

Keith Olbermann leaves MSNBC: Another rightward lurch in US media

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US television commentator Keith Olbermann, the longtime host of “Countdown with Keith Olbermann,” abruptly announced on his program Friday that it would be his last at MSNBC. Since his show began in March 2003, Olbermann has been one of the more outspoken left-liberal, pro-Democratic Party news commentators on US cable television.

While the terms of his departure agreement with MSNBC prevent Olbermann from discussing the reason for the termination of his contract, speculation quickly turned to the imminent transfer of NBC Universal, MSNBC’s parent company, from its current owner, General Electric, to Comcast. Comcast CEO Brian Roberts is a major donor to the Republican Party, though executives at the company contribute heavily to both political parties.

According to a report in the *New York Post*, when Roberts was asked last May what he would do if Olbermann began attacking a Republican member of Congress, he responded, “Let’s have that conversation in 12 months, when we’re playing with live ammo.”

The US federal government last week formally approved the sale, which is expected to close sometime this week. While Comcast denied any involvement, the *Washington Post* reported, “One person intimate with MSNBC’s management ... said there were strong indications that the timing wasn’t coincidental. With Olbermann’s patron, NBC chief executive Jeff Zucker, no longer part of the company’s leadership, ‘the timing was right’ to seek the removal of the successful but difficult host and anchor....”

The sale of NBC will involve a restructuring of the company, including the departure of Zucker and the transfer of oversight of MSNBC to NBC News.

Olbermann has clashed on a number of occasions with executives at MSNBC. In November, he was

suspended for several days, supposedly because he had donated \$2,400 each to three Democratic candidates for Congress in the 2010 elections. This included representative Gabrielle Giffords, the target of the assassination attempt earlier this month in Tucson, Arizona.

As the WSWWS commented at the time, this pretext for the suspension of Olbermann was absurd, given the openly partisan character of much of the American media.

Regardless of the specific set of circumstances that led up to Olbermann’s departure, it certainly is one reflection of the continued rightward lurch of the American media.

In his eight years at MSNBC, Olbermann, formerly a host of ESPN’s SportsCenter, cultivated an audience with his continual denunciations of right-wing media and political figures. His first show on MSNBC was in March 2003, at the time of the US invasion of Iraq.

Olbermann’s success was a reflection of the growth of popular opposition to the Bush administration, initially over the war with Iraq, and then more broadly, particularly after the White House indifference and incompetence in response to the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005.

The first of Olbermann’s “special comments,” lengthy editorials that targeted top Bush administration officials and rightwing commentators like Bill O’Reilly of Fox News, came in August 2006, and denounced the performance of Donald Rumsfeld, then secretary of defense.

The success of the program in the ratings was lucrative for both MSNBC and Olbermann personally. The network developed a stable of similar-minded liberal talkshow hosts, who apprenticed as substitutes for Olbermann and then were given their own

programs, including Rachel Maddow, Ed Schultz and Lawrence O'Donnell, who will now replace Olbermann in his 8pm time slot.

Their programs never went outside the bounds of the official US political spectrum, with its two parties controlled by big business. His often superficial commentary was premised on support for the Democratic Party, and Olbermann strongly backed Barack Obama's presidential campaign in 2008.

Olbermann & Co. simply articulated the concerns of the liberal, Democratic Party wing of the corporate ruling elite, of which they became an integral part: Olbermann himself signed a \$30 million, four-year contract in 2008.

Such millionaire media personalities, whether rabid right-wingers like Glenn Beck and O'Reilly or liberals like Olbermann and Maddow, are divided by an impassable social gulf from the concerns and needs of ordinary working people.

In the aftermath of the 2010 midterm elections, the American political establishment as a whole is moving sharply to the right. Olbermann was out of step with this shift. He has at times targeted Obama as well, including denouncing the administration's recent executive order on business deregulation and its moves to cut spending on entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicare.

Conservative columnist Jennifer Rubin pointed to this fact in her *Washington Post* column, "Right Turn," remarking that "the virulent anti-Bush sentiment that he championed, and around which the left-leaning network built its image, has played out ... Olbermann is out of sync with the current political ethos. When Obama is moving to the center and political elites ... are making a fuss over civility, MSNBC is suddenly so yesterday."

Another casualty of this shift was National Public Radio's top news editor, Ellen Weiss, who was forced to resign earlier this month for her role in the firing of Juan Williams. (See, "NPR fires Juan Williams"). Williams's contract as an NPR analyst was terminated after he declared in an interview with Fox's O'Reilly that he was "nervous" whenever he saw people dressed in "Muslim garb" on airplanes.

The US mass media as a whole is a thoroughly corrupt institution, owned by giant corporations and tied with a million threads to the state. The departure of Olbermann is another indication that the response of

the media to growing social tensions will be to wall itself off even more thoroughly from any expression of the concerns and opposition of the population as a whole.



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