The 2012 US presidential campaign begins: A cynical exercise in duping the people

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The January 3 Iowa caucus, the first contest for the Republican presidential nomination, marks the official beginning of 2012 US election campaign, an exercise in mass deception whose purpose is to legitimize the individual whom the financial aristocracy chooses as its political champion for the next four years.

The campaigning by the Republican candidates in the run-up to the Iowa voting marked a new low point in American capitalist politics, with an unprecedented barrage of attack ads financed by "Super PACs" set up by wealthy supporters of the candidates. As for the candidates themselves, it would be hard to come up with a more reactionary collection of corporate flunkeys, religious fanatics and influence peddlers.

Despite the electoral trappings—caucuses, primaries, debates, rallies, conventions—and the accompanying onslaught of media coverage, there is not a shred of genuine democratic content in the selection of the next American president. The election provides the illusion of choice, but there are no fundamental differences between the two corporate-controlled political parties. Both the Democrats and the Republicans defend the wealth of the super-rich and the worldwide interests of American imperialism.

From the standpoint of working people, it does not matter in the slightest whether Barack Obama is reelected to a second term in the White House or replaced by any of his Republican challengers. The next president, whatever his name or party, will function as the representative of the political, military and corporate elite that controls all the levers of power.

The usual suspects will line up behind the Obama reelection campaign, citing the right-wing ravings of the Republican candidates as an argument for, once again, dragooning the working class behind the Democrats as a "lesser evil." These arguments are already being rehearsed by pro-Democratic Party publications such as the *Nation* and the *New York Times*.

These apologists have hard going, however, since the performance of the Obama administration and the Democrats in Congress has largely dispelled the popular illusions that accompanied the elections of 2006 and 2008. The promises of "hope" and "change" have given way to the reality of a government even more right-wing than the Bush administration, committed to imperialist war, domestic austerity and attacks on democratic rights.

It would be hard to overstate the cynicism of the Obama reelection campaign and its pseudo-populist posturing. This was on display the night of the Iowa caucuses, when Obama addressed Democratic caucus-goers over closed-circuit television. In response to one woman's question about criticism that his administration hasn't done enough for working people, Obama said, "We've done a lot, and we have a lot more to do. That's why we need four more years."

This should be taken as a threat that a reelected Obama administration will move even further to the right. In that context, the most important political event of the 2012 campaign so far is not the rise or fall of the entirely insignificant and forgettable candidates for the Republican nomination, or the results of Iowa caucus balloting, but Obama's signing of the National Defense Authorization Act on December 31.

The legislation gives the president the authority to order the open-ended military detention of any American citizen, without trial or charge, and with no legal recourse. As the prominent civil liberties lawyer Jonathan Turley noted in the *Guardian*, the American media has been completely silent about a measure that effectively abolishes constitutional principles laid down

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in the Bill of Rights more than 200 years ago.

The popular disillusionment with Obama and the Democrats gives an opening for the Republicans, who are well practiced in exploiting working class hostility to the right-wing, pro-corporate policies of the Democrats, to advance even more right-wing policies.

The co-leader in Iowa, former Senator Rick Santorum, gave an example of this in his victory speech late Tuesday night, in which he presented himself as the advocate for laid-off steelworkers and other victims of the collapse of US manufacturing in industrial states like Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and Illinois.

These workers have been completely abandoned by the Obama administration, but the right-wing nostrums of the Republicans—deregulation of industry, tax cuts for corporations and millionaires, gutting of collective bargaining rights—would only deepen the attack on jobs and living standards.

US elections have increasingly become a media spectacle aimed at distracting the population while the political establishment shifts further and further to the right. There is a definite progression, however, as working people have increasingly bitter experiences with the capitalist two-party system.

The 2008 election, particularly the contest between Obama and Hillary Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination, and then Obama's successful general election campaign, engendered significant popular illusions in both the Democratic Party and the new president. These have long since been dissipated, and in the 2012 campaign the entire exercise seems even more empty and hollow.

There is no popular enthusiasm either for Obama or his Republican opponents. Millions of working people have begun to draw the conclusion that neither of the two big business parties offers any solution to the crisis of the profit system. Both are committed to the defense of corporate interests and obey their real masters in the financial oligarchy, regardless of what they say to the voters in the course of an election campaign.

Passive alienation and hostility are not enough, however. The working class must break with the official political framework of the United States, in which two right-wing parties exercise a monopoly and exclude any policies that threaten corporate interests. Working people need a new political road: the building of an independent mass movement based on a socialist program and fighting for the abolition of the profit system.

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