

Obama's "left" cheerleaders and the right-wing transition

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The increasingly right-wing character of the transition being organized in preparation for President-Elect Barack Obama's inauguration in January has elicited expressions of concern from the middle-class "left." This milieu, whose views are reflected in publications like the *Nation* magazine, played a significant role during the election campaign in promoting Obama's candidacy and the Democratic Party as vehicles for fundamental political and social change.

The past ten days have served to expose the real content of Obama's "change you can believe in." First came the appointment of Rahm Emanuel, the right-wing Democratic congressman and millionaire investment banker, as chief of staff. No sooner was he tapped for the post than Emanuel pledged to the *Wall Street Journal* that the Obama White House would "stand up to" the strengthened Democratic majorities in Congress.

Then came news that the transition teams at the Pentagon and CIA were headed, respectively, by supporters of the Iraq war and CIA veterans who were complicit in policies of torture and extraordinary rendition as well as in fabricating the phony intelligence used to promote the war against Iraq.

On Friday, persistent reports that Obama has tapped Senator Hillary Clinton whom he pilloried on the campaign trail for her vote in favor of the Iraq invasion, for his secretary of state, and that he intends to retain Robert Gates, the champion of the "surge" in Iraq, as defense secretary, were joined by reports that he will shortly announce his choice of New York Federal Reserve President Timothy Geithner for treasury secretary. The news that one of the key architects of the government bailout of the banks will head Obama's Treasury Department sent stock prices on Wall Street soaring.

These developments, combined with the coterie of bankers and Washington insiders that is heading Obama's transition, and the army of ex-Clinton-officials-turned-corporate-lobbyists who are trooping back into official Washington, are providing a preview of the administration that will take office just two months from now.

What is taking shape is a government that represents continuity with the last eight years far more than change. Its personnel and the policies with which they are identified spell a continuation of wars of aggression abroad and domestic policies that defend the interests of America's financial elite at the expense of the broad mass of working people.

The conditions are being created in which illusions fostered by Obama's rhetoric about "hope" and "change" will be dashed and a

period of tumultuous struggles, driven by the economic crisis, will inevitably arise.

Of course, there are illusions and there are illusions. Millions of American working people went to the polls November 4 and voted for Obama with the aim of putting an end to two criminal wars and to express their anger over policies at home that have led to unprecedented social inequality and the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression.

Then there are those who make a political profession out of deluding themselves and fostering illusions among others in order to support the Democratic Party and the profit system which it defends. This is the political specialty of the *Nation*, which has long been a central organ of left liberalism in America.

Its columnists are finding the job of peddling illusions in Obama more difficult in light of the appointments and statements surrounding the transition, and are expressing concern. At the heart of their worries is the fact that Obama is moving sharply and openly to the right even as the crisis gripping American capitalism is creating conditions for a sharp turn to the left among American working people, students and youth.

Nation columnist Tom Engelhardt makes the observation in a piece published Wednesday that, given the appointments thus far, "you might be forgiven for concluding that Hillary Clinton had been elected president in 2008." He cites a *Politico.com* article reporting that "thirty one of the 47 people thus far named to transition or staff posts have ties to the Clinton administration, including all but one of the members of his [Obama's] Transition Advisory Board."

Nonetheless, Engelhardt goes on to describe Obama himself as "nothing short of a breath of fresh air" and voices the "hope that, as the good times roll (or even in bad times) for Democrats, he keeps his equilibrium amid the usual Washington consensual pressures."

Similarly, Robert Scheer, the former *Los Angeles Times* columnist who writes for the *Nation*, voices concerns over the role of Obama advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski in setting policies pointing toward escalating confrontation with Russia. "It is disquieting in the extreme that some of his [Obama's] closest advisers are inveterate hawks with a history of needlessly provoking tension with the Russians during the Cold War days," writes Scheer. He goes on to express anxiety over the reported offer to keep Gates, a former Brzezinski aide who has supported a hard line against Russia, as Pentagon chief.

"I know, Obama is not yet in office," writes Scheer. "I voted for

him with enthusiasm in part because he does seem to have transcended the preoccupations of the cold war. But as a buyer, I have to beware of those unrepentant Democratic hawks now hovering."

The essential conception expressed in both columns is the same: that in the aftermath of the election, the "progressive" Obama is in danger of falling under the sway of right-wing aides and advisers, shifting him off the path of "change."

This is nonsense. Obama's entire candidacy was crafted by these "advisers" as a means of effecting tactical changes in the pursuit of US imperialist interests while masking the right-wing character of the political agenda that they now intend to foist upon the American people.

To anyone who paid serious attention to what Obama was saying and doing in the course of the election campaign—his vote to expand domestic spying and grant immunity to the telecoms, his statements threatening war against Iran and Pakistan and vowing undying fealty to Israel, his admission that his Iraq withdrawal plan would leave a "residual force" of tens of thousands of troops in the country, while its pace would be set by commanders on the ground, and his support for the \$700 billion Wall Street bailout—the character of the transition should hardly come as a surprise.

The thrust of the political campaign being waged by the likes of the *Nation* is to subordinate any emerging struggles by American working people to the incoming Obama presidency.

This is spelled out by another long-time *Nation* columnist, Frances Fox Piven, in a November 13 article entitled, "Obama Needs a Protest Movement." While hailing Obama's victory at the polls as a "rightful cause for jubilation," Piven takes a somewhat more clear-eyed approach to the president-elect's character.

"Let's face it: Barack Obama is not a visionary or even a movement leader," she writes. Rather, she describes him as a "skillful politician" who "has to conciliate ... in realms dominated by big-money contributors from Wall Street, powerful business lobbyists and a Congress that includes conservative Blue Dog and Wall Street-oriented Democrats." It's not Obama's fault, she adds, "It's simply the way it is."

One could not ask for a clearer statement of the prostration of these not-so-left liberal circles before the corporate-controlled two-party system.

Piven suggests that, Obama's limitations notwithstanding, popular expectations of change upon his taking office can create conditions for "authentic bottom-up reform."

She goes on to draw a parallel between Obama's election and that of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932, making the point that FDR took office based upon a conventional, conservative Democratic Party program. Referring to the mass strike movements and social struggles of the 1930s, however, she argues that "the rise of protest movements forced the new president and the Democratic Congress to become bold reformers." Protest, she suggests, can produce similar results from Obama.

There are two obvious problems with this argument. The first is that the objective position of American capitalism is far weaker than it was in the 1930s, when Washington remained a creditor nation, enjoying trade surpluses, while US manufacturing

dominated the global markets. It was from this position of relative strength that Roosevelt was able to grant limited reforms in the face of such mass, and at times semi-insurrectionary struggles as the Toledo Autolite strike, the Minneapolis general strike and the San Francisco general strike in 1934 and the subsequent sit-down strikes in the auto industry.

The present crisis is the outcome of the protracted decline of American capitalism, which is massively indebted, has seen a decades-long decimation of its manufacturing base and whose financial system has become the destructive engine of a deepening worldwide slump. There is no modern New Deal forthcoming from an Obama administration.

Moreover, the one implemented by Roosevelt more than 70 years ago failed to overcome the Depression. That was achieved only through a second world war that annihilated millions of people. With the political assistance of the trade union bureaucracy and the Stalinist Communist Party, however, the Roosevelt administration did succeed in staving off the threat of socialist revolution.

That period holds stark lessons for the coming struggles of the American and international working class. Unless working people are able to advance their own, socialist alternative to capitalism, the "solution" to the present crisis will be found along similar lines of a re-division of the world market through mass slaughter.

This is what makes the politics of the *Nation* and similar political tendencies so pernicious. The struggle against war and deepening attacks on social conditions can be advanced only through a decisive break with the Democratic Party and the political illusions promoted by tendencies such as the *Nation*.

Not by mere protest and pressure, but only by building its own political party, armed with a socialist program aimed at uniting workers in a common international struggle against capitalism, can the working class advance its own progressive solution to the catastrophe that the unfolding capitalist crisis threatens to unleash upon humanity.

Bill Van Auken



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