The International Socialist Organization's perspective in tatters

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The International Socialist Organization (ISO) posted an editorial July 13 ("Claiming the Republican agenda as his own"), on the subject of Barack Obama's proposal for massive budget cuts, which begins, "Turns out the president many expected to revive the New Deal is out to bury it instead."

The comment failed to mention any of these "many" people with misplaced expectations by name. The editors at socialistworker.org are far too modest. Among those who energetically encouraged illusions in Obama were the ISO and its website, as well as many in the environs in which the ISO functions, including the left-liberal orbit of the *Nation* magazine and the trade unions. They bear a share of political responsibility for the present disastrous situation.

The Obama administration is proposing trillions in cuts to programs wide layers of the American population depend on. Life will become harsh and even unbearable for many. There is confusion and illusions in the working class, but the objective logic of events is unmistakable: an extraordinary intensification of the class struggle is on the agenda whatever the details of the deal eventually worked out with the Republicans in Congress.

The ISO's July 13 editorial makes various points about the president's proposals. It argues: "Obama's actions can't be explained as bad or incompetent tactics. He and his administration hope to win the favor of the bankers, CEOs and moneyed interests who fund politicians of both parties—in short, to keep capital happy."

The editors write: "Obama's right turn isn't simply political opportunism or a bid for independent voters in 2012. His proposed cuts are part of a drive by the U.S. capitalist class to overcome the crisis by pushing the cost onto working people and making the U.S. economy more competitive by cutting wages and lowering social spending."

What does socialistworker.org propose? Not very much. The editorial concludes: "With austerity and suffering for the working class now the official bipartisan consensus in U.S. politics, many people will be looking for alternative politics and organizations that are prepared to fight the cuts, whether they are pushed by Republicans or Democrats."

Not what one would call a confident or fighting conclusion. In fact, one has the sense that the ISO doesn't know what to propose. The organization finds it difficult to put a good face on the policies of the Obama administration, but it speaks for and draws support from an affluent milieu of academics, journalists, researchers, union officials and professional "activists" in various protest movements whose orientation to the Democratic Party is unwavering. So the editorial urges vague "alternative politics and organizations," which will either never emerge or which will be another form of bourgeois "left" politics—an extension of the Democratic Party in one or another guise (Ralph Nader, the Greens, etc.).

In fact, the editorial itself is something in the way of a warning to the Democrats that their measures are hazardous to their hold over the population. It suggests that "by offering a 'grand bargain' to Republicans, Obama has already done incalculable political damage." *To whom and to what?* By placing Social Security and Medicare on the chopping block, the Democrats have revealed themselves for what they are, a party of big capital. This is reactionary and brutal, but it will only inflict "damage" on the illusions of masses of Americans, who voted for Obama in hopes of change.

The editorial criticizes Obama for "emboldening the right," for aiding and abetting "the right-wing effort to gut what remains of the U.S. welfare state," for "giving the green light to cut 'entitlement' programs the Republicans have been itching to attack for years." What concerns the middle-class layer in and around the ISO is the possibility that social anger at Obama's policies could lead masses of people to break with official politics and develop a mass movement to the left of the Democratic Party.

Remaining hopeful, however, the ISO editorialists write: "Will all this sink Obama's chance for reelection? Maybe not, given that the Republicans can always be relied on to steer ever further to the right. The Democratic base that was inspired to vote for Obama in 2008 may well feel frightened by the alternative should they fail to turn out in 2012." In fact, the ISO here is joining in the effort to frighten the population into remaining in the Democratic Party fold.

In any event, the record is perfectly clear. The ISO criticizes Obama today, but in 2008 it presented his candidacy as a historical breakthrough and a political turning point in American history.

In an editorial August 26, 2008, while chastising Obama for his lackluster election campaign, the ISO wrote that his "victory in the primaries depended on building a sense of excitement about the historic character of his candidacy…and a sense of urgency about changing the political system. His campaign invoked the icons of the great political and social struggles of the past." Who was creating expectations at the time? And if Franklin D. Roosevelt wasn't one of the "icons" supposedly invoked by the Obama campaign, just whom did socialistworker.org have in mind?

In the aftermath of Obama's victory in November 2008, the ISO headlined its first post-election editorial, "The New Shape of American Politics." That alone is an indictment of the organization's political line and the extent to which it fostered illusions. The column gushed, "The sweeping victory of Barack Obama in the presidential elections is a transformative event in U.S. politics, as an African American takes the highest office in a country built on slavery." The word "transformative" means, according to the dictionary, "A marked change, as in appearance or character, usually for the better." Was this true? Did Obama's election "transform" the political system or the lives of the American people?

The next editorial posted on socialistworker.org was entitled, "Great Expectations," i.e., expectations in Obama, the very phenomenon the ISO today criticizes. The piece would need to be cited in full to give the full flavor of its wretched pandering to pro-Obama sentiment. We can only

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offer a few passages.

"Four years ago, a shroud of despair and fear descended after George W. Bush's re-election… Four years later, the mood could not be more different. …

"A country founded on slavery and maintained through systematic racism elected its first African American president…

"In this sense, the celebration of Obama's win isn't just of one side beating the other, but of history being made."

After voicing some concerns about Obama's initial moves, the editorial continued, "But that doesn't mean we should expect a repeat of the triangulated policies of the [Bill] Clinton era. The difference is that Obama has become president after the discrediting of the right-wing agenda that dominated U.S. politics for the last three decades, including the Clinton years.

"On the economy especially, Obama faces a severe crisis that won't respond to the tame government measures popular with policymakers in the neoliberal era…

"In short, the scale of the problems and questions the U.S. faces—not just economically, but in the areas of foreign policy and more—is driving Obama toward a different agenda."

The ISO reiterated this claim that the Obama administration would be obliged by the depth of the crisis facing American capitalism to carry out reform measures, repeatedly in the months after November 2008.

A few weeks later, in December 2008, socialistworker.org told its readers that "the conservative stranglehold over U.S. politics for a quarter century under Republicans and Democrats alike has been broken." The editorial suggested that no matter how Obama tried to avoid facing up to the crisis, his administration would be driven "toward a different agenda," i.e., a progressive one, because "the real world will present questions that can't be answered in the same old way. If the Obama administration turns to outdated solutions on the economy or other issues, those solutions will fail—and will have to be junked eventually, one way or another."

And so it went for months. Meanwhile, one should not forget about the ISO's allies who were doing as much or more to promote illusions in Obama.

In January 2009, the ISO co-sponsored a forum in Madison, Wisconsin addressed by one of its leading members, Lance Selfa, and John Nichols of the *Nation*, among others. Nichols, of course, was (and remains) an open and ardent supporter of Obama who described the 2008 election result as "historic." The *Nation* columnist waxed poetic November 5, praising "the result from the long election night that followed the longest campaign in American history. And as the sun dawns on a new day, it is perhaps a bit easier to hear, as Whitman did, America singing." How nauseating.

Socialist Worker got worked up about the Madison forum at which Nichols appeared in January 2009, commenting: "Coming so soon after the inauguration of President Barack Obama, the tone of the event was excited and motivated. Many of the speakers spoke of the need to continue the excitement that the majority of Americans felt around the election of Obama, and become even more active in the fight for social change." This should be branded on someone's forehead.

And, if the unsuspecting suppose that the ISO by now must have had second thoughts about Nichols in light of Obama's evolution in office, they should suppose again. Only a few weeks ago, on June 23, 2011, the ISO sponsored an event ("The Return of Socialism") at which Nichols unloaded his particular brand of bilge, again in Madison.

Another ally of the ISO is Sal Rosselli, currently president of the National Union of Healthcare Workers, which broke away from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) as part of a factional struggle within that union's upper management.

Rosselli was an early and enthusiastic supporter of Obama, when the former was still an official in the SEIU. On January 31, 2008, he issued a statement that declared, "We feel Obama is the best candidate for working families, and we will urge the Service Employees International Union's state council [in California] to officially endorse him." Rosselli was a major "dissident" figure in the unions who promoted Obama and created expectations in him. He isn't mentioned by name in the recent socialistworker.org editorial, nor did his role in supporting Obama prevent him from being a featured speaker at the "Socialism 2010" and "Socialism 2011" conferences.

The ISO discovered belatedly that the Obama administration was carrying out, all along the line, a right-wing policy. Then the organization changed tack somewhat and suggested, as though this had always been their position, that everything depended on the pressure exerted on Obama from below.

On June 29, 2009, Lance Selfa raised the issue at socialistworker.org as to whether Obama would be "The next FDR or the next Hoover." It remained an open question, according to Selfa. Roosevelt, he wrote, "grasped (consciously or not) that his intention of stabilizing the system couldn't be accomplished without striking a new social compact with the working-class majority that was demanding it."

"If we take any lesson from that past for today," Selfa wrote, "it should be that what happens in the streets, communities and workplaces is the ultimate factor that determines what reforms the working class can win." So it was up to the population to make Obama into a Roosevelt, which presumably means that the population is to blame for the fact that the administration has proposed no social reforms and has done everything in its power to defend the banks and giant corporations.

The ISO position on Obama has been thoroughly discredited by events. But what next? Will the organization rethink its previous orientation and subject it to ruthless criticism? Of course not. Its leaders are hardened political operators, whose position on the left flank of bourgeois politics in America makes it impossible for them to be either honest or consistent.

The ISO has adjusted its attitude toward the administration because to do otherwise would have meant the organization's utter discrediting. *Socialist Worker* criticizes Obama today as part of the continuing effort to head off the development of a movement that breaks the bounds of the Democratic Party, the liberal left and the trade unions, and challenges the profit system.

The ISO's orientation and its political sympathies for the Obama administration stand in sharp contrast to the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the World Socialist Web Site. From the beginning, the SEP warned of the right-wing character of the incoming Obama administration. In its election campaign statement, posted in September 2008, our party predicted that "the next president—regardless whether his name is McCain or Obama—will almost immediately escalate attacks on the American and international working class." (See "Reject Obama and McCain! Support the socialist alternative in 2008! Build the Socialist Equality Party!".)

The statement explicitly warned against illusions "that the election of Obama, the first African-American to receive the presidential nomination of one of the two major capitalist parties, would herald a decisive shift in the foreign policy of the United States… If he is elected, Obama will pursue the global imperialist interests of the American ruling class no less ruthlessly than Bush."

On November 7, 2008 we wrote: "Three days after Barack Obama's election victory, the initial moves by the president-elect to prepare his administration already show that his policies will be determined not by popular expectations, but by the domestic and foreign policy interests of the American financial and corporate elite." (See "As Democrats seek to dampen popular expectations: Obama administration begins to take shape".)

Detailing the right-wing character of Obama's transition team, two weeks after the election, the WSWS concluded: "Obama was the choice

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of the faction of the US political establishment that saw him as the ideal figurehead for the repackaging and recalibration of US imperialist policy." (See "Obama's transition: A who's who of imperialist policy".)

Three years later, after trillions of dollars in Wall Street bailouts and the extension of US wars to countries including Pakistan and Libya, the WSWS analysis has been entirely vindicated. Organizations such as the ISO who cover up for the Obama administration represent, in the final analysis, mildly dissident factions of the establishment.

Those who want to fight against the Obama administration, the savage austerity measures of both parties and American capitalism as a whole will have to inoculate themselves against the opportunist and unprincipled politics and activities of the ISO. Everything that organization does, in the final analysis, is driven by the determination of more privileged sections of the middle class to suppress and prevent the working class from establishing its political independence.

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