Obama and Mandela

Bill Van Auken
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The speech delivered Tuesday by Barack Obama at the memorial to former African National Congress leader and South African President Nelson Mandela has been widely billed as the high point in proceedings that were noteworthy for their empty rhetoric and restive audience.

The US president was the first of six foreign heads of state to address the crowd assembled in Johannesburg's FNB Stadium. Filled with demagogic phrases about "struggle," "liberation," "freedom" and "revolution," the speech's attempt to cloak Obama in the legacy of Mandela's years of sacrifice, imprisonment and persecution was an obscene exercise in hypocrisy.

One would never guess from Obama's remarks that he is the head of a government that for decades counted the South African apartheid regime as a critical ally on the African continent, and that the CIA, which he now utilizes as a refurbished Murder, Inc., assassinating perceived opponents of US policy with Predator drones, played an instrumental role in Mandela's 1962 arrest, which led to 27 years of imprisonment. It was not until 2008—nine years after Mandela had stepped down as South Africa's president—that Washington removed him from its list of foreign terrorists.

Obama by no means had a monopoly on cynicism and hypocrisy. Joining him in paeans to the memory of Mandela was Washington's closest ally, British Prime Minister David Cameron, who in 1989, as the apartheid regime was on its last legs, took an all-expenses-paid trip to South Africa sponsored by a firm lobbying against international sanctions. In those days, his fellow young Tories took pride in sporting "Hang Mandela" buttons.

In Obama's case there was an attempt to weave together the mythology that has been created about his own record and the biography of Mandela. This was made explicit toward the end of his remarks. "Over 30 years ago, while still a student, I learned of Mandela and the struggles in this land," he declared. "It stirred something in me. It woke me up to my responsibilities—to others, and to myself—and set me on an improbable journey that finds me here today."

Improbable journey indeed! After graduating from college, Obama—supposedly propelled by Mandela's example—took his first job as an "analyst" for Business International Corporation, which provided intelligence dossiers for US corporations while serving as a front for covert CIA agents.

Associated with no social struggles in the course of his meteoric rise to the US presidency, he was groomed at Harvard Law School and then by wealthy interests in Chicago to become a right-wing militarist and defender of Wall Street, making himself millions in the bargain.

Obama invoked the civil rights movement in the US—with which he had no association—and compared it to the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. "As was true here, it took the sacrifice of countless people—known and unknown—to see the dawn of a new day," he said. "Michelle and I are the beneficiaries of that struggle."

Here, at least, there is a note of truth. The mass struggles of African-American workers to achieve fundamental rights in the battle against the system of Jim Crow apartheid in the American South led to a conscious policy by the American ruling class to expand the use of affirmative action policies and cultivate a privileged layer of the black upper-middle class, elements of which were brought into the political and economic establishment.

This policy reached its peak with the decision of big money interests to promote Obama's presidential ambitions. The aim was to exploit his status as America's first black president to mask the reactionary policies being pursued by the US government at home and abroad.

Again, drawing the parallel between the US and

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South Africa, Obama declared that, "our work is not done" with the "victory of formal equality and universal franchise."

"There are too many of us who happily embrace Madiba's legacy of racial reconciliation," he continued, "but passionately resist even modest reforms that would challenge chronic poverty and growing inequality. There are too many leaders who claim solidarity with Madiba's struggle for freedom, but do not tolerate dissent from their own people."

Whom does he think he is kidding? This is a president who has presided over the steepest growth of social inequality in the history of the United States. His policies, from the financial bailouts of 2008, to the rescue of General Motors and Chrysler and his government's backing for the bankruptcy of Detroit, have constituted a deliberate and massive transfer of wealth from America's working people to a financial and corporate oligarchy. In his five years in the White House, 95 percent of all income gains have gone to the richest 1 percent, and, while the working class has seen its living standards decline, the country's billionaires have doubled their wealth.

As for not tolerating dissent, this goes hand-in-hand with levels of social inequality that render the forms of democracy unworkable. Obama has overseen a massive growth of domestic spying by the National Security Agency and other parts of Washington's gargantuan intelligence apparatus. He has sought the extradition and prosecution of Edward Snowden for exposing these illegal and unconstitutional operations, while pursuing WikiLeaks' Julian Assange and condemning Private Bradley Manning to 35 years in prison as punishment for exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. His administration has invoked the World War I era Espionage Act to suppress whistleblowers more times than all other previous presidents combined.

Amid the lies and hypocrisy that dominated the platform at Tuesday's memorial, an element of political reality intruded from the stadium bleachers. The crowd repeatedly booed South African President Jacob Zuma—the subject of endless corruption scandals—upon his arrival, when his face appeared on the giant screens, and upon his introduction as keynote speaker.

Cyril Ramaphosa, Zuma's deputy and former mine workers' union head-turned multimillionaire capitalist, was forced to intervene repeatedly. According to the South African *Daily Maverick*, he appealed at one point to the crowd in Zulu: "Don't embarrass us, we have overseas visitors here. We can deal with present day stuff once the visitors have gone."

The episode provided a pale reflection of the explosive anger building up in the South African working class against the ANC and the monied interests—black and white—that it defends. This confrontation found its sharpest expression in August of last year, when the successors of Mandela sent riot police to gun down 34 striking miners at Lonmin's Marikana platinum mine, reprising the bloody repression of the apartheid regime.

While the ANC—and for that matter Obama—had hoped to bask in the reflected glory of Mandela's funeral, social tensions in this, the world's most unequal country, are too sharp to grant the ruling party any respite.

Nearly two decades after Mandela brokered an end to apartheid that kept the capitalist interests of the white ruling establishment and the foreign banks and corporations intact, the fundamental reality that the basic division in society is class, not race, is reasserting itself with a vengeance in South Africa. The ANC, representing a layer of corrupt officials and predatory black capitalists, while defending the profit interests of domestic and international capital, has emerged as a bitter enemy of the working class.

All of the platitudes mouthed by Obama and others Tuesday cannot conceal this fact, nor can they hold back a resurgence of class struggle and social revolution from South Africa to the United States itself.

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