On the eve of Obama’s inauguration

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The inauguration of Barack Obama has become the occasion for a tidal wave of media-orchestrated delusions and stupidities designed to overwhelm and chloroform public consciousness. The junior senator from Illinois is being compared, and is comparing himself, to everyone from Abraham Lincoln to Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Martin Luther King, Jr. An observer of the wall-to-wall coverage of the events leading up to Obama's swearing in as president might think he was witnessing nothing less than the second coming.

Such events are always repellent to those who retain their critical faculties. But the hoopla inevitably exhausts itself and what remains after the litter is swept away is reality—in this case the coming to power of the man who will preside over the most reactionary state in the world, under conditions of an unprecedented crisis of American and world capitalism. The policies of the Obama administration will be determined not by media image-making or hollow rhetoric, but by the imperatives of the crisis and the social interests which Obama represents.

Obama has already indicated that his policies will in all essentials be a continuation of those of the outgoing administration, perhaps in a somewhat more skillfully packaged form. He has surrounded himself with individuals associated with imperialist crimes and financial scandals, including Bush's Pentagon chief, Robert Gates, who presided over the military "surge" in Iraq and opposed any timetable for withdrawing US troops from the devastated country.

Obama has devoted the months since his election—a sweeping popular repudiation of the Bush administration's policies of war, repression and social reaction—to conciliating and reassuring the Republican right. The *New York Times* reported Monday that Obama has regularly consulted his defeated opponent, Republican Senator John McCain, allowing the virulently pro-war senator to vet his nominees for top national security posts. The *Times* notes that, according to South Carolina senator and McCain associate Lindsey Graham, McCain has told colleagues "that many of these appointments he would have made himself." McCain was Obama's guest of honor at his pre-inaugural dinner Monday night.

To the extent that there is any basis for the self-congratulatory tone of the media hype, it is the fact that Obama is the first African-American president. This is undoubtedly a milestone. But its significance is vastly eroded by the fact that in the current historical circumstances it is impossible to associate his ascendancy with a revival of policies that promote social equality.

It is many decades since the American ruling class took the civil rights movement in hand and, on the basis of identity politics and affirmative action, integrated the black upper-middle-class into the political establishment. Obama represents the apotheosis of the politics of race, gender, etc. that were used to evade and bury the more fundamental social and class issues in American society, while the conditions of the working class, including the vast majority of African-Americans, steadily deteriorated.

It should not be forgotten, amidst the officially sanctioned celebration, that the last two secretaries of state, who presided over the crimes of Iraq and Afghanistan, were African-Americans.

It is also necessary to recall that Martin Luther King, Jr., whose memory is being cynically exploited, was the representative of a great struggle for social equality and a vehement opponent of American imperialism. In the months before his assassination, King publicly denounced the War in Vietnam and increasingly insisted that the central issue in America was not race, but class, a conviction which he sought to act upon by initiating the "poor people's march." During that period he began to raise the need for a labor party and a break

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with the Democratic Party.

It is impossible to attribute any such principles to Obama, who has never been associated with a popular struggle and who spent much of his adult life working his way up within the Illinois Democratic Party machine, where early on he was groomed for high political office. From the outset, his presidential effort was organized and financed by powerful factions within the US political and corporate establishment, which saw in him an instrument to refurbish the image of the United States after the disastrous blows to the prestige and position of American imperialism during the Bush years.

It is not necessary to refute in detail the absurd comparisons of Obama to Lincoln or to the far lesser figure of Roosevelt. However, it should be noted that in the utterly superficial and ahistorical analogies that are being conjured up, there is no consideration of the explosive manner in which the crises they confronted developed. Notwithstanding Lincoln's oratorical brilliance (to which Obama's canned speeches bear no resemblance) the contradictions he faced erupted within five weeks of his inauguration into civil war.

Within a year of Roosevelt's inauguration, he faced massive social struggles by the working class, including general strikes in Toledo, Minneapolis and San Francisco, followed shortly by the formation of the CIO and sit-down strikes that assumed a quasi-insurrectional character.

The most pathetic and despicable role in the glorification of Obama is being played by liberals and "lefts" associated with the *Nation* and similar publications. Through their campaign for his election and their portrayal of him as the leader of an insurgent movement for "American renewal" they are facilitating the implementation of right-wing policies that would otherwise be politically unfeasible, including the expansion of the war in Afghanistan, trillions more in handouts to the banks and cuts in bedrock social programs such as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

It would, however, be a mistake to believe that the combination of deception and self-inebriation of this opportunist milieu is shared by the working class. It lives in the real world of surging unemployment, poverty and homelessness. Even to the extent that workers have expectations that Obama will realize their aspirations for genuine change, this will not stop them from entering into struggle. And events will, sooner rather than later, shatter their illusions and clarify that the new government is no less their enemy than the old one.

For our part, we have not forgotten that four years ago the accepted wisdom was that George W. Bush bestrode the world like a colossus. Many of the "lefts" who today praise Obama as the new messiah were the most deeply convinced that Bush was omnipotent.

The real issue that dominates the inauguration of Obama is the fact that he assumes the presidency in the midst of a historic crisis of American capitalism that is compounded by the aggressive global agenda of US imperialism. After January 20 comes January 21. The mounting contradictions of American capitalism abroad and the sharpening social divisions at home will produce something for which none of the power brokers or their "left" appendages are prepared—the reemergence of the American working class.

The inauguration of Barack Obama ushers in a period of unprecedented social and political upheavals.

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