

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1599>



USA

Reading, Writing and Union Building

- IV Online magazine - 2009 - IV408 - January 2009 -

Publication date: Saturday 31 January 2009

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

THE UNITED STATES changed forever on November 4, 2008. It will undoubtedly change even more during the next four years — although just how remains to be determined. There has never been such a convergence of yawning crises facing an incoming U.S. government, including a collapsing credit system and the near-death spiral of the North American auto industry. It's an entirely open question whether the sheer scale of the objective emergency might impose serious structural changes on the way capitalism is administered in this country.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/ATC138.200.jpg>]

The January-February 2009 issue of Against the Current

What kind of change? One set of possibilities is represented by 260 members of UE Local 1110 who seized the factory in Chicago when their employer, Republic Windows and Doors, announced that it would close without giving the legally required 60-day notice or their earned vacation pay. Bank of America — fresh from its \$25 billion cash infusion from the banking bailout — had cut off the factory's line of credit! This kind of worker response can determine whether the coming economic restructuring will meet the needs of working-class Americans, or destroys what's left of union power.

The criminal and incompetent enterprise known as the George W. Bush administration has left a legacy of wreckage — from the Middle East to South Asia, from Guantanamo prison to global warming denial, from the ruins of New Orleans to bridges getting ready to fall down across the country. The November 4 vote swung the way it did, to Barack Obama and the Democratic Party, because people are at one and the same time hopeful and terrified.

So what next? Every discussion begins, of course, with Obama. Having an African-American president of the USA is a bit analogous to women becoming ordained Catholic priests. The day before, it seems impossible, unimaginable, never in a thousand years...the day after, it will seem as natural as the sun rising in the morning. What took so long? It's even possible, after the precedent-setting events of the long 2008 campaign, that we'll never again revert to all four of the presidential and vice-presidential candidates of both capitalist parties being white men.

Herein lies a paradox. U.S. voters elected a president — a genuinely brilliant individual and exceptionally talented politician — whose parents, the year he was born, might have been arrested in a number of southern states for miscegenation ("race mixing"). Malik Miah's article in this issue of *Against the Current* discusses what a transformational political moment this represents. It is entirely appropriate to celebrate this truly amazing change in the face of American politics.

The politics of this historic president-elect are those of a thoroughly conventional corporate Democrat, as the configuration of his incoming administration shows. Some of Obama's supporters on the liberal left are stunned by the speed with which he's incorporated Clinton-era figures into his economic and foreign policy teams. As New York Times columnist Gail Collins delightfully retorted to such naïve types: "The only people who thought Barack Obama was a radical were you and Joe the Plumber." Obama is doing pretty much exactly what he promised he'd do — with implications we'll return to below.

Obama's mandate came not only "from below," the masses of people rallying behind his appeal for "change," but also from above, from the corporate elites who clearly felt that the McCain-Palin continuation of the Bush regime was absolutely inadequate to confront the capitalist crisis. That elite mandate determines the makeup of the incoming Cabinet — and all the "Progressives for Obama," antiwar and organized labor forces who worked so hard for his

election have nothing to do with it.

Saving the Empire

President Barack Obama, to whom literally billions of people around the world look to provide “U.S. leadership” with a human face, inherits an empire that the United States economy in its current condition can’t afford to maintain. He shows no intention, however, of downsizing American imperial reach. He’s surrounded himself with the same Clinton-era figures who promoted “free trade” agreements, happily enabled Israel’s strangulation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories under the cover of the never-ending “peace process,” and proclaimed that the deaths of Iraqi children under sanctions were “worth it.”

As his pre-election policy statements indicated to anyone who chose to pay attention, president-elect Obama has appointed a bipartisan, centrist war Cabinet. The neoconservative architects of Bush’s Iraq disaster, of course, are out of the “foreign policy and national security team” and so is the peace movement, which has neither representation in nor meaningful access to the policy makers.

Robert Gates, the leading proponent of the troop “surge” in Iraq and previously a prominent member of the Baker-Hamilton Commission before being recruited to replace the disgraced Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, stays on to head the Pentagon. (Surprised? You were expecting maybe Dennis Kucinich and the Department of Peace?) Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her presidential campaign famously advertised her readiness to answer that 3 AM red phone call and to obliterate Iran if it attacked Israel (not vice versa, obviously). Attorney General Eric Holder was an early post-9/11 advocate of excluding “terrorism suspects” from the protection of the Geneva Conventions, although he’ll likely be more sharply questioned about his role in the sleazy festival of pardons at the close of the Bill Clinton presidency.

Hillary Clinton by most accounts is the riskiest appointment, given her political ambition and apparent need to prove how tough she can be. At a time when U.S. imperialist power has been seriously weakened both by the economic meltdown and the legacy of Bush’s blunders, threatening Iran and Russia in particular isn’t really smart strategy. Complex agreements and understandings with Iran will be needed to extricate the United States from Iraq without that country disintegrating. Careful negotiations with Russia are necessary to control the growing dangers arising from Georgia’s disastrous South Ossetian war (obviously approved by Bush’s gang), Russia’s aggressive military intervention, reckless NATO expansion and the U.S. scheme to station missiles in Poland and the Czech Republic which the citizens of those countries don’t want.

Obama has pledged sending 20,000-30,000 more troops into the quagmire that is Afghanistan where the United States military will never lose a battle and will never win the war. U.S. raids and bombing of villages in Pakistan have created growing resentment in that country, while the terrorist massacre in Mumbai has rekindled the India-Pakistan crisis. It’s even possible that neocon “dead-enders” to borrow Rumsfeld’s infamous phrase following the next Israeli election might aim to embroil the new American administration in a confrontation with Iran, a war that could destroy Obama’s presidency in its infancy.

Bailing Out Capitalism

For most of the U.S. population, to be sure, the above issues even Iraq faded into the background during the election campaign. The financial and economic crisis is the paramount question, and what kind of “stimulus” or

“bailout” package can address it. The fact is that none of the experts on either the Keynesian “left” or free-market “right” wing know what might work.

The tragedy for the U.S. working class and social movements is that there is so little “pressure from below” on the powers-that-be for the moment. People who are facing massive insecurity in their employment and their families’ survival right now are generally paralyzed by fear, or waiting for some kind of salvation from Obama, or both. Naturally, then, the current debates over “rescue” take place within strictly capitalist bounds.

The initial “Wall Street bailout” was promoted as a program to purchase “toxic assets” from the subprime mortgage debacle, alleviate home foreclosures and re-start the frozen credit markets. It rapidly devolved under the leadership of Secretary of Treasury Henry Paulson, to simply stuffing money into failing or even not-failing banks to buy up each other. Paulson has become the Mike Brown of the banking crisis (remember “Brownie, you’re doing a heckuva job” as New Orleans drowned?). But this is no real surprise: that’s how capitalism bails out capital. The problem of course is that it hasn’t worked; banks won’t lend and credit remains almost frozen, housing values continue to collapse and consumer spending sinks like a stone.

Obama’s “economic team” of Lawrence Summers, Timothy Geithner, Robert Rubin and company were Clinton-era architects of the financial deregulation that helped produce this mess. Once again, the liberal left is on the outside looking in. But the extraordinary pressure of the crisis, just as it compelled Bush’s advisors to dump their “free market” religion overboard, now forces the incoming centrist Democrats to undertake some massive stimulus and rescue measures for the economy and critical industries. The state is once again overtly a major economic player — but on what terms?

To be sure, the ongoing fight over auto is not about saving jobs and communities, or converting the industry to sustainable mass transit. It’s about whether the bankruptcy of the Big Three would be one of those moments of “creative destruction” so dearly beloved by free-market ideologues, whose own lives of course aren’t at stake. It’s about how (not whether) to most effectively shred the United Auto Workers’ contracts and reduce wages and benefits to the level of the nonunion sector. It’s about whether the companies will go bankrupt anyway — so do it now and crush the union outright — or whether the impact of their precipitous collapse on the system as a whole is too enormous to risk.

There’s been almost no hearing for the solutions that would meet real human needs: Since private banks won’t lend, and need public subsidies just to survive their own ruinous mistakes, they ought to be nationalized so that lending can begin for society’s urgent needs. The auto industry too ought to be a publicly owned asset under workers’ management, so that its conversion to production for a sustainable economy of renewable fuels and mass transit can begin. It’s important for socialists to present this program, without any illusion that such a fundamental transformation can come about through a centrist Democratic legislature — unless the example of those workers at Republic in Chicago is followed on a large scale.

Perhaps the one issue on which there’s the beginning of grassroots mobilization right now is for government national health insurance. What we in the backward USA call “single payer” is already taken for granted in other industrial countries. The rationality and necessity of such a program is overwhelming. It is even possible that the new Democratic administration and Congress, pressured by the sheer magnitude of the crisis, might take some steps toward guaranteeing some kind of insurance for 45 million U.S. citizens who don’t have any — but leaving the private health insurance industry intact allows only partial and inadequate solutions.

The role of the social activist left in this situation is not to position as supplicant “Progressives (or beggars) for Obama,” but to engage in building movements that could change the social equation and the terms of political debate. This will not be quick or easy, but it is most urgent if America is going to change, for real.