# Obama’s speech and the bankruptcy of identity politics

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President Obama’s State of the Union address, delivered Tuesday night, is nearly as remarkable for what it did not mention as it is for the unabashedly right-wing and pro-corporate agenda it outlined.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* already noted, the speech is typical of a political order in which “no aspect of social reality can be openly and honestly addressed by any section of the American ruling class or the corporate-controlled media” which fears that “any acknowledgment of the real state of American society could become a focus for the social anger building up just below the surface.”

One of the more striking omissions from the president’s speech was any reference, even in a tangential way, to the desperate conditions facing the majority of the nation’s 37 million African-Americans, or the closely related social crisis overtaking the cities.

Obama is neither more nor less indifferent toward poor and working class African-Americans than he is toward their white, Latino, and immigrant counterparts. His concern, to the total exclusion of all others, is the wealth and security of the financial elite, as he made clear in his speech by equating the supposed economic recovery with stock values and corporate profits.

But Obama’s studied indifference to the severe social crisis that is impoverishing millions of African-Americans and destroying US cities is a ringing indictment of identity politics and affirmative action programs, which hold that advancement of a layer of “leaders”—as CEOs, military officers, academics, and politicians—would somehow advance the interests of all. Indeed, Obama is himself the embodiment of the bankruptcy of this perspective.

Two years ago, Obama’s inauguration was greeted rapturously in the media as a celebration of “the nation’s first black president.” During his election campaign for the presidency and even after his victory, Obama’s skin color and his history as a “community organizer” in south Chicago were relentlessly promoted by various middle class organizations as somehow imparting to him a left or progressive character that, based on his entire career and his avowed political positions, did not exist.

African-Americans, in particular, were endlessly told this was their victory—even that Obama’s ascension to the White House marked the completion of Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation ending slavery and Martin Luther King Jr.’s struggle against Jim Crow oppression in the South.

It is time to draw up a balance sheet. The four years since the housing market bust of 2007—two of them under the Obama administration—have been the most disastrous for African-American workers since the Great Depression.

The crisis engulfing the entire working class—mass layoffs, wage and benefit cutting, the foreclosure epidemic, homelessness, hunger, the gutting of public education, drastic increases in college tuition, the slashing of all forms of social spending—have hit African-American workers with particular force.

The official US poverty count last year hit a record of 43.6 million people, or one in seven. Among African-Americans, 25.8 percent of the population, more than one in four, lived in poverty in 2009, while one in three African-American children lived in poverty. The official unemployment rate for African-Americans went from 8.7 percent in 2007 to nearly 16 percent today; 40 percent of African-American youth are unemployed. Home ownership among African-Americans, who were disproportionately victimized by the banks in various forms of sub-prime lending, has fallen sharply.

In the face of this disaster, Obama’s State of the Union Speech can only be called a provocation.

“Many people watching tonight can probably remember a time when finding a good job meant showing up at a nearby factory or a business downtown,” Obama said. “If you worked hard, chances are you’d have a job for life, with a decent paycheck, good benefits, and the occasional promotion. … Americans [have] seen their paychecks dwindle or their jobs disappear—proud men and women who feel like the rules have been changed in the middle of the game.”

“They’re right,” he continued. “The rules have changed. …

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The competition for jobs is real." The president then segued into the promotion of economic competition with China and India, the clear implication being that American workers will have to accept even more drastic wage cuts to become competitive, and later declared that he would freeze at current levels all discretionary social spending for five years.

The president has fully adopted the mantra of "personal responsibility" long lorded over the poor and working class African-American population by the Republican Party. He spoke of "giving every child a chance to succeed," but insisted that instead of "pouring money" into schools, "responsibility begins … in our homes and communities. It's family that first instills the love of learning in a child. Only parents can make sure the TV is turned off and homework gets done."

Obama does not ask how children can learn when they are hungry and homeless and live in homes without heat and light. There were, as of 2008-2009, nearly one million public school students who experienced homelessness during the course of the school year. The same year, among the over 50 million Americans classified as "food insecure" by federal authorities, fully 17 million were children. These numbers have risen sharply among white and African-American children alike.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the problem of the oppression of African-Americans was commonly understood as a particular expression of an underlying social problem—the intractability of poverty and the development of the economy in areas like the rural South and urban North. Shaken by the mass freedom struggle in the South and the urban uprisings in the North, "the Negro question," as it was then called, preoccupied the ruling elite and in the 1960s made its way each year into the State of the Union speeches of Democratic presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, expressed as promises for "urban renewal" and more jobs in "urban ghettos."

All of these promises were broken. The upsurge of African-American workers—part of larger social struggles of the US working class as a whole that lasted through the early 1970s—corresponded with the decline of the global position of US capitalism, which had been accelerated by the Vietnam War (1965-1974). This was followed by the intentional gutting of American industry through the interest rate "shock therapy" of Federal Reserve chief Paul Volcker which devastated Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, St. Louis, Gary, and many other cities beginning in the late 1970s.

Instead of fulfilling promises of jobs and an expanded social safety system, the ruling class adopted a different strategy. Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it began to promote affirmative action policies with the express intention of cultivating a layer of African-American politicians, capitalists, and military men. As the Democratic Party retreated from any commitment to ameliorating conditions for masses of working class people, it increasingly focused on affirmative action as the alpha and the omega of its social agenda.

The layer of leaders that were thus brought forward quickly came to inhabit a different social reality than the masses of working class and poor African-Americans. Over the past four decades, social inequality within the African-American population has increased enormously, mirroring trends in the population as a whole. Since 1966, while the income of the top 5 percent of African-American households has increased by 50 percent, inflation-adjusted, the income for the bottom 40 percent has actually fallen by 25 percent.

Barack Obama is the quintessential expression of this process. In both his own history and his political experiences, he has nothing to do with the struggles of masses of African-American workers. From his Ivy League education at Columbia and Harvard, Obama launched a career in academia and politics in Chicago. Early on he was spotted and taken in hand by powerful political and financial interests, which ultimately shepherded him to the White House.

What appealed to the corporate and diplomatic elite about Obama was his carefully cultivated ethnic identity. He could be promoted as "change" personified, allowing more time for the class war offensive against jobs and democratic rights in the US and the machinations of American imperialism abroad. These same right-wing policies carried out by his Republican competitor for the presidency, John McCain, or even his main Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton, would have more quickly led to a social explosion.

In the end, the purpose of identity politics—endlessly promoted in academia and by liberals and ex-left middle class organizations—is to block recognition that the decisive social division is class and not race, gender, nationality, or sexual orientation. If there is one positive outcome of the policies of the Obama administration, and his State of the Union address in particular, it is the further discrediting of this reactionary perspective.

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