

New York Times columnist worries over Obama's "credibility gap"

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New York Times editorial page writer Bob Herbert penned a column Tuesday entitled "Obama's Credibility Gap." Writing a week after the Democrats' electoral debacle in Massachusetts, Herbert, a liberal supporter of the president, expresses concern over growing popular opposition to the administration. He warns that its new rhetoric about "fighting for the middle class" will do little to dampen anger over the economic crisis and the president's embrace of Wall Street.

Herbert begins by asking, "Who is Barack Obama?" If Americans don't get the answer soon, or don't like the answer, he warns, "the president's current problems will look like a walk in the park."

What follows is a concise summary of the contrast between the expectations encouraged by Obama's "campaign mantra of change" and the reality of the first year in office.

Herbert writes: "The anti-Iraq war candidate who escalated the war in Afghanistan; the opponent of health insurance mandates who made a mandate to buy insurance the centerpiece of his plan; the president who stocked his administration with Wall Street insiders and went to the mat for the banks and big corporations, but who is now trying to present himself as a born-again populist."

The president, Herbert warns, is "creating a credibility gap for himself, and if it widens much more he won't be able to close it."

During the election campaign, the *Times* columnist writes, there was widespread belief that Obama would be "far more in touch with the economic needs of ordinary Americans" and reverse the pro-corporate policies of his Republican predecessor. Upon election,

Herbert complains, the president "put together an economic team that would protect, above all, the interests of Wall Street, the pharmaceutical industry, the health insurance companies, and so on."

With his poll numbers plummeting and the Democrats facing the prospect of electoral rout in the November congressional elections, Herbert continues, Obama is "trying again to position himself as a champion of the middle class." Every other utterance from the president, he says, is about "fighting for the middle class," for jobs and "against the big bad banks." These pronouncements, Herbert warns, ring hollow, especially since the president is about to announce a new budget plan that will freeze spending on vital social programs and exclude any serious expenditures to create jobs.

The *Times* columnist ends with a plea to the president, saying the most important thing about the upcoming State of the Union address Wednesday night is not its content, but "whether the president really means what he says." Americans, he continues, "want to know what he stands for, where the line in the sand is, what he'll really fight for, and where he wants to lead this nation. They want to know who their president really is."

This is rather banal stuff. Nevertheless, Mr. Herbert's question merits an answer.

Obama is a representative of the American ruling elite. His reactionary policies are no surprise, but rather the inevitable result of the social and class interests he has defended throughout his political career. Early on, Obama made his services available to the financial and corporate establishment in Chicago, along with the Democratic Party machine, and groomed himself to use his persona and background to better serve their interests.

Obama was picked up in the 2000s by important sections of the foreign policy establishment, including former Carter national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, along with powerful financial backers, who were dissatisfied with the Bush administration and wanted to give US imperialism a new brand image, while intensifying the attack on the working class. Except for the color of his skin he is and always has been a thoroughly conventional bourgeois politician who has no compunction about carrying out the most right-wing policies against the working class at home and the oppressed masses around the world.

While Herbert expresses shock and disappointment, Obama's evolution comes as no surprise to the *World Socialist Web Site* and our readers. The WWSWS has been making an analysis of the forces behind Obama since the beginning of the 2008 election campaign.

Whether or not the *Times* columnist was naïve enough to swallow Obama's campaign lies, the fact is he helped promote the fiction that the Democratic president represented a fundamental break with the militarist and pro-business policies of Bush and the Republicans.

Even as he acknowledges that Obama lied to the American people time and again, Herbert tries to argue that the president is a progressive and reformer at heart, but somehow he has gotten entangled with the wrong crowd of economic advisors. Thus, he asks, "How can you look out for the interests of working people with Tim Geithner whispering in one ear and Larry Summers in the other?"

This is absurd. Obama chose Treasury Secretary Geithner and chief White House economic advisor Summers—who were both involved in the financial deregulation carried out under the Clinton administration in the 1990s—to protect the financial interests he was selected to serve.

From the multi-trillion bailout of Wall Street, to the attack on GM and Chrysler workers, to the rejection of any serious relief to the unemployed, to the demand for fiscal austerity, Obama has pursued the single-minded aim of making the working class pay for the parasitism and bankruptcy of American capitalism.

Herbert further suggests that Obama's problems stem from the supposed "mistake" of focusing on health care instead of job creation. The fact is that health care "reform" has been central to the entire right-wing

agenda of the administration, from slashing costs for US corporations, to reining in deficits and the national debt, to preparing to gut Medicare and Medicaid. Moreover, the ruling class as a whole has used mass unemployment as a hammer to impose wage and benefit cuts and drastically increase the productivity of workers.

Herbert presents the president's repeated lies as incidental or the unfortunate product of political expediency. In fact, such duplicity is in the political DNA of the Democratic Party, which has long been tasked by the ruling class with presenting itself as a party of ordinary working people, while upholding the interests of the financial oligarchy. In the end, however, the interests of "Main Street" and Wall Street are not the same—despite the claims of the president—but irreconcilably opposed.

In the final analysis, Herbert's meek protest and hand-wringing advice are part of an increasing chorus from the president's liberal supporters who are desperate to find something they can point to, so that they can continue boosting illusions in this right-wing administration.

The problem for them—and, more importantly, for the ruling class—is that Obama's credibility has already been chiefly shattered. Tens of millions of workers and young people know he is a fake, a con man and a stooge of Wall Street. Herbert and others are now warning that the administration's newly found pseudo-populism will have little effect other than further inflaming public anger and opposition.



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