



# Will Barack Obama bring a new deal for American workers?

Thu, 02/10/2008 - 22:00

Barack Obama has electrified the American president elections and fostered the belief amongst American workers, African-Americans and youth, that, if elected, he will bring radical change. Dave Stockton looks beyond Obama's celebrity and radical language and finds a candidate itching to serve the capitalist class.

The financial and banking crisis is leading the United States and the world economy into recession. The dramatic stock exchange crashes in New York, London, continental Europe and the Far East have driven the US election campaign off the front pages and radically altered the agenda of the campaign itself. The principal loser so far has been McCain, a man who told the Wall Street Journal earlier in the year that he 'didn't really understand economics'. At the same time, he wrote that he was 'fundamentally a deregulator' and even talked of deregulating health care, 'just like banking'.

Before it was upstaged by the Wall Street Crash Mark II, everybody was in agreement that the 2008 US presidential election campaign had been the most exciting for many years. And one of the longest; although it officially began with the primaries, in January, the main contenders had been at it for at least a year prior to that. No one has any doubt about who injected a new dynamism into the race. It was indisputably the junior senator from Illinois, 47-year old Barack Obama.

Three factors contributed enormously to the excitement: he was a black American, he was a newcomer to Washington (elected senator in 2005) and he was young (47). In addition, he was highly personable and plain talking for a politician. All this enabled him to mobilise many who had become disillusioned with party politics and were seeking a major change from the old guards of both main parties.

Barack Obama's campaign for the Democratic Party nomination drew in a veritable army of enthusiastic young activists, what has come to be called the Obama movement, who were eager for change. Moreover, in a nail-biting series of primary campaigns, he was able to defeat the entrenched Clinton leadership of his party, albeit narrowly, despite its much stronger backing from the State-level and Congressional elites.

Thus, for the first six months, attention focussed on Obama's duel with the establishment candidate, Hilary Rodham Clinton. Electricity was added to the campaign by the fact that, if either were victorious on November 4, it would be a historic first: either the first woman or the first black American to enter the White House as President.

Of course, counter-arguments were mobilised that it would prove dangerous for the Democrats to choose either, that is, that sexist or racist prejudices would drive voters over to the Republicans. Supporters of the Clintons more than hinted that blue collar workers (by which they mean white workers) would not vote for Obama for racist reasons. There was talk of the 'Bradley effect', named after the African American, Tom Bradley, who lost to a white candidate in the 1982 contest for Mayor of Los Angeles, although opinion polls showed him several points ahead, indicating that some white voters had lied about their (racist) voting intentions.

## Raising hopes of radical change

The Obama campaign falls into two parts, before he clinched the nomination in early June, and after the Democratic Convention in Denver, Colorado in late August. In the first part, Obama concentrated on the change he would bring to

Washington, using frankly populist rhetoric. However in the run up to the Convention, his message became more conservative, and this trend was cemented by his appointment of a Washington insider Joe Biden (66) a six time senator since 1972, pro-war and pro-business, as his Vice Presidential candidate. The name of the game is ?triangulation? ? a strategy formulated by the Democrats to get Clinton re-elected in 1996.

The trick is for a candidate to present themselves as above party politics, as beyond ?left? and ?right? ideology. It necessitates adopting some of the ideas of ones opponent so as to make inroads into his/her voter base and to avoid charges of extremism. The problem is that this method leads to politically look-alike candidates and complaints from voters that no real choice is being offered to them. Part of Obama?s impact had been that he seemed to offer a break from triangulation. But the real test was not in the primaries but the election campaign itself.

In fact, in all capitalist electoral systems, the technique is much the same; in the first phase, hopes and aspirations for change are stoked up to mobilise the activists and loyal voters to rally around their party and candidate, assuring them that this time things will be different from their previously disappointing standard bearers; to bring about, in the words Dr Johnson used about a second marriage, ?the triumph of hope over experience?.

Once this has been achieved, the second phase, the election proper, focuses on winning over the ?middle ground?. Obama?s campaign has followed just this pattern; having hopefully assured himself of his core vote, he set out to win over the middle ground by the classic Clinton strategy. The rhetoric of hope and change remained, of course, but the policies became increasingly indistinguishable from those of McCain.

With Joe Biden on board this is hardly surprising. In 2004, Obama?s running mate actually suggested that his personal friend, John McCain, stand on a cross party ticket with John Kerry for the Democrats, to ?heal the rift in American society?. In other words, to prevent the anger caused by the disastrous Iraq war, which both had enthusiastically supported, from breaking the spell of pro-big business politics on the US population at large. But Biden is a real liability when it comes to continuing to motivate Obama?s movement. Take, for example, his early racist ?gaffe? about previous black candidates in the Democratic Party (Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988 and Al Sharpton in 2004): ?I mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy.?1

The significant bounce which McCain gained from enthusing his reactionary middle class base by appointing a young (right-wing) populist outsider as his running mate contrasted with the effect of Obama?s choice of Biden, which clearly disappointed, even disillusioned, some of his heartland voters and his activists. Obama?s sudden slide in the polls had a lot to do with this sinking enthusiasm for him as the antiwar, anti-racist, anti-Washington candidate. However, the historic financial crisis that hit the US banking system in September restored Obama?s lead immediately.

### **The Obama movement**

From the outset, the Obama campaign made enormous use of the web and, by the start of the primaries, already had more than 800,000 registered users on its custom-built social network platform, which helped it arrange more than 50,000 real events, create more than 10,000 local campaign groups and attract more than 1.5 million individual donors. It was the prospect of mobilising such enthusiastic new layers of activists or at least the danger of losing them, that eventually convinced the Democratic Party?s ?super-delegates? to swing behind him.

During his two year campaign for the nomination, Obama played the role of the outsider, the bringer of a radical change away from the pro-big business, neoliberal policies of the Bush-Cheney Administration certainly, but above all the antiwar candidate. To boost the former aspect, he was unusually frank for a US politician in describing America?s problems. His message resonated with the themes of redemption from the painful divisions of US society, black and white, rich and poor, from the feelings of impotence to change things, from the feelings of disillusion with politicians who promised much but delivered little, but also from the guilty consciences of those who colluded with racism by moving out of the inner cities to unofficially white-only suburbs.

It is worth quoting an extended passage from one of Obama?s speeches to catch the blended tones of John F Kennedy and Martin Luther King:

?We have been waiting for so long for the time when we could finally expect more from our politics, when we could give more of ourselves and feel truly invested in something bigger than a candidate or cause. This is it: We are the ones we've been waiting for, we are the ones that we seek. We are the hope of those boys who have little; who've been told that they cannot have what they dream; that they cannot be what they imagine. Yes they can. We are the hope of the father who goes to work before dawn and lies awake with doubts that tell him he cannot give his children the same opportunities that someone gave him. Yes he can. We are the hope of the woman who hears that her city will not be rebuilt; that she cannot reclaim the life that was swept away in a terrible storm. Yes she can. We are the hope of the future; the answer to the cynics who tell us our house must stand divided; that we cannot come together; that we cannot remake this world as it should be. Because we know what we have seen and what we believe ? that what began as a whisper has now swelled to a chorus that cannot be ignored; that will not be deterred; that will ring out across this land as a hymn that will heal this nation, repair this world, and make this time different than all the rest ? Yes. We. Can.?

Another part of Obama's coalition, a traditional one for all Democrats since Roosevelt, is the support of organised labour. Although the unions were not amongst the first converts to Obama, indeed many initially backed John Edwards as the best traditional 'friend of Labour' and others briefly supported Hilary Clinton, they finally rallied behind Obama. Some, like the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) probably because of its considerable black and Latino membership, announced their endorsement immediately after he declared he was running in mid-February.

With some 1.8 million members this was an important breakthrough. SEIU President Andy Stern said the union's board voted overwhelmingly to support Obama. 'We have an enormous amount of respect for Senator Clinton, but it's now become clear members and leaders want to become part of an effort to elect Barack Obama the next president.'

When both US union federations, the older and larger AFL-CIO and 'Change to Win', of which the SEIU is a leading force, decided to back Obama, a still powerful grass roots activist machine was mobilised. The AFL-CIO has mobilised 200,000 volunteers. In return for union support, Obama committed to enacting an Employee Free Choice Act. This would amend the National Labor Relations Act, the main framework for US labour law, to enable employees to form, join, or assist unions and unionising campaigns and provide for mandatory injunctions for unfair labour practices during organising efforts and ballots. Not since the Roosevelt administrations of the 1930's, have the Democrats backed a new labour law that would actually improve the bargaining position of the unions. Union leaders have expressed the hope that Obama will enact changes that will open the way to organising drives on a scale not seen since the early days of the CIO.

Today, in many states and industries, union organisation often takes place in a climate of near terror against employees and union activists. The desperate need for unionisation in the US is clear; over 90% of the private sector is union-free but over 60 per cent of non-union workers say they would join a union, if there was no danger of being sacked for doing so. Of course, the reality of what Obama delivers will, in all probability, be far less than the unions expect. Indeed, it will take a massive movement and the threat of a mass unionisation drive by strike action to force him to 'do a Roosevelt' and pass anything like the original National Labor Relations Act. It would mean repealing the infamous Taft-Hartley Act of 1947. This prohibited strikes over union jurisdiction (for example, challenges against yellow or company unions), unofficial or wildcat strikes, solidarity or political strikes, secondary action (blacking or picketing employers not immediately involved in a dispute) and monetary donations by unions to federal political campaigns. It also required union officers to sign affidavits they were not communists. In addition, it heavily restricted closed (or all-union) shops.

Under Taft-Hartley, states were also allowed to pass their own Right to Work Laws that outlawed union shops altogether and greatly hampered organising and recognition procedures. In all, 22 states did this, including 12 in the South, the entire old Confederacy. As a result, these states have attracted anti-union employers relocating from elsewhere or starting up new firms. In many ways, the historic decline of the US union movement is due in no small measure to these ferociously anti-union laws and a judiciary willing to enforce them. The fact that many Democrats, and not only in the South, are ardent supporters of these laws makes it clear that only a massive movement from below could actually force their repeal.

Obama has suffered a setback amongst women voters in part because of his defeat of Hilary Clinton and his refusal to include her on the ticket as vice president. According to opinion polls, she had led Obama by 24 per cent amongst white women voters. Nevertheless, the National Organisation for Women (NOW) switched from endorsing Clinton to endorsing Obama in September. Since then, he has constantly praised Hilary Clinton in attempt to change the minds of some of her angry supporters who claimed they would rather vote for the John McCain-Sarah Palin ticket. Obama pledges to realise equal pay, increase childcare tax credit and expand paid leave for new mothers.

On abortion rights, he has always defended Roe v. Wade, the 1973 decision of the Supreme Court which forbade States to pass laws which infringed a woman's right to have a termination up to the point at which a foetus becomes viable. This ruling has been the target of a fierce campaign by the Catholic Church and Protestant fundamentalists alike. Obama also supports expanded access to contraception, health information and preventative services to reduce unintended pregnancies.

Although he has a one hundred per cent rating on his votes in votes both in Illinois and Washington from pro-choice groups, more recently he has talked about the need to reconcile pro-choice and pro-life camps, and claimed he is now uncertain whether individual life begins at conception - yet another example of triangulation and potential compromise once in office.

### **Obama's business backers**

Despite Obama's mobilisation of a powerful coalition of the young, the black community and the trade unions to secure his nomination, he could still not have done it without the massive donations he received from big business and, indeed, from Wall Street financiers. Behind the army of volunteers, lies a sophisticated and expensive campaign machine, able to fund radio and TV ads.

As a Junior Senator, he already received major contributions from Illinois-based firms in ethanol and nuclear power. During his campaign, he has received nearly \$10 million in contributions from the finance, insurance and real estate sector. He ranks second among all presidential candidates in money raised from commercial banks (Hilary Clinton was number one) with Goldman Sachs as his top contributor.

In the first six months of 2008, Obama received \$339 million compared to McCain's \$145 million. In thirteen leading industrial sectors, Democrats led Republicans, being outstripped only in energy, agribusiness and construction. Even the anti-union giant Wal-Mart made a near fifty-fifty split between Republicans and Democrats in its campaign donations. As a result, during the first six months of the year, during the mounting credit crunch, Obama refused to call for a moratorium on foreclosures, for interest rate restrictions or even tighter regulation of lenders other than for actual fraud in the current sub-prime crisis.

When the crisis broke in September, despite the rage of ordinary Americans at the idea of spending three quarters of a trillion dollars bailing out Wall Street, beyond a bit of cheap populist rhetoric, Obama was on board, all the way. Worse still, he indicated that his already meagre programme of social reforms would probably be the first victim of the bailout. In an interview with NBC's 'Today', Obama said, 'Does that mean I can do everything that I've called for in this campaign right away? Probably not. I think we're going to have to phase it in. And a lot of it's going to depend on what our tax revenues look like.'

Obama's economic advisers include free market enthusiasts like Austan Goolsbee, a University of Chicago economist. Chicago, Obama's own alma mater, is the centre of neoliberalism, where Milton Friedman (1912-2006) trained a whole generation of 'Chicago Boys' who wreaked havoc on the workers of their own country as well as on Third World countries in the 1980s. Obama is also close to the billionaire investor, Warren Buffett, but the biggest shock was his endorsement by Paul Volcker, former chairman of the Federal Reserve. He is evidently now advising Obama on economic matters.

Volcker is famous, or rather infamous, for the 'Volcker Shock', the economic 'therapy' of very high interest rates that began in October 1979 under Democrat President Carter and lasted until August 1982, under Reagan. The US and

world economies were plunged into a deep recession, the worst since World War II. It was particularly severe in housing, steel and automobiles. By September 1982, the jobless rate reached 10.8%, the highest in the post-war era. Twelve million people were unemployed, an increase of 4.2 million people since July 1981. This was used to weaken yet further the power of the unions and has had a lasting effect in holding down workers' wages and raising profit levels.

In a speech to The Economic Club of New York, on April 8, 2008, Volcker remarked that the Federal Reserve's task was indeed to intervene and regulate the then deepening credit crisis, and warned:

Then the temptation is to subordinate the fundamental need to maintain a reliable currency worthy of trust and confidence at home and abroad. (...) The apparent pressure of the Federal Reserve to take many billions of uncertain assets onto its own balance sheet raises questions that must be decisively answered by demonstrating the commitment to deal with emerging inflationary pressures that is all the more important in the midst of the weakness of the dollar internationally and our dependence on foreign capital.

But he added:

Let's not lose sight of the silver lining that what can be the positive outcome of all the turbulence. (...) By force of circumstances, the nation's spending and consumption are being brought in line with our capacity to produce.<sup>4</sup>

In short, for all his support for regulation of the banks and finance, Volcker, now 80, remains a convinced monetarist as far as interest rates are concerned. That Obama has taken him on as an economic advisor is a warning sign indeed.

Obama has presented a plan to reform the greed and excesses of Washington. Whilst still populist in its rhetoric, it plays much more to the traditional themes of right-wing populism and its hatred of wasteful big-government. In it, he vowed to take a meat axe to the federal government, We will fire government managers who aren't getting results, we will cut funding for programs that are wasting your money, and we will use technology and lessons from the private sector to improve efficiency across every level of government, because we cannot meet twenty-first century challenges with a twentieth century bureaucracy.<sup>5</sup>

The reasons for his conservatism on economic policy are clear when you consider that seven of the Obama campaign's top 14 donors during the primaries were top Wall Street firms: Goldman Sachs, UBS, AIG, Lehman Brothers, JP Morgan Chase, Citigroup, Morgan Stanley, Credit Suisse and the big hedge fund, Citadel Investment Group.

While a key element of Obama's rhetoric is bashing Bushonomics, he has so far done little more than support the measures of the government to deal with the credit crunch rather than offering any plan of his own. He has made populist speeches demanding that the government help the millions of ordinary Americans losing their jobs and homes, not just the rich and big business, but his words have been vacuous, If we can extend a hand to banks on Wall Street, we can extend a hand to Americans who are struggling through no fault of their own.<sup>6</sup>

The mealy-mouthed plans for immediate relief are, like Obama's ticket as a whole, accompanied by heartwarming, but unbankable, promises of better things to come, if only he is elected president. He promises tax cuts for working families and retired workers, along with affordable healthcare, rebuilt infrastructure and schools and colleges. Where the money for this would come from, when he has also promised to balance the budget, remains unanswered.

Obama's presidency would be caught between the recession and the Federal debt that, after Paulson's Plan, will touch 70 percent of gross domestic product and take the annual budget gap to an all-time high, possibly exceeding \$1 trillion next year. Thus, any redistribution toward the working class and the poor would mean hitting the profits of the capitalists hard. After 35 years of stagnating profit rates, during which US capitalism has continuously fought to offshore jobs, slash pensions and healthcare, hold down wages and push through tax cuts for the rich, the capitalists will not stand idly by. They will insist his plans wait till they have recapitalised. It is unlikely in the extreme that Obama will resist them. Any hope that he might, ignores the fact that the Democrats are tied to the US capitalist class and business interests by a thousand strings.

Obama is in reality no less of a triangulating Democrat than Clinton. Neither one can bite the hand that feeds them and the majority of big business funding has shifted from the Republicans to the Democrats, a sure sign that Obama is their trusted representative, whatever the illusions he generates amongst the poor and exploited millions. For the major US capitalists, a Democratic administration is the best way to extricate themselves from the impasse created by Bush in Iraq; maintaining strategic bases in the region whilst redeploying resources to assure control of Central Asian oil reserves and pipelines.

Obama cannot in any way be relied on to meet the needs or aspirations of trade unionists, Black and Latino Americans, indeed of the working class majority as a whole. The only solution is for the US working class to define its own goals, rely on its own strength to win them and create the organisations, political and trade union, needed to accomplish this.

## **Healthcare**

Central to Obama's agenda for change is a promise to finally do something about the fact that 47 million Americans are without health insurance, living in fear that any serious illness will bankrupt them. In 1993, the health insurance industry, the giant drug companies and private healthcare corporations spent millions of dollars on killing the Hilary Clinton proposals for a national health care system.

Health campaigners claim the Obama plan would leave as much as a third of those currently uninsured still lacking coverage. Obama actually opposed a single-payer bill sponsored by Congressmen Dennis Kucinich and John Conyers in 2006, despite 75 other members of Congress supporting it. 'Single-payer' is the term used to describe payment for doctors, hospitals and other providers of health care from a single, state-supervised, insurance fund, on the European model.

His excuse for avoiding such a system is simply a conservative fear of taking on the vested interests in the private system. 'Given that a lot of people work for insurance companies, a lot of people work for HMOs (health maintenance organisations-DS) you've got a whole system of institutions that have been set up.'

Instead of a single-payer plan, Obama would create a new, government-run, marketplace in which Americans could buy insurance, mostly from private companies. He would offer subsidies to individuals and to small business owners that offer their workers coverage to make it more affordable. The plan would also require parents to take out insurance for their children. Nevertheless, his proposals would leave the industry, with its huge and spiralling costs, still firmly in private hands, having to provide profits first.

'People don't have time to wait,' Obama said. 'They need relief now. So my attitude is let's build up the system we got, let's make it more efficient, we may over time as we make the system more efficient and everybody's covered decide that there are other ways for us to provide care more effectively.' Campaigners, such as the filmmaker, Michael Moore, whose film, 'Sicko', is a devastating exposure of the cruelty and exploitation of the present US system, are very disappointed. Moore is scathing, saying, 'Obama wants the insurance companies to help us develop a new health care plan, the same companies who have created the mess in the first place.'

The reasons for Obama's timidity are pretty clear; up to 30 June, 2008, the Democrats had received contributions worth \$16.1 million from the healthcare companies, the Republicans received just under \$10 million.

## **Race and nation?**

Given the heritage of the country, race was always going to be a major issue in the 2008 campaign. Obama has acknowledged the issue but sought to play it down. His rhetoric is certainly not actively anti-racist; rather it is aimed at galvanising black voters with the prospect of electing the first black president. Certainly, his appeal hardly touches them on the level of class, though it is black workers who have been hit the hardest by declining wages and the sub-prime crisis, with black and Latino workers twice as likely as whites to have sub-prime mortgages.

Obama is long on symbolism, in fact, he is a magpie, picking up shiny phrases which seem to identify him with historic struggles. His slogan 'Yes we can' is a steal of 'Si se Puede' used by the 'day without immigrants' of May 1 2006,

and originating with the United Farm Workers' union of César Chávez in the 1960s and '70s. Chávez is the Latino equivalent of Martin Luther King.

Equally, he says that he takes his inspiration from the civil rights movement and his acceptance address took place on the anniversary of Martin Luther King's famous 'I have a dream!' speech. But he always balances his appeals to black history and struggle, the historic possibility of a black president, with a broader, populist appeal.

Obama does evoke the memory of hardship and oppression and, in that, he is quite distinct from previous mainstream politicians of recent years. However, his appeals are to a past common decency and humanity which America is supposed to have experienced. Somehow, this is expected to overcome the existing chasm of social inequality, though Obama offers few measures that are at all adequate to the scale of the problem.

'It used to be a good country. We're going down the tubes. All our good jobs have gone overseas. It's all service jobs. The middle class is disappearing. All we're going to have is a rich class and a poor class.'

What he does not evoke, even in his references to Martin Luther King Jr, is the memory of militant struggle. While he may be the first black presidential candidate adopted by either of the two governing parties, he repeatedly insists that he is not the black candidate. Indeed, he emphasises that his is the campaign for those who want to move 'beyond race.' In his words: 'There is not a liberal America and a conservative America-there is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America-there's the United States of America.'

Obama pointed to his own arrival as a contender for the presidency as proof that the US has changed. On the eve of his first victory in the Iowa primaries, 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.'

Of course, this raises the intimately related, though scarcely ever acknowledged, issue of class. Which section of the black community can 'move on' from the issue of racial prejudice and discrimination, from levels of inequality between black and white in the USA which have hardly changed since the 1960s? Only the upper middle class, whose elite professional and business backgrounds earn from their white class brothers and sisters at least the concealment of racist attitudes, can even dream of this.

For the rest of the black community, the idea of transcendence can only be a matter for hope, including the hope that a black president will finally break the centuries old barriers. In the ghettos and the prisons, even such a hope must be hard to sustain, although people would certainly see the election of Obama as a blow to all the racists, high and low, that subject them to countless oppressions and humiliations.

What the more perceptive American commentators have noted about Obama and his undeniably powerful rhetoric is that, whilst it evokes the experience of oppression and exploitation, carefully coupling that of black Americans with that of poor white and Latino Americans, it always does so in order to suggest that these divisions can be transcended in a shining new vision of the 'American dream', that uplifting amalgam of material prosperity, individual freedom and moral self-righteousness. The only operative factor in achieving this is his own election, though this is artfully presented as a collective achievement.

At the same time, 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.

Obama's views on immigration are only cautiously liberal, not much different from those of John McCain (and George W Bush) before the election campaign started. Both McCain and Obama supported the failed Bill to regularise the

status of a substantial number of the immigrant workforce, a measure filibustered by right-wing Republicans. As in other matters, Obama combines heartwarming words of sympathy with meagre measures to help.

[We] have to recognize that we've got 12 million undocumented workers who are already here. Many of them live their lives alongside other Americans. Their kids are going to school. Many of the kids, in fact, were born in this country and are citizens. And so, it's absolutely vital that we bring those families out of the shadows and that we give them the opportunity to travel a pathway to citizenship. It's not automatic citizenship. It's not amnesty. They would have to pay a fine. They would have to not have engaged in any criminal activity. They would have to learn English. They would have to go to the back of the line so that they did not get citizenship before those persons who had come here legally.<sup>11</sup>

In a nation built through unlimited immigration, this is a mean and restrictive offer, involving fines and going to the back of the queue for citizenship rights. Obama dismissal of immigrant rights is all the worse, when one considers that the labour of the 12 million 'illegal' immigrants has been essential in sustaining the US economy, with the growth in this strata of workers closely related to the upswing in the American economy.

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 falsely accused of the attempted murder of 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 that the verdict had to be respected since the USA is 'a nation of laws'!

Obama has not used his campaign, either during the primaries or since the Convention, to highlight the enormous inequality and state repression to which Black Americans are still subjected. In this context, his mildly progressive comments on the death penalty and the rising prison population are instructive. In his book, *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama said of the death penalty that it 'does little to deter crime.'<sup>12</sup> But he supported capital punishment in cases 'so heinous, so beyond the pale, that the community is justified in expressing the full measure of its outrage by meting out the ultimate punishment'.<sup>13</sup> Yet, the death penalty is massively skewed towards punishing blacks. Only a tiny handful of district attorneys (the prosecuting official and an elective office) in the whole country are black. Human rights organisations from around the world have condemned the US justice system as systemically racist.

Whereas around 13 per cent of US citizens are African Americans and 80 per cent are white, of those executed since the resumption of executions in the early 1980's, 40 percent have been black, Of those on death row, 41.9%, or 1,411 are black and 45.3 per cent, 1,527, are white. More than two million men and women are now behind bars in the United States. Nearly five percent of all black men, compared to 0.6 percent of white men are in jail. Given that conviction for felony involves loss of voting rights, this has further ramifications in the long and ancient process of reducing the number of black Americans able to vote.

The main issues are those of economic disadvantage; the level of black unemployment is always, in boom times as well as slumps, twice the rate for whites. Since the official unemployed statistics are, as in most countries, shamelessly massaged down, it is safer to deduct the number of those employed from the total and consider the rest as unemployed. By this measure, the level of unemployment among African Americans may be as high as 37 per cent.

Despite Obama's claim that his is a 'post-race' candidacy, this has not calmed the fears of the white establishment who have done all they can to make sure he sticks to this agenda. Newsweek warned that, 'the more he supports traditional black issues like affirmative action, the more that will eat into his white base of support'.<sup>14</sup> 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.

A good example is the furore over his Chicago pastor, Jeremiah Wright, who supposedly inspired the young lawyer to become a practising Christian. Membership in Wright's church gave Obama, brought up entirely outside the cultural world of most Black Americans, essential experience to begin his career in politics. Wright taught him the rhetorical



skills of the Black preacher and acquainted him with the story of Black suffering, struggle and redemption that, mixed with the myth of the American dream, has given him such an effective populist appeal. Obama thus obtained a passport to the Black community, plus the religious credentials the hypocritical US media demand from any political figure.

However, in early March, the media began 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', saying they killed far more than Al Qaeda. He powerfully expressed the reality of life for many Black Americans, exposing the racist nature of the criminal justice system and the iniquity of billions being spent on the war in Iraq while millions languished in poverty at home.

At first, Obama, in a powerful speech on 18 March in Philadelphia, forthrightly stated that discrimination in the USA had not gone away and that while he did not agree with many of Wright's statements, he could 'no more disown him than I can disown the black community.' Indeed, 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.'<sup>15</sup>

This was powerful and direct stuff for a mainstream US politician. But his promise that discrimination and inequality would be ended in housing, schools, and jobs was not accompanied by any clear proposals about where the resources were to come from to uproot racial and social injustice. However, when Pastor Wright struck back against the media attacks on him with a series of interviews and press conferences in which he suggested that Obama's distancing was just a political manoeuvre, the latter finally broke with him, condemning his views as 'divisive and destructive...giving comfort to those who prey on hate.' An instructive turn against the man who is supposed to have converted Obama to active Christianity and one of whose sermons, entitled 'the audacity of hope', provided the title for his own book.

In fact, not only is Obama not really a protagonist in the Black American movement or the antiwar movement, he is scarcely partisan in the conflict between liberals and reactionaries. In his book, he distances himself from these conflicts as 'the psychodrama of the Baby Boom generation, a tale rooted in old grudges and revenge plots hatched on a handful of college campuses long ago.' He goes on:

'The victories that the 60s generation brought about, the admission of minorities and women into full citizenship, the strengthening of individual liberties and the healthy willingness to question authority, have made America a far better place for all its citizens. But what has been lost in the process, and has yet to be replaced, are those shared assumptions, that quality of trust and fellow feeling, that bring us together as Americans.'<sup>16</sup>

Someone who cannot see any good reason for being partisan on these issues, who simply sees racist reactionaries and warmongers as 'my fellow Americans,' is not going to be a force for radical change. Whilst Obama certainly saw social deprivation in his three years NGO-type work on Chicago's south side, he saw it not as a political campaigner, not as one born and bred amongst the oppressed, but as an outsider come to do good. Likewise, his years as a lawyer helping civil rights cases, provided him only with a perspective from above and from outside. His co-workers have recalled that his skills were not so much as a tribune, let alone an agitator, but rather as a negotiator and reconciler.

Thus Obama may be the first black candidate from a mainstream party but he is consciously trying to be a 'post-racial' one, proclaiming that the battle for freedom has been won, that the American Dream can be realised at last for black people without confrontation, without mass direct action, let alone violent confrontation. He asserts that his election will definitively prove it. We can predict with certainty that an Obama presidency, once the inevitable and deeply understandable euphoria has worn off, will prove to be deeply disillusioning for black Americans. As Karl Marx said

with regard to religion, revolutionaries seek to dispel illusions not in order that people become cynical and apathetic about politics but so that they may seize hold of their own destiny. As he put it:

‘Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower.’<sup>17</sup>

This is no less true of the flowers of Obama’s rhetoric. That is why revolutionaries have to be there, in the front ranks of the battles against racism, inequality and exploitation to ensure that when it is proven, that ‘no saviours from on high deliver’, a new revived movement of black Americans arises, one integrally linked to the movement of Latino and white workers. This is an indispensable foundation for a new working class party in the USA, and a revolutionary one at that.

### **Iraq, Afghanistan and the War on Terror**

One of the key issues in the debates between Clinton and Obama, and now between Obama and McCain, is the invasion and occupation of Iraq, as a touchstone of their supposedly different approaches to foreign policy. In 2002, when Hilary Clinton famously voted in favour of the Iraq war, Obama, then a member in the Illinois state senate, spoke out against it. But Obama has since stated in interviews that, if he had seen US intelligence reports, he might have thought differently concerning the invasion. This is curious indeed, given the lack of evidence for the ‘weapons of mass destruction’ or the existence of any links between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein’s regime. But, in any case, it hardly shows intransigent opposition to the war on terror. Likewise, although he has often talked about the need to withdraw from Iraq, his timetable remained completely vague until the US military themselves agreed to something close to his eventual target of 15 months after assuming power, that is, mid-2010, at the earliest.

Moreover, since the November 2006 Congressional elections, the Democrats have controlled both Houses but have signally broken their promises, voting at least three times for funding requests from the White House to continue the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, and dropping a deadline for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq under Bush’s threat of a veto – and Obama has consistently voted with them. The Democrats and Obama are united on other key points: ‘to keep the ‘military option’ open for an attack on Iran, whilst engaging in ‘tough diplomacy’ (otherwise known as threats)

‘to maintain non-combat troops and bases in Iraq in order to fight ‘terrorism’

‘to transfer troops from Iraq (the ‘wrong war’ in Obama’s words) to fight in Afghanistan

‘to vote for an only mildly amended renewal of the Patriot Act that has slashed civil liberties and enabled repression of those opposing the war

Overall, Obama’s voting record on the war on terror, since he joined the Senate in 2004, is exactly the same as Clinton’s.<sup>18</sup> Whilst he has, like Clinton (and John McCain before the election started) come out in favour of closing the Guantanamo Bay concentration camp, he actually voted against the only two bills to come before Congress that would have done this. His acceptance speech in Colorado was full of evasions on the Bush-Cheney war:

‘I will end this war in Iraq responsibly, and finish the fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. I will rebuild our military to meet future conflicts. But I will also renew the tough, direct diplomacy tha can prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons and curb Russian aggression.’<sup>19</sup>

During his recent tour of the Middle East, he made it clear that his plans to bring troops home from Iraq were linked to sending over 10,000 troops to Afghanistan. He has promised to escalate the Afghanistan war by using military force to go after terrorists in Pakistan, even without the Pakistan government’s permission, actually a ‘harder’ verbal position than the Bush administration, though they are in the process of implementing it. He has extended the same type of sentiment to the recent events in Eastern Europe, agreeing with Bush and McCain that action should be taken in retribution against Russia for ‘invading Georgia’, blithely ignoring the fact that the US client state had actually done the invading first. Obama also declared that he supports the so-called ‘missile shield’, ‘as long as it does not threaten Russia’.

In a deal signed by Bush with the Polish government on August 4, American interceptor missiles are to be stationed in Poland with radar tracking stations there and in the Czech Republic. The excuse, ridiculous in its transparency, is that this is to intercept Iranian nuclear missiles heading for the USA, that is, massive intercontinental ballistic missiles that nobody thinks the Iranians are remotely able to manufacture, even if they had the nuclear warheads to arm them. The Russians clearly realise that the interceptor system is aimed at weakening, if not negating, their own nuclear deterrent.

On the 2008 anniversary of 9/11, Obama made an even more ominous statement. 'If we are going into war, then all of us go, not just some' and he added that, as president, he would demand that the American people recognise an 'obligation' for military service. When Obama was asked, 'What would you do to counter the problem of soldiers not re-enlisting?' He replied, 'I would increase the size of the military.'<sup>20</sup>

Fundamentally Obama, like all the Democrats, with the possible exception of a maverick social democrat like Denis Kucinich, member of the House of Representatives for Ohio, is totally loyal to the international aims of US imperialism: maintaining its economic and military supremacy in the strategic energy regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. He has no principled opposition to the War on Terror, either on moral or political grounds, indeed, he accepts the rhetoric that America originally invaded to 'spread democracy' simply believing that the Iraq war has been a 'strategic blunder.'

In short, the idea that Obama is in any sense whatsoever a peace candidate, that he can be relied upon to oppose future wars by the United States, is quite simply a delusion. Neither is it true that a Democrat president could be better relied on to oppose such wars. Indeed, many have recalled that nearly all of America's major wars (First and Second World Wars, Korean War, Vietnam War) were launched by Democratic Presidents.

Nonetheless, United for Peace and Justice, the largest US antiwar coalition, has focused its hopes on Obama. Many antiwar militants believe that funding, campaigning and voting for the Democrats is the way forward or, at least, that they are a 'lesser evil' to the Republicans. That depends whether you think that Lyndon B. Johnson's war in Vietnam was a lesser evil than that of Richard M. Nixon. Or on whether you think it is a lesser evil to be spin-doctored into wars in the name of defending human rights (Clinton) than to be scared into the 'war on terror' for the interests of big Oil (Bush). After all, it was Clinton's UN sanctions and bombing of Iraq, in which nearly a million Iraqis died, which prepared the way for Bush's invasion in 2003.

Perhaps the most alarming result of Obama's campaign, and the approach of the presidential elections, has been the marked lowering of the scale of activity by the anti-war movement. No serious mass mobilisations have occurred since early 2007. If Obama is elected, quite as much as if McCain were to win, this movement will have to rebuild and remobilise its forces on a massive scale. Above all, it urgently needs to learn a hard lesson; diverting mass direct action into electioneering to get Democrats into the White House or Capitol Hill is a fatal strategy for the anti-war and anti-imperialist forces. Here, as on the other fronts, the lesson is simple: break from the Democrats, the second party of US imperialism.

### **Israel and US imperialism**

Obama claims he was a radical in the 1980s but soon got over it and learned to love America, capitalism, imperialism and all:

'My friends and I stopped thinking and slipped into cant: the point at which the denunciations of capitalism or American imperialism came too easily,,, I would find myself in the curious position of defending aspects of Reagan's worldview,,, I couldn't be persuaded that U.S. multinationals and international terms of trade were single-handedly responsible for poverty around the world.'<sup>21</sup>

Nor has his loyalty wavered since. It is clear that, with the possible exception of a partial and tardy troop withdrawal from Iraq, a President Obama will not be pulling back the empire's legions from the far-flung outposts. He insists:

'We need to maintain a strategic force posture that allows us to manage threats posed by rogue nations like North

Korea and Iran, and to meet the challenges presented by potential rivals like China?<sup>22</sup>

If this is an accurate presentation of his views, then Obama is scarcely a principled liberal, let alone a radical. This shows up clearly enough wherever the interests of US imperialism and its allies, like Israel, are at stake around the world. Of course, he realises, as do fierce old imperialist warriors like Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, that Bush's foreign policy has been a disaster for the US system of alliances around the globe.

He veers and tacks depending where the pressure is applied to him. When seeking a radical image, in his first years in politics, he voiced sympathies for the plight of the Palestinians. But, since winning the Democratic nomination, Obama has come under increasing fire from the Republicans and the right wing press for being 'soft' on the Middle East and, now, Russia, a job made easier by misleading reports about the success of the 'surge', the truth of which the Democrats do not try to challenge.

Clinton or any other Democrat nominee would, of course, have had to deal with such attacks, too. But Obama, with his earlier anti-war rhetoric, is an easy target for people like the white supremacist Jerome Corsi (author of *Obama Nation: Leftist Politics and the Cult of Personality*) who variously accuses him of being an African-Islamic radical, a drug abuser, a Communist, anti-war, anti-nuclear and in favour of reducing the size of the army and opening up America and Israel to attack.

Rather than standing firm and exposing these smear campaigns for what they are, Obama's response has been to work overtime to reassure the US capitalists and state, the financial and military establishment, that he is a safe pair of hands to look after their interests in an increasingly unstable world.

Proving his loyalty to Israel was top of the list. Many black people in the USA see through Israel's rhetoric about having to 'defend itself' from the resistance of the occupied Palestinians as language typical of racist colonists. So Obama had to prove that Israel would continue to get unconditional support if he reaches the White House. In his very first policy speech after winning the nomination, he spoke out loudly and unambiguously in support of Israel and threatened to attack Iran.

The Zionists gave Obama his cue, launching a huge military training exercise in early June with over 100 fighter and bomber planes carrying out manoeuvres over the Mediterranean and Greece. This show of strength was clearly aimed as a warning to Iran of the scale of military power that could soon be levelled against it, with one US official admitting it was 'a rehearsal for a potential bombing attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.'

Of course, many experts have stated that Iran is nowhere near developing a nuclear weapon and it is not even clear that they want to. However Obama ignored this and echoed the corporate media's 'facts' when he said 'there is no doubt that Iran poses an extraordinary threat to Israel and Israel is always justified in making decisions that will provide for its security'.

This follows hot on the heels of a speech to the pro-Zionist lobbying group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in which Obama reaffirmed his support for the US imperialist project and its Israeli puppet. He declared that US support for Israel was 'unbreakable today, unbreakable tomorrow, unbreakable forever' and said he spoke as a 'true friend' of Israel.

In a provocative statement that exposed his total capitulation to the key demands of Israel he added, 'any agreement with the Palestinian people must preserve Israel's identity as a Jewish state, with secure, recognised and defensible borders. Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided.'

What does this mean for Obama's foreign policy and his position on Israel's continued occupation and oppression of the Palestinians? Basically, it is a continuation of US policy to date. He has pledged to continue funding Israel to the tune of \$30 billion over the next 10 years and said that Israel's security was 'sacrosanct' and 'non-negotiable'.

For the Palestinians, Obama's announcements destroy any hope that he could help force a just solution to their plight.

Obama's declared support for a 'two-state solution' is, in reality, no advance over the existing position of the Bush administration. It is simply support for Israel's continued oppression of the Palestinians. The Zionist state will only allow the Palestinian National Authority to exist if it remains confined in a network of isolated enclaves with all transport and trade routes controlled by Israel and its Army, the misnamed Israeli Defence Force.

The reality is that, despite the vast scale of illusions that people certainly have in Obama, his open support for Israel makes him an enemy of consistent anti-racists, of anyone who opposes the oppression of the Palestinians and of the millions who resist US imperialism's occupations and wars.

Obama says he is willing to enter into talks with Iran using 'tough and principled diplomacy'. Yet, at the same time, he has said he will do 'everything in my power' to prevent Iran getting a nuclear weapon. The first comment is a sop to the illusions in him held by millions of progressive workers and youth, that he will negotiate with these regimes and not drag America into another bloody and fruitless war of conquest. The second comment is reassurance to his capitalist backers that he will do everything to carry out their wishes and ensure America's continued dominance of the Middle East. It is a clear sign that Obama is willing to be a nuclear hawk if the US establishment demands it.

### **Israel and US imperialism**

Obama claims he was a radical in the 1980s but soon got over it and learned to love America, capitalism, imperialism and all:

'My friends and I stopped thinking and slipped into cant: the point at which the denunciations of capitalism or American imperialism came too easily,, I would find myself in the curious position of defending aspects of Reagan's worldview,, I couldn't be persuaded that U.S. multinationals and international terms of trade were single-handedly responsible for poverty around the world.'<sup>21</sup>

Nor has his loyalty wavered since. It is clear that, with the possible exception of a partial and tardy troop withdrawal from Iraq, a President Obama will not be pulling back the empire's legions from the far-flung outposts. He insists:

'We need to maintain a strategic force posture that allows us to manage threats posed by rogue nations like North Korea and Iran, and to meet the challenges presented by potential rivals like China.'<sup>22</sup>

If this is an accurate presentation of his views, then Obama is scarcely a principled liberal, let alone a radical. This shows up clearly enough wherever the interests of US imperialism and its allies, like Israel, are at stake around the world. Of course, he realises, as do fierce old imperialist warriors like Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, that Bush's foreign policy has been a disaster for the US system of alliances around the globe.

He veers and tacks depending where the pressure is applied to him. When seeking a radical image, in his first years in politics, he voiced sympathies for the plight of the Palestinians. But, since winning the Democratic nomination, Obama has come under increasing fire from the Republicans and the right wing press for being 'soft' on the Middle East and, now, Russia, a job made easier by misleading reports about the success of the 'surge', the truth of which the Democrats do not try to challenge.

Clinton or any other Democrat nominee would, of course, have had to deal with such attacks, too. But Obama, with his earlier anti-war rhetoric, is an easy target for people like the white supremacist Jerome Corsi (author of *Obama Nation: Leftist Politics and the Cult of Personality*) who variously accuses him of being an African-Islamic radical, a drug abuser, a Communist, anti-war, anti-nuclear and in favour of reducing the size of the army and opening up America and Israel to attack.

Rather than standing firm and exposing these smear campaigns for what they are, Obama's response has been to work overtime to reassure the US capitalists and state, the financial and military establishment, that he is a safe pair of hands to look after their interests in an increasingly unstable world.

Proving his loyalty to Israel was top of the list. Many black people in the USA see through Israel's rhetoric about

having to 'defend itself' from the resistance of the occupied Palestinians as language typical of racist colonists. So Obama had to prove that Israel would continue to get unconditional support if he reaches the White House. In his very first policy speech after winning the nomination, he spoke out loudly and unambiguously in support of Israel and threatened to attack Iran.

The Zionists gave Obama his cue, launching a huge military training exercise in early June with over 100 fighter and bomber planes carrying out manoeuvres over the Mediterranean and Greece. This show of strength was clearly aimed as a warning to Iran of the scale of military power that could soon be levelled against it, with one US official admitting it was 'a rehearsal for a potential bombing attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.'

Of course, many experts have stated that Iran is nowhere near developing a nuclear weapon and it is not even clear that they want to. However Obama ignored this and echoed the corporate media's 'facts' when he said 'there is no doubt that Iran poses an extraordinary threat to Israel and Israel is always justified in making decisions that will provide for its security'.

This follows hot on the heels of a speech to the pro-Zionist lobbying group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in which Obama reaffirmed his support for the US imperialist project and its Israeli puppet. He declared that US support for Israel was 'unbreakable today, unbreakable tomorrow, unbreakable forever' and said he spoke as a 'true friend' of Israel.

In a provocative statement that exposed his total capitulation to the key demands of Israel he added, 'any agreement with the Palestinian people must preserve Israel's identity as a Jewish state, with secure, recognised and defensible borders. Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided.'

What does this mean for Obama's foreign policy and his position on Israel's continued occupation and oppression of the Palestinians? Basically, it is a continuation of US policy to date. He has pledged to continue funding Israel to the tune of \$30 billion over the next 10 years and said that Israel's security was 'sacrosanct' and 'non-negotiable'.

For the Palestinians, Obama's announcements destroy any hope that he could help force a just solution to their plight. Obama's declared support for a 'two-state solution' is, in reality, no advance over the existing position of the Bush administration. It is simply support for Israel's continued oppression of the Palestinians. The Zionist state will only allow the Palestinian National Authority to exist if it remains confined in a network of isolated enclaves with all transport and trade routes controlled by Israel and its Army, the misnamed Israeli Defence Force.

The reality is that, despite the vast scale of illusions that people certainly have in Obama, his open support for Israel makes him an enemy of consistent anti-racists, of anyone who opposes the oppression of the Palestinians and of the millions who resist US imperialism's occupations and wars.

Obama says he is willing to enter into talks with Iran using 'tough and principled diplomacy'. Yet, at the same time, he has said he will do 'everything in my power' to prevent Iran getting a nuclear weapon. The first comment is a sop to the illusions in him held by millions of progressive workers and youth, that he will negotiate with these regimes and not drag America into another bloody and fruitless war of conquest. The second comment is reassurance to his capitalist backers that he will do everything to carry out their wishes and ensure America's continued dominance of the Middle East. It is a clear sign that Obama is willing to be a nuclear hawk if the US establishment demands it.

### **Conclusion: What socialists should do about the Obama phenomenon**

The Democrats are not, as we have seen, any real alternative for the US working class, for the Black and Latino population of the inner cities, or for youth campaigning against war and for the restoration of human rights. They are simply a second capitalist party that is no less controlled and run by corporate interests than the Republicans. Indeed, their purpose is always to renew illusions in a capitalist America whenever experience of a Republican administration has begun to alienate significant sectors of the population from the system.

The long-standing identification of the majority of US workers with the Democrats, via their trade unions, and via

organisations of the black community like the NAACP, is a shackle that must be broken if workers are not to witness another neoliberal, imperialist Democratic presidency like that of Bill Clinton in the 1990's, this time taking place against the backdrop of a deepening economic recession.

The key for the labour movement, and all the movements of the racially oppressed, the super exploited and the jobless poor, is to sever their ties to the Democrats. US workers need to break from the Democrats and form a workers' party that can fight against any cuts to jobs or pay in the coming recession, against the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, against racism and discrimination against Black people and Latinos.

Whilst expressing not the slightest political confidence in Obama, such a party would recognise that millions have placed their trust in him and, should he and the Democrats come to power, call for organised mass mobilisations to force him to take action, to demand that his vague promises are made concrete.

We should demand that Obama and the Democrat majority in congress repeal the Taft-Hartley Act and work for the repeal of all federal and State laws standing in the way of mass unionisation of the millions of workers that say they want to join a union. Obama should be made to take federal action against all states or employers that try to intimidate union organisers and workers.

We should demand a health service for all, free at the point of use and paid for from the profits of the corporations, first among them Big Pharma, and from massive taxation of the super rich.

We should demand that Obama gives assurance to all homeowners with mortgage problems that they will not be turned out of their homes. Homes that have been repossessed, or are on the verge of repossession by the nationalised mortgage companies Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae, should be turned into social housing for their inhabitants at cheap rents.

Mumia Abu Jamal should immediately receive a presidential pardon as well as the opportunity to expose his frame up by a public enquiry. The death penalty should be abolished, all black and ethnic minority prisoners, should have their cases reviewed [realistic?! ?A public enquiry into the racist police, judicial and penal systems leading inevitably to the pardon and release of thousands of wrongly imprisoned or sentenced black and ethnic minority prisoners??.]. The gross racial imbalance of the judiciary, the district attorneys and the jury system should be remedied by the speediest action, and ultimately by changing the law to ensure their election rather than appointment.

American troops should be brought back immediately not only from Iraq but from Afghanistan. Support for Colombia's death squad regime should be ended, as should the 46 year blockade of Cuba and the role of US embassies in fomenting coups, most recently in Venezuela and Bolivia. The over 500 detainees remaining in Guantanamo Bay should be released and the Patriot Act should be repealed in its entirety.

In the context of the deepening recession, no one should suffer unemployment or have their real wages, pensions or benefits slashed as a consequence of an outmoded capitalism. We should demand that Obama completes the nationalisation of the banks, guarantees only small-to-medium savings and pension funds, and taxes the fortunes and property of the super-rich at ninety per cent.

We should demand he introduces a sliding scale of wages and hours so that no one sees their wages eaten away by inflation or is dismissed for 'lack of work.' The unemployed should be taken on at full trade union rates in a huge programme of socially valuable public works; building and equipping schools, hospitals and clinics, high quality, publicly owned housing, public transport systems, sustainable power generation and protection systems against the effects of climate change.

Without such measures, all talk of a New Deal, all flattering parallels with Roosevelt's 1930s reforms, are vcompletely wide of the mark.

For the unions and the movements of the oppressed communities and antiwar campaigns to mobilise around such a series of immediate demands on a president Obama would be a serious step forward. Of course, socialists should spread

no illusions that he would realise any them, although a massive movement might force concessions. Any such 'gifts' should, as the phrase goes, be received on the points of our spears, that is, accepted as a first instalment without demobilising our forces.

In reality, through such struggles, it will become clear that the working class, the oppressed and the youth need their own party, not the Democrats and Obama. Organised US labour, at least until the most recent moves to recruit immigrant workers, has restricted itself far too exclusively to the labour aristocracy, the skilled workers and semi-professionals, the people whom Obama and the Clintons refer to as 'the middle class.' A massive campaign by organised labour and the oppressed under Obama could not only recreate a mass trade union movement, but also politicise the labour movement itself, establishing class independence from all capitalist parties. It could lead swiftly to the creation of a mass Labour Party.

From the outset, the process of creating a workers' party in the United States must be a thoroughly open and democratic one, it must be taken to the masses of workers, unionised and non-unionised, employed and unemployed and above all to the black and Latino workers, and to the poorest white workers. Thus, and thus only, can the unity of the working class be made unbreakable and the scourge of racism be banished.

Such a party is an urgent necessity as both Republicans and Democrats will make the workers pay for the recession through lay-offs, wage cuts, slashing welfare, poorer health and more wars in which working class men and women will be killed. The campaign for such a party must go among the working classes, the unions, the unorganised, migrant workers, black and Latino communities to offer a break from the bosses' parties and real 'change'.

But such a party must not end up aping the reformist Labour, Social Democrat or Socialist parties of Europe that are today implementing cuts and neo-liberal policies. Any US reformist party would soon be cajoled and coerced by Wall Street and big business into attacking the working class and migrants, just as the British Labour Party is doing.

We in the League for a Fifth International believe that such a party must be a revolutionary party, committed to the overthrow of capitalism and private property. The US working class and its allies live and struggle in the most powerful economy on the planet, we have every confidence that they can deal capitalism the deathblow it so richly deserves and open the road to socialism in the USA and the world.

## ENDNOTES

1 'Biden's description of Obama draws scrutiny', 9 February 2007, CNN.com

2 'Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Super Tuesday' 5 February 2008, [www.barackobama.com](http://www.barackobama.com) [1]

3 Obama: Bailout May Delay Spending Programs?, 23 September 2008, CNBC.com

4 [http://econclubny.org/files/Transcript\\_Volcker\\_April\\_2008.pdf#PDF](http://econclubny.org/files/Transcript_Volcker_April_2008.pdf#PDF) [2]

5 'Obama Outlines Plan to Reform Washington's Greed and Excesses', 9 September 2008, NewsAloud.Com

6 Obama: on Renewing the American economy?, 27 March 2008, Nytimes.com

7 'Can Obama Reform Healthcare?' 8 October 2008 news.yahoo.com

8 'Who Do We Vote For This Time Around? A Letter from Michael Moore?', 2 January 2008, MichaelMoore.com

9 Obamas rhetoric captures the mood of the nation, Andrew Gimson, Daily Telegraph Jan 13 2008 The Independent February 16 2008

10 CNN LARRY KING LIVE Interview With Barack Obama Aired October 19, 2006 ? 21:00 CNN transcripts: <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0610/19/lkl.01.html> [3]

11 'Larry King Live,' March 24, 2007

12 Audacity of Hope, as quoted in Counterpunch 4/5 November 2006 <http://www.counterpunch.org/sustar11042006.html> [4]

13 Obama, The Audacity of Hope

14 'Obama's Postracial Test?', 27 March 2008, Newsweek

15 'Obama Race Speech: Full Text?', 18 March 2008, HuffingtonPost.com

16 Audacity of Hope, as quoted in 'Obama's Foursquare Politics, With a Dab of Dijon' 17 October 2006, Nytimes.com



17 Karl Marx, Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1843)

18 [www.factcheck.org](http://www.factcheck.org) [5]

19 29 August 2008, NECN.com

20 'Obama calls for US military mobilisation?', 13 September 2008, wsws.org

21 Audacity of Hope, as quoted in Counterpunch 4/5 November 2006

<http://www.counterpunch.org/sustar11042006.html> [4]

22 ibid

---

**Source URL:** <https://fifthinternational.org/content/will-barack-obama-bring-new-deal-american-workers>

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.barackobama.com>

[2] [http://econclubny.org/files/Transcript\\_Volcker\\_April\\_2008.pdf#PDF](http://econclubny.org/files/Transcript_Volcker_April_2008.pdf#PDF)

[3] <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0610/19/kl.01.html>

[4] <http://www.counterpunch.org/sustar11042006.html>

[5] <http://www.factcheck.org>