

Obama promotes token jobs plan in campaign-style tour of North Carolina, Virginia

Barry Grey
19 October 2011

President Barack Obama completes his three-day campaign-style bus tour of North Carolina and Virginia today with a speech at Langley Air Force Base in Hampton, Virginia. The president has staged a series of speeches and appearances in the two states to promote his token jobs plan and present himself as a populist alternative to the Republicans.

Obama won both traditionally Republican states in 2008, taking North Carolina by a mere three-tenths of a percentage point and Virginia by seven percentage points. It was the first win in North Carolina by a Democratic presidential candidate since Jimmy Carter's election in 1976 and the first in Virginia since Lyndon Johnson's landslide victory in 1964.

Obama's victory in the two states three years ago was emblematic of the popular repudiation of George Bush and the Republicans and their policies of war and social reaction. Obama and the Democrats appealed to the widespread desire for progressive reform and peace with the slogans of "hope" and "change." By mobilizing, in particular, large numbers of young and minority voters they were able to take these southern states that had repeatedly voted Republican in presidential contests.

Three years of right-wing, pro-corporate domestic policies and an escalation of US militarism even beyond the Bush years have deflated the naïve illusions in Obama and left millions of former supporters disillusioned and angry, especially as the economic crisis has taken a devastating toll on jobs and living standards without any serious response from the administration.

With his poll numbers stuck well below 50 percent nationally, including in both North Carolina and Virginia, Obama last month unofficially launched his reelection campaign with the announcement of his

American Jobs Act. In September he carried out campaign-type sweeps through key electoral states in the Midwest, including Michigan and Ohio.

The plan, supposedly costing \$447 billion over ten years, is entirely cynical in two respects. First, if enacted in full it would produce well below 1 million new jobs. In comparison, the economy has lost 7 million jobs since the official beginning of the recession in December 2007 and needs to create 11.1 million new jobs to replace those that have disappeared and provide for the growth in the interim of the working-age population. It would leave the official unemployment rate well above 8 percent and leave many millions of workers without employment.

Obama's proposal consists mainly of more tax breaks for businesses, including a cut in employer payroll taxes that would drain billions of dollars from Social Security. And Obama has linked the plan to his push to reduce the federal deficit by \$4 trillion, in part by slashing hundreds of billions of dollars from social programs, including Medicare and Medicaid, as well as a so-called tax "reform" that would cut taxes for corporations and the wealthy.

Second, the administration never had any expectation, or, for that matter, desire, to see the plan passed by Congress. The American Jobs Act was conceived of as a means of demagogically channeling the social anger in the US against the Republicans and behind Obama's reelection bid, without enacting any serious measures to reduce unemployment or provide relief for the victims of the recession.

In his tour of the Midwest last month Obama insisted that he would not back down and urged people to demand that the Republicans drop their opposition and help pass the American Jobs Act into law. Last week, the Democratic-controlled Senate blocked a vote on the

bill, with all of the Republicans joined by several Democrats in opposing it. Obama did nothing to seriously oppose this outcome, and no doubt secretly welcomed it.

In North Carolina and Virginia this week, Obama said he would break up the bill into “bite-sized pieces” and seek to have the Senate vote on a series of separate measures. The first of these, a \$35 billion infusion of federal aid to state governments to retain teachers or rehire some of those who have been laid off, and hire additional police and firefighters, may be brought up in the Senate later this week.

This measure, which would be funded by a 0.5 percent tax surcharge on incomes above \$1 million, will be blocked by the Republicans, likely joined once again by a number of Democrats. The anticipated—and intended—outcome of the entire legislative exercise will be the passage of new or extended tax cuts for business, which will be backed by the Republicans in both the Senate and the Republican-controlled House of Representatives.

CBS News reported on its web site Monday: “Some aspects of Obama’s jobs agenda are expected to become law this year. The most likely include extending tax breaks for businesses that buy new equipment and offering a \$4,800 tax credit to companies that hire veterans.” There is also a good chance that the proposal to expand the cut in Social Security payroll taxes and extend it to employers will be passed.

This is the reactionary reality behind Obama’s efforts to put a “left” and populist gloss on his administration. At his first stop on the tour, at the Ashville, North Carolina regional airport on Monday, Obama sounded the political theme of foisting the blame for the jobs crisis entirely on the Republicans.

“If they vote against taking steps that we know will put Americans back to work right now,” Obama said, “then they’re not going to have to answer to me, they’re going to have to answer to you.”

Speaking Tuesday in Jamestown, North Carolina, Obama adopted his “folksy” persona and tried to show that he “cared,” declaring: “Times are tough for a lot of Americans. And here in North Carolina here are a lot of folks who have been spending months looking for work and still haven’t found it yet... It’s tough. It’s hard.” This was followed by an applause line about building

“an economy that works for everybody, not just for folks at the top.”

Mindful, however, of the corporate bosses and bankers to whom he really answers, he added, “That’s why we cut a trillion dollars out of the federal budget this summer. It’s why I’m proposing to cut more to close the deficit.”

While Obama was met with enthusiasm at the carefully staged events on the tour, the less than rosy reality found expression in other ways. As his armored bus, dubbed Ground Force One, snaked along the Blue Ridge Mountain roads of North Carolina, for example, a woman along the road held up a cardboard sign that read: “We Believed, We Voted, Now What?”

In Virginia on Tuesday, Obama arrived for an event in Emporia to find that the local Lowe’s Home Improvement store was one of 20 across the US whose closure was announced that day. Scores of local workers will be laid off, part of 1,950 nationally, adding to the social disaster gripping the area for which neither Obama nor any section of the political establishment has an answer.



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