

Obama in Detroit

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In the final weekend before Tuesday's midterm elections, US President Barack Obama held a series of campaign rallies that only underscored the gulf separating official politics in America from the concerns and interests of the vast majority of the population.

The elections have been greeted with general disinterest and hostility from workers and youth. Turnout is expected to be extremely low, despite the record amount of money for a nonpresidential election spent by corporations and wealthy donors.

The American people are confronted by mass unemployment, ever-widening social inequality, increasing hunger and homelessness, a new war in the Middle East and the danger of war in Europe, rampant police violence, and a constitutional crisis provoked by the cover-up of CIA torture. None of these issues are being addressed in the election campaign. Both big-business parties are advancing reactionary agendas of militarism and austerity.

The empty and cynical character of the election was epitomized by President Obama's campaign appearance Saturday in Detroit. The event was organized to drum up support for Democratic Senate candidate Gary Peters (a former Merrill Lynch executive) and Democratic gubernatorial candidate Mark Schauer.

Those in attendance represented the "base" of the Democratic Party—more privileged sections of the middle class, leaders of the official "civil rights" establishment, and trade union executives and their hangers-on. This complacent and affluent crowd was brought together in a city that embodies the crisis of American capitalism and the political conspiracy of the banks, the corporations and both parties against the social and democratic rights of the working class.

This week, bankruptcy court judge Steven Rhodes is scheduled to give the final go-ahead for a plan that will

ravage the pensions and health benefits of city workers and sanction the sell-off of public assets, including the city's water department. The largest municipal bankruptcy in US history, in what was once the country's industrial center, is viewed as a model for similar actions throughout the country.

Obama made a point of praising the trade union officials, widely despised by workers, who have played a critical role in the bankruptcy process. He began his remarks by hailing these "labor leaders" who "know what it means to fight for working families."

Obama himself made no mention of the Detroit bankruptcy, which he fully supports. However, he shared the stage with Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, who praised the fact that "as we're standing here," blighted houses were being demolished throughout the city.

The contrast between the glowing portrait given by Obama in his speech and the social reality in Detroit is a mirror for the country as a whole. "We've seen progress on almost every economic measure," the president declared, adding that "over the past four-and-a-half years, we have seen American businesses create more than 10 million new jobs."

Obama made these claims in the wake of a series of reports showing that child poverty and hunger remain at record levels, while millions are unemployed and wages are falling. Detroit itself is the poorest large city in America, with a real unemployment rate of about 50 percent.

Obama then praised the results of his administration's restructuring of the auto industry, saying, "I don't have to tell you the auto industry that was on the brink of collapse is back on its feet, making better cars than ever, right here in Michigan."

He did not mention that the return of the Big Three US automakers to profitability was based on his administration's imposition of wage cuts of 50 percent for new-hires, along with cuts to the pensions and

benefits of existing workers, production speed-ups, ten-hour shifts and ever-worsening job conditions.

The central axis of Obama's speech was the supposed vast ideological gulf between the Democrats and the Republicans. As he put it, "When you step into that voting booth... you're making a choice about two different visions of what America is about." This supposed vast ideological chasm between the two parties is, in fact, entirely imaginary.

Obama sought to paint the Republican Party as the "champion" of the "biggest corporations" and the "wealthiest Americans," while the Democrats, by contrast, want to help the "middle class."

He denounced Republicans for calling for "another massive tax cut for millionaires," neglecting to note that he himself is calling for a reduction in corporate taxes to 25 percent from the current level of 35 percent. He claimed that his opponents want "less investment in education," yet his 2014 budget proposal called for 22 percent less in federal education spending, after adjusting for inflation, than the Bush administration proposed in 2008.

Looming over the proceedings—and the election as a whole—is an immense political crisis. Those gathering to hear Obama speak were talking to themselves. Beyond the confines of their "political space," broad sections of workers and youth view the entire state apparatus with distrust, hostility and even hatred.

In his speech, Obama noted the supposedly puzzling statistic that hundreds of thousands of Michigan residents who voted for him in 2008 did not vote in subsequent elections. "I don't know what's going on with those folks," he mused. Later, he warned his audience, "Don't let them tell you that your vote doesn't matter. Don't get cynical."

The "cynicism" against which Obama warned is the recognition by ever-broader sections of workers and young people that their votes do not matter and the state does not and will not represent their interests. Whatever the distribution of seats in Congress resulting from the upcoming vote, the elections will be followed by an escalation of war abroad and an intensification of attacks on the working class at home, alongside more tax handouts and windfalls for big business and continued attacks on democratic rights.

It is necessary for workers and young people to give their growing alienation and hostility to the political

establishment a positive and concrete form. They must draw the conclusion that it is not only the two-party system that is worthless and corrupt, but the social order that it sits atop and embodies—capitalism.



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