

Obama and the debate

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In the 24 hours since Wednesday night's debate between President Obama and his Republican challenger Mitt Romney, the American media has been filled with commentary on the failure of Obama to conduct a serious defense of his record or mount an effective attack on his opponent.

The organs of the Republican right, like the *Wall Street Journal* and Fox News, have hailed the debate as a vindication of the Romney candidacy, signaling his transformation from the hapless loser of the week before into a credible standard-bearer for their favored policies of shredding the social safety net to fund even greater tax cuts for the super-rich.

Such arguments explain nothing. Romney is still just as reactionary and his policies just as unpopular the day after the debate as they were the day before. Moreover, his performance Wednesday night, from his brazen lies about his plan to cut taxes for the wealthy to his incomprehensible reference to "trickle-down government," was no more cogent or convincing than Obama's.

Liberal pundits were up in arms, venting their disappointment at Obama's lackluster performance. Their explanation for the debacle explained nothing either: Obama had made a poor tactical choice in deciding not to bring up his rival's record as an asset stripper and corporate raider at Bain Capital or Romney's disparaging comments before an audience of wealthy contributors about the "47 percent" of Americans who are supposedly "dependent on government" and "believe they are entitled" to healthcare, food and housing.

In part, the intensity of their disappointment with Obama's capitulation reveals their own self-delusion. They seem to have believed their own hype that this right-wing bourgeois politician was the champion of "hope" and "change."

Equally bankrupt were the incessant references in the

pro-Obama media, like the *New York Times*, to the president's "professorial" demeanor and approach. Obama was no less vapid and pedantic in 2008, when the corporate-controlled media hailed him, without the slightest justification, as a superb orator who was moving millions.

Among the most apoplectic responses came from MSNBC's Chris Mathews, who exploded "Where was Obama tonight?" as if the man on the stage in Denver and the occupant of the White House were two different people.

In the debate, however, the real Obama was on display: a man with no significant political background or career, much less independent ideas. An individual who had passed through no real struggles before he was picked up and promoted as the symbol of "change," while remaining a loyal servant of the state.

No doubt, for someone whose meteoric political rise has depended on rich patrons, being roundly attacked by someone from that social layer was disconcerting.

It is impossible, however, to explain the performance witnessed by 70 million Americans by focusing solely on the political tactics devised by Democratic Party spin doctors or the personality traits of the nonentity in the White House. Like any significant political event, the course of the US presidential election can be grasped only through an analysis of the social forces at work. Only by considering the essential *class* role of the Democratic Party can Obama's failure to take the offensive against Romney be understood.

The Democratic Party, like the Republican, is a political instrument of the financial aristocracy that rules America. It has not the slightest independence from the capitalist ruling elite. That does not, however, make the two parties identical. They play distinct, albeit complementary, political roles.

The Republican Party asserts the barely disguised appetite of the ruling elite for the greatest possible

accumulation of wealth in the shortest possible time. While claiming, as Romney did Wednesday night, that policies of cutting taxes on corporations and the wealthy will “create jobs” and improve conditions of life for working people, this pretense has very little credibility with the American people. After all, the US is now in the fifth year of the greatest financial crisis since the Great Depression, with Wall Street profits returning to record levels, but working class living standards thrown back a generation.

The Democratic Party poses as the advocate of ordinary working people, supposedly concerned with jobs, social programs and raising living standards, while occasionally criticizing the excesses of Wall Street. Its substantive policy differences with the Republicans in relation to working class interests, however, remain minimal, and it competes with them in currying favor with the bankers and billionaires.

In a period of ever more acute social tensions, such as today, the contradictions posed in this political division of labor can reach a paralyzing level. The Democratic Party seeks to play its role as social safety valve, as the Obama reelection campaign has done for several months, adopting a populist posture with denunciations of Romney as a vulture capitalist whose private equity firm, Bain Capital, raided companies and destroyed jobs.

But this populism is empty and cynical. The Obama administration remains the instrument of big business. It carried through the Wall Street bailout, begun under Bush, as well as the bailout of the auto companies, in the course of which the White House pushed through a 50 percent cut in wages for new hires, setting an example for the whole of corporate America to slash working class living standards using mass unemployment as a club.

If Obama were a genuine opponent of Wall Street privilege and criminality, having Mitt Romney as his challenger would be a godsend. As the longtime proprietor of a major private equity firm, Romney is the personification of the social layer that wrecked the US and world economy and plunged millions of workers into unemployment and destitution.

But Obama is a political servant of that same social layer. Face to face with Romney, he cannot indict him for the 2008 crash, because that would entail indicting the financial aristocracy itself, and making an appeal to

social forces that all the bourgeois political establishment, Democrats and Republicans alike, regard with hostility and fear.

There are already signs, in the strikes in Chicago and Detroit against Democratic administrations, of a movement of the working class that will challenge the policies of both capitalist parties. In the 2012 election campaign, there is only one party that fights to develop this independent movement and give it a revolutionary anti-capitalist direction. That is the Socialist Equality Party, and our candidates for president and vice president, Jerry White and Phyllis Scherrer.

For the SEP, the capitulation of Obama and the Democrats to right-wing reaction is not a cause for consternation, but a predictable, even inevitable development. To defend jobs, living standards and social programs, and oppose imperialist war and attacks on democratic rights, the working class must mobilize its strength politically, challenging the monopoly of the capitalist two-party system and building an independent mass political movement fighting for a socialist program.

For more information on the SEP campaign, visit www.socialequality.com

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