

MSNBC's suspension of Keith Olbermann: US media shifts further to the right

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Keith Olbermann, the host of “Countdown with Keith Olbermann”, a news commentary program on US cable channel MSNBC, was suspended November 5 for having donated \$2,400 each to three Democratic candidates for Congress on the eve of the recent elections. Phil Griffin, MSNBC president, asserted that Olbermann had violated a company policy that requires obtaining management approval before making political contributions.

On the face of it, the suspension that ends Tuesday is absurd. As host of the nightly program, Olbermann has made no secret about his support for the Democratic Party. Indeed, his program, watched by an audience of one million in the most recent period, came to prominence on the wave of hostility to the George W. Bush administration and its criminal activities. The show has been at the center of MSNBC's own gain in popularity in recent years. Olbermann had a number of “good days” mocking and excoriating Bush, Dick Cheney, Karl Rove and company—granted that this crowd was an easy target.

In social and political terms, the action taken by MSNBC management against the *Countdown* host is an expression of a further rightward shift on the part of the media and political establishment in the wake of the midterm elections. Having been granted time to regroup by Barack Obama's election and first two years in office, the US ruling elite will now step up its campaign of reaction.

Olbermann's donation to the three Democrats—Senate candidate Jack Conway in Kentucky, and Arizona Democratic Representatives Raul Grijalva and Gabrielle Giffords—is small potatoes by any objective standard.

As a whole, the Fox News Channel—owned by Rupert

Murdoch—is a perpetual political operation on behalf of the Republican Party, the Tea Party movement, Sarah Palin and the rest of that ultra-right crowd. According to Media Matters for America, more than 30 Fox News hosts and personalities “have endorsed, raised money, or campaigned for Republican candidates or organizations in more than 600 instances.”

Ultra-right Fox News hosts such as Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck, Mike Huckabee and others regularly endorse Republican candidates and causes on the air and even shill for campaign funds. They also personally donate money to candidates. For instance, Hannity gave \$5,000 to the political action committee of Rep. Michele Bachmann (Republican from Minnesota) this past summer.

In regard to that financial gift, the *St. Paul* (Minnesota) *Pioneer Press* reported that “Fox News programming head Bill Shine said there's no company policy against talk show personalities giving to candidates, but said Hannity would disclose the donation when Bachmann appears [on his program]. ‘It always good to remember that he's not a journalist, he's a conservative TV host,’ Shine said. ‘If he wants to donate to a candidate, he certainly can.’” In fact, Hannity never did disclose the contribution on the air.

The right-wing host also contributed \$4,800 to the unsuccessful congressional campaign of John Gomez in New York. Fairness and Accuracy in Media (FAIR) writes that “Hannity reportedly promised New York Republican and Conservative Party leaders he would ‘do all he could’ to promote Gomez, help him fundraise and bring in headliners for events if they gave Gomez their party nods. Hannity made good on his promise by reportedly bringing in fundraisers for Gomez and using his Fox News program as a promotional tool for Gomez.”

FAIR also reports that MSNBC's parent company, General Electric "made over \$2 million in political contributions in the 2010 election cycle (most coming from the company's political action committee). The top recipient was Republican Senate candidate Rob Portman from Ohio. The company has also spent \$32 million on lobbying this year, and contributed over \$1 million to the successful 'No on 24' campaign against a California ballot initiative aimed at eliminating tax loopholes for major corporations (*New York Times*, 11/1/10)."

Comcast, the cable giant, which is apparently in the process of purchasing NBC, is another lavish corporate contributor and lobbyist. The Center for Responsive Politics reports that the company donated \$2.7 million to Democratic and Republican candidates in the 2010 elections. Comcast has spent \$8.8 million on lobbying politicians so far in 2010, after dishing out \$12.6 and \$12.5 million, respectively, in 2009 and 2008 on such efforts.

American corporations systematically buy up and control state and national legislators, governors, and members of Congress, without anyone in the US media batting an eyelid.

Olbermann's chief crime is to be identified with anti-Bush and pro-Obama sentiment, which the political establishment now considers has served its purpose. Olbermann has shown signs recently of reining himself in. At the wretched Rally to Restore Sanity held October 30, presided over by Jon Stewart, the latter showed a montage featuring cable news hosts Beck, Olbermann and others. Stewart asserted that the "24-hour politico pundit perpetual panic conflictinator" was worsening the country's problems.

While the right-wing hosts paid no attention to Stewart's appeal, Olbermann announced two days later that he was scrapping the "Worst Person in the World" segment of his program. Figures such as Beck, Fox News Channel commentator Bill O'Reilly, demagogue Rush Limbaugh, as well as right-wing politicians and former members of the Bush administration had been featured in the nightly segment. Olbermann indicated that the "tone needs to change."

Olbermann's colleague at MSNBC, Rachel Maddow, took a thoroughly cowardly stance, defending the cable channel's action. On her program, Maddow told viewers, "Here at MSNBC, there is an explicit

employee rule against hosts making contributions like that [Olbermann's]. You can do it if you ask in advance and management tells you, 'Okay.' That's what I understand happened in 2006, under previous management. But if you don't ask in advance for an exemption from the rule, you are bound by the rule."

She went on: "Let this incident lay to rest forever, the facile, never-true-in-any-way, lazy conflation of Fox News, and what the rest of us do for a living. Everybody likes to say, 'Oh, that's cable news. It's all the same. Fox and MSNBC, mirror images of each other.' Let this lay that to rest forever."

Maddow and her ilk are simply pathetic. Her mealy-mouthed argument, which will only convince her most uncritical admirers, carries no weight whatsoever, it merely expresses the incapacity of latter-day American liberalism to offer any resistance to the extreme right.

The media has speculated as to the more immediate cause of the clampdown on Olbermann. An article in *Politico* observed, "Some saw in MSNBC's latest move corporate fears about appearing too liberal, which were being exacerbated by NBC Universal's pending takeover by Comcast.

"Michael Wolff wrote at *Adweek* that the pending merger ... is the true reason for the power shift behind Olbermann's suspension. 'The background to everything is that is happening at NBC is the transition to Comcast ownership,' he wrote."

Whatever the facts of the case, Olbermann's suspension is a sign of things to come. We hold no brief for his largely superficial and unsubtle political pronouncements, but his suspension is one signal of a new official lurch to the right.



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