

The increasingly right-wing, pro-Democratic Party ISO

David Walsh
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The remarkable response of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) to Barack Obama's State of the Union address February 12 gives expression to the organization's movement even farther to the right and into the camp of the Democratic Party.

The most critical moment in Obama's speech, as the WSWs noted, came when the newly re-inaugurated president defended the program of drone assassinations currently operated by his administration, in violation of the Constitution, as well as US and international law, which has resulted in thousands of civilian deaths.

After observing that Al Qaeda, the organization that attacked the US on September 11, 2001 "is a shadow of its former self," Obama went on to claim that the threat posed by the Islamist group and its affiliates "is evolving." Instead of sending troops to invade Yemen, Libya and Somalia, for example, the president suggested, the US would continue, "through a range of capabilities ... to take direct action against those terrorists who pose the gravest threat to Americans." This is a euphemism for the drone program and other related activities, aspects of Washington's drive to dominate the strategically important region.

Obama insisted that "we must enlist our values" in carrying out this program of long-range assassination, over which he personally presides. Insofar as the president is referring to America's revolutionary-democratic "values," embodied in such documents as the Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation, along with the best instincts of the population rooted in those traditions, there is no possibility of such an enlistment. The two phenomena are entirely at odds, and if democratic "values" had the slightest resonance within the political and media establishment, calls for Obama's impeachment and removal from office would be too numerous to keep track of.

There is no attachment to Constitutional rights within the American establishment, including its comfortable liberal-left element within which the ISO is located.

The February 14 editorial response by Socialistworker.org to Obama's address ("Hollowed-out hope") makes no

reference to "drones," "assassination program" or "kill list." In fact, the ISO has had almost nothing to say about Obama's drone murders. A February 12 piece by Eric Ruder suggested that a "real debate" and "a challenge" were needed in relation to the extra-judicial program. The rest is silence.

This in itself is not a surprise. The ISO has steadily accommodated itself to US-led imperialist interventions. The pseudo-left group equivocated in regard to the attack on Libya, arguing that whether to support or oppose the Great Powers' campaign was a matter of legitimate discussion "on the left." It has endorsed the imperialist-backed campaign for regime change in Syria.

The ISO's decades of activity in and around various middle class protest movements and the trade union apparatuses, in the orbit of the Democratic Party, have created something quite reactionary. Its leadership and membership can easily be manipulated by abstract and empty appeals to "human rights" and "women's rights," and mutterings about "Muslim backwardness" and "Islamofascism," all of which are the pretexts the imperialists and their apologists provide for their neo-colonial operations, just as the West's "civilizing mission" was offered up a century or more ago.

So, the ISO has nothing to say about Obama's State of the Union defense of the killing of countless Pakistani, Afghan and Yemeni citizens and his promise to continue the program. None of that, as they say, registers on the ISO's political radar screen.

Socialistworker.org does, however, choose to take quasi-seriously what the WSWs described as the president's "left-sounding rhetoric," intended "to give a 'progressive' gloss to a reactionary, anti-working class program."

The ISO sees its task as forcing Obama and the Democrats to live up to their promises.

The editors write, "The media consensus is in about Barack Obama's State of the Union address: his speech was aggressive and progressive, challenging the Republican Party to deliver on immigrant rights, raising the minimum

wage, climate change and more.”

Having introduced this “consensus” view to their readers, the ISO editors never seriously debunk it. They later merely observe that “the real Obama isn’t the progressive firebrand liberals wish he was, but a conventional politician squarely at the center of the bipartisan political establishment in Washington.”

The complacency of this comment, regarding an administration dominated as perhaps no other in history by the financial aristocracy and military-intelligence apparatus, which has made a considerable advance in the direction of police-state dictatorship, is aimed at lulling the reader to sleep.

The ISO’s message is: Obama isn’t the “progressive firebrand liberal” *they* say he is—he’s perhaps only half or a quarter of that.

The editorial continues: “Obama has so far taken a tougher stand against the Republicans than he did in his first four years, when he gave up ground again and again. That doesn’t mean the White House won’t cave, over the sequester or some other issue. But even if they don’t retreat, Obama and the Democrats sure can’t be described as standing up for a progressive agenda.”

In his State of the Union address, Obama boasted of having slashed \$2.5 trillion from the deficit, “mostly through spending cuts,” and proposed to cut hundreds of billions more from Medicare and Social Security. The differences between the Democrats and Republicans on budget cutting are tactical and largely cosmetic. The two parties agree that the costs of the global economic crisis and bailing out of the banks have to be imposed on the population in part by eviscerating social programs.

Thus, to describe the Democrats’ support for austerity and the impoverishment of the American people as simply “not standing up for a progressive agenda” is so misleading as to constitute an out-and-out political falsehood. If such a formulation is not a semi-covert argument for supporting the “lesser of two evils,” then what is it?

The ISO, in this same dishonest, backhanded manner, again and again puts the best face on Obama’s address in their February 14 editorial. “He [the president] did dust off an old promise to raise the federal minimum wage—to \$9 an hour from the current \$7.25. ... That’s just not enough action from the man who declared that ‘in the wealthiest nation on Earth, no one who works full-time should have to live in poverty.’” “Obama’s speech contained numerous proposals that may sound good—like tax credits to expand access to higher education,” etc., etc. “Not enough action”—if only he would do more!

The profoundly right-wing thrust of the editorial emerges most clearly in its last two paragraphs:

“It’s time,” editorializes Socialistworker.org, “for the labor movement, liberal organizations and the broader left beyond them to stop praising Obama for merely opposing the Republican right. Working people need to fight for the agenda we want, not Obama’s hollowed-out, compromised version.

“The only way Obama or any other Washington politician will match the rhetoric they use to appeal for votes with actual action is if we build a working-class alternative in all the struggles taking place in US society.”

First of all, the ISO explicitly identifies itself as part of a social movement that includes the trade unions and “liberal organizations.” That is to say, it associates itself with conscious defenders of the existing bourgeois order and the Democratic Party. These forces, it admits, are busily praising Obama. The ISO proposes to debate these allies, enemies of the interests of the broad mass of the population, about tactics.

Perhaps most revealingly, Socialistworker.org acknowledges that Obama’s program, as the chief defender of American imperialist interests, is only a “hollowed-out, compromised version” of their own.

It is speaking here, not for the mass of working people, but for a significant layer of union officials, journalists, professors, graduate students with prospects, professional social activists, environmentalists, “community organizers” and so forth.

They would like to see more favorable conditions for union dues-collecting, more opportunities for upper middle class minority, female and gay academics and researchers, more government spending on various “progressive” projects related to their narrow interests and, in general, a slight adjustment of the national wealth in their favor. The real complaint here is that Obama has not gone far enough along these lines, despite his promises to the middle class “left” when the Democrats need its votes and support.

The ISO’s political perspective is to organize lobbying, protest and the application of political pressure to move the Democrats in the direction of meeting this social layer’s demands, to make Obama and the Washington politicians “match the rhetoric they use ... with actual action.” This has nothing in common with, and indeed is thoroughly hostile to, a socialist, working class program and orientation.



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