

The American “left” and the debt ceiling deal

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The debt ceiling agreement reached between President Barack Obama and the Democrats and Republicans in Congress this week demonstrates that the two-party system is nothing but a mechanism for defending the rule and wealth of the American financial aristocracy.

Both major parties are indifferent to current and future popular suffering. Tens of millions in America already find it difficult, if not impossible, to make ends meet. What lies in store as the political establishment in Washington attempts to repeal whatever social concessions were forced out of the ruling elite over the course of the past century or more?

In the face of this devastating attack, how have the official liberal-left (the *Nation* magazine) and “far left” (the International Socialist Organization) in the US responded? There are no surprises here. These extremely tame and complacent political entities, speaking for affluent constituencies in the middle class, divert attention from the central lessons of the recent crisis and continue to encourage illusions in one faction or another of the Democratic Party.

While criticizing Obama for “capitulating” to the Republican right, both the *Nation* and the ISO hold out hope, explicitly or implicitly, for the “progressive” wing of the Democratic Party. What worries these pseudo-left elements, above all, is that the shameless pro-big business policies of the Obama administration, along with congressional acquiescence, will *weaken the hold of the Democratic Party* on the working class and open the door to mass struggles against the status quo. And they are quite right to be anxious on that score.

Both the *Nation*’s John Nichols and the editors at the ISO’s *Socialist Worker* strive to perpetuate the myth that the Democrats’ “Progressive Caucus” in Congress opposed the assault on social programs and acted in a principled manner.

Nichols’ piece posted August 1 is a lengthy defense of Democratic Party liberals (more than 2,000 words), while offering certain criticism of Obama, who, Nichols writes, “Instead of taking a tough stance ... blinked in the face of Republican recalcitrance.” Blaming the crisis on the Republicans is another attempt to throw dust in the eyes of the public. Obama took the occasion of the debt ceiling stalemate, which was entirely avoidable, to *initiate* savage spending cuts.

The *Nation* correspondent tells his readers that House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi “reportedly told members of the House Democratic Caucus to vote their ‘individual consciences’” on the deal August 1. Nichols writes that “Consciences divided evenly, with ninety-five Democrats opposing the compromise agreement while ninety-five supported it in a Monday evening vote.”

This is a falsification of the situation, as Nichols knows full well. “Conscience” had nothing to do with any of it. Whatever words she used, this is what Pelosi was really telling her caucus on the eve of the vote in the House: “Listen, I understand that some of you, in order to salvage your political reputations, will have to vote against the debt ceiling deal and its budget cutting. That’s fine. In fact, *it is desirable*. Your vote will provide the party as a whole some badly needed credibility. In any case, it is entirely safe. We know that there are plenty of votes for the deal and it will pass. So, go ahead, make your little protest, it will help all of us.”

The ISO’s version of events is nearly as misleading (although not as longwinded) as Nichols’. In an editorial posted August 2 at socialistworker.org, the organization commented, “Many liberals were aghast at Obama’s deal with the Republicans. Some 95 House Democrats, half the total who voted, rejected the deal in an August 1 vote because it went too far” ... and left it at that.

The cynicism of the “No” vote by the 95 Democrats and the falsity of these “left” accounts of it are established by a number of facts. First of all, the entire Progressive Caucus voted July 30 for the plan put forward by Sen. Harry Reid, Nevada Democrat and Senate Majority Leader, which also called for trillions in spending cuts.

Dennis Kucinich, Raúl Grijalva, Barbara Lee and the rest said “Yes” to this massive slashing of entitlement programs. Lee, for example, announced that “While I disagree with much of the Reid bill, I voted yes ... because I believe we must address this Republican-created crisis.” Their vote two days later was pure politics. The Reid plan, from the point of view of the American people, was as retrograde and cruel as the final deal.

Speaking for his fellow liberal Democrats, Congressman Pete Stark from northern California, made clear that he only voted “No” on August 1 because it was a meaningless vote. Stark noted that he “voted this past Saturday to raise the debt ceiling in conjunction with significant spending cuts when the House considered Senator Reid’s compromise package.” He went on, “*If my vote [August 1] is needed to prevent default, I will hold my nose and change my vote to yes. I will do that because governing requires tough choices.*” [Emphasis added]

The *New York Times* reported that in the August 1 House vote, “Scores of Democrats initially held back from voting, to force Republicans to register their positions first.” They wanted to make sure, in fact, that the measure would pass before offering their empty protest.

The Congressional Progressive Caucus has been further exposed in this crisis as a fraud. It is political insincerity and impotence incarnated. If seventy or more members of Congress found it

impossible to defeat or even slow down the passage of brutal anti-working class measures, it was not because they lacked the parliamentary or political means. In the final analysis, the CPC members are as thoroughgoing representatives of big business and the rich as the Republicans, who subscribe to the theory of “shared sacrifice,” i.e., the notion that the working population should pay some (if not all) the cost of the economic disaster brought about by the profit system.

But some comments are priceless! Listen to Katrina vanden Heuvel, editor and publisher of the *Nation*, on July 20, only twelve days before the tragicomic denouement of the debt ceiling crisis: “It’s good to get a grip and some perspective at times like these. That’s why I appreciated Congressman Raúl Grijalva, co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC), reminding us that a ‘Gang of Seventy’ Democrats in the House has already vowed to oppose *any* deal which cuts benefits in Social Security, Medicare or Medicaid.” (That opposition only lasted until July 30, when they voted en masse for the Reid plan, which included enormous cuts to social programs.)

“Our Gang of Seventy-plus has the Gang of Six [the bipartisan group of right-wing US Senators] completely outnumbered,” says Grijalva. ‘And with Republicans not voting for any package, period, because of their opposition to a functional economy, House Democrats hold the key to whatever plan can pass Congress.’”

Indeed, the population had nothing to worry about with Grijalva and his ‘Gang of 70’ on the scene!

It’s largely true, of course, that the Democrats held the key to whatever plan could pass Congress, and the plan that passed was a declaration of war against the working population. What conclusion should be drawn from that?

As for the political charlatans at the ISO, their August 2 editorial begins, “Now we know why Barack Obama heaped such praise on Ronald Reagan during the 2008 presidential campaign. Having hailed the right-wing Republican known for axing social programs as a ‘transformative president,’ Obama has now far outdone Reagan by pushing cuts in social spending on a scale that the Republicans have only dreamed of.”

That’s fine, except if the ISO understood that in 2008, why did it hail the “historic character” of Obama’s candidacy at the time and gushingly describe his victory in November 2008 as, ironically, “a transformative event in US politics”?

The editorial goes on: “In fact, Obama didn’t capitulate to Republican right-wingers. Instead, he greeted them as liberators. They freed him from the high expectations of voters who elected him to bring ‘change’ amid the worst economic crisis since the 1930s.” Again, it is necessary to remind the ISO that it was one of those forces creating expectations in Obama less than three years ago, insisting that “the scale of the problems and questions the U.S. faces ... is driving Obama toward a different [i.e., progressive] agenda.”

Now *Socialist Worker* has sharp words of criticism for the president, before noting that “There was plenty of liberal outrage at the deal.” But what is the ISO’s attitude toward that “outrage”? They cite the reactions of former labor secretary Robert Reich, Rep. Emmanuel Cleaver of the Congressional Black Caucus, Grijalva and Rose Ann DeMoro of National Nurses United without

comment, as though they were good coin.

The editorial continues: “Obama’s decisive swing to the right will be disorienting and demoralizing to millions of working people, including the activists who are central to social struggles, from trade union shop stewards to people who organizing around issues from housing rights to defense of public services.”

“Disorienting and demoralizing”? The ISO had better speak for itself. The bipartisan assault is shocking and painful, but the present situation will also clear up a great many misconceptions about the political system in the US. It inevitably sets the stage for enormous social struggles in the US. The ISO is essentially mourning for lost illusions in the Democratic Party, the center of its political universe.

The editorial makes noises about “a political alternative to the left of the Democratic Party.” This is devoid of serious content. For the ISO, this means reviving or creating a new political safety valve, such as the Greens, the Ralph Nader campaign or something similar, which operates within the overall dominance of the Democratic Party. They make this clear in an earlier editorial when they state directly, “The formation of a new political party isn’t on the agenda.”

John Nichols of the *Nation* is also made anxious by the brazenness of Obama’s actions. He writes that “Barack Obama did himself and his party a world of hurt by cutting the deal with the GOP leadership.” His response? To redouble his efforts to cover up for the Democrats and find a silver lining in every political disaster.

Both the *Nation* and ISO are wings of the Democratic Party, with varying degrees of criticism and dissidence. They are both discomfited at present because the debt ceiling crisis and the brutal spending cuts campaigned for by Obama leave them discredited along with that party.



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