

Netroots meeting in Detroit: “Progressive” cover for right-wing Democrats

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The ninth annual meeting of Netroots Nation, a four-day conference financed by a dozen unions and giant corporations like Google and Facebook, is an attempt to give a “progressive” gloss to the right-wing policies of the Obama administration and mobilize support for Democratic candidates in the 2014 elections.

The Netroots Nation web site describes attendees as “thousands of bloggers, newsmakers, social justice advocates, labor and organizational leaders, grassroots organizers and online activists.” Despite posturing as a venue for grassroots organizing and anti-establishment protest, the conference is nothing more than a junior varsity edition of the Democratic National Convention. The same web site proudly quotes the *New York Times* describing the annual Netroots conference as “becoming as much a part of the Democratic political circuit as the Iowa State Fair.”

Vice President Joseph Biden gives the keynote speech on Thursday, and Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts speaks on Friday, along with a slew of other Senate and House Democrats. Joining them will be virtually every prominent Democratic Party officeholder and candidate from Michigan, including Senator Debbie Stabenow, congressman and Senate candidate Gary Peters, congressmen John Conyers and Dan Kildee, and former congressman and 2014 candidate for governor Mark Schauer.

Holding the conference in Detroit is a calculated political act. Netroots announced the selection in June 2013, after the imposition of an Emergency Manager on the city and one month before the city filed for bankruptcy. Since then, big business politicians of both parties, Democrats and Republicans alike, have collaborated to slash wages, jobs, pensions and basic services like water.

On Friday, participants in the Netroots conference and a section of the trade union officialdom, joined by members of pseudo-left organizations like the Workers World Party and By Any Means Necessary, will take part in a demonstration against water shutoffs in Detroit, in front of the Water Board headquarters on Randolph Street downtown.

This protest is a fraud on multiple levels. First of all, it will do nothing to stop the shutoffs, Secondly, and more importantly, it is a deliberate cover-up of the responsibility of the Democratic Party and the Obama administration for the devastating conditions being imposed on the population of Detroit through the bankruptcy process.

While apologists for Obama and the Democrats like John Nichols of the *Nation* magazine write that the water shutoffs are “thanks to Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder,” a Republican, the appointment of an Emergency Manager to run Detroit and impose savage cutbacks in services was completely bipartisan. The Obama administration has fully supported the bankruptcy, and Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, Mayor Michael Duggan, and other local officials carrying out the attacks are all Democrats.

Detroit is a model for the policies being carried out by Democratic and Republican politicians in Washington and every city and state: brutal austerity measures against the working class, while the interests of the banks and billionaires are given the highest priority. Obama imposed the poverty level wages on new auto workers during the 2009 restructuring of GM and Chrysler; the city has been “ground zero” for his administration’s corporate-backed school “reform;” and the bankruptcy will set a precedent for gutting the health care and pensions of public sector workers around the country.

More than five years of the Obama administration have produced widespread popular disillusionment and anger with the Democratic Party—reflected in opinion polls showing Obama’s popularity at a record low, and dismal prospects for the Democrats in the congressional and gubernatorial elections that take place in less than four months.

The Netroots conference is part of the effort by pro-Democratic Party groups, including the trade unions, *Move-on.org*, *Daily Kos* (which initiated the Netroots meetings), the *Nation* magazine, and sections of the corporate elite, to bolster the credibility of the Democrats and revive their electoral fortunes. Hence the two main characteristics of the meeting: no criticism of the policies of the Obama

administration, at home and abroad; and no serious assessment of the actual conditions of life for tens of millions of working people.

Biden's appearance is his first at a Netroots conference. His previous campaigns for national office involved appealing to more overtly right-wing sections of the Democratic Party, while the "progressive" factions gave their support to figures like Howard Dean in 2004 and Obama in 2008. His appearance in Detroit is a signal that in a forthcoming race against Hillary Clinton for the 2016 nomination, however, Biden sees the need to curry favor with the party's "left." (Clinton, while booed at a 2007 Netroots conference for her support to the war in Iraq, nevertheless kept her lines of communication open, with a "Ready for Hillary" bus parked outside the Cobo Hall convention center during this year's conference).

In a media interview last week, Netroots board chairman Adam Bonin said that Clinton would have considerable support in the 2016 campaign from Netroots participants. "I have to say, even with ideological misgivings, there is going to be a faction of people with progressive credentials who recognize the historical nature of her candidacy," he said, alluding to her gender. In addition, he said, "There is no Iraq war to help her rival position on her left."

This remarkable declaration should be translated as follows: Clinton lost support among Netroots activists for supporting the war launched by Republican President George W. Bush. No such price will be paid for supporting the many wars, civil wars, and other slaughters instigated by Democratic President Barack Obama—Libya, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Iraq again—or his continuation of the war in Afghanistan.

The complete alignment of Netroots with the bloodstained foreign policy of the Obama administration is demonstrated in the list of 120 panel discussions and training sessions announced in advance of the conference.

Exactly one, the "National Security Caucus," deals with events outside the borders of the United States. It offers the opportunity to "share views on how the U.S. should best deal with global terrorist threats without being on a continual war footing, continue to move toward closing Guantánamo, successfully reach a comprehensive nuclear agreement with Iran, and avoid any unwise military action in Iraq." The name "Obama" does not appear, nor the word "drones." There is no reference to Libya, Ukraine, Syria or any of the countless other foreign interventions by American imperialism.

Similarly, there is a single panel discussion on "NSA Surveillance Reform: Pitfalls and Opportunities." The description of the panel makes no reference to Edward Snowden, whose exposure of massive, illegal and

unconstitutional spying by the NSA prompted the Obama administration and supporters of government spying in Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, to offer a preemptive "reform" bill that legalizes everything the NSA is now doing.

The bulk of the sessions deal with the continuing obsession with identity politics, as there are caucuses of every conceivable group defined by gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, as well as discussions of such topics as "The Rise of Janet Yellen: Why the Fed Matters, and How Progressives Fought for the First Female Chair of the Federal Reserve." That Yellen is slavishly devoted to the interests of Wall Street and the superrich is apparently of less significance than her possession of two X chromosomes.

The political perspective of Netroots Nation is also demonstrated in its list of sponsors, including the Silicon Valley giants Google and Facebook, two of the main collaborators in the US government surveillance of the Internet and telecommunications.

Joining them are the considerably less well-financed businesses that still call themselves trade unions, among them AFSCME, SEIU, CWA, UFCW, USWA, ATU and the Laborers International Union. It would take several dozen pages simply to list the number of occasions in the past two decades that these organizations have blocked, sold out or directly sabotaged efforts by workers to fight back against the attacks on their jobs, living standards and working conditions, while preserving and defending the perks and six-figure salaries of the union executives.

Discredited by their collusion in the corporate-government attacks on workers, the union executives have joined this effort to refurbish the image of the Democratic Party out of fear of the emergence of a genuine political opposition of the working class against both big business parties and the capitalist system they defend.



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