

One week since the election of Obama

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It is one week since the decisive election victory of Barack Obama. There has been a wealth of commentary both in the US and internationally on the significance of the election. With few exceptions, what has characterized the media response is a curious combination of self-congratulatory assertions that the election has redeemed America in the eyes of the world and set the stage for a new era of progressive change, and warnings that the Obama administration must be prepared to say “no” to its popular constituency and pursue a conservative and bipartisan course. In many cases, these themes have been voiced by the same commentator and in one and the same article.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board wrote on the outcome of the vote, the overwhelming victory for Obama and the Democratic Party marked a major change in the political life of the United States. It was a sweeping popular repudiation of the Bush administration, the Republican Party and nearly three decades of right-wing domination of American politics.

What drove the election outcome, above all, was the desire of millions of working people and youth, under conditions of a deepening recession and growing social distress, to effect a reversal of economic policies devoted to the enrichment of the financial elite, bring an end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a foreign policy based on militarism, and halt the attacks on democratic rights. All of the policies that were repudiated by the electorate are essentially bipartisan in character. But under conditions of a state-enforced monopoly of two corporate-dominated parties, the drive by working people to express their socio-economic interests could only take the form of a victory for the Democrats.

The sentiments and political views animating the broad mass of voters, however, are only one side of the political equation. The selection and election of Obama is also the response of the most conscious sections of the American ruling class to the crisis of American imperialism. A growing section of the political establishment had come to view the foreign policies of the Bush administration, especially after 9/11, as reckless, ill-considered and doomed to fail. The outcome of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the decline in the global influence of American imperialism under Bush increased the constituency within the ruling class for a recalibration of US foreign policy and a change in the country's leading personnel. Others within the corporate and political elite viewed with increasing anxiety elements of the administration's economic policy—its massive budget and trade deficits, the

weakening of the dollar and the growing challenge from old economic powers in Europe and Japan and emerging economic powers such as China and India.

To deal with the protracted and visible decline of American capitalism, whose iconic banks and industrial firms are verging on collapse, these sections sponsored and financed the campaign of Obama, with an eye to installing a more popular and at the same time entirely reliable representative of the class interests and global aims of American imperialism.

American industry may be all but bankrupt, but America remains the world's leader in marketing. A well-oiled and lavishly funded marketing campaign was launched to give American imperialism a new brand, in the form of the young, African-American senator from Illinois.

The first week of the Obama transition has already begun to illuminate the social contradictions within the so-called Obama coalition. Here it is sufficient to point to a few key developments. First is the appointment of Rahm Emanuel as Obama's chief of staff. This right-wing congressman and millionaire investment banker has already made clear that his main job is to rein in the more liberal elements in the Democratic majorities in the House and Senate. Asked point blank by the *Wall Street Journal* whether “liberal majorities” in Congress would “have their way” with President Obama, Emanuel replied, “Barack Obama can stand up to them.”

He went on to state that the country was not “yearning for an ideological answer” and that Obama would not seek “to satisfy any constituency or ideological wing of the party.”

Both the *Journal* editorial board and leading neo-conservative William Kristol congratulated Obama on his choice of Emanuel.

Similar remarks were made by some who supposedly represent the “ideological wing” of the Democratic Party. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, for example, declared one day after the election that Obama would have to “govern from the middle.”

This theme—the need for a bipartisan and “centrist” course, the claim that America remains, despite the mass repudiation of right-wing politics a “right-center” country—has dominated the press commentary of the past week.

Then there was Obama's press conference on Friday, where he answered questions with his team of economic advisers lined up behind him. Most prominent among the collection of bankers, corporate CEOs and former government officials was Paul Volcker, the former Federal Reserve Chairman who engineered the recession of the early 1980s that was used to undermine the militant resistance of the working class to plant closures and wage cuts and break the power of the unions.

On Monday, Obama made the traditional visit to the outgoing president in the White House. However, this ritual was moved forward in order to reassure the financial markets that the taxpayer bailout of the banks and financial firms would continue without interruption despite the change of administration.

Virtually without exception, liberal commentators and "left" political tendencies have ignored or downplayed all such indications that Obama intends to pursue a conservative course and reject anything that suggests a more democratic and egalitarian restructuring of American capitalism. This has been facilitated by their interpretation of the election almost entirely in racial terms. The obsession with race, which for 40 years has been the mainstay of liberal politics in America, has, if anything, been accentuated in the aftermath of the election.

This is despite the fact that the election was a powerful refutation of the portrayal of American working people as racist, backward and hopelessly in the thrall of religion and conservative "values"—a political myth that assumed the status of an unassailable truth after the reelection of Bush in 2004.

Typical is the column in the Sunday *New York Times* by Frank Rich, which begins, "On the morning after a black man won the White House, America's tears of catharsis gave way to unadulterated joy." Rich notes approvingly that the election disproved what "we've been told by those in power... that we are small, bigoted and stupid—easily divided and easily frightened." He then makes the significant admission that "We heard this slander of America so often that we all started to believe it, liberals most certainly included."

It is obvious that Rich, speaking for liberals in general, employs the same superficial impressionism, buttressed by an obsession with race, that led him to buy into the old illusions in order to embrace a new one—that Obama represents a new dawn of democracy and progress in America.

It is legitimate to recognize that the vote for Obama would not have been possible were it not for the fact that social attitudes in America have changed profoundly over the past 50 years—something that was for all practical purposes denied by Rich and his fellow liberals. Nor is there any doubt that the movement to the left of broad sections of the working class overcame any hesitations linked to the lingering influence of racial attitudes.

But there is a disturbing undercurrent in the response of Rich and

other liberal and "left" commentators to the election. For them, it is all about race, and not about the social sentiments, policy questions and class issues that actually determined the outcome. They define the election as the victory of a black man, not the result of a wave of popular opposition to Bush and a Republican administration that lifted a candidate into the White House who happens to be black.

This indicates that Rich and others of his political stripe will be prepared to tolerate policies that they considered unacceptable under Bush when they are carried out by Obama—which was precisely the point of the promotion of Obama by his establishment backers. To the extent that Obama is able to exploit his identity to politically disarm workers, his administration becomes all the more dangerous to the social interests of the working class.

What happens when the working class begins to fight for its social interests and comes into conflict with an Obama administration, when the class nature of the Obama administration is revealed and workers come forward to oppose it? Then the class basis of liberalism as a political standpoint of a section of the bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeoisie will be revealed, and its fundamentally reactionary nature exposed.

Whatever the initial exhilaration over Obama's victory, the deepening economic crisis will sooner rather than later make itself felt in the lives of tens of millions of Americans and begin to clarify the class interests that underlie the new administration. This will set the stage for a new period of class struggle in the United States.

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