

Obama in Michigan: economic nationalism and “reformism” without reforms

Jerry White
10 September 2008

Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama campaigned in Michigan Monday, appearing in Flint and suburban Detroit. This reporter covered the latter event at North Farmington High School, which attracted an audience of some 1,200 people—including high school students, better off sections of the working and middle classes, and local Democratic Party officials.

The event was marked by the enormous disconnect between the devastating social reality in the state—which has the highest unemployment rate in the nation—and the tepid and thoroughly inadequate “reforms” promoted by Obama, which amount to various tax credits and a multi-billion dollar bailout of the auto industry.

In the course of the evening, Obama appealed to popular opposition towards the Bush administration and the Republicans, denouncing McCain’s remarks about the economy being “fundamentally sound.” At the same, he was careful not to raise popular expectations too high, well aware that if elected he will undertake a policy of austerity and sacrifice in order to try to stave off a collapse of the American financial system.

This is what gave his criticisms of McCain such a half-hearted character, much to the frustration of many in the audience who were clearly looking for an aggressive attack against the Republicans. At one point Obama said he would not “get mean” in talking about McCain and his vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, saying they both had “compelling biographies.” Many in the audience shouted, “Get mean, get mean,” but Obama rejected any effort to expose the extreme right-wing character of the Republican Party.

Obama’s speech made clear that he is trying to fashion a new ideological basis for the struggle of American capitalism against its foreign competitors and imposing the sacrifice needed for the expansion of US militarism around the world. This is content of his calls for “national unity,” celebration of the US militarism and declarations about “national service,” with its hidden implication that an Obama administration would resume the military draft.

The North Farmington High School rally was filled with the same reactionary symbolism one might find at a Republican event, albeit with a slightly more multi-cultural and populist

twist. A massive American flag was draped on the gymnasium wall. The audience was led in the pledge of allegiance to the flag and then a local singer gave a soulful rendition of the national anthem.

The event began with an invocation by a black preacher, who bowed his head in prayer, saying, “Dear God, thank you for intricately shaping a candidate who by his very nature unifies all classes, colors and ethnic groups. Those who listen to his voice—whether the have-nots or have-mores—can believe that we are one nation, not a black nation, not a white nation, but one nation under you, God.”

In his opening remarks, Obama claimed, “In my travels around the country, I realize that the American people share core values of family, neighbors, love of country, faith and hard work.”

Some months ago, it should be recalled, Obama presented a different picture of working-class America, saying he had witnessed widespread “bitterness” and “anger” over declining living standards and growing unemployment. Religion and xenophobia, he acknowledged, had long been promoted to distract attention from those politically responsible for such social misery.

Obama long ago apologized for partially lifting the lid on this truth about American politics. Lacking any serious policy to address the social crisis, moreover, he has resorted to the same reactionary nostrums about faith, family and patriotism—no doubt also believing that this might help him win more votes in working class areas.

Insofar as he addressed the destruction of jobs and working class living standards, Obama framed this entirely from the standpoint of economic nationalism. He promoted the idea that American workers should unite with their bosses behind a program of increasing rationalization and downsizing and intensification of exploitation in order to strengthen the position of American capitalism on the world market. At the same time, he made it clear there was no prospect of regaining any of the decent-paying jobs that have been destroyed.

Indicating his support for \$50 billion in federal loan guarantees to the auto industry to help General Motors, Ford and Chrysler convert to alternative energy vehicles, he said, “We have to invest in and retool the auto industry so hybrid

cars are made, not in Japan, not in South Korea, but right here in Michigan and the US.”

“A retooled auto industry,” he said, “will be so efficient that not all new jobs are going to be in automotive. We’re not going back to the past but forward to the new economy of the 21st century. The jobs will be in alternative fuels, high-speed rail, but not all of that is going to happen overnight,” he added.

He complained that the Olympics had highlighted the fact that China was building new roads, bullet trains and ports. “Why can’t we have high-speed trains connecting Detroit and Chicago?,” asked, while offering to spend only a few billions dollars on infrastructure that has been neglected for decades.

Economic nationalism and class collaboration are the guiding principles of the trade union bureaucracy, which is fully behind the Obama campaign. Much of the audience at the Flint meeting was made up of officials of the United Auto Workers and other unions. The UAW’s “American-first” and pro-company policies have led to a disaster for the working class. In Michigan, alone, nearly half a million jobs have been destroyed in the last decade, while in the name of being more “competitive,” the UAW has negotiated near-poverty wages for the next generation of auto workers.

Significantly Obama made no mention of the massive redistribution of wealth that had taken place in the US over the last thirty years under both Democratic and Republican administrations. Nor did he cite the decision to bailout the mortgage giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, a measure that will secure the interests of big investors while doing nothing to relieve those facing foreclosures and the devastating decline in the value of their homes.

Obama denounced McCain for continuing the policies of the Bush administration, saying the Republican candidate “will continue tax cuts for the wealthiest” while he “doesn’t want relief for ordinary people.” Obama said he would give tax cuts 95 percent of the American people and deductions “so you can pay a little less on your mortgage.”

He also did not mention his comments on ABC News the day before when he said he would reconsider his proposal to rescind Bush tax cuts on the wealthy because of the economic downturn. Given his commitment to “fiscal responsibility,” expanding the US military and paying for the bailout of corporate America, Obama, if elected, would quickly shelve even his meager proposals.

While many in the audience wore T-shirts or carried signs with the “O” in Obama filled with a peace symbol, Obama made clear his determination to use military might to protect the interests of American imperialism around the world. He reiterated his position that Iraq had been a distraction in the “war on terror,” and pledged to escalate the war in Afghanistan, where scores of civilians have recently be slaughtered by US bombs and missiles. He reiterated that he was a “stalwart supporter of Israel,” making no mention of widely reportedly plans that Israel was preparing a military

strike against Iran in the run-up to the November elections.

In one of the few questions allowed from the audience, a woman said she was tired of “politics based on the fear” and complained about the trampling of democratic rights under the mantle of the war on terror.

While Obama made a few perfunctory remarks about civil liberties, while focused his response to accusations at the Republican National Convention that he was concerned with “reading terrorists their rights” rather than waging the war on terror. “You can’t read them their rights if you don’t catch them,” he said, repeating his position that should have made “more progress” catching Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. “If you have a terrorist in your sights, take them out,” he said. “Anyone involved in 9/11, take them out,” he repeated.

Many in the audience appeared genuinely taken aback by these chilling remarks, which were greeted with dead silence rather than applause.

Although many in the audience, particularly sitting in the roped off sections, were Democratic officials and functionaries, there were many in the stands who were motivated by a sincere hatred for the Bush administration and a desire to end the war and address the social crisis. In the case on many of the high school students, their lack of political experience left them susceptible to vague promises of “change.” As for older workers who should know better, many are clinging to the hope—despite all evidence—that Obama will represent a break from the reactionary policies of the last eight years.

In reality, Obama is advancing a right-wing program, which varies, only in the most narrow and tactical sense from that of his Republican opponent. Either way the election goes, the working class will make an experience with the Obama campaign and the Democratic Party, which will further underscore the need to break with this party of big business and war and develop a politically independent movement, based on a socialist and internationalist alternative.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact