

Behind the Democratic debacle

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Only a day after the midterm elections, the US media quickly coalesced around a narrative, accepted by everyone in the political establishment, that the victory of the Republican Party was a popular repudiation of the supposedly left-wing policies of the Obama administration. In his press conference on Wednesday, Obama himself adopted this analysis, pledging to work closely with the Republican Party, find some compromise on tax cuts for the wealthy, and improve his relations with corporate America.

Underlying this claim are two premises, both of which are false: 1) that Obama has carried out an anti-corporate program during his first two years; and 2) that the population as a whole has used the election to give a rousing affirmation of capitalism and big business. These premises are not only absurd, they clash with the basic facts.

In the flood of political commentary, no one in the mainstream media has suggested a far more plausible explanation: After coming to power by posing as the tribune of “hope” and “change you can believe in,” Obama, through his pro-corporate and pro-war policies, has succeeded in alienating and politically demoralizing large sections of the population that had voted for him.

The event that secured Obama's election was the spectacular collapse of Wall Street in September of 2008, which shattered whatever was left of the credibility of the Bush administration and deeply discredited the capitalist system itself. Obama came into office with an overwhelming mandate for radical reform.

The response of the administration was to rush to the defense of the banks. Even before coming to power, Obama expressed his unconditional support for the bailouts, which he subsequently expanded. He assembled an administration dominated by the interests of finance capital, symbolized by economic adviser Lawrence Summers and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner.

The administration opposed any constraints on executive compensation and rejected out of hand sanctions against or the prosecution of those responsible

for the economic catastrophe. Over the past two years, the wealthiest individuals have vastly expanded their share of the national income and the largest banks are expected to hand out record compensation packages.

The economic crisis has led to a jobs crisis unlike anything seen since the Great Depression. The administration has rejected any government hiring programs. Throughout the crisis, Obama has endlessly repeated the claim that employment levels are a “lagging indicator.”

After bailing out Wall Street, Obama oversaw the forced bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler, demanding that workers accept deep cuts in jobs, wages and benefits. As a result, profits for the auto giants have soared while the assault on auto workers' wages has become the model for wage-cutting in every economic sector and in every part of the country.

The consequences can be seen in the collapse of support for the Democratic Party in the industrial Midwest, the site of half the seats lost by Democrats in the House of Representatives. In Michigan, a center of the auto industry, the Republicans swept state and local offices, amid a turnout of only 45 percent. In Detroit, which had voted for Obama overwhelmingly in 2008, barely one in five voters showed up at the polls.

The principal domestic program for which Obama is associated is the overhaul of the health care system. The bill was entirely tailored to the interests of insurance companies and giant corporations. For the sake of “bipartisanship,” Obama abandoned anything that hinted of progressive reform, including the “public option.” Elderly voters, in particular, quite correctly saw the entire measure as a step toward cutting Medicare benefits and rationing care, resulting in a significant electoral swing to the Republican Party, which recorded an 18 percent advantage among voters over 60.

On foreign policy, Obama came to power on a wave of opposition to war. In the Democratic primaries in 2008, his main argument against rival Hillary Clinton was that

he had not voted to support the Iraq war. On assuming office, Obama quickly moved to reappoint those responsible for the war under Bush, including Defense Secretary Robert Gates and General David Petraeus. His administration has continued the occupation of Iraq, vastly expanded the war against Afghanistan and Pakistan, threatened new wars against Yemen and Iran, and deployed CIA drones to kill people all over the world.

In every election since 2002, the issue of war has played a dominant role. Through the actions of the Obama administration, however, it is becoming clear to millions of people that it is impossible to end war by voting for the Democratic Party. Among young people, where opposition to war is particularly strong, turnout on Tuesday fell precipitously. Whereas voters aged 18 to 29 made up 18 percent of the electorate in 2008, they comprised only 10 percent this election.

To the list of right-wing policies in Obama's first two years must be added: expanding the attack on democratic rights and opposing any prosecution of those responsible for torture and domestic spying; defending the profits of energy giant BP, responsible for the greatest environmental disaster in US history; and rejecting any moratorium on home foreclosures, despite evidence of massive fraud carried out by the very banks that are throwing millions out of their homes.

Under the peculiar conditions of American politics, which excludes any opposition to the two parties of big business, mass disaffection with the Democratic Party found expression in the victory of the Republicans. In addition to capitalizing on the collapse in voter turnout for Democrats, Republicans were able to exploit the fact that all of Obama's betrayals and his lack of principle exposed the insincerity and duplicity that permeates the Democratic Party and its liberal backers. The rhetoric of the Republicans resonated in sections of the population that felt they had been duped.

The failure of the Obama administration is not simply failure of one individual. It is one expression of the failure of an entire political and economic system. Under conditions of long-term economic decline, American capitalism has no response to the capitalist crisis outside of an ever-expanding attack on the working class.

The trade unions and the array of liberal and middle-class organizations that promoted Obama will point to the victory of the Republicans to insist once again that the Democrats must be supported. This is utterly bankrupt. The claim that the growth of extreme right-wing forces can be stopped by the election of Democrats is the

opposite of the truth. The promotion of the Democratic Party facilitates its own anti-working class policies while creating the conditions for even more right-wing forces to come to the fore.

The elections must be seen as a warning. The political system, including both parties, is moving ever further to the right. The aftermath of the elections will bring a deepening of the attacks on jobs and wages, a further erosion of democratic rights, and an expansion of war, including preparations for a global conflict with unimaginable consequences.

In the midst of this crisis, American politics takes on a diseased character. Like an impacted tooth that leads to infection, the anger and discontent felt by millions of people are denied any genuine expression. So long as the working class remains trapped within the framework of the Democratic Party and the capitalist two-party system, it is the right wing that will exploit the situation to its advantage.

Workers and young people have to seriously think through the implications. There is no way forward through the Democratic Party and capitalist politics. What is necessary is the building of an independent revolutionary movement of the working class in the struggle for socialism. This is the perspective that the Socialist Equality Party is fighting to bring to the broadest sections of workers and youth.

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