

# Why is the political right on the offensive in America?

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Less than six weeks before the midterm congressional elections, the political initiative rests entirely with the Republicans and the most right-wing sections of the US political establishment. There are many indications that the Obama administration and the Democrats accept as inevitable substantial Republican gains in both legislative houses, including the possible Republican capture of the House of Representatives.

This is despite mounting anger against Wall Street and a general shift in popular sentiment to the left. Even the opinion polls show a substantial majority in favor of raising taxes on the rich to pay for job-creation programs.

To date, the growth of popular discontent fueled by mass unemployment and mounting social distress has found political expression only on the right. The corporate-sponsored, pseudo-populist Tea Party movement is largely the creation of forces within the Republican Party. Its popular support is vastly exaggerated by the media, which has relentlessly promoted it.

Nevertheless, this right-wing formation has been able to tap into popular anger and gain a degree of political traction, despite its program of brutal cuts in social programs and more deregulation and tax cuts for big business and the rich.

The absurd combination of populist rhetoric and pro-corporate policies was summed up in the "Pledge to America" election manifesto presented Thursday by House Republicans. The 21-page document calls for an extension of the Bush tax cuts for the rich, the immediate cancellation of some \$258 billion of the \$814 billion stimulus that has not yet been spent, a \$100 billion reduction in government spending on non-military agencies, and the repeal of Obama's health care "reform."

Only the last demand has widespread popular support, since tens of millions of Americans rightfully fear that Obama's cost-cutting plan will mean higher premiums and reduced coverage for them and their families.

How is the right-wing offensive to be explained?

In the depths of the last depression, the Democrats won a landslide victory in the first midterm election following the inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and increased their gains in the House and Senate in a further rout of the Republicans in the presidential election of 1936.

Roosevelt had a reform agenda, including large-scale public works and job creation programs, certain protections for union organizers, and Social Security for retirees. While frequently berating Wall Street bankers, he did not conceal the fact that his reform program was designed to save capitalism from the threat of social revolution and secure the basic interests of the ruling class.

Roosevelt acted under the pressure of growing struggles of the working class against the impact of the depression, and he came into conflict with sections of his own class that ruthlessly resisted any concessions.

There was, however, a significant reform constituency within the bourgeoisie itself, and the New Deal programs generated mass support for the Democratic Party within the working class and broad layers of the middle class, including small farmers and shopkeepers, professionals, artists and intellectuals.

Today, in a comparable period of capitalist breakdown and social crisis, there is no significant reform section of the American bourgeoisie, and the Obama administration is characterized above all by its lack of any serious policies to reduce unemployment or provide relief for the victims of the crisis. On the contrary, the record of the Obama administration is uniformly reactionary.

Coming to power on the basis of a popular repudiation of the pro-corporate, war-mongering policies of the Republican Party and Bush, arguably the most despised president since Herbert Hoover, and enjoying massive Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, Obama has managed in the space of 21 months to alienate and antagonize the majority of workers and youth who voted for him in the misguided hope that his "change you can believe in" slogan was genuine.

The disillusionment of millions of Obama voters was summed up poignantly at the "Town Hall Discussion on Jobs" hosted Monday by the business cable channel CNBC. One woman, who identified herself as an executive for a veterans service organization, said, "I'm one of your middle-class Americans, and quite frankly, I'm exhausted. I'm exhausted from defending you, defending your administration, defending the mantle of change that I voted for, and deeply disappointed with where we are right now."

"I have been told that I voted for a man who said he was going to change things in a meaningful way for the middle class. I'm one of those people, and I'm waiting, sir. I'm waiting...the financial recession has taken an enormous toll on my family.... I need you to answer this honestly. Is this my new reality?"

Obama dodged the question. In fact, he has continued and expanded the bailout of the financial aristocracy launched under Bush. He has opposed any limits on executive pay, while giving the signal for a nationwide assault on workers' wages and benefits through the forced bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler and his endorsement of attacks on teachers and other public-sector workers.

From day one, Obama, in the name of bipartisanship, has labored to rehabilitate the Republican Party, going so far as to retain Robert Gates, Bush's defense secretary and the architect of the military surge

in Iraq. He even made an unsuccessful attempt to appoint right-wing Republican Senator Judd Gregg as his commerce secretary.

Obama epitomizes the political physiognomy of the Democratic Party—always on the defensive and at pains to reassure the corporate-financial ruling elite on both domestic and foreign policy, while at the same time obliged to maintain the fiction that it is the party of ordinary “middle class” Americans.

In fact, the Democratic Party long ago repudiated the social reform policies associated with the New Deal and its successors—Truman’s Fair Deal and Johnson’s Great Society—and lost its mass base of active support in the working class. After four decades in which it has moved relentlessly to the right, it is today the party of the comfortable and complacent upper-middle-class and sections of the financial aristocracy.

The Republicans, on the other hand, represent the most intractable and ruthless sections of the ruling class. No matter which party occupies the White House, they retain control of the central levers of power in the military and security apparatus and on Wall Street.

The contrast between the Democratic-liberal response to the crisis of the 1930s and the response to the crisis of today is not at root a matter of the subjective characteristics of Roosevelt or Obama. Its source is the vast changes in the global position and internal composition and structure of American capitalism.

In the 1930s, the United States, despite the ravages of the Depression, was a rising capitalist power, with the most powerful industry in the world and vast financial reserves. The intervening decades have seen a drastic decline in the global economic position of US capitalism and, correspondingly, an immense internal decay.

The dismantling of much of US industry has been accompanied by the growth of financial parasitism, increasing the grip of Wall Street over every aspect of economic and political life. This has gone hand in hand with a decades-long offensive against the jobs and living standards of the working class—an assault that is being intensified in the current slump.

There has been a vast polarization of society. Large sections of the old middle classes that provided a base of support for social reformism—family farmers, small businessmen—have been decimated as part of the growth of social inequality and the proletarianization of the overwhelming majority of the population.

The objective material bases for the social reform agenda that characterized the 1930s through the 1960s no longer exist. There is no prospect for a Roosevelt-type response to the present breakdown in American and world capitalism.

So long as the working class remains politically subordinated to the Democratic Party, the most right-wing sections of the ruling class can capitalize on the political vacuum on the left to divert mass discontent along right-wing channels. The danger of the growth of these forces lies not in some mass popular support for their right-wing nostrums, but rather in the lack of an independent political movement of the working class fighting for socialist policies.

The role of left-liberal tendencies, such as the *Nation* magazine, and organizations of the middle-class ex-left, such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO), is precisely to promote the increasingly discredited notion that Obama embodies a progressive reform impulse. Their major preoccupation is to prevent the emergence of a movement of the working class independent and outside of the Democratic Party.

Thus the editorial in the current issue of the *Nation* declares, “Obama isn’t going to finish cleaning things up between now and

November 2, but he can renew confidence in his ability—and that of congressional Democrats—to get American back to work....

“If Obama adopts bolder proposals, he will be able to win the jobs debate. And he and the Democrats can renew, not just the economy, but their popular appeal in a defining election year.”

In her weekly *Washington Post* column of September 15, *Nation* editor and publisher Katrina vanden Heuvel cites an Obama speech from 2009 on building a “new foundation” for the US economy to give the following blanket endorsement of Obama’s right-wing policies: “The agenda is both good policy and a powerful political message. It provides a context for what Obama has done to date—from the recovery plan to financial reform—and the case for staying the course.”

The ISO’s role is complementary. It promotes the illusion that mass pressure from below will allow Obama and the Democrats to act upon their supposedly progressive inclinations. Its website, socialistworker.org, on September 18 republished without comment a handwringing commentary by *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert, a Democrat and Obama supporter, warning the administration of the dangerous growth of popular discontent.

In an August 9 article entitled “The Coming Democratic Wipeout?” *Socialist Worker* wrote, “The missing element here has been a movement from below to pressure the Democrats to act on an agenda that responds to ordinary people, rather than to bankers and big business.”

This perspective, that the growth of right-wing forces can be stopped by appealing to the Democratic Party, is utterly bankrupt. It simultaneously facilitates the anti-working class agenda of the Democrats and reinforces the political conditions that foster the emergence of even more right-wing elements.

What is required is precisely the opposite: a decisive break with the Democratic Party and the two-party system and the development of a mass socialist movement of the working class. This movement must now be built. The coming class battles will provide great opportunities. The critical issue is the building of the Socialist Equality Party to provide the necessary program and leadership.



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