

Inequality and the political vacuum in the United States

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On Friday, with no action from the US Congress, food assistance benefits for 48 million Americans were slashed, the first-ever nationwide reduction in Food Stamp payments. The cuts total \$11 billion over the next three years, and amount to over \$300 per year for a family of three. These cuts will mean that millions of children, new mothers, elderly, and disabled people will go hungry.

Congress is currently discussing even further cuts to Food Stamps, with Democrats and Republicans debating just how much should be eliminated from a program that provides minimal assistance to the most vulnerable.

Meanwhile, the federal Emergency Unemployment Compensation program, which provides extended jobless benefits beyond the 26-week cutoff for most state assistance programs, is scheduled to expire in December. With no significant change since the depths of the economic crisis in real unemployment—measured by such figures as the overall employment-population ratio—states have already cut benefits throughout the country.

Poverty, joblessness, and economic insecurity are a daily reality for the vast majority of the population. By one survey, four in five Americans have lived in near-poverty, been unemployed, or used welfare for a year or more during their lives.

The cut in food assistance was a non-event in official American politics. It was hardly noted in the mass media, aside from the occasional cursory report. No major political figure suggested that anything should be done to stop it from happening. President Barack Obama had nothing to say about it, a fact that speaks not just to his individual indifference to the suffering of the population, but reflects the social outlook of his administration and the entire political system.

One sees here a particularly glaring expression of the vast political vacuum that exists in the United States. Not only is the political system unresponsive to the basic needs of the population, it is thoroughly hostile to them.

A string of recent polls show deepening popular alienation from Obama and the political establishment as a whole. Obama's approval rating has fallen to a record low of 42 percent, according to a *Wall Street Journal/NBC* poll released last week. More respondents said they disapprove of the administration than approve of it for the first time in his presidency.

There are no doubt many different factors that combine to produce these numbers. The revelations of massive illegal and unconstitutional police-state spying have exposed the repeated lies of the administration and its top spy chiefs. The latest revelation from National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden—that the government copies all of the internal data of Google and Yahoo and has been spying on dozens of world leaders—only serves to reemphasize the rot of American democracy.

The rollout of the Affordable Care Act—which every day is being exposed as yet another handout to major corporations—has also had a significant impact. In presenting his health care proposals to the population, Obama repeatedly stressed that “if you like your health care plan, you’ll be able to keep your health care plan.” Now, millions of people are being forced off their existing plans, and Obama treats the glaring reversal of his previous pledges as a non-issue.

This together with the bungled and incompetent release of the program's website are expressions of the basic character of the program itself, which from the beginning was intended not as a means of providing people with health care but rather the opposite. It is a

huge subsidy for insurance companies, further entrenching their control over the health care system. And it is an opportunity for corporations and governments to slash costs by eliminating their own plans and forcing workers to purchase insurance on the private market. The principal domestic “reform” initiative of the administration is a monumental fraud.

In addition to a growing resentment of the Obama administration, polls show a general alienation. Figures for Republicans have fallen even more sharply. According to the WSJ/NBC poll, more than half of the population said they belong to neither the Democratic nor the Republican parties. Support for a third party has risen to the highest levels on record, according to Gallup. These numbers are in part a consequence of the federal government shutdown, which had been engineered to create the conditions for even further attacks on the working class.

The parallels between the poll figures for Obama and his predecessor, George W. Bush, are striking and significant. According to an earlier Gallup poll, Obama’s current approval rating is only 0.6 percentage points higher than that of George W. Bush at the same point in his presidency, in the autumn of 2005. This was immediately following the administration’s callous, indifferent, and incompetent handling of the Hurricane Katrina aftermath, one of the greatest disasters in American history.

The candidate of “hope” and “change,” hailed by the liberal and pseudo-left supporters of the Democratic Party as the “transformational” president, has been exposed as committed representative of the banks and military-intelligence apparatus, and an unconvincing liar at that.

Following the enormous wave of popular opposition to Bush, who left office the most unpopular president in modern American history, Obama was brought forward in an effort to repackage the policies of the ruling class. Yet Obama has presided over the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression, with the government responding by handing trillions of dollars to the banks and pursuing a policy that has led to surging corporate profits, declining wages and economic stagnation for the vast majority.

At issue is not just one individual or administration, but an entire rotten political system. It is necessary for workers and young people to generalize from the

experience of the past decade and a half. The basic continuity of the Bush and Obama administrations’ policies is a product of the fact that they are both representatives of the ruling class and defenders of the capitalist system.

Replacing one big-business politician with another will do nothing. The only way to address the vast social problems of poverty and social inequality that loom over contemporary society is to build a political party that represents working people, armed with a socialist program of reorganizing society on the basis of meeting social needs, not the enrichment of the super-wealthy.



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