

Obama to American youth: Stop complaining, things have never been better!

Niles Niemuth—SEP candidate for US vice president
17 May 2016

Niles Niemuth is the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for vice president in the United States

US President Barack Obama used his commencement address Sunday at Rutgers University in New Jersey to express contempt for those who are supporting either the campaigns of Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump or self-proclaimed socialist Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders.

While the media has focused on Obama's thinly-veiled swipes against Trump's promise to build a wall along the Mexico border and his foreign policy, more significant was the president's clear rebuke of students and others for supporting Sanders.

The conclusion to be drawn from his speech is that workers—and particularly youth—need to stop complaining and do what they are told. Obama insisted, in what has become his mantra, that things have never been better in America and chastised young people for supporting calls for a “political revolution.”

In a reference to Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump, who has promised that if elected he will “Make America Great Again,” Obama insisted that social and economic conditions have never been better than they are now. “In fact, by almost every measure, America is better, and the world is better, than it was 50 years ago, or 30 years ago, or even eight years ago.”

Among other trends, Obama cited the decline in crime rates, teenage pregnancies, the percentage of people living in poverty and an overall increase in life expectancy as proof that life in America is better than it has ever been. He also cited the fact that a greater share of Americans have a college education and more blacks and Latinos sit on corporate boards and hold political office than ever before.

In the course of his remarks, Obama complained that access to the Internet and smart phones has “in some

ways... made us more confident in our ignorance... We have to agree that facts and evidence matter. And we got to hold our leaders and ourselves accountable to know what the heck they're talking about.”

It would have been appropriate for someone in the audience to have shouted out at this point, “Physician, heal thyself!”

Obama's rose-colored account flies in the face of the reality of life confronted by the vast majority of Americans in 2016. Over the last eight years workers have experienced declining incomes and wages, and rising death rates among working class men and women due to an increase in suicides, drug overdoses and alcoholism. Entire cities and regions have been devastated by decades of deindustrialization, with the rate of poverty higher than ever in urban and suburban areas across the country.

Obama was addressing an audience that is part of a generation saddled with more than \$1.3 trillion dollars in student loan debt. The first generation worse off than their parents, millions of college graduates who entered the job market after the 2008 economic crisis are either unemployed or underemployed, with an average student loan debt of \$30,000.

A majority of individuals with onerous debt payments are unable to afford to buy a car, buy their own house and many delay getting engaged or married. A recent poll found that 77 percent of respondents found it more difficult to live due to their student loan debt.

After eight years of the candidate of “hope and change,” a period in which 95 percent of income gains (since 2009) have gone to the top one percent, there is a general sense that the entire political system is rotten and the economic order is rigged.

Obama's remarks expressed concern within the ruling class not over Sanders himself, who is working

to redirect opposition back into the Democratic Party. Rather, it is over the anti-capitalist sentiments that are motivating an overwhelming turn out among young voters for the self-declared socialist.

He lectured students with a potted version of history in which activists and organizers engaged in “alliance-building and deal-making” are the source of all social progress in America. Lest they get any ideas, Obama warned his young audience that change “didn’t happen because some massive political revolution occurred.”

Even as Obama argued that social and economic conditions in America are better than ever, he insisted they could be even better if only more people, especially students, voted in even greater numbers for the Democrats! He cited 2014 voter turnout, which was the lowest since the World War II era, and warned that “apathy has consequences.”

Obama cynically counseled the students to “have faith in democracy,” by which he meant they should support a political set-up entirely controlled by and subservient to the interests of the wealthiest individuals and corporations. The accusation that those who do not vote are apathetic is slander. The general sentiment is not apathy, but hostility and anger over a corrupt two-party system over which Obama himself presides.

In an additional jab at students, Obama went on to criticize protests at Rutgers over a previous announcement that Condoleezza Rice, one of George W. Bush’s secretaries of state, would speak at a commencement. That students should object to having to listen to a war criminal upon their graduation is, according to Obama, an outrageous violation of the principle that is necessary to “listen to those who don’t agree with you.” Obama perhaps worried that he could be the object of similar protests and denunciations in the not-so-distant future.

Even as he admitted that “big money in politics is a huge problem,” he cynically asserted that “the system isn’t as rigged as you think, and it certainly is not as hopeless as you think...if you vote and you elect a majority that represents your views, you will get what you want. And if you opt out, or stop paying attention, you won’t. It’s that simple.”

It was apparently lost on the president that the history of his own administration is ample proof that the anger and hostility he sought to counter is, in fact, entirely justified.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact