

# Obama's post-election pivot to austerity and war

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With the US elections out of the way, the American ruling class is moving with remarkable speed to implement a deeply unpopular agenda centered on trillions of dollars in cuts to health care and other social programs.

The first order of business, to be at least partially implemented even before the newly elected Congress takes office in January, is the so-called “fiscal cliff.”

The language is chosen quite deliberately. The image of a “cliff”—first used by Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke in February 2012—is intended to create a sense of impending catastrophe. The fiscal cliff has become the latest mantra of the political and media establishment, complete with a continually updated countdown on CNN. The aim is to foster a crisis atmosphere to force through measures long desired by the ruling class that would otherwise be impossible to impose.

This “cliff” is an artificial creation. As a result of legislation agreed to by Congress and the Obama administration, the end of the year will bring with it the expiration of Bush tax cuts on all income brackets as well as the implementation of across-the-board cuts in military and domestic spending (excluding Social Security and Medicaid).

Other measures set to expire at the end of the year, particularly extended federal unemployment benefits, have gone unmentioned in the media. Both parties agree on the need to cut off meager assistance to the jobless.

The date of the “cliff” was quite deliberately set for after the elections to prevent the vote from becoming a referendum on the social cuts and give the White House and Congress, whichever party was in control, a free hand to impose their bipartisan austerity agenda.

Both Democrats and Republicans are hailing the

prospects of an agreement that would focus on two goals: 1) Replacing the automatic spending cuts with cuts that target Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security, while averting cuts to the military; 2) Moving forward on a “pro-growth tax reform,” which would include a reduction in corporate and individual tax rates combined with the elimination or scaling back of deductions that benefit the working population.

During the election campaign, Obama made an issue of calling for an end to the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy—a move that would result in a relatively small increase in the tax rate for top earners. Exploiting the popularity of raising taxes on the rich, the administration is seeking to give itself a fig leaf of “equal sacrifice” as it gets down to the business of gutting social programs.

However, even the nominal increase in tax rates will likely not see the light of day. Top Obama strategist David Axelrod said on Sunday that he would not “pre-judge” negotiations. Praising comments from Republican Speaker of the House John Boehner, Axelrod declared, “[O]bviously there’s money to be gained by closing some of these loopholes and applying them to deficit reduction [rather than raising rates], so I think there are a lot of ways to skin this cat so long as everybody comes with a positive, constructive attitude toward the task.”

Whatever the details of the agreement that is ultimately reached, it will involve historic cuts to programs that benefit the working class while increasing the wealth of the financial and corporate elite.

On foreign policy, the administration is moving quickly to escalate Washington’s drive for regime-change in Syria while making new threats against Iran. In its first post-election foreign policy announcement,

the administration slapped new sanctions on Iranian officials. A bipartisan bill is making its way through the Senate that would impose crippling sanctions on the entire Iranian economy, which has already been devastated by the actions of the US and its European allies.

The president's first post-election trip, beginning November 17, will be to Asia, as the administration intensifies its campaign to isolate and target China.

The first week after the election has set the tone for the next four years under Obama. It has also underscored the accelerating decay of American democracy.

Billions of dollars were expended by the two campaigns in the election, supposedly the most important opportunity for the American people to have a say over the future of the country. Meanwhile, the real plans of the ruling class were concealed behind the platitudes and empty rhetoric of the two candidates. Now that the elections are concluded, the agenda of the corporate-financial oligarchy is being pursued with ruthless determination.

The experience of the past four years of the Obama administration has not been lost on working people. The *World Socialist Web Site* has been virtually alone in pointing to the most significant aspect of Tuesday's vote: the extraordinary decline in voter participation and, above all, the sharp fall in the number of votes for Obama.

When all the ballots are tallied, Obama's vote will be 7 to 8 million below his vote four years ago. The decline is not a result of support for Romney, whose vote total was lower than that of Republican candidate John McCain in 2008. Rather, broad sections of the population expressed their disillusionment and alienation from both parties and the entire political set-up by not casting a vote.

Under the impact of the economic crisis and in response to the policies of the ruling class, the disillusionment of millions of workers and youth will turn toward anger. What political form will this anger take?

The array of pro-Democratic Party institutions—from the trade unions to the liberal and pseudo-left organizations and publications—are compromised by these developments. They hail Obama's reelection as a great victory for "progressives" and look on the

alienation of workers from the Democratic Party with fear and foreboding.

Politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum. The strength of the socialist perspective—and of the program of the Socialist Equality Party—is that it corresponds to the logic of objective developments. In the course of the elections, the SEP campaign warned of what was to come after the elections. The ruling class in its own actions is demonstrating the correctness of this warning and of the Marxist perspective.

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