Barack Obama's dilemma of race and class

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After his victory in the Oregon primary on 20 May, with only three more to go in early June, Obama has claimed the nomination is "within reach." Though Hilary Clinton still refuses to admit defeat, the Democratic establishment has turned towards Obama. In mid-May he passed Clinton's tally by winning a steady stream of endorsements from superdelegates - the 796 national party leaders, representatives, senators, and governors who will have the deciding vote in the nomination. With defeat looming, Clinton has resorted to playing the race card, arguing that, almost regardless of the primary results, she should win the nomination because a black candidate could not win the presidential election itself. Contests in West Virginia (13 May) and Kentucky (20 May) saw high votes for Clinton (67% and 65%) due in large part to racism among poorer white voters: Her vote among non-college educated whites in Kentucky rose to 69 percent, among whites with a family income below $50,000, she won 75 percent of the vote. In a CBS exit poll, eight out of 10 Clinton voters said they would be unhappy with Obama as the Democrats' candidate, with only 33% willing to vote for him while 41% said they would vote for McCain.

Obama: a "post-race" candidate?

Given the heritage of the country, race was always going to be a major issue in the campaign. Obama's chosen strategy has been to acknowledge the issue but play it down. He pointed to his own campaign as proof that the US has changed because a Black man could now stand for president. On the eve of his first victory in Iowa, he argued: "People are willing to look beyond race, particularly on issues as important as who is going to lead the country." He claimed his campaign would appeal to all, rich and poor, black and white, old and young, Democrat and Republican, seeking to unite "a divided America" with a new direction, under the watchwords "hope" and "change", promising "to heal the nation and repair the world."

At the same time, he insists that he takes his inspiration from the civil rights movement but balances his appeals to black history and struggle, the historic possibility of a black president, with a broader, populist appeal to the poor and working class as a whole. All this is combined with a coded assurance to the rich and powerful that his "common-sense, practical, non ideological solutions" will not make any inroads into their wealth. As a result, he has been able not only to generate a tidal wave of "hope", that is to say illusions, amongst black people and youth, but also to win huge financial contributions from bankers, financiers and venture capitalists. In order to cultivate a persona acceptable to the mainstream media, Obama has also stayed away from campaigns fighting against racist injustice such as the Jena 6 (black teenagers unjustly accused of beating a white fellow student at their Louisiana High School that provoked a 20,000 strong protest march in September 2007). When three policemen involved in the fatal shooting of Sean Bell in New York City, were acquitted, Obama called it a tragedy, but argued the verdict had to be respected since the US is "a nation of laws"! On the economy, Obama has no policies to abolish the terrible poverty, housing crisis and failing schools that Black people face. His "post-race" candidacy doesn't mean leaving racism behind, but leaving its roots untouched and ignoring its crimes. Indeed, the idea of a "post-race" candidacy has already been run over by the reality of racism in the US. Not only have many white voters refused to vote for him, all the rightwing media search out and circulate stories, pushing them
into a willing mainstream media that scrutinises Obama more than any other candidate. Newsweek warned that, "the more he supports traditional black issues like affirmative action, the more that will eat into his white base of support". Every time a racist incident occurs, the media demand that he comments on it, condemning him for prejudice if he takes a strong stand against racism. Hilary Clinton has pushed such stories, too, in order to advance her own campaign, for instance weighing in during the recent furore over his pastor, Jeremiah Wright. Wright was a Black church leader in Chicago and mentor of Obama who supposedly inspired the young lawyer to become a practicing Christian. More importantly, membership in Wright's church gave Obama, educated at elite Harvard University and president of Harvard Law Review, the credibility to begin his career in politics. Wright taught him the powerful rhetorical skills of the Black preacher and familiarised him with the story of Black suffering, struggle and redemption that, mixed with the myth of the American dream, have given him such an effective populist appeal. Obama thus obtained a passport to the Black community, plus the religious credentials the US media demand from any political figure.

Obama's moment of truth

However, in early March, this political opportunism became a political nightmare as the media struck back at the "Obama phenomenon", circulating video clips of Wright condemning America's racism and imperialism, and arguing that the US had brought 9/11 on itself through its foreign policy, such as its support for "state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans", which killed far more than Al Qaeda. He articulated the reality of life for many Black Americans, slamming the racist nature of the criminal justice system and the billions spent on the war in Iraq while millions languished in poverty at home. The rightwing radio and cable channels publicised Wright preaching not "God bless America" but "God damn America"! Of course everything Wright said was perfectly true, but for the US ruling class such media-created "crises" are a means of testing out the reliability of candidates. Where did Obama stand? Would he be caught in the contradiction between the black community and the wider US society, and forced to choose? Or was he a clever enough politician to keep his Black support while demonstrating his total commitment to the state?

Obama finally confronted this on 18 March, in Philadelphia, in a speech regarded as something of a tour de force. Rather than cave in to the right, he forthrightly stated that discrimination in the USA had not gone away and that while he did not agree with Wright's statements, he could "no more disown him than I can disown the black community" - precisely what the mainstream media, Republicans, and Hilary Clinton were in effect demanding. But he then used the incident to appeal to white workers and middle class people by showing that they too were suffering the effects of globalisation such as downsizing and offshoring: "In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience - as far as they're concerned, no one's handed them anything, they've built it from scratch. They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pension dumped after a lifetime of labour. They are anxious about their futures, and feel their dreams slipping away; in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense." Obama's speech was hailed as showing unusual honesty, giving a consistent message to both Black and white, rather than the usual two-faced positioning of politicians who are more radical speaking to niche audiences while being more mainstream on the TV. Similarly in his earlier Martin Luther King Day speech at a Black Alabama church he had, quite rightly, openly addressed anti-semitism, anti-immigrant sentiment and homophobia in some in the Black community, as part of his argument that Black people cannot "walk alone" in the struggle for racial justice. However, this approach actually ends up soft peddling and minimising racism and, at the same time, it deflects white workers' attention away from the evils of capitalism as a system and onto a narrow
focus on globalisation. This is safer ground, shared by many US bosses and union chiefs. His insistence that discrimination and inequality be ended in housing, schools, and jobs was not accompanied by any clear proposals about where the resources are to come from to uproot racial and social injustice. This was enough to defuse the issue in March. However Pastor Wright struck back in April with a series of interviews and press conferences defending his views and suggesting Obama's distancing was just a political manoeuvre. Faced with this, Obama finally broke with his former pastor on 29 April, condemning his views as "divisive and destructive...giving comfort to those who prey on hate."

Democrats and white workers

If Obama wins the Democrats' nomination, the Republicans will play the race card in a way that will put Clinton's efforts in the shade. The media will put him under the spotlight on every question that raises the race issue. Already in five states there are initiatives opposing affirmative action (positive discrimination policies) on the ballots. They have the backing of powerful tycoons like Rupert Murdoch and the TV stations and newspapers he owns across the US. In states like Iowa, Vermont and Wyoming, up to 70 per cent of white males who supported Obama, nevertheless oppose affirmative action. Consequently, Obama has sought to avoid a clear policy on the issue. Those that knew him at Harvard say he stayed out of the big affirmative action battles in the 1980's. However, to bend the knee on this issue would lose him support among the black community. So, can Obama avoid falling off his tightrope? His hope is that many white working class and lower middle class Democrats who voted Clinton will vote for him when they see McCain and the Republican campaign. He hopes that the message of unity will allow him to transcend these divisions:

"Bottom line is, I think people across the board are figuring out how are we lowering gas prices, how are we putting people back to work, are we going to make sure we're dealing with the war in Iraq and starting to bring our troops home now. I don't think there's a huge difference between the black working, the white working class, suburban, urban rural. I think people want to see the country make progress. So what I'm going to continue to do is address issues that affect people's bottom lines, the issues they're talking about around the kitchen table."

However, so far, Obama has been long on verbal support for workers, such as the striking Axle auto workers, while short on condemnation of the bosses who forced them and others to strike. What about social issues where religious conservatism dogs many in the poor white and black communities alike? On questions like gay marriage Obama has equivocated. One of his biggest so-called "gaffes" - in fact a simple statement of truth - was to say that small-town Pennsylvanians were "clinging" to religion out of economic despair. The media accused him of Marxism ("religion is the opium of the people") and he immediately apologised. Taunted with being weak on national security, he is moving away from his promise to open talks without preconditions with Cuba, Iran and Hamas in Gaza. Given the importance of the black vote, once affirmative action and similar issues are posed point-blank, Obama may be forced to come out in their defence. However, he could only prevent the right wing stirring up a racist backlash among sections of white workers if he could also address their elementary class interests, increased wages, protecting jobs, providing affordable housing and protection from repossessions, providing free medical cover. To provide the resources even for the reform packages of his Democratic predecessors Roosevelt (the 'New Deal' of the 1930s) or Johnson (the 'Great Society' of the 1960s) would today mean breaking with the financial interests and corporate backers that fund him. Obama's loyalty to capitalism and enthusiasm for free market policies in healthcare or to address the repossession crisis, make clear that this is impossible. Of course the same holds true on foreign policy like escaping the Iraq quagmire without undermining US imperialism's interests in the Middle East. This will prove easier to address in heart-
warming rhetoric than in reality. Millions of workers, black and white, have bought Obama’s message of “change” and “hope” for a better life. They see his presidency as a way to begin reversing the sinking real wages and decaying social structure that decades of free market policies have inflicted on the US working class. However Obama, and the Democratic Party, are bourgeois through and through, totally committed to US capitalism and its imperialist exploitation of the globe. Until a new party is built by the US working class to fight for socialism, elections will continue to divert the energy of hundreds of thousands of activists in the trade union, antiwar, and immigrants’ rights movements into the dead end of the Democrats.

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