The Obama-McCain debate: Right-wing politicians agree on bailout and militarism

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Friday night's presidential election debate between Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John McCain demonstrated that there is no choice in the 2008 presidential election within the confines of the official two-party system. Two candidates stood facing each other, espousing nearly identical positions in defense of Wall Street and American militarism which would, in any other country in the world, immediately identify them as representatives of the ultra-right.

Both agreed that all possible resources must be mobilized to prop up Wall Street, regardless of the cost to working people. Obama declared, "We have to move swiftly and we have to move wisely," although he did not explain why speed was required to save the banks and speculators, but not to stop foreclosures, layoffs and the destruction of working class living standards.

McCain praised the bailout talks in Washington, saying, "We are seeing, for the first time in a long time, Republicans and Democrats together, sitting down, trying to work out a solution to this fiscal crisis that we're in."

Two days earlier, President Bush went on national television, to all but declare the bankruptcy of American capitalism, warning of an "imminent collapse" of investment banks, "the gears of the American financial system ... grinding to a halt," "a financial panic" and "a long and painful recession."

Obama and McCain presented no such dire picture, and evaded answering the question of what impact the $700 billion bailout of Wall Street would have on their future policies should they win the election. The discussion of the financial crisis, which occupied the first half of the debate, seemed intended more to put the audience to sleep than to define the candidates' positions.

On foreign policy, both candidates agreed that American imperialism has the right to deploy its military forces worldwide, attacking and invading whatever country the "commander-in-chief" deems necessary. Obama said that the lesson of Iraq was "we should never hesitate to use military force, and I will not, as president, in order to keep the American people safe, never hesitate to use military force."

The two candidates clashed mainly over which countries should be targeted for American aggression, with Obama favoring Afghanistan and Pakistan, while McCain remained focused on Iraq. Both threatened Iran and Russia. The *Washington Post* noted the consensus on foreign policy approvingly in an editorial published Saturday, declaring, "Barack Obama and John McCain don't differ as much as they may lead voters to believe."

The most notable feature of the debate was the extent which Obama, marketed as the proponent of "change," declared his agreement with McCain. After an extraordinary week of upheavals in the financial markets, Obama had every opportunity to go on the offensive against his Republican opponent. Instead, he repeatedly declared McCain was "absolutely right" on one point or another—a statement that recurred 11 times in the course of the debate.

It is worth citing some of these declarations of agreement, for they demonstrate the completely conventional and right wing political orientation of the Obama campaign.

On the financial crisis: "I think Senator McCain's absolutely right that we need more responsibility."

On spending: "Senator McCain is absolutely right that the earmarks process has been abused."

On taxation: "John mentioned the fact that business taxes on paper are high in this country, and he's absolutely right."

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On the federal budget: “John is right, we have to make cuts.”

On Iraq: “Senator McCain is absolutely right that the violence has been reduced as a consequence of the extraordinary sacrifice of our troops and our military families.”

On threatening military action in Pakistan: “John ... you’re absolutely right that presidents have to be prudent in what they say.”

On Iran: “Senator McCain is absolutely right, we cannot tolerate a nuclear Iran.”

Obama thus acknowledged that he and McCain share a common framework, which is the defense of the interests of the American ruling class, both at home and abroad. If he had been debating a socialist candidate, he would have had no agreement on anything.

Given this level of consensus, the media obsession with which candidate “won” the debate takes on an unreal, even absurd, character. The decisive factor in the election is not the popular response to the candidates, but the attitude of the financial and political establishment, which has swung behind the Obama campaign in the last few weeks, particularly as Obama took the lead in supporting the bailout of Wall Street.

There are two interpretations for Obama’s behavior: First, a considerable degree of political cowardice in the face of McCain’s strident defense of militarism and big business. Obama seemed abashed, and allowed McCain to interrupt him almost at will.

But given the highly contrived and orchestrated character of presidential election debates, it is likely as well that Obama was following a script—and there were reports that the Democratic campaign made a deliberate decision to include statements of agreement with McCain at regular intervals to present Obama as a seeker of bipartisan consensus.

This is more than a matter of electoral tactics, but expresses the fundamental character of the Democratic Party, an imperialist party of big business that nonetheless is assigned the role, in the American political system, of appealing to working people, minorities and the oppressed in general.

This is what gives the declarations of leading Democrats such a half-hearted, tongue-tied character. Obama & Co. are always tripping over their own internal contradictions, as they seek to posture as the “people’s party” while reassuring the ruling elite as a whole and making conciliatory gestures to the ultra-right.

It was noticeable in the course of the debate that Obama avoided any sort of populist appeal in his comments on the economic crisis. His remarks were targeted, not to the mass audience, but to the most critical constituency that his campaign must seek to satisfy: the major financial interests and their media representatives.

While McCain has occasionally indulged in demagogic sallies against Wall Street greed and corruption, the Democrats have made it clear to big business that they will not seek to mobilize or stir up in any way their nominal “base” among working people.

Obama does not represent an alternative to the right-wing program of the American ruling elite, but rather a cosmetic change to permit this program to be continued and even escalated. An alternative to the policies of imperialist war, economic austerity and attacks on democratic rights will only come from below, from the political mobilization of working people, independently of and against the two-party system, and on the basis of a socialist program.

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