The Nation magazine and the campaign to reelect Obama

Joseph Kishore
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With just weeks to go before the US presidential election on November 6, the *Nation* magazine is ramping up its campaign for the reelection of Obama.

Four years ago, the *Nation*—the standard-bearer of left-liberal support for the Democratic Party—hailed the election of Obama as a transformative event that would end the right-wing consensus in American politics. "Make no mistake," wrote the magazine's editor, Katrina vanden Heuvel, in August 2008, after Obama had secured the Democratic Party nomination, "[Obama's] election will open a new era of reform."

In the 2008 election, the *Nation* sought to cultivate support for Obama's campaign. At that time, Obama's claim to represent "hope" and "change" found some popular resonance, particularly among youth, reflecting a deep popular hatred of the policies of the Bush administration and a belief that an African American would be more sympathetic to the plight of working people.

The election of Obama, the Democrats and their "left" supporters such as the *Nation* argued, would bring with it a sea change in American politics.

Four years later, these illusions have been shattered. Genuine popular support has largely dissipated as a consequence of the policies of the Obama administration itself. No less committed to Obama's reelection, however, the supposedly "left" supporters of Obama must now contend with this record. This is what lends their arguments a particularly dishonest and internally contradictory character.

The *Nation* magazine's October 22 issue, which includes 10 articles by various *Nation* writers and "left" activists, is devoted to arguing in favor of support for Obama's reelection. The main article, by Deepak Bhargava, bears the headline, "Why Obama?" Bhargava is executive director of the Center for Community Change, a "community building" organization with close ties to the Democratic Party.

His piece is preceded by an editorial entitled "Re-elect the President" (analyzed separately by the WSWS in "The class issues in the 2012 US elections").

The *Nation*'s argument for Obama's reelection runs along the following lines: Yes, Obama has done certain "disappointing" things, but these are balanced by positive and "progressive" things. Whatever concerns might exist, it is necessary to "lean into this election without ambivalence," Bhargava writes, since a "defeat will be catastrophic for the progressive agenda and movement."

Economic and social devastation, bank bailouts, expanding war, police state measures, wholesale attacks on teachers, auto workers and workers in general—for the *Nation* writers, all this falls under the euphemistic category of "disappointments."

Bhargava, for example, notes that the administration has failed "to hold Wall Street accountable for crashing the economy," while doing nothing for "millions of homeowners facing foreclosure."

Another writer in the same issue, Robert Borosage, acknowledges that the administration "turned toward austerity…in the midst of mass unemployment, rising poverty and declining wages. [Obama] joined the 'elite consensus' on austerity early and has shown that he's ready to put Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid 'on the table.'"

On the administration's assault on the Bill of Rights, Bhargava writes that Obama has "failed…to reverse the erosion of civil liberties in the 'war on terror.'" This "failure" includes continuing the Bush administration's policies of domestic spying, keeping Guantanamo Bay open, and opposing the prosecution of those responsible for torture.

Bhargava downplays the extent of Obama's assault on democratic rights, describing it as a lack of action, when, in reality, the current administration has expanded the buildup of police powers begun under Bush, including Obama's assertion of the president's "right" to assassinate anyone, including US citizens, without any judicial process.

The *Nation* is hustling votes for a man who holds weekly meetings at which he personally signs off on drone assassinations, knowing that those killed will include innocent men, women and children.

What are the supposed "gains" cited by the *Nation*? They fall into two main categories: right-wing policies that are palmed off as reforms, and token measures taken to placate the liberal-left milieu and address its lifestyle and identity politics concerns.

Chief among the former is Obama's health care overhaul, which Bhargava claims will "provide coverage to 35 million people." In fact, Obama's health care measures require individuals to purchase insurance from private companies or face a penalty, thereby strengthening the hand of the insurance corporations. The main purpose of these measures is to cut health care costs for the government and private corporations.

Nothing is said by the writers of the *Nation* of the hundreds of billions of dollars in cuts to Medicare included in Obama's plan, or the campaign being waged by Democrats against supposedly "unnecessary" tests and procedures. Little if anything is said of the bipartisan plans after the elections to slash trillions of dollars in domestic spending, taking an axe to Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security.

The second category of "gains" consists of sops from the administration to its middle-class "left" supporters, with something for each of the various constituencies that make up this political milieu.

Many of the articles cite what Bhargava calls Obama's "executive

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action to protect more than 1 million immigrant youths from deportation." This thoroughly cynical maneuver requires undocumented immigrant youth who meet stiff eligibility requirements to file with the Department of Homeland Security—thereby exposing themselves and their families to potential victimization—in the hope of receiving a two-year reprieve from deportation.

In defending Obama, the *Nation* is led to absurd contradictions. According to Bhargava, Obama is defending immigrant youth even as he oversees an "alarming increase in deportations." The administration has supposedly carried out significant "financial reform," even as it has "failed to hold Wall Street accountable for crashing the economy."

Then there is Obama's repeal of the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, which banned openly gay individuals from serving, and Obama's verbal expression of support for gay marriage, which actually committed the administration to nothing.

These measures are entirely compatible with the interests of the financial aristocracy. To the extent that democratic issues involved, the *Nation* never seeks to explain how democratic rights can be defended by a party dedicated to serving the corporate elite, lowering the living standards of the broad masses of the people, and upholding staggering levels of social inequality.

As in 2008, chief among the arguments for Obama's reelection is the fact that he is African American. The elevation of race to the fundamental social category in the United States has been central to the politics of the Democratic Party for decades. The fact that the president is black has been hailed as the high point of social progress, even as the vast majority of African Americans suffer devastating poverty and unemployment.

The crudest example of the racialist argument for Obama's reelection is provided by Bill Fletcher, a former assistant to AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and cofounder of "Progressives for Obama." He writes, "The 2012 election is not really about Obama and Obama's record." Rather, it is about countering the Republicans, who are based on "the racists and the fearful within white America." These racists "not only despise the idea of an African-American serving as president of what they believe to be a white republic; they are terrified that the demographics of the country are changing in favor of people of color."

This injection of racial politics is aimed at tarring any opposition to Obama—particularly from the working class—as racist.

Notably absent from any of the articles in the *Nation* is a serious analysis of military policy, outside of a reference to the administration's supposed "ending" of the war in Iraq. This is because the *Nation* and the social forces that it represents fully support the administration's expansion of war, including the assault on Libya and the current stoking up of a civil war in Syria.

None of the writers refers to plans underway for launching military action against Iran in the aftermath of the elections, regardless of who is elected. Such a war could quickly escalate into a confrontation with China and Russia, which the *Nation* would find a way to support.

Behind the sophistry and lies, the arguments of the *Nation* boil down to insisting that it is necessary to support Obama to ensure the gains of "progressives." As one of the writers puts it, "A GOP victory robs us of the oxygen required to grow deeper and broader roots for the progressive movement."

What is this "progressive movement?" There are real social interests involved, but they have nothing to do with the working class.

Nation speaks for a layer of the upper-middle class that has done quite well under Obama—sections of the trade union bureaucracy, tenured professors at elite universities, well-paid journalists in the orbit of the political establishment and employed by Democratic Party think tanks, better-off sections of minority populations. Obama has offered them "space," soliciting their services in policing the working class and maintaining the political order.

They are upset at the prospect of a Romney victory, but not because of Romney's viciously anti-working class agenda, which Obama shares. Rather, they are concerned about their own positions and privileges, which are linked to the fortunes of the Democratic Party.

In the end, the anti-working class and militarist policies of the Obama administration are not disappointments at all. The writers of the *Nation* are far more concerned about the danger of an independent movement of the working class than they are about wage cutting, unemployment and attacks on education and health care.

The upper-middle class layers for which the *Nation* speaks are sensitive to the potential for a movement from below, outside of the Democratic Party, which would threaten their own social and political position. Their social grievances, and their opposition to the Republicans, reflect dissatisfaction with the distribution of wealth within the top 10 percent, not the lowering of the living standards of the bottom 60 percent. They exclude any genuinely popular and democratic alternative to the two-party system—that is, a socialist alternative.

The elections—an undemocratic and highly manipulated contest between two right-wing representatives of the American financial oligarchy—do present workers and young people with a real choice. But it is not, as the *Nation* would have it, between the "lesser of two evils."

It is the choice of taking up the struggle to build a mass socialist movement of the working class in opposition to the capitalist system, which is incapable of meeting the basic needs of the people, and the political establishment that defends the system, including the *Nation* magazine and its milieu.

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