Democratic convention meets with Obama campaign in crisis

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The first two days of Democratic National Convention have been dominated by a sense of foreboding and unease, with mounting concern that the Obama campaign is losing ground in the polls, and that the divisions opened up in the primary contest between Obama and Senator Hillary Clinton have not healed, but rather have begun to fester.

The Obama campaign has suffered a palpable loss of political momentum which elaborate attempts at media stagecraft—the candidate's trip to the Middle East and Europe, the hype over the vice-presidential selection process, the convention itself—have so far failed to reverse. Polls show a tightening race between Obama and his Republican rival Senator John McCain, despite overwhelming popular hostility to the Bush administration and the Republican Party.

There has been complete silence in both the media and the Democratic Party over the real source of this decline, which has little to do with negative advertising or the supposed prowess of the Republican "attack machine." In fact, the falloff in backing for Obama is sharpest among those layers—the young, self-described liberals, and those most hostile to the Iraq war and the Bush administration—who were among his most enthusiastic supporters in the primary campaign.

Obama's lead in the polls has dwindled as he turned sharply to the right following his primary victory over Hillary Clinton. His campaign faltered not because of a Republican media blitz—Obama continues to greatly outspend McCain—but because of the Democratic candidate's demonstrative efforts to disassociate his campaign and prospective presidency from any semblance of progressive change.

The Democratic presidential nominee voted in the Senate for increased wiretapping powers for the FBI and NSA, downplayed his past criticism of the war in Iraq, positioned himself as the most fervent advocate of military escalation in Afghanistan, and echoed the Bush administration's saber-rattling over the conflict between Russia and Georgia. He said little about the continued deterioration of the US economy, reiterated his support for fiscal austerity policies that effectively rule out any significant program of social reform, and prostrated himself before the religious right in a joint appearance with McCain at a fundamentalist church.

None of these positions came as a surprise to his most important backers, billionaires like Warren Buffett and the Pritzker family (Hyatt Hotels), other sections of the financial aristocracy and the Democratic Party establishment. But Obama's emergence as an utterly conventional and conservative bourgeois politician—culminating in the selection of Senator Joseph Biden, a 35-year veteran of Washington, as his running mate—has deflated whatever there was of a popular mobilization, however manipulated and misguided, behind his campaign.

Obama was never the candidate of a genuine oppositional movement against the political establishment. On the contrary, his candidacy was carefully planned by a section of that establishment, disaffected from the foreign policy of the Bush administration, particularly in Iraq, and the support for it from Democratic congressional leaders like Clinton and Biden.

The Obama camp had no fundamental or principled differences with the use of war as an instrument to secure the interests of US imperialism. Its criticism of Bush was that he had waged war ineffectively and to a certain extent needlessly, and that the administration's obsessive focus on Iraq had become a diversion from broader global concerns. Equally important, by defining his principal difference with Clinton in terms of her original vote to authorize the war in 2002, Obama was able to make at least a limited appeal to antiwar sentiment, and channel the mass opposition to the war back into the straitjacket of the Democratic Party.

The divisions over Iraq were of a tactical character. In the past several months, however, a bipartisan consensus has emerged, embracing virtually the entire political establishment, Democrat and Republican, that the Bush administration escalation in Iraq has been a "success," and that the US occupation has been at least temporarily stabilized at a level of violence acceptable to Washington (if not to the Iraqi people themselves).

Now that the positions of Obama and Clinton on Iraq have largely converged with those of Bush and McCain, what accounts for the seemingly intractable divisions in the Democratic Party itself? As the WSWS explained during the primary voting, while political differences over foreign policy provided the initial impetus for Obama's challenge to the presumptive frontrunner, the Obama-Clinton contest began to split the Democratic Party along race and gender lines.

This was not merely due to the fact that the two finalists were the first African-American and the first woman with a significant chance of winning the presidential nomination of one of the two major bourgeois parties. More fundamental was the historical transformation of the Democratic Party over the past 40 years, the abandonment of any, however modest, class-based political

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appeal, and the emergence of identity politics as its central organizing principle.

In the last great crisis of American capitalism, the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Democratic Party under Roosevelt forged a coalition embracing more far-sighted sections of the ruling class, the trade unions, including the newly formed industrial unions, the professional middle classes, small farmers and urban middle-class layers, from shopkeepers to intellectuals.

While American liberalism fervently supported the profit system, it advanced in that period a reform agenda calling for a restructuring of American capitalism in a way that would curtail the power of big business, make a limited redistribution of wealth and achieve a semblance of greater socio-economic equality.

This program ended in shipwreck in the 1960s, when the Democratic Party had to choose between social reform and the war in Vietnam, and it chose, as it had to as a capitalist party, the defense of imperialist interests abroad at the expense of the working class.

More fundamentally, the protracted decline of American capitalism's world position, throughout the 1960s and 1970s undermined the core Democratic promise of rising living standards and expanded social services for all. The party sought to refashion itself instead as the dispenser of privileges to elite layers among various racial and ethnic constituencies and among women, while the living standards of the broad mass of working people, African-American and Latino as well as white, women and men, stagnated or declined.

The embrace of identity politics was based on an evasion of the fundamental class issues in American society. No Democrat politician today could denounce the pernicious influence of the financial oligarchs, as Roosevelt did, without suffering immediate political oblivion.

This obsessive focus on secondary issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, etc., was on display throughout the Democratic convention, where speaker after speaker sought to avoid the overriding social fact of deepening economic inequality, the polarization of American society between a relative handful of multi-millionaires and billionaires, and the vast majority who work for a living.

The suppression of class issues is demonstrated in the very structure of the Democratic Party. On Monday, for example, there were 16 meetings of Democratic caucuses based on various forms of identity—blacks, women, religious, Asian-American, Native American, Hispanic, gays, seniors, youth, rural residents, even an "ethnic coordinated caucus." There is a "labor" caucus, consisting of highly paid union bureaucrats whose interests are diametrically counterposed to those of the workers. The working class, which comprises the overwhelming majority of the American population, is unrepresented and virtually unmentioned.

Typical was the speech of Michelle Obama on Monday night, where the candidate's wife engaged in a demeaning effort to disavow any hint of a critical attitude to American society, portraying herself as an ardent patriot and presenting her family's rise in social status as the personification of the "American dream."

In decades past, the "American dream" would have been defined as the belief in each generation of working people that their children would live better than themselves. But in Ms. Obama's formulation, the "American dream" means that blacks as well as whites, women as well as men, have the opportunity to join the privileged elite and escape the working class—as she and Barack Obama did.

Perhaps the clearest expression of this rejection of any class appeal was Obama's selection of former Virginia governor Mark Warner as the convention keynote speaker. It is the first time that a Democratic Party convention keynote speech has been delivered by an individual possessing a nine-figure personal fortune.

Warner's speech Tuesday was both soporific and reactionary. He began by celebrating his own success as a cell-phone capitalist (his wealth is estimated at over $250 million). It was naturally impossible for such an individual to make any genuine connection to the conditions of life facing hundreds of millions of working people.

Appealing to economic nationalism—as did many of the speakers Tuesday—Warner warned that the Bush administration's policies were opening the door to international competitors of the United States, particularly China, to seize the world's economic leadership. Warner declared that his biggest criticism of Bush was his failure to demand sufficient sacrifices from the American people in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks—an argument that suggests that a Democrat in the White House would take such steps as slashing social spending to boost the military and reintroduce the draft.

There were similar themes in Hillary Clinton's speech late Tuesday night, which concentrated on an appeal to her own supporters to rally behind Obama as the Democratic presidential candidate. Although overlaid with a greater degree of populist demagogy, of the type that characterized the last few months of her unsuccessful campaign for the Democratic nomination, Clinton placed her criticism of Bush's economic policies in a nationalist framework, citing the export of jobs to other countries, rather than the destruction of jobs by giant corporations. And she fully embraced identity politics, presenting herself—the multimillionaire wife of a former president—as the personification of the struggle of generations of women against oppression.

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