

The US midterm elections and the bankruptcy of the capitalist system

Joseph Kishore
17 October 2014

The upcoming US midterm elections is an appropriate occasion to draw a balance sheet—of the Obama administration’s past six years in office and of the American political system as a whole.

The ballot coming up in only a few weeks is an “invisible election.” While hundreds of millions of dollars are being poured into the campaigns of the two big business parties (total spending will make 2014 the most expensive non-presidential election year in US history), it has not evoked a trace of enthusiasm from the vast majority of the population. Turnout is expected to reach new lows, even for American elections, which routinely attract less than 50 percent of the electorate.

The collective disinterest in the 2014 elections is the outcome of an extended period of disillusionment in the American political system. There is a growing—and entirely correct—sense that whoever is elected, the outcome will be an even further shift to the right.

A significant turning point in the attitude of the working class to the political system was the election of Obama in 2008 and the subsequent trajectory of his administration. The Obama campaign six years ago was part of a deliberate effort to revive public confidence in a political system that had been shaken by an extended deterioration in social conditions, the trauma of the extremely unpopular Iraq war and the shock of the economic crisis of 2008. Obama replaced George W. Bush, who left office the most reviled president in US history. The election campaign was accompanied by an enormous amount of media marketing, with a candidate who had no significant political history packaged as the agent of “hope” and “change.”

Upon coming to office, however, Obama pursued the most right-wing agenda in US history. It quickly emerged that whatever vague promises he made were insincere, and that his administration was committed to

an acceleration of the policies of the Bush administration—overseeing a historic transfer of wealth to the rich, escalating military violence abroad, and deepening the attacks on democratic rights within the United States.

In this context, it is worth recalling the way in which illusions in Obama were fueled by the “left”—that is, by those political organizations and publications that make it their business to promote illusions in the Democratic Party and maintain the political domination of the two-party capitalist system.

Among these forces, the election of Obama was universally hailed as a “transformative” event that would set American politics on a new trajectory. Katrina vanden Heuvel, the editor of the *Nation* magazine—the standard-bearer for what presents itself as the Democratic Party’s liberal wing—wrote in August 2008, after Obama secured the Democratic Party nomination, that with his election “new possibilities will be born.” It represented “a historic candidacy, a new generation in motion, a nation yearning for change.” Whatever the concessions he had made during the campaign, Vanden Heuvel wrote, “Make no mistake, [Obama’s] election will open a new era of reform.”

These words were echoed by the International Socialist Organization, whose specialty is packaging Democratic Party politics with the trappings of “socialism.” After Obama won the presidential election in November, the ISO’s *Socialist Worker* declared (in an editorial headlined, “The New Shape of American Politics”) that “the sweeping victory of Barack Obama... is a transformative event in US politics, as an African American takes the highest office in a country built on slavery” (emphasis added).

A few weeks later (in “Great expectations”) the ISO

insisted that with Obama's election, the "neoliberal era" was over. "[T]he scale of the problems and questions the US faces—not just economically, but in the areas of foreign policy and more—is driving Obama toward a different agenda."

Similar comments can be found in the archives of innumerable publications that operate in the orbit of the Democratic Party. Their claims of a historic transformation—which relied heavily on Obama's status as the first African American president—proved a political fraud. Whatever minor adjustments in policy that have been made have addressed the particular concerns, centered on identity politics, of the upper-middle class layers that form the base of support for organizations like the ISO and the *Nation*.

For the ISO, the *Nation* and the like, the promotion of Obama served definite political aims. It was not simply a question of mistaken interpretation, but of deliberate deception. Six years later, they are busy seeking to re-inflate support for the Democrats by elevating new supposedly "left" figures (Bill de Blasio, Elizabeth Warren and the like) or attempting to set up combinations nominally outside the Democratic Party to serve the same purpose (the Socialist Alternative campaign of Sawant in Seattle, the \$15-an-hour minimum wage campaign organized in affiliation with the trade unions, etc.).

In contrast, the events of the past six years correspond to the prognosis made by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party. In its election statement of 2008, the SEP warned that "the next president—regardless whether his name is McCain or Obama—will almost immediately escalate the attacks on the American and international working class." In the aftermath of Obama's victory, the WSWS wrote that Obama's policies "will be determined not by popular expectations, but by the domestic and foreign policy interests of the American financial and corporate elite."

These predictions, confirmed in practice, were rooted in a theoretical understanding that politics is an expression of class interests. The state apparatus—the two big business parties, the mass media, the courts and police, and the network of organizations that form the periphery of the Democratic Party—all uphold and defend the global interests of the ruling class and the social system, capitalism, upon which it is based.

There is a growing sense within the United States of

the need for a radical social transformation. It would be a mistake to see the mass disaffection in the upcoming election as simply a matter of apathy. There is widespread hatred of the political system as a whole and a general perception that the politicians of both parties speak and act on behalf of the rich.

However, this instinctive feeling, rooted in experience, must be transformed into a conscious political understanding, lest workers fall into the same trap in another form. Above all, it is necessary to understand that the trajectory of the Obama administration is the product not simply of one individual or administration, but of the entire political and economic system—in the United States and internationally.

It is impossible to change anything through a shift in the composition of the personnel of the capitalist state. What is required is a social revolution—the independent mobilization of the working class, in the United States and internationally, to take political power, establish new forms of democratic control of the economy, and restructure society on the basis of equality and social need, not private profit.

To carry out this task, a political leadership—the Socialist Equality Party and its sister parties internationally—must be built. We call on our supporters and readers to fight for this perspective by joining the SEP and taking up the fight for socialism.



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