

Election Day 2008: The class issues

4 November 2008

Today is Election Day. By the time the polls close this evening as many as 140 million people will have cast their ballot to select a new president and determine the composition of the US Senate and House of Representatives. While tens of millions of Americans go to the polls, the outcome of the election will be awaited with intense interest by billions of people all over the world. This is not because they view the US president as the “leader of the free world,” a title bestowed by the media on the occupant of the White House. Rather, it is because they know from bitter experience that the American president, as leader of the most powerful imperialist country, is capable of pursuing policies that will wreak havoc in their lives and for the planet as a whole.

The sense of hope and fear is particularly acute on this Election Day, within and beyond the borders of the United States. It is not an exaggeration to state that George Bush is despised as no other president in American history. This is a status which he has worked hard to achieve and which he richly deserves. He is, as a man and as a political figure, the most despicable human being who has ever occupied the office of president. And that, in a country that has had even an out-and-out gangster like Richard Nixon in the White House, is saying a lot.

Within the United States, the last eight years are viewed by tens of millions as a nightmare. The sordid experience of the Bush administration is captured in the words and phrases with which it will always be associated: “Abu Ghraib,” “rendition,” “preemption,” “water-boarding,” “Guantánamo,” “Katrina,” “sub-prime mortgages,” and, most recently, “bailout,” “financial meltdown,” and “foreclosures.”

The desire for change is deep and widespread. Growing poverty, home foreclosures, layoffs, a dysfunctional health care system, a disintegrating public education system, and a physical infrastructure collapsing from years of neglect, combined with an unprecedented concentration of wealth at the very summit of society, are fuelling a popular mood of anger, frustration and bitterness. The election is being held, moreover, under conditions of an economic crisis without precedent at least since the Great Depression, and in the midst of two major wars.

As voting begins, the opinion polls indicate that Barack Obama is significantly ahead of his Republican opponent, John McCain. It is possible that Obama and the Democratic Party will win the election. However, the Democratic candidate has made only a limited appeal to popular discontent, one, moreover, which avoids any indictment of the social and economic interests which have determined the policies of the Bush administration.

This limitation, which flows from the logic of the class interests represented by Obama and the Democratic Party, is the principal

vulnerability of the Democratic campaign. The continuous appeal of the Republican Party to racism and social backwardness, which remain significant factors in the reactionary political climate fostered in the United States, could really be fought and beaten back only on the basis of a direct appeal to the class interests of all working people.

In keeping with the norms of American politics, where no mention of the working class is permitted and the great mass of working people must be labeled the “middle class,” Obama has avoided any class appeal. To the extent that he has sought to capitalize on popular anger, he has to an extraordinary extent done so on the basis of his individual persona. The Democratic Party has sought to exploit the expectation that the election of Obama, by virtue of his personal background, will substantially change the direction of America. This belief is widely held not only in the United States but throughout the world. It is, however, an illusion.

The real basis of politics in the United States as in every other part of the world is not race or ethnicity, but class. To recognize this fact and draw the appropriate conclusions is not to ignore or deny the sordid history of injustices carried out against African-Americans. However, what has sustained racism in the United States has been the class structure of American society.

Senator Obama, no less than Senator McCain, is a representative of the capitalist class. His ethnic background does not change this fact, any more than the personal background of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas or former Secretary of State Colin Powell has imparted to their politics a progressive character.

Were he not committed to the defense of the interests of the financial and corporate aristocracy within the United States and internationally, Obama would not be the presidential nominee of the Democratic Party. The *World Socialist Web Site* is not making a revelation when it points out that powerful forces in the American political and financial establishment have rallied behind Obama precisely because they believe that he, after eight disastrous years of Bush, will help restore the battered image of American imperialism. The hundreds of millions of dollars that Obama has received from the business community testify eloquently to the social and financial interests that he represents.

Despite all the campaign rhetoric, the differences between the candidates are far narrower than presented by the two campaigns and the media. The differences between them do not reflect different class interests, but rather disputes within the ruling elite over certain aspects of foreign and domestic policy. The underlying unity was demonstrated in practice by the joint Obama-McCain endorsement of the bailout of Wall Street.

Given the peculiar characteristics of the American political

process, which focuses obsessively on the personalities of the different candidates, little attention is paid to the objective forces, not to mention class interests, that will determine the policies of the next administration, regardless who wins the election.

Not surprisingly, the clearest assessment of the situation that will confront the president-elect on November 5 (assuming that the election will be decided this evening or in the early morning hours of Wednesday) has appeared in the press outside the United States. Martin Wolf, economic columnist for the *Financial Times* in London, offered the following somber assessment in a column published last week:

“JPMorgan expects shrinkage this quarter at an annualized rate of 4 percent in the US, 3 percent in the UK and 2 percent in the euro zone. It is forecasting 0.4 percent global growth in 2009, with advanced countries shrinking 0.5 percent and emerging ones growing at 4.2 percent.

“Given the near-disintegration of the western world’s banking system, the flight to safe assets, the tightening of credit to the real economy, collapsing equity prices, turmoil on currency markets, continued steep declines in house prices, rapid withdrawal of funds from hedge funds and ongoing collapse of the so-called ‘shadow banking system’, these forecasts even look quite optimistic. The outcome next year could be far worse.”

Warning against those within the financial elite who oppose government measures to stave off a collapse, he writes:

“Yet the idea that a quick recession would purge the world of past excesses is ludicrous. The danger is, instead, of a slump, as a mountain of private debt—in the US, equal to three times GDP—topples over into mass bankruptcy. The downward spiral would begin with further decay of financial systems and proceed via pervasive mistrust, the vanishing of credit, closure of vast numbers of businesses, soaring unemployment, tumbling commodity prices, cascading declines in asset prices and soaring repossessions. Globalization would spread the catastrophe everywhere.

“Many of the victims would be innocent of past excesses, while many of the most guilty would retain their ill-gotten gains. This would be a recipe not for a revival of 19th-century laissez faire, but for xenophobia, nationalism and revolution. As it is, such outcomes are conceivable.”

In recent days the *New York Times* and its Nobel laureate economic columnist Paul Krugman have warned of a global deflation, similar to that of the 1930s.

Obama’s response to this crisis has been to maintain the fiction that the interests of all social classes—the rich and the poor, Wall Street and Main Street—are identical. He has called for austerity and made clear that the American people will have to make “sacrifices.”

What will come after the election is more layoffs and plant closures and further cuts in social services. The *Wall Street Journal* reports a sharp increase in utility shutoffs as companies crack down harder on customers unable to pay their bills on time.

The second major determinant of the policies of the next administration is the international situation confronting American imperialism. The war in Iraq will continue. To the extent that Obama talks about drawing down US troops in Iraq, it is for the

purpose of sending them to Afghanistan. Nor are these the only areas for which US policy makers, behind the backs of the American people, are drawing up war plans.

While the attention of the population is focused on the election and the economic situation, Obama and his advisers are, according to an account published yesterday in the *New York Times*, engaged in high-level and secret discussions relating to the preparation of a military strike against Iran.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes the candidates of the two major capitalist parties. We reject the politics of the “lesser evil.” Indeed, the invocation of “the lesser evil” has long been utilized to conceal and evade the class interests that form the basis of American politics.

Moreover, as a matter of principle, we maintain that to give support means to accept political responsibility for what the recommended candidates do. We reject entirely the opportunist and cowardly politics of “left” and liberal tendencies such as the *Nation* magazine which engage in deception and outright fraud in order to conceal the class interests that underlie the Obama campaign, thereby leaving the working class unprepared for what lies ahead.

Nor do we call for support to the campaign of Ralph Nader or a host of other Third Party candidates. This is not because these parties “can’t win,” but because they do not advance a principled political and programmatic alternative, based on socialist policies, to the two major capitalist parties.

Jerry White and Bill Van Auken are the presidential and vice presidential candidates of the Socialist Equality Party. We call on supporters of the SEP and readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* to cast a class-conscious vote by writing our candidates’ names on the ballot. Such a vote is a means of expressing opposition to a corrupt and reactionary two-party system that is controlled by and serves the interests of the capitalist class.

It is also a commitment to continue the political struggle for socialism after Election Day--above all by joining the Socialist Equality Party.

Political Committee of the Socialist Equality Party
To learn more about the SEP click here.



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