

The Nation and the International Socialist Organization respond to the 2014 elections

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Tuesdays elections in the US were a debacle for the Democratic Party. In 2008 the Democrats turned to Barack Obama in an effort in part to encourage the illusion, with some degree of success, that they represented something distinct from George W. Bush and the Republicans, who were associated with war, repression and corporate corruption in the minds of millions of people.

Six years of an African American president, the candidate of “change,” who has pursued unrelentingly reactionary and anti-working class policies, have disappointed and disillusioned many. According to the United States Election Project, only 36.6 percent of the voting-eligible population cast ballots this year, a 9 percent drop from the last midterm election in 2010.

Various political forces combined in 2008, and again in 2012, to paint Barack Obama as an alternative to Bush and the Republicans, including the *Nation* magazine and a host of left-liberal groupings, as well as the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and its online publication, *SocialistWorker.org*. These political elements share responsibility for the policies and actions of the Obama administration, including its launching of new wars in the Middle East, its assault on democratic and constitutional rights, and its bailout of the banks at the expense of the working class.

Now that the Democrats are in shambles, and Obama is a discredited, broadly unpopular figure, where do the *Nation* and ISO stand?

The *Nation* editorial board and its backers operate openly as a wing of the Democratic Party. The task the magazine perpetually assigns itself is to urge Obama and the Democrats to adopt more “progressive,” “populist” policies. No matter what war crime, filthy deal with Wall Street or act of political repression the White House is responsible for, nothing shakes the *Nation*’s confidence that *this* is the exact moment to exert pressure and set the administration straight.

In reality, the *Nation*’s recurring insistence at such junctures, often when public opinion threatens to turn against the White House, that renewed pressure must be put on the Democrats, is part of a damage control effort organized by the political establishment. The argument, “What the Democrats have done is very bad ... now this is what we must do so they won’t do it again,” is intended to prevent anyone from concluding that what’s needed is a *decisive break* with the entire two-party system owned and operated by big business.

Katrina vanden Heuvel, editor, publisher and co-owner of the *Nation*, is the pre-eminent specialist at this sort of urging. Her writings over the past six years in the *Nation* and the *Washington Post*, where she has a regular column, are crowded with suggestions as to what “Obama must” or “Obama should” do.

In November 2008, vanden Heuvel described the incoming Obama administration as a “Transformational Presidency.” She explained at the time that “our offices are filled with editors, writers, interns, and colleagues—some crying, this time with joy—all jubilant about the new era of possibility opened up by Barack Obama’s victory. ... [T]onight we

simply celebrate.”

By September 2009, some of this mood had dissipated, at least in the general population, and vanden Heuvel opined in a headline that “Obama Must Reclaim the Debate.” This piece is especially full of “musts” and “shoulds.” Among the passages: “Obama must invoke history. He should place himself squarely in the tradition of those reform presidents—Roosevelt, Truman, Johnson—who labored hard for universal healthcare.” “Obama must lead the charge and rally the people who swept him into the White House,” etc.

Over the years vanden Heuvel has also argued, among other things, that “Obama must get Afghanistan right,” that “this president must lead the nation from the calamitous failures of three decades of conservative dominance, that he “must strengthen America’s basic social contract in a global economy, not weaken it,” that “Obama should ignore the warriors and focus on the economy,” that “Obama should set his sights higher,” that “Obama should offer clemency to [whistleblower Edward] Snowden for revealing the alarming truth to the American people,” and more.

The White House, which can afford to take the wretched *Nation* crowd almost entirely for granted in its political calculations, ignored each one of vanden Heuvel’s suggestions, although it has offered a few sops in the form of ending the ban on gays in the military, mounting an empty campaign against sexual violence on campuses and such.

Now, in the wake of the 2014 election disaster, vanden Heuvel explains in her most recent column “Why Obama should double down”: “If I were advising the White House right now, I would encourage President Obama to take advantage of the end of this year’s election cycle—the next fifty or so days—to immediately try to change the subject, in a big way.”

Vanden Heuvel goes on: “President Obama should embrace good progressive public policy while expecting—indeed, hoping for—a massive outcry from the wing-nut section of the GOP. ... The president should go big right now, undertaking a quick series of high-profile executive actions on issues that the Republican House has not acted upon, and will never pass.”

The *Nation*’s most recent editorial (“After the Midterms: Time to Fight Back”), sounds the same theme: “Obama should borrow from those of his most successful predecessors: don’t give [new Senate Majority Leader Republican Mitch] McConnell an inch. Keep campaigning, get the people on your side and write the narrative of the next two years.”

This is all a fantasy. The election will not result in Obama’s turning to the “left,” just the contrary. We safely predict the Republican victory in Congress will present an excellent opportunity, and excuse, for the White House to shift even further to the right, both in regard to militarist aggression across the globe and to attacks on social programs and democratic rights in the US.

Whether vanden Heuvel and company recognize that what they write has no relationship to reality or not is beside the point. They don’t care about the conditions of the mass of the people, nor do they feel any outrage against government of the rich, by the rich, for the rich. This

complacent petty bourgeois crowd will continue to press every section of the ruling elite, under all conditions, for more privileges.

The International Socialist Organization also accepts the legitimacy of the political set-up, the elections and the two-party system in the US, but it prefers to maintain a nominal independence, all the better to redirect anger and protest back into Democratic Party channels.

The ISO is obsessed with race and gender, but this week's election showed, as the WWS editorialized, that the Democrats no longer have the ability to "use identity politics based on race, gender and sexual preference to mask their steady shift to the right." The 2014 election result was thus also a repudiation of the ISO's politics, although the organization is hardly in a position to acknowledge it.

SocialistWorker.org has written very little about the elections in recent weeks, on the ISO's favored principle of remaining quiet about any phenomenon its leadership finds troubling or that might result in alienating one or another of the organization's upper middle class constituencies. Remaining quiet in this case meant discreetly hoping for a Democratic Party win; all the ISO's constituencies, in one fashion or another, swim in those waters.

In a November 5 article at *SocialistWorker.org*, "Looking past the myths about Election 2014" (halfway down the front page and not so easy to spot), Lance Selfa and Alan Maass begin by finding the Republican pickup of eight Senate seats "impressive on its face" and the Democrats' wipeout "incredible." They go on to suggest that the Republicans, who are unpopular themselves, made gains largely by default, because they ran "with a single relentless message—against the presidency of Barack Obama."

Yes, perhaps, but that can be interpreted in different ways. Leaving aside the mass abstention, did those who voted for Republican candidates do so in considerable numbers out of confused protest against Obama's right-wing policies or because they are naturally susceptible to Republican appeals to racism and backwardness?

Selfa and Maass are ambivalent on this score. They leave the door open for their readers to draw quite reactionary conclusions by what they say and by what they don't say.

First of all, it should be noted the article makes virtually no reference to the extremely low voter turnout, which has quite explosive political and social implications, except to comment that in midterm elections, "Fewer people vote, so the electorate is older and whiter—closer to the GOP's natural base."

Moreover, in seeking to explain the Democrats' defeat, the authors start off with this quite foul question, "Did Ebola defeat the Democrats?" They elaborate: "One explanation for the tide of defeats suffered by the Democrats is that the Republicans successfully 'demagogued' a number of unforeseen issues—from the child refugee crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border, to ISIS's rise to power in Iraq, to the Ebola crisis this fall. According to this argument, the Republicans—still masters of whipping up their largely white base with coded appeals to racism—outmaneuvered Democrats once again."

Selfa and Maass go on to assert that this argument "doesn't wash," but the seed has been planted: at least in part, the article hints, Obama's defeat can be accounted for by the American population's innate xenophobia and racism.

The piece goes on to claim that those crises (immigration, ISIS, Ebola, etc.) may have played a role, but they "erupted at a time when public opinion had already soured on Obama and the Democrats." But, again, this is a formula open to quite opposed interpretations. Why had it "soured"? Is the population moving to the right or to the left?

In this connection, the most dishonest portion of the article is its failure to provide any indication of the ISO's past attitude toward Obama. The authors comment: "Obama was expected to be a 'transformative' president. Taking office in the midst of the worst economic crisis since the

Great Depression, his administration could have reshaped American politics for a generation. Instead, Obama has been a careful guardian of status quo."

Expected by whom? And which political forces reinforced this illusion; lulling people to sleep and helping Obama implement his right-wing agenda?

Let us remind Selfa and Maass what their own organization said in 2008. The ISO headlined its first post-election editorial, "The New Shape of American Politics," and commented: "The sweeping victory of Barack Obama in the presidential elections is a transformative event in U.S. politics, as an African American takes the highest office in a country built on slavery." So it was the ISO who expected Obama to be "transformative"! Why not be honest enough to say so?

The next editorial posted at *SocialistWorker.org* in 2008 asserted that the "celebration of Obama's win isn't just of one side beating the other, but of history being made." A few weeks later, in December 2008, *SocialistWorker.org* told its readers that, "the conservative stranglehold over U.S. politics for a quarter century under Republicans and Democrats alike has been broken."

This was utterly false. Selfa and Maass are understandably silent about their own rotten record.

Now they pay lip service to the administration's refusal to act on "income inequality and jobs," and note that "Obama and the Democrats have no one to blame but themselves" for their unpopularity, but the authors' continued focus on race and the supposed sins of the population can't help but emerge. So they assert that Obama failed to sign an executive order stopping deportations because that would have been "going too far for Democrats running for re-election this fall and hoping to win racist votes."

When it comes to a sign of hope, Selfa and Maass point to the Green Party vote in New York, where Howie Hawkins and Brian Jones, candidates for governor and lieutenant governor, respectively, won nearly five percent of the vote, and did better than that in a number of counties. Jones, according to the Greens' website, "is a long-time member of the International Socialist Organization."

The Green Party vote in New York no doubt does express in a limited fashion popular dissatisfaction with the two-party system, but the Greens' platform is a lengthy wish list of reformist, liberal and trade union demands, without any indication of how they might be implemented. In fact, that the Green Party is an upper middle class pressure group on the Democrats is proven by the remarkable fact that neither Obama nor the Democratic Party is criticized *or even mentioned by name once* in the platform!

Like the *Nation* editors, Selfa and Maass are gloomy about the future. Obama, we are told, "is the lamest of lame ducks" and he is "certain to be spending his last two years in the White House fighting rearguard battles," presumably against Republican right-wingers. It's all very disappointing, after the excitement and euphoria of November 2008, when the ISO saw its racist brand of politics apparently coming into its own.

In reality, the fact that millions have seen through Obama and the effort to palm off this creature of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus as a "progressive" and "transformative" figure is a politically significant event, which foreshadows the movement of the working class into struggle on the basis of its own social interests and needs. Both the *Nation's* editors and the ISO will prove to be inveterately hostile to such a development.



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