

Kicking off his presidential campaign

Biden makes right-wing plea for “unity” with Republicans

Patrick Martin
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Former Vice President Joe Biden, the current frontrunner in the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2020, formally kicked off his campaign Saturday with a rally in Philadelphia in which he presented himself as the Democratic candidate most able to work with congressional Republicans.

The main slogan of the rally was “unity,” and campaign staff distributed hundreds of placards embossed with the word “United” with instructions to text the word to a specified phone number to enlist in the campaign.

The rally, generously estimated at 6,000, was smaller than those staged by some of Biden’s major rivals for the nomination, including Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and California Senator Kamala Harris. It was dominated by supporters of the Philadelphia and Pennsylvania Democratic Party machines and the trade union apparatus.

Much of Biden’s address was Democratic Party boilerplate. He denounced Trump as the “divider-in-chief” and criticized the president’s attacks on immigrants and Muslims, but failed to offer any policy for the struggle against racism and bigotry, or the defense of the democratic rights of immigrants.

On virtually every question, Biden proclaimed that the first step was to “beat Trump.” This was his program for immigration, the environment, the defense of democratic rights and the expansion of access to health care. This mantra spared him from the necessity of actually elaborating alternative policies on any of these issues.

There was an obvious contradiction at the core of Biden’s address. While he predicated all social

progress on the defeat of the Republican president, he presented his own major credential as the ability to work with virtually any Republican not named Trump, no matter how reactionary.

He outlined two examples of the supposed achievements of the Obama-Biden administration, one enacted with zero Republican votes—the Affordable Care Act—and one dependent for passage on three Republicans in the Senate whom Biden personally lobbied—the 2009 Economic Recovery Act.

“I know how to get things done, folks,” Biden said. “I know how to go toe-to-toe with the GOP. But it doesn’t have to be and it can’t be that way on every issue.”

The choice of those two pieces of legislation was revealing. Both bills were crafted from the standpoint of winning Republican (and Democratic) support by incorporating into their structure the interests of the giant corporations. The Affordable Care Act compelled millions of low-income workers to buy private insurance or pay a penalty. Its goal was to shift the cost of health care from corporations and the government to the working class.

The economic stimulus bill was entirely geared to boosting the profits of the corporations: it did not establish any government jobs program to assist the millions thrown out of work by the 2008 financial crash. It did not create a single new job, relying instead on what Democrats used to denounce as “trickle-down economics,” i.e., providing subsidies to corporations and the rich with the promise that eventually workers would benefit.

The legislation specifically excluded aid to state and local governments, which were financially hemorrhaging under the impact of the Wall Street

crash, with the result that some 300,000 school employees, most of them public school teachers, lost their jobs.

That Biden would present these measures as the summit of his achievements in the realm of bipartisan cooperation says a great deal about the policies a future Biden administration and his real attitude to the working class.

The former vice president attempted to address the criticism he has already begun to receive from rivals for the nomination regarding his previous comments on bipartisanship, most notably his claim that Republicans would experience “an epiphany” if Trump were defeated for reelection, i.e., that they would come to their senses and be amenable to compromise with the Democrats.

“I know some of the really smart folks say Democrats don’t want to hear about unity,” Biden said. “They say Democrats are so angry that the angrier a candidate can be the better chance he or she has to win the Democratic nomination. Well, I don’t believe it. I really don’t.”

He continued: “If the American people want the president to add to our division, lead with a clenched fist, a closed hand, a hard heart, to demonize your opponent, to spew hatred, they don’t need me,” he said. “They’ve got President Donald Trump.”

Just as important as what Biden said in his address is what he did not say and the subjects he avoided. He accepted without question the claims by the Trump White House and the corporate media that the American economy is now booming, saying only that Trump inherited a rising economy from the Obama-Biden administration, “just like he inherited everything else in his life.”

Biden said nothing at all about rising economic inequality, stagnant wages, deepening poverty and social misery, the enormous toll of opioid addiction, the daily slaughter of working class youth and minorities at the hands of the police, or any of the manifold social evils that plague the American working class. Other words he avoided included: “millionaire,” “billionaire,” “rich,” “Wall Street,” “hedge fund,” “stock market,” “profit.”

Apparently this is what Biden means by striking a note of “optimism:” a cynical refusal to acknowledge the social crisis produced by the decay of American

capitalism.

The former vice president, who played an active role in the foreign policy of the Obama administration—and was selected as running mate in part because of his longtime role on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—said nothing at all about any event taking place outside the borders of the United States. Nothing on Iran, Venezuela, North Korea, China or the mounting trade tensions in world capitalism.

His only comment in this area, an echo of the anti-Russian campaign fomented by congressional Democrats, was to criticize Trump because he “praises tyrants like Putin and Kim Jong Un.” What a Biden administration would do in relation to any of the foreign targets of American imperialism he did not say.

But he closed the speech with a boast that the United States has “the biggest economy in the world, and the most powerful military in the history of the world.” His final words—apparently an invocation to be delivered at the end of every address—were “and may God protect our troops.”

This is the perspective of the politician currently favored for the Democratic presidential nomination and the most likely—after Trump himself—to be the occupant of the White House in 2021.

Biden’s speech will arouse little interest and less enthusiasm among working people, but that was not his primary audience. He was above all reassuring Wall Street, the military-intelligence apparatus and the political establishment as a whole that Joe Biden is a safe pair of hands, an alternative to be preferred to the erratic Trump, whose increasingly authoritarian rule risks provoking a massive movement of popular opposition from below.



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