for African-Americans and make it better for all of us.”

This reporter pointed out that more than three decades ago, black mayors had been installed in several major cities, including Detroit, and that they defended the interests of big business just like their white counterparts. The real division in America was over class, not race, I said.

“It’s true,” she admitted. “Even in Africa there is a certain class of Africans who have been the rulers and others the servants. That has happened all throughout history.

“I just hope that Obama will spark a change,” she sighed.

In this election campaign the WSWS will patiently explain that this is not the case.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact