

After the US presidential debates: The political issues facing the working class

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It is now less than two weeks to Election Day in the United States. The campaigns of the two principal candidates have exposed the fraudulent, anti-democratic character of the entire electoral process. The American people are presented with a “choice” between two candidates who have, in the end, no significant political differences.

That was on display Monday evening in the last of the debates between President Barack Obama and his Republican challenger, Mitt Romney. Sounding like Mafia dons, both candidates declared their cold-blooded commitment to defending the interests of American imperialism abroad. At times they appeared to revel at the prospect of pulling the trigger to “take out” opponents of the American ruling class around the world.

Romney’s “strategy,” he said, “is to go after the bad guys... to kill them, to take them out of the picture.” Obama trumpeted the fact that his administration had “finished the job” in Libya by hunting down and killing Muammar Gaddafi. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s “days are numbered,” he declared.

Obama boasted that Iran’s “economy is in a shambles,” while Romney praised the devastating impact of “crippling sanctions.” Both pledged even harsher measures, while threatening that, as in Iraq, the economic measures that are creating suffering for millions will be followed by bombs and missiles. “The clock is ticking,” warned the president.

Romney said he “absolutely supports” the Obama administration’s drone assassination program, declaring that “the president has the right to up the usage of that technology... to go after the people who represent a threat to this nation and to our friends.”

He was underscoring the bipartisan support that exists for Obama’s having gone even further than his predecessor, George W. Bush, in exterminating those who resist US neo-colonial occupations and wars in the Middle

East and Central Asia. Obama has declared that the president has the right to assassinate anyone, including US citizens, without even the pretext of judicial review. He has let it be known that he personally selects the targets for drone attacks every week.

The fact that such statements are placed at the center of the final pre-election presidential debate testifies to the collapse of democratic sensibilities within the state and media apparatus in the United States.

What is true of foreign policy is equally true of domestic policy. The elections are a contest between two hand-picked representatives of the corporate and financial elite.

On the one hand there is Romney, an individual who in his personal history embodies the parasitism of a financial aristocracy that is responsible for the worst world economic crisis since the Great Depression. On the other, there is Obama, who has dedicated his four years in office to bailing out the banks, boosting corporate profits and spearheading an attack on the jobs and living conditions of the working class.

The real plans of these candidates for the period after the elections—including an escalation of war abroad and attacks on the working class at home—are being kept from the American people. A sharp warning must be made: whoever comes out on top, the ruling class is preparing to vastly expand its policy of militarism and social reaction.

In the aftermath of the elections, the ruling class will intensify its campaign against Syria and Iran, preparing a war that could rapidly erupt into a conflict with Russia or China. Basic social programs—such as Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security—will be decimated.

What remains of democratic rights will be thrown out the window as the state responds with force to the emergence of mass social struggles in the United States. How long will it be before the language of state assassination is used to target not only overseas opponents

of the American ruling class, but domestic ones as well?

The ruling elite has a certain choice to make in manipulating the outcome of the election. There are tactical considerations involved. The candidates employ different rhetoric and rely on different political forces.

The Democratic Party, in particular, calls on the services of a complacent “liberal” and “left” upper-middle class social layer, dominated by its own selfish concerns and thoroughly hostile to the working class. Its role is to provide a “progressive” gloss to the reactionary policies of the Obama administration and a “democratic” cover to the capitalist two-party system—a task that grows more difficult by the day.

If the debate on foreign policy helped expose the essential unanimity of the two big business candidates, it also demonstrated that there is very little that separates Romney and Obama from the program of the *Nation*, the International Socialist Organization, and the entire array of liberal and pseudo-left political tendencies in the orbit of the Democratic Party.

In its own coverage of Monday’s debate, the *Nation*, which is campaigning for Obama’s reelection, noted that little could be found to separate its candidate from Romney. “Obama seemed content to tell voters that he and Romney agreed,” worried Robert Dreyfuss, the magazine’s chief foreign affairs commentator. “That hardly helps Obama.”

John Nichols, the chief political commentator for the *Nation*, was less reserved. “Again and again, Romney agreed with Obama’s approaches on international issues,” Nichols exulted.

Nichols and company fail to grasp that the unanimity on display Monday is a devastating exposure of their own political role. Their “transformative candidate,” who was supposed to usher in a new and progressive period in American politics, has in fact implemented a policy entirely in conformity with that of his predecessor—and his potential successor.

These elections are the culmination of a historic and protracted process of decay of American capitalism. With the vast growth of social inequality and the rise of a corrupt financial aristocracy, the political apparatus has become more and more removed from broader layers of the population.

The lies are more blatant and shameless, the rhetoric more tired and empty. Every element of the electoral process—the domination of corporate cash, the stage-managed debates, the media manipulation—bears witness to the rotted out character of the entire political system.

How long can this continue? The degraded character of American politics testifies to its extreme fragility—and the fragility of the capitalist system upon which it rests. What passes for American “democracy” rests on a social and political time bomb.

In the backdrop to the American elections is a global economic crisis that has already begun to produce explosive class battles—from South Africa, to Europe, to the United States itself. But the great mass of the American people have no means of expressing their interests within the framework of the existing political system.

The great and urgent task is the building of a new political leadership that gives conscious expression to the objective development of the class struggle. The working class needs its own political party, one that begins from the understanding that the capitalist system has failed.

The rights of the working class can be secured only through its independent mobilization in a struggle for political power and the socialist reorganization of economic life. This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party and it informs our election campaign.

Workers and young people face a major decision, but it is not the empty choice between Obama and Romney. It is the decision to take up an active struggle for socialism. It is not enough to bemoan the political choices as they are presented by the ruling class and its political system. It is necessary to join and build the alternative—the Socialist Equality Party.

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The SEP urges all of its supporters to attend one of our upcoming regional conferences—in Los Angeles on October 27, Berkeley on October 28, New York on November 3, and Detroit on November 4. For more information on joining the SEP, click here.



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