

The unreality of the US presidential campaign

Patrick Martin
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The US presidential election campaign sees its first official contest in only three weeks, with the January 3 Republican and Democratic Party caucuses in the state of Iowa, followed by the first primary election in New Hampshire a week later.

The main features of the campaign so far—the debates among the Republican candidates, the responses from the Obama White House, the feverish media coverage—testify to the immeasurable chasm that separates the US political system from the concerns of the vast majority of the American people.

Both of the two political parties of big business, the Democrats as much as the Republicans, are moving further and further to the right, demanding savage cuts in social services to cover the deficits created by the bailout of Wall Street and the economic slump brought on by the financial crash of 2008.

But among working people, the trajectory of political development is toward the left, expressed in embryonic form in the Occupy Wall Street protests and the increasing anger among workers in factories and offices and on the unemployment lines. Opinion polls show overwhelming popular opposition to cuts in Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security as well as to reductions in other social programs at the state and local levels.

There is an overpowering air of unreality in the 2012 election campaign. One would not know, listening either to Obama's campaign-style appearance in Kansas last Wednesday or the Republican debate in Iowa Saturday, that tens of millions of working people in the United States live in poverty, that economic insecurity dominates daily life, and that American society faces a tidal wave of hunger, unemployment, foreclosures and the collapse of education, health care and other social services.

All of the Republican candidates are appealing to the prejudices and selfish financial interests of the most

reactionary sections of the population—a thin layer of the financial aristocracy and the “base” of the Republican Party among Christian fundamentalists and the ultra-right Tea Party movement.

The Republican Party has moved so far to the right that the current frontrunner, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, despite a record of more than three decades of political reaction, came under attack at the Saturday debate largely for being insufficiently conservative. In the course of one response, Gingrich reiterated his support for the abolition of laws against child labor. All of the candidates vowed to make further cuts in taxes on the wealthy and corporations.

Media commentary after the debate focused on the supposed gaffe by former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, who challenged one of his opponents, Texas Governor Rick Perry, to a \$10,000 bet. Critics said that by naming such a large sum, equal to three months' wages for an average Iowa worker, the multi-millionaire investment banker was demonstrating insensitivity and exposing his distance from the voters.

Romney may be the most glaring example, as the candidate with the fattest bank account, but he only personifies the dominant role that accumulated wealth plays in American politics. The entire official political system, the Democratic Party as much as the Republicans, is in the pockets of the super-rich and separated from the needs and interests of working people by an unbridgeable social gulf.

While the Republicans act as the open and unabashed defenders of the wealthy, the Democrats play a more complicated role—defending the financial aristocracy while posturing as the allies and advocates of the “middle class” or even “working families.”

This was the core of Obama's speech at Osawatomie, Kansas, where he pretended to be following in the footsteps of Theodore Roosevelt as a scourge of the big financial interests, and claiming to sympathize with the victims of the

financial crisis—those who have lost their jobs, livelihoods and homes. Obama called them “innocent, hardworking Americans who had met their responsibilities but were still left holding the bag.”

Such demagoguery is an insult to the intelligence of the American people, since it presumes that no one has paid any attention for the last three years as Obama continued and expanded the Wall Street bailout begun under Bush, rescued the auto bosses while slashing auto workers’ wages, enacted a health care program directed at cutting services for the sick and benefits costs for American companies, and spearheaded a frontal assault on public education and school employees.

The populist pretense is wearing thin, and American working people increasingly see through it. In an interview broadcast Sunday night on the CBS program “60 Minutes,” correspondent Steve Kroft asked Obama about the growing perception that his government was defending the rich. He cited a recent poll that asked Americans who had gained the most from the Obama administration’s policies. By far the largest number, 42 percent of those polled, said that Wall Street was the number one beneficiary of the Obama administration.

The American media is increasingly filled with speculation about which of a half-dozen political reactionaries, all largely unknown to the American people, will win the Republican nomination to face Obama, and what the outcome of the general election contest will be. But it is a long way to November 6, 2012 and things will unfold very differently than the media projects.

The unreality of the bourgeois election campaign has an objective source: neither party can acknowledge, let alone seriously discuss, the profound crisis of American and world capitalism that overshadows the election and is the driving force of a new series of shocks—economic, political, even military—that will quickly overwhelm the political calculations of the Democrats and Republicans.

The year 2011 saw political upheavals across the Middle East and much of Europe, including most recently in Russia. It also saw the first stirrings of mass opposition to the bipartisan right-wing policies of the Democrats and Republicans in the United States, in the protests among public employees in Wisconsin and other states, and then in the Occupy Wall Street protests that took center stage throughout the fall.

Much greater events are in store for 2012: new outbreaks

of financial crisis, new wars, new eruptions of popular opposition. These events will break up the political stability of the United States—or, to call things by their proper name, the long political stranglehold of the American financial elite and exclusion of the working-class population from political life.

During the last great social and political crisis in America, in the 1960s, the mass upsurge over civil rights and the Vietnam War found expression in internal conflicts within the capitalist parties, particularly the Democratic Party.

There is no such development today. The administration has worked assiduously, with the assistance of the trade unions and the “left” liberal milieu, to prevent any challenge to Obama’s renomination as the Democratic candidate for president.

Opposition to the wars in Afghanistan and Libya, to torture and assassination as government policy, to the bailout of Wall Street, to the destruction of social services finds no expression whatsoever within the existing political system.

The very exclusion of these issues from official politics demonstrates the bankrupt and reactionary nature of the two-party system. It insures that mass popular opposition to the policies of the American financial elite will erupt outside the framework of the US elections and the two official parties.

The entrance of the American working class into mass struggles goes hand in hand with the struggle for political clarification. Millions of working people are breaking with illusions in Obama and the Democratic Party. They will increasingly see the need for an alternative based on socialist policies.

The Socialist Equality Party will intervene in the struggles that lie ahead in 2012 to build a mass movement of the working class, based on a revolutionary socialist program, as the solution to the crisis of capitalism.

Patrick Martin



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