

The American ‘left’ and Obama’s State of the Union address

Janel Flechsig
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The response of representatives of left-liberal and pseudo-socialist circles to Barack Obama’s January 24 State of the Union address confirms their role as adjuncts of the Democratic Party and supporters of Obama’s reelection campaign.

The speech itself was as dishonest and cynical as it was reactionary. Billed as a populist response to the economic crisis, it was nothing of the sort. Rather, it was an exercise in jingoism, economic nationalism, and election year myth-making. Its centerpiece was Obama’s blueprint for an “economy built to last,” with the supposed success of the auto bailout as its model.

What Obama did not mention is that the revival of US auto industry profits is based entirely on the abolition of decent wages and benefits for auto workers and the establishment of poverty-level wages as the benchmark for American manufacturing. His auto task force imposed a 50 percent pay cut for all newly hired General Motors and Chrysler workers, along with a no-strike clause and drastic cuts in benefits for new workers as well as retirees.

This economic plan was, moreover, presented within the context of a celebration of American militarism. Obama praised the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and the murder of Muamar Gaddafi, as well as extrajudicial drone assassinations in Africa and the Middle East. He threatened China with economic war, Syria with diplomatic war and Iran with military attack. He concluded by invoking the Navy SEAL hit squad that assassinated Osama bin Laden as the apotheosis of American values and a model for US society as a whole.

David Corn, former Washington editor of the *Nation* who now heads the Washington bureau of *Mother Jones* magazine, published a full-throated endorsement of Obama’s speech almost immediately after it was

delivered. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of Corn’s rave review was his enthusiastic response to Obama’s appalling peroration.

“Obama did not cite this success [the murder of bin Laden] as a reply to GOP charges that he’s an appeasing wuss,” Corn wrote. “Instead, he used it like a national-security version of an Amish barn-raising—defining the American story as one of communal action: We’re not individual actors being bounced around by market forces; we band together for the greater good. It’s worth a read.”

These are the words of a man who, whatever connections he may have once had to anti-war and anti-imperialist sentiments, has joined the camp of American imperialism body and soul. His transition is not simply that of an individual. He represents an entire milieu of middle-class ex-radicals and liberals who have benefited personally and financially from decades of political reaction and attacks on working class living standards. This affluent social layer has grown alienated from and hostile to the working class.

This is fundamentally what underlies Corn’s enthusiasm for Obama and his economic blueprint. “The 2012 race,” he writes, “is shaping up as a titanic face-off between a president who advocates using government to bolster the economy and address inequities and Republicans who have one answer to everything: Smother government and let the markets run free. In his speech, Obama called for ‘great projects.’ Republicans call for no projects—that is, nothing outside the private sector. This is a damn clear contrast.”

Corn’s claim that there exist huge policy differences between the Democrats and the Republicans is a rather obvious lie, and he knows it. Despite the bitter recriminations and mudslinging between the parties,

what dominates the 2012 elections is the inability of either party to offer any proposals to address mass unemployment and mounting poverty. They have no differences on the need to destroy the living standards of working people, wage aggressive war and gut democratic rights in an attempt to halt the decline of American capitalism and protect the wealth of the financial elite.

“Obama,” Corn continues, “is pitching a patriotic, quasi-populist progressivism (while conceding the need for deficit reduction and government cost efficiencies).” A “progressivism” based on austerity and chauvinism—such is the reactionary program applauded by Corn.

An editorial posted January 25 on the web site of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) likewise tail-ends Obama, although in a less overt and crude manner. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this multi-page excavation of the speech is what it does not talk about. It mentions neither the wage-cutting that underlies Obama’s economic plan for manufacturing nor the sinister militarism of the speech.

The basic outlook is summed up in the first lines of the statement: “Barack Obama talked tough about Wall Street in his State of the Union speech. But look behind the rhetoric, and his economic proposals fall short of what’s needed.”

Obama’s timid and empty swipes at Wall Street—meant to obscure a policy that is dictated by the banks and corporations—evidently impress the ISO. But his proposals “fall short.” This formulation is significant. It is not a matter of a brutal anti-working class offensive, but rather a positive program that just doesn’t go far enough. This, of course, implies that Obama and the Democrats can be pushed by applying more pressure from below to go further and carry out genuinely progressive policies. Here, in a nutshell, is the ISO’s real perspective of channeling popular opposition behind the Democrats and Obama’s reelection campaign.

This is spelled out more explicitly in the following passage:

“To some extent, the sharper edge in Obama’s speech is another result of the rise of the Occupy movement and its impact on US politics. Even mainstream Washington politicians have had to acknowledge the increasingly vocal discontent about a

society divided between the super-rich 1 percent at the top and the rest of us. This shift has been a breath of fresh air...”

In other words, the Occupy protests have shifted Obama and the Democrats to the left, proving the efficacy of a perspective that rejects a break with the two parties of big business and the development of an independent movement of the working class fighting for socialism.

As is frequently the case with this supposedly socialist tendency, the editorial concludes with a formal injunction not to “place any hopes in the Democrats” and an assertion of the need to “remain independent of both capitalist parties.” This, however, is rhetorical window dressing for a political orientation and practice aimed at promoting illusions in the Democrats and their allied organizations, beginning with the trade unions.

The United States is entering a new period of great class struggles. This is, moreover, an international phenomenon. It is driven by a historic crisis of American and world capitalism and the increasingly obvious failure of the profit system. Millions are beginning to recognize that this system and all of its political parties and representatives have nothing to offer except war, depression and the destruction of democratic rights. They are looking for an alternative and moving into struggle.

The single-minded focus of left-liberals and fake-socialists such as the ISO is to prevent the emergence of an independent movement of the working class fighting for a socialist program. They are not opponents of the capitalist status quo, but rather its left flank of defenders.



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