

At Wisconsin rally, Obama shows contempt for his “base”

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President Barack Obama appeared Tuesday before the largest rally of the fall election campaign, attended by thousands of students at the University of Wisconsin campus in Madison.

After two years of right-wing rule, in which he has followed in the footsteps of his Republican predecessor, bailing out Wall Street, escalating the war in Afghanistan, and intensifying the onslaught on democratic rights at home, Obama sought to revive the tired and vacuous slogans of “hope” and “change” that he employed in the 2008 presidential campaign.

The Madison rally was the first in a series of four appearances to be held at major college campuses over the next few weeks, as the Democratic Party seeks to revive popular illusions that have been shattered by Obama’s actions since he entered the White House in January 2009.

In his Madison speech, and in a lengthy interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, posted on the Internet the same day, Obama blamed his former supporters, not his own policies, for the poor political standing of his party and administration. Those who fail to turn out November 2 to support Democratic congressional candidates will be “irresponsible” and their actions “inexcusable,” he charged.

Top Democratic political operatives began to make this argument aggressively in speeches after Labor Day, most notoriously when Vice President Joseph Biden said that liberals should “stop whining” about the administration’s right-wing policies. The Republicans would be even worse, Biden threatened, adding with a sneer, “Don’t compare us to the Almighty, compare us to the alternative.”

As he has in a series of speeches this month, Obama made demagogic criticisms of the Republicans, centering on their support for an extension of the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy, in order to disguise the fact that his own administration has served the same class interests, albeit by slightly different means.

The entire speech was predicated on the fact that the US two-party system limits the choices of the American people to candidates from the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. Only the two parties controlled by big business have the financial resources and legal standing—including ballot status and access to the media—necessary to win seats in Congress. Obama’s argument boiled down to political blackmail: if you don’t like my policies, the Republicans are even worse.

At the same time, he mocked his own supporters, saying, “Sometimes people say, well, you know, this item is not done and that idea—well, I’ve only been here two years, guys. If you look at the checklist, we’ve already covered about 70 percent, so I figured I needed to have something to do for the next couple of years.”

This kind of arrogance was combined with outright lying, claiming that those who are now taking a more critical look at the Democratic administration’s record constituted the faint of heart, people who had become tired of “struggle” and “sacrifice.” Actually, those working people who are turning away from Obama have begun to recognize that in their struggles, the Democratic Party stands on the other side. It is their enemy, not their advocate.

In an effort to appeal to his audience of young people, Obama sought to link the efforts of his administration to the struggles for civil rights, for the right of women to vote, even the struggle against slavery. In reality, however, American imperialism, for which Obama serves as the front man, is the principal reactionary force on the planet, defending the interests of the giant banks and corporations which enslave working people all over the world.

The *Rolling Stone* interview was also conducted in an effort to revive illusions among young people, but Obama made equally condescending pronouncements. The interview consisted of a series of softball questions from multi-millionaire publisher Jann Wenner. One excerpt demonstrates the fawning tone. Wenner began a long question by gushing, “You’ve passed more progressive legislation than any president since Lyndon Johnson. Yet your base does not seem nearly as fired up as the opposition, and you don’t seem to be getting the credit for those legislative victories.”

Obama again mocked disappointed supporters, saying, “There’s a turn of mind among Democrats and progressives where a lot of times we see the glass as half-empty. It’s like, ‘Well, gosh, we’ve got this historic health care legislation that we’ve been trying to get for 100 years, but it didn’t have every bell and whistle that we wanted right now, so let’s focus on what we didn’t get instead of what we got.’”

One would never suppose from this comment that Obama was describing a health care program that represents a drastic

regression, not a limited step forward. Designed in collaboration with the drug companies and insurance companies, the Obama health care “reform” leaves the profit-driven medical system undisturbed, imposes penalties on workers if they don’t buy private insurance, and is funded by slashing half a trillion dollars from the Medicare program for the elderly. Working people will end up paying more for their health care and getting less, while corporate profits soar.

Obama went on to claim that his administration has “accomplished an incredible amount in the most adverse circumstances imaginable.” Modestly presenting himself as a political superman, he declared, “I came in and had to prevent a Great Depression, restore the financial system so that it functions, and manage two wars. In the midst of all that, I ended one of those wars, at least in terms of combat operations. We passed historic health care legislation, historic financial regulatory reform and a huge number of legislative victories that people don’t even notice.”

Here the class blindness exceeds even the egomania. While Obama chastises “people” for not noticing his brilliant successes, the president failed to note that the American people are suffering through the greatest increase in human misery since the Great Depression, with destitution, homelessness and hunger spreading while the White House rejects the slightest measure to alleviate the impoverishment of tens of millions.

Since the US Census figures released earlier this month showed a record increase in poverty during Obama’s first year in office, the president has been asked about the issue frequently. He has evinced complete indifference, while reiterating that his sole anti-poverty program is to restore “economic growth,” i.e., to boost the profitability of American corporations and the stock portfolios of American multi-millionaires.

After the interview ended and Obama got up to leave, he returned and began a finger-jabbing diatribe to Wenner. “It is inexcusable for any Democrat or progressive right now to stand on the sidelines in this midterm election,” he said. “There may be complaints about us not having gotten certain things done, not fast enough, making certain legislative compromises. But right now, we’ve got a choice between a Republican Party that has moved to the right of George Bush and is looking to lock in the same policies that got us into these disasters in the first place, versus an administration that, with some admitted warts, has been the most successful administration in a generation in moving progressive agendas forward. The idea that we’ve got a lack of enthusiasm in the Democratic base, that people are sitting on their hands complaining, is just irresponsible.”

In actuality, the mass disillusionment with the Obama administration, which is deepening into outright political hostility, has nothing to do with this self-serving and grossly distorted portrayal. What Obama characterizes as “progressive” are a few sops to the identity politics that is all that remains of American liberalism, like his proposal to phase out

discrimination against gays in the military. On the issues of greatest import to tens of millions of people—jobs and living standards, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the attacks on democratic rights—the Obama administration has gone even further than the Bush administration in pursuing policies of imperialist reaction.

The US ruling elite installed Obama in the White House in the midst of an unprecedented world financial crisis. It needed the cover of a “progressive” Democratic president, better yet, the first African-American president, to pursue policies so brazenly opposed to the interests of working people that the discredited Republicans would have had far greater difficulty carrying them out.

Would a President McCain have been able to quadruple the number of troops in Afghanistan, or launch FBI raids against antiwar activists, or claim the right to assassinate American citizens, or orchestrate one handout after another to Wall Street and other corporate interests? Not without provoking a mass movement from below of potentially uncontrollable dimensions.

Up until this month, the media propaganda about the US elections has presented a false and reactionary narrative that the American people are up in arms over government deficits and Obama’s supposedly left-wing social policies, like health care reform. Manipulated opinion polls projected a sweeping Republican victory, including takeover of the House of Representatives and major gains in the Senate, which would lead to a “return to the center” by Obama—i.e., a further turn to the right.

This story line has come into conflict with the awkward fact that the working class is moving to the left, not the right. There is enormous anger over the bailout of Wall Street, the disparity between the trillions lavished on saving the banks and the super-rich, while workers’ jobs are wiped out, homeowners are foreclosed and evicted, small businesses starved of business and cash and forced into bankruptcy. But in the framework of the two-party system, there is no outlet for such sentiments.

Now a new narrative is emerging: the impending Democratic Party defeats are presented as the result of the defection of Obama’s “base”—the millions of workers and youth who turned out at the polls in 2008 to sweep out Bush and the Republicans—because they had unrealistic expectations. In other words, Obama & Co. are seeking to blame the working class for the political debacle which their own right-wing policies have prepared.



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