

Obama, The Crisis & The Movements

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The election of Barack Obama as president of the United States and his taking office on January 6 established a new political administration in Washington just as a financial crisis threatened to bring the U.S. economy to a halt. We ask here:

What has Obama done in his first months in office?

What do the economic and political conditions and Obama's response mean for the labor and social movements in this country?

What should Solidarity, other socialists, and labor and movement activists throughout the country be doing to respond to the crisis?

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1. The Obama Election

Introduction: The Promise of Hope and Change

Barack Obama rode an wave of optimism to the White House in the November 2008 elections. Voters overwhelmingly rejected John McCain, whom they saw as likely to continue the policies of George Bush's disastrous presidency. Worried about the worsening economic situation, and disgusted by the Bush gang's imperial adventures and assorted crimes, Americans voted for change. The first African American to be elected president, Obama represented a sea change in American politics and society. His campaign was propelled by organized groups from all social classes: from financiers and corporate attorneys to labor unions and poor peoples' organizations. The Black vote was his, as was a large majority of the Latino vote. The election seemed a stunning victory for a young, charismatic, liberal, Black candidate.

While the Obama's administration has failed to make good on the American people's hope for change

in either domestic or foreign policy, most people do not at this point blame the administration, tending instead to put responsibility for the situation on the previous administration of George W. Bush. With strong support from its liberal institutional base, the Obama administration is working closely and cautiously with the banks and corporations to resolve the current economic crisis on the basis of sacrifices of taxpayers and working people. The public, however, by and large tends to exculpate the president from responsibility or is inclined to blame his advisors for the failure to solve problems as they had expected. The new administration pursues policies which benefit banks, corporations and the wealthy, but so far it has come under fire only from the rightwing core of a largely disoriented and debilitated Republican party. The public has not yet recognized that the Obama presidency pursues policies invidious to the interests of the majority.

The Obama Political “Movement”

The public’s confidence in Obama has in large measure to do with the campaign and the forces assembled around Obama to carry it out. At the level of party politics, Obama’s victory represented something novel: the first step in the creation of a new hegemonic political bloc. Obama’s campaign represented the culmination of a long period of Democratic Party transformation that began in the 1960s and 1970s, but to understand this we have to look back to the 1930s and 1940s and to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal Coalition. The New Deal Coalition brought together consumer capital goods, labor unions (both the AFL and the then new CIO), the white racist machine of the Solid South, the politically corrupt big-city machines (such as Chicago), and after 1936 African American voters.

By the 1960s, the New Deal Coalition began to break down. With the growing role of TV, the Democratic big city machines declined in importance, and by the 1970s the Democrats had lost the Solid South because of their support—reluctant and half-hearted as it was—for the civil rights movements. During the 1980s, the labor unions began to decline rapidly in membership, losing some of their weight in the Democratic Party. All of these changes left capital—banks and corporations—in charge of the Democrats, but also left the Democrats with a fractured social base, as many of their white male supporters leaked away to the Republicans. The New Deal Coalition was dead and the Democratic Party would have to be rebuilt on some other basis to survive.

Obama created a new coalition. His campaign was backed by high finance—banks, insurance companies, and the mortgage industry—by communications and electronics, and by many wealthy corporate board members and executives, as well as professionals, particularly lawyers. At the same time, Obama had support from both the AFL-CIO and Change to Win, as well as of the National Organization for Women and while many people of color organizations often could not endorse Obama because of their not-for-profit legal status, he had their tacit backing. Obama’s campaign appears to be a classical cross-class Democratic Party phenomenon, and in some respects it was, but it also had a new method and style.

Electronic Populism

Obama and his advisor David Axelrod, however, created a political organization that did not entirely rely upon the Democratic Party or its constituent organizations. Using electronic communications and social media, Obama created his own independent organization of supporters, raising money, organizing very large and in some cases enormous rallies, and building an organizational infrastructure of personal supporters. Through this organization Obama raised far more money from individual contributors than did his rivals. While corporations also provided much of the money, the organizations of labor, women and people of color provided the phone bankers, door-knockers, and GOTV workers.

In many areas, the Obama campaign took on something of the look and feel of a social movement: people took to the streets with Obama signs, the candidate was greeted with massive rallies, the crowds were often made up of union members, anti-war activists, and environmentalists. For some they saw their movement flowing into the Obama campaign, for others the Obama campaign was their first and only experience with anything like a movement. The exuberance of the Obama crowds was contagious, and those who saw the candidate and heard his message often felt that the country was on the verge of a fundamental shift not only in politics but also in culture. The campaign revitalized the Democratic Party and created a whole new generation of Democratic party activists and voters.

Not only did Obama build such an organization, but he also has not disbanded it following his election, though at the same time neither has he activated it on any large scale. The Obama campaign organization could be used as a potential social support for his presidency. While waiting to assume his new role and during his first days in office he called upon his electronically connected supporters to meet and discuss some of his proposals, such as health care. The continued existence of these networks suggests that he may at some point call them to action: not only for electoral campaigns, but also to mobilize them in support of his policies as they come before Congress. He might even mobilize them for social action—though that seems doubtful. So far, however, the networks of labor and students activists have been allowed or even encouraged to wither away, and it seems will only be revived with the next election.

The electorate voted its hopes: a return to economic prosperity and an end to the wars in the Middle East. Unions had their own wish list, topped by the Employee Free Choice Act and health care reform, but also including a new immigration law. Women wanted to protect the right to choose abortion. Environmental groups wanted a policy to confront global warming. Everyone had hope. The optimism generated by the Obama campaign, however, did not last long, as between November and the inauguration, the collapse of the financial institutions intensified. When Obama took office on January 20, this represented not only the arrival of a new political administration but also the beginning of a world financial crisis and the opening of a new economic period.

A New American Politics? Or a Return to the Clinton Years

Obama's election appeared to represent the emergence of a new coalition (dominated by high finance) and his campaign used new technologies and a new style. The challenges of the economic crisis also present him with new possibilities. Still, it is not yet clear that the Obama administration really represents a new politics, rather than simply a return to the policies of the Clinton years. In many ways, the administration of Bill Clinton anticipated the approach of Obama: a foreign policy operating through the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and a domestic policy based upon a preference for market approaches, corporate interests, and public-private partnerships. What appears clear now is that the George W. Bush administration and its neo-conservative ("neo-con") policies represented a rightwing aberration from politics as usual. The neo-liberal—that is pro-market and pro-corporation—policies that first emerged under Jimmy Carter and expanded under Ronald Reagan, were continued by George H.W. Bush and then under Clinton. George W. Bush represented something different.

The Bush presidency, guided by Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz, and strongly influenced by the Evangelical wing of the Republican Party, envisioned the reestablishment of the United States as the uncontested world superpower through militarism, foreign conquest, and state-building. At the same time it pushed even more conservative pro-market and pro-corporate policies, ignored environmental issues, and promoted a rightwing social agenda that promoted Christianity and opposed abortion and gay rights. With both its foreign and economic policy having proven disastrous, the Bush administration had used up its political capital. The country's financial and

corporate elite recognized that the Republicans had been—for the time being—used up, and it was time to turn their support to the Democrats if the United States was going to preserve its dominant role in the world and save the capitalist economy.

Just at that moment, an ambitious and talented young Black politician from Chicago emerged on the scene, and through a process of political competition and corporate selection emerged as the candidate of the corporate elite. The corporate elite—particularly the financial and computer sectors—backed Obama and helped him to capture the discontent of voters tired of the wars and afraid of the economic collapse. Serendipity brought together corporate interests, the Democratic Party, Obama, liberals and progressives, and disgruntled voters in such a way as to give us our first Black president. Obama, with his brilliant oratory and his considerable charm, has become the expression of the interests of American capitalism and its imperial ambitions.

While Obama, his coalition, and his campaign may be new, there is nothing new about the role of the Democratic Party. The Republican and Democratic parties represent two political alternatives by which the financial and corporate elite, the leaders of the capitalist class, shape politics and policies. The parties are fraternal - not identical - twins. The Republicans' historic role was that of "the party of big business," representing more laissez-faire economic policies, while the Democrats' were "the party of the working people," representing Keynesianism, and social welfare. This has all now become blurred by the common commitment of both Republicans and Democrats to neo-liberal policies throughout the last twenty-five years, a one-side class war by both parties and big business against working people and the poor. While the differences have blurred, the parties' functions remain distinct.

The function of the Democratic Party is to contain and control opposition to the symptoms of capitalism that arise from the experience of working people. Since the rise of modern capitalism, the Democrats have either crushed or coopted every social and political movement that arose to challenge capitalism from the left or from below. Whether we talk about the absorption of the Populists in the 1890s, the swallowing of the Socialists and the cooptation of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) unions in the 1930s, the cooptation of the civil rights, anti-war movements, and women's movement of the 1970s, the Democratic Party has absorbed opposition forces which, had they become independent, might have challenged U.S. capitalism and imperialism. Jesse Jackson's "Rainbow Coalition" of 1988 - which adopted a quite liberal platform - in the end mainly kept opposition in the party. Jackson argued in a speech at the Democratic Party Convention that "it takes two wings to fly." Clinton, with his more moderate policies, used a populist style to win votes, even as the corporations and his government unleashed a one-side class war against working people. With people turning against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and with the economy in crisis, the corporate elites turned once again to the Democrats, and the Democrats found the best possible person to contain the actual and potential opposition in Obama.

Whether Obama's policies represent something fundamentally new remains to be seen. Certainly, the economic crisis has forced Obama to take actions—such as the nationalization of banks and corporations—never dreamed up by Clinton. Nevertheless, the similarities of their positions on major issues such as health care, education, and foreign policy are becoming increasingly clear. We turn now to an analysis of both the situation and the policies.

2. The Economic Crisis & The Crisis of Hegemony

The Economic Crisis

The new period began with the financial crisis. The seriousness of the crisis became clear to all as

several major banks and other financial institutions failed—Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, AIG, Citibank, etc.—corporations began to go bankrupt, and plants shuttered operations while retail chains closed their stores, all on a scale not seen for decades. In the United States, the center of the storm, no sector of the economy has been spared. What began in the housing construction, real estate, and mortgages soon spread to finance and quickly jumped to the auto industry, and from there to the economy as a whole. The collapse of General Motors and Chrysler represents the most dramatic and significant industrial restructuring in the modern history of the United States.

In the period leading up to Obama's presidency and then on into his first months in office more jobs were lost than in any similar period since October 1949. At the end of January alone, widely disparate corporations—Citigroup, Caterpillar, Harley-Davidson, Home Depot, General Electric and Nokia, Sprint Nextel, Texas Instruments, and even Microsoft—announced layoffs amounting to 75,000 jobs. Boeing and IBM also cut their workforces. In February, the 500 largest U.S. corporations laid off 123,604 people at JP Morgan, Dow Chemical, Corning, Micron Technology, Avon, U.S. Steel, Best Buy, Chevron, Delta, Goodyear, General Motors, Delphi, John Controls, Smithfield, Wal-Mart, United Technologies, W.W. Grainger, Caterpillar, U.S. Airways, Nike, General Electric, and Macy's. All sectors of the economy have been caught up in the crisis.[8] General Motors, for decades a linch-pin of U.S. industry, has gone bankrupt.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has reported that the unemployment rate has risen to the highest rate in over 25 years. Moreover, the economic crisis has hit hardest those who already had the least: the elderly, children, and African Americans, though white male workers have also been hit harder than usual in this recession. With unemployment officially at 9.4 percent (and the "real" jobless rate at 16.4%) for the entire population in May, African American unemployment was at an official 14.9 percent, with 12.7 percent of Latinos and 22.7 percent of teenagers unemployed. Many U.S. cities now have official unemployment rates of between 10 and 20 percent for all workers, according to a report by the US Labor Department of 372 metropolitan areas.

The economic crisis and unemployment mean a rise in poverty for the population. Already in 2006, 18 percent of all children lived in poverty, and the recession is increasing those numbers. Similarly 12.6 percent of the country's total population and 25 percent of all African Americans lived in poverty in 2007, numbers which are now rising dramatically. The Obama administration came to office facing the worst global economic crisis since the Great Depression.

A World Economic Crisis

The economic crisis that began in the U.S. has been rapidly communicated to the rest of the world. Those countries that believed that they were insulated from the financial crisis have found that if the banks did not draw them down into a whirlpool, then they have lost the market for their products, and jobs for their migrant labor forces. Production, sales, employment, and profits are all falling at a dizzying rate everywhere. Japan's economy soon reacted much like that of the U.S.: Toyota Motor Co., Nippon Steel, and Panasonic laid off thousands. In Europe, by April 2009 the unemployment rate of the 16 euro currency countries had reached 9.2 percent; while for all 27 members of the European Union it climbed to 8.6 percent.

The crisis became international. The International Monetary Fund's January 28, 2009 news release, "World Growth Grinds to Virtual Halt, IMF Urges Decisive Global Policy Response," predicted that the U.S. economy would not grow this year, but rather shrink by 1.6 percent and that global economic growth would be a mere 0.5 percent, the worst rate of economic expansion in 60 years. [10] This overly optimistic projection will have to be revised downward. [11] Since then Japan's industrial production fell by 10 percent in January and the U.S. economy shrank by 6.2 in the fourth quarter. Even the Indian economy, expected to do better than most found its growth rate reduced to 5.3 percent from the previous year's 8.9 percent.

The ILO issued a report in January that predicted that global unemployment in 2009 could increase over that of 2007 by a range of 18 million to 30 million workers, and more than 50 million if the situation continues to deteriorate. At the same time some 200 million workers, mostly in developing economies, could be pushed into extreme poverty. ILO Director-General Juan Somavia said that “the number of working poor living on less than a dollar a day could rise by some 40 million — and those at 2 dollars a day by more than 100 million.” China alone could lose 50 million jobs just among its internal migrant workers.

At this time (June 2009) it is not clear whether this Great Recession might become a second Great Depression, something which remains quite possible. What is clear, however, is that the process of capitalist crisis which opened in the late-1960s continues to move on, with each new economic crisis—1974-75, 1980-82, 1990-91, 1992, and now 2008-09—the standard of living for workers has been ratcheted down. We may not experience a Great Depression on the 1929-1939 scale, but the seriousness of this crisis is not to be minimized and if it continues will lead to a working class response.

U.S. Hegemony Tested

While Obama faces the economic crisis both domestically and internationally, he also finds the United States tested in its role as “leader of the free world.” Though the United States retains its role as the dominant military power, its slipping economic position means that it can no longer so easily assert its will over all the other major powers. Japan and Germany remain major competitors, while China will soon overtake Japan as the second largest economy. While most other nations will remain stagnant or contract during the crisis, China is expected to grow at 6 percent per year—far below its 10 percent per annum for the last several years, but still a growth which will strengthen it vis-à-vis its rivals. China continues to expand its economic interests in Africa and Latin America, and Australia.

In this situation, Obama is calling for more cooperation with Europe, the U.N. and NATO. The approach is not novel. Since the end of World War II, the United States pursued its foreign policy objectives—domination of the skies and seas, containment of Soviet and Chinese Communism, control of Middle Eastern oil, subordination of Latin America as a U.S. sphere of interest, expansion of its role in Asia—through the U.N. and NATO. This was the policy under George H.W. Bush and under Bill Clinton, the first in the Iraq War and the second in the war against Serbia. George W. Bush, under the influence of his neo-con advisors, broke with that pattern, undertaking unilateral U.S. action, or action in alliance with the “coalition of the willing,” that is, Great Britain and a collection of small, dependent nations. Obama now returns the United States to its traditional policy of seeking to carry out its imperial objectives through a coalition with its European allies, and through the U.N. and NATO. But this is a policy that means the U.S. will also have to share the spoils.

Something more profound may be at work here. The weakening of U.S. hegemony may mean that we are witnessing a transition from the long period of U.S. domination to a new period of Great Power politics such as existed through much of the 19th and 20th century. The U.S. finds itself confronting not only Japan, Germany and the rest of the European Union, and Russia, but also by stupendous expansion of capitalism in China, and the rise of countries such as Brazil and India. Thus, Obama is led to work with Europe and through the U.N. and NATO. But it may be that we are seeing something new here, the actual decline of the United States and the beginning of a transition first to Great Power rivalry and then to the rise of a new hegemonic power, perhaps China. Such a transition cannot be imagined without a new period of international warfare in which China or any other pretender would have to prove its military superiority before assuming the mantle of world hegemon. For the moment, however, the U.S. remains the greatest economic and military power and the international organizations will be the vehicles of its continued dominance. We appear to be

returning to the Clinton years or something very like them, that is to say to the 'normal' imperial policies of the post-war period.

3. Obama's Domestic Policies

Obama Playing the Violin

Former Clinton administration official David Rothkopf mused that Obama's political style follows "the violin model:" you hold power with the left hand but you play it with the right. Obama has come to power and hopes to keep power in Congress through the support of the left while clearly governing as a moderate centrist domestically, and a conservative internationally. Obama's appointments to both his foreign policy and economic teams indicate that he is not even liberal in the way that's usually understood in this country.

Obama's Economic Policies

The Washington Post notes, "Obama's economic team isn't particularly liberal, either. Lawrence H. Summers, who--as Bill Clinton's Secretary of the Treasury--opposed regulating the new-fangled financial instruments that greased the way to the subprime meltdown, will chair Obama's National Economic Council. To head the Treasury, Obama has chose Timothy F. Geithner, the president of the New York Federal Reserve, who helped oversee the financial system as it collapsed. Each is close to Robert Rubin, another former Clinton Treasury Secretary, a director of bailed-out Citigroup and a poster boy for both the corporate wing of the Democratic Party and discredited Big Finance. Obama's Economic Recovery Advisory Board will be guided by Paul Volcker, the former Fed chairman whose controversial tight-money policies ended the stagflation crisis of the 1970s but led to a nasty recession."

The Obama administration talked about cooperating across the aisle with Republicans in Congress. However, the Democrats have been forced to pass their principal legislation almost all alone, with few votes from the opposition party—for which Obama was willing to water down the stimulus part of the bill. The \$775 billion in stimulus spending--involving tax cuts (\$300 billion), infrastructure construction, and other projects--received the votes of most Democratic legislators, but almost all Republicans stood firmly against it. The economic stimulus plan, intended to put money in the hands of consumers in order to get the economy moving again, represents very much a traditional measure if on a grand scale.

Obama and his Treasury Secretary Geithner have dealt with the financial crisis so far by throwing trillions of dollars to the banks and other financial institutions. In economic terms, this is Keynesian deficit spending with a vengeance, but, in social terms, it has nothing to do with the kind of Keynesianism that promoted public works employment and social welfare programs. We should remember that the Keynesianism of the 1930s which created the Works Progress Administration and Social Security was succeeded by the military Keynesianism of the post-war period of the 1950s to the 1980s, and now we appear to be experiencing financial Keynesianism, deficit spending aimed as refinancing the banks and corporations by socializing their failure.

The first step has been to save the banks by buying them. While Obama and his team would have preferred ideologically to avoid buy the banks they have in fact had to buy Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, AIG, and Citibank among others. To other financial institutions they have offered billions in loans and financial guarantees. Whether or not this massive infusion of taxpayer money into the financial system will save it from collapse remains to be seen.

Obama has acted similarly with industry, putting up billions in loans and eventually purchasing the stock of General Motors and Chrysler, while forcing them to reorganize through bankruptcy. The

U.S. has in effect nationalized GM and become a major partner in Chrysler, though the Obama administration claims that it will function as owner but not as manager, and will get out of the auto business as soon as possible. In this way Obama hopes to keep Congress and the public from making demands on how the government administers its auto business, demands that might harm corporate profits. He has called on bondholders, the corporations and the union to make sacrifices. The Obama administration, together with the GM and Chrysler corporations and the UAW has shifted the problems of the corporation on to the autoworkers and retirees.

The goal of everything that the Obama administration has done both with the banks and with the corporations is intended to return them to profitability in order to make possible the continued accumulation of capital. The goal is to make these corporations capable of competing in the world market, which means above all reducing labor costs and thus strengthening capital's hand over labor.

Labor Policies

While Obama wishes to strengthen capital, he has not pursued, as he might have in this crisis, a policy of smashing unions in either the private or the public sector. Like Clinton before him, he pursues the "third way," or the "middle path," that is, the view that capital must live with labor, so long as labor remains docile and subordinate. The way that Clinton and now Obama pursue this is by promoting "partnership" between management and union, or between government and public employee unions. This "partnership" is typified by the no-strike language in the GM and Chrysler bailouts. Meanwhile, unions remain weak with only 12.4 percent of all workers in unions (with 36.8 in the public sector, but only 7.6 percent in the private sector).

As with so many issue, Obama made an important and symbolic statement early on. Obama's first presidential act was the signing of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which makes it easier for workers to challenge unlawful pay discrimination based on gender, race, age, and disability. That act, however, may never be complemented by action on the rest of labor's platform.

The unions' primary demand of Obama and the Democratic Party is the passage of the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), introduced to both houses on March 10. Under EFCA, rather than holding a representation election, workers could indicate their desire to join a union by simply presenting a majority of signed cards in any given workplace. While Obama says that he continues to support the act, AFL-CIO and Change to Win leaders fear that many Democratic Party legislators will knuckle under to the pressure of both the corporations and the small business lobby, mindful of the potential campaign contributions that might be lost. Meanwhile, three big retailers—Costco, Starbucks. and Whole Foods Market—are putting forward a compromise that could divide Congress. Under the retailers' proposal, workers will need 70 percent (rather than a simple majority of 50% + 1) to unionize. This proposal may be enough to slice off a group of Democrats and moderate Republicans to kill EFCA.

Health Care

Obama plans to deal with the country's health care problems, the 45 million uninsured and the rising cost of health care, by entering into an arrangement with the major health business groups—insurance companies, health and hospital corporations, pharmaceuticals industry—which will force everyone who can to purchase private insurance while allowing those companies to avoid fully insuring those who have the highest risks. At his mid-May Health Care Summit, Obama announced that his administration and these health care industries and corporations had come up with a plan that would save two trillion dollars over the next ten years and save U.S. families as much as \$2,500 per year. This purely voluntary plan, with no government oversight, represented a first step toward the creation of a two-tier health care system.

This most recent development should be seen in the context of Obama's on-going expansion of the government's role and its relationship with business. Some of this, of course, represents a dramatic break with the Bush administration, but not necessarily a progressive step toward comprehensive national health care. On February 4, 2008, for example, Obama signed the Children's Health Insurance Act, an expansion of State Children's Health Insurance Programs that would extend its coverage to approximately four million of the eight million uninsured children in the country. President Bush had twice vetoed the bill. Obama argued that it represented the first step to health care for all. A single payer system, however, appears to be dead during this presidential term. Single payer advocates were only permitted to attend Obama's major health care policy meeting after Physicians for a National Health Program threatened to picket the White House, but even then were ignored.

American Health Industry Plans, Inc., the insurance lobby, has spent \$4.3 million in the last six months to advocate for their position. The Obama-insurance company plan has three planks, all mandates: 1) everyone must be covered (the "guarantee issue"); 2) customers would be charged the same rates (called "community rating"); 3) everyone must buy health insurance (called "the individual mandate"). The insurance companies want the government to subsidize the cost of health insurance, perhaps for all with serious health problems.

As Timothy P. Carney wrote in a column titled "Why insurers will win in Obama's health reform":

"President Barack Obama and Sen. Ted Kennedy look likely to give the health insurance industry exactly what it wants on health care reform. This would be an ironic outcome, considering how activists on the Left have demonized the insurers, and how crucial health care reform is to liberals who care about policy."

"While Obama and congressional Democrats will claim the insurers' victory as a win for the forces of equality and progress, the more hard-core Left — the progressives who formed much of Obama's base — will swallow this as a bitter pill or even a deal with the devil."

The Obama health care plan seems destined to make the government the guarantor of insurance company profits by forcing everyone who can to buy insurance.

Obama's Immigration Policy

President Barack Obama announced on April 8 that he would make immigration one of his legislative priorities this year, after health care and energy. Obama's plan represents a refurbishing of the Kennedy-McCain Comprehensive Immigration Reform Proposal of the last years of the Bush administration. That is, it aims to legalize many of the undocumented immigrants now in the country, but within a larger plan which sees a place for guest workers, albeit guest workers with routes to residency and possibly citizenship. Obama says his plan will:

- Bring "illegal immigrants" into the legal immigration system after they have recognized that they violated the law and paid fines and penalties.
- Prevent future illegal immigration by strengthening border enforcement and cracking down on employers who hire illegal immigrants.
- Establish a national system for verifying the legal immigration status of new workers.

Missing from the initial announcement by Obama was any statement about guest worker programs, which have been a particularly controversial immigration issue. Employers generally seek an expansion while unions generally oppose any expansion.

Labor's Immigration Plan

The leaderships of the AFL-CIO and Change to Win have also come together to make their own policy proposal, not so different from the president's. Shortly after Obama announced that he was making immigration a priority for this term, they announced their position on April 13. In 2008, the AFL-CIO and Change to Win were divided, with several major unions in the latter allied with employer associations. The new united labor position calls for:

- An independent commission to assess and manage future flows, based on labor market shortages.
- Secure and effective worker authorization mechanism.
- Rational operational control of the border.
- Adjustment of status for the current undocumented population.
- Improvement, not expansion of temporary worker (guest worker) programs.

The united labor position is meant to support President Obama's initiative as well as to pressure him to adopt something close to the labor position.

Meanwhile, mass arrests and raids have continued apace throughout the U.S., and the Obama administration has stated that it intends to expand immigration checks to local jails (such practices already exist on the federal and state level), another extension of a Bush-era policy.

Republicans and Democratic Party conservatives are hostile to the Obama proposal in that it offers "amnesty" to undocumented workers. They can be expected to mount a strong opposition to proposals for "comprehensive immigration reform," as the Obama package is labeled.

The Obama administration has encouraged Representative Luis V. Gutierrez (D-Ill.) to travel throughout the country speaking on the issue of immigration reform and to build support among Latino voters. The Roman Catholic Bishops Council appears to support the Obama position. In early June 2009 Democratic Party politicians, the AFL-CIO and Change to Win unions, churches, and immigrant organizations in forty cities launched the Campaign to Reform Immigration for America. This campaign, it appears, will be the principal vehicle for mobilizing public support for what will once again, as it was in the last Congress, be called "comprehensive immigration reform."

Some immigrant organizations will criticize the fines and penalties and others will object to the border enforcement and to more pressure on employers to deny employment or to fire workers whose documents don't check out. Nevertheless most immigrant groups will support the measure. Legalization of 12 million undocumented immigrants would mean, at least potentially, more Democratic Party voters and more union members. Passing the reforms as drafted is unlikely and more negative elements may well be grafted onto it. Immigration reform will be a test for this administration as it was for the last one.

Education Policy

Despite the strong backing of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association, many of whose local affiliates and members worked on his campaign, Obama has taken a social liberal position on education, one that does not necessarily support traditional public education or teachers unions. With public education seen as failing, many will no doubt support his policies. Over the unions' objections, Obama has come out strongly for national standards, charter schools and merit pay.

Obama's Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, was once Richard Daley's CEO of Chicago Public Schools. Duncan's program of school reform, imposed against the will of the Chicago Teachers Union, relied heavily on closing failing schools and opening others to replace them, many of those

charter schools. He also supported the alternative of military schools. Critics argue that under his leadership, schools cut culturally relevant curricula and critical pedagogies and encourage teaching to the test.

Organizations such as the National Center on Education and the Economy with its report "Tough Choices for Tough Times," suggest that the education system should be fundamentally reorganized along Japanese or European lines with a critical examination in the 10th grade that would sort out vocational or technical students from those going on to colleges and universities. Such reforms are premised on the notion that education should serve corporations as they struggle to win supremacy in international economic competition. Obama and Duncan share a commitment to the social liberal school reform program advocated by corporations and their foundations, which encourage the partial privatization of education, the results of which would be a multi-tiered educational system reflecting social class structure.

Environmental Issues

The Obama's environmental policy represents a break with the Bush administration, but it does not in any way represent a fundamental break with the overall approach of past administrations. The Obama administration has adopted a series of measures which will reduce auto emissions and energy industry greenhouse gases, but which will not dramatically change the country's policy and practices. These measures represent a partial fulfillment of campaign promises and the on-going pressure of liberal environmental organizations.

In the area of automobile standards, Obama ordered the EPA and Transportation Department to take action which would, in effect, allow California's higher emissions standards to set the national standard (since Californians buy so many cars). California's standards would require manufacturers to raise average miles per gallon from 27 to 35 by 2016. Obama has pushed these administrative measures so that auto companies can begin retooling for the 2011 model year with the new standards in mind. Since cars produce one-fifth of all greenhouse gases, this is an important measure, but obviously it does not represent a fundamental break with past policy. The administration continues to put the internal combustion engine automobile at the center of the national transportation system, rather than to promote a national alternative based on some combination of rail, light-rail, trolley and buses, electric cars, and bicycles.

With regard to greenhouse gas emissions from energy production and industry, the Federal government will create a so-called "cap and trade" system. The federal government will set a national limit on greenhouse gas pollution, a limit which will be reduced over time. Corporations which pollute will be allowed to buy pollution credits, from the government or from others, to cover their emissions. The bill now before Congress calls for a 17 percent reduction by 2020. States would also be required to get 15 percent of their energy from renewable sources by 2020. These standards were reduced from the original proposals, allow a more gradual transition for coal-fired plants.

Some environmental groups have also expressed concern about Obama's choice of Ignacia Moreno to head the Department of Justice Environmental Division. Moreno, a former Clinton Justice Department official, is now counsel for environmental programs at General Electric, a corporation that has been called the country's biggest polluter.

Obama's 'violin method' operates clearly with respect to mountaintop removal mining. On the campaign trail, Obama pledged stronger review of proposed projects by the Environmental Protection Agency and more enforcement to protect threatened communities and polluted streams and lands in Appalachia. All the major enviro and conservation organizations unconditionally supported Obama. But after meetings in May between Obama's Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, and

pro-mining lobbyists and politicians, the EPA quietly gave the go-ahead for two dozen mountaintop removal projects, included in the 42 of 48 mining projects the EPA has approved during Obama's tenure.

On other environmental issues, such as genetically modified organisms, cloning, and biotechnology, Obama's choice former Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack for Secretary of Agriculture worries some. The Organic Consumers Association writes of him:

"While Vilsack has promoted respectable policies with respect to restraining livestock monopolies, his overall record is one of aiding and abetting Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) or factory farms and promoting genetically engineered crops and animal cloning. Equally troubling is Vilsack's support for unsustainable industrial ethanol production, which has already caused global corn and grain prices to skyrocket, literally taking food off the table for a billion people in the developing world."

As Philip Brasher wrote in late April in his DesMoinesRegister.com blog:

"If there was any question about how the Obama administration would get behind agricultural biotechnology, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack is removing any doubt. In fact, he says he's going to do a better job than the Bush administration."

Just back from the G8 summit in Italy, Vilsack pledged today to bring a "more comprehensive and integrated" approach to promoting ag biotech overseas.

That will be good news to biotech companies such as Pioneer Hi-Bred and Monsanto but it shouldn't be much of a surprise. Vilsack was a vocal backer of the biotech industry as governor, and President Barack Obama has been a supporter as well."

Whatever one's position on genetically modified foods, what is clear is that big agriculture and corporate science and technology will be well represented by the Obama administration.

Reproductive Rights

Obama, under the watchful eyes of NOW, Planned Parenthood and NARAL, has moved to reverse the Bush policies on reproductive rights, taking us back to the Clinton years. National Organization of Women President Kim Gandy issued a statement saying, "It goes without saying that the combination of war, economic collapse, piracy and a potential pandemic may have removed many important items from the top of the president's legislative agenda, including the Freedom of Choice Act. But I urge President Obama to maintain his public support for this critical legislation, which he enthusiastically endorsed during the campaign."

Obama has acted to meet the immediate demands of women's organizations regarding reproductive rights issues. In January, he ended the "Mexico City Policy," which forbade the U.S. government from funding clinics or groups that offered abortion-related services overseas. The "global gag rule" had barred foreign aid recipients from promoting or even discussing abortion as a method of family planning.

In April, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) made it easier for women to purchase Plan B, a morning after drug that can prevent conception if taken within 72 hours of intercourse. The Obama administration will also end the practice of funding "abstinence only" sex education programs, and will instead fund sex education programs that actually work.

NOW and NARAL have also been pleased to see the nomination and confirmation of former Kansas

Gov. Kathleen Sebelius as Secretary of Health and Human Services. Their central preoccupation now is to see Obama nominate a pro-abortion rights candidate, preferably a woman, nominated for the Supreme Court to replace retiring Justice David Souter.

Some reproductive rights organizations are, however, concerned because Obama has not dealt with the Hyde Amendment in the proposed 2010 budget. The Hyde Amendment restricts government funding of abortions. Nancy Northup of the Center for Reproductive Rights, stated on May 1, "President Obama made clear during the election that he opposes the Hyde Amendment. And for good reason—over a third of women who rely on Medicaid and are seeking an abortion have been prevented from exercising their constitutional right to an abortion. Hyde unjustly impedes women's access to timely, quality healthcare and disproportionately harms those women who already face significant barriers to obtaining services. Sound public health policy means protecting the wellbeing of all women." As socialists, we oppose Hyde and demand that all women have, together with access to free contraception and sex education, access to free abortion on demand.

GLBTQ Issues

Obama had strong backing from GLBTQ voters who look to him for leadership on issues of concern to them, but while he will advance elements of their agenda, he draws the line at gay marriage. While in the Illinois State Senate, Obama supported gay rights and a law that would ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The Human Rights Campaign rated him as having a voting record of 89% on issues of importance to gay and lesbian citizens in 2006. Obama has committed to passing the Matthew Sheppard Act which would expand hate crimes protection, and the Employment Non-Discrimination Act which would expand existing anti-discrimination legislation to include sexual orientation and gender identity and help make possible domestic partner benefits. The new president also supports gay and lesbian adoption rights. Obama opposes the U.S. Military's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy, though it is not clear if he will make a fight over this with military commanders.

Obama and his GLBTQ backers fall out over the question of gay marriage. While Obama voted against the Federal Marriage Amendment and opposed the Defense of Marriage Act, and supports civil unions with full partner rights (accompaniment in emergency, equal health insurance, employment benefits and property rights), still he opposes gay marriage. Obama said in an interview with the Chicago Daily Tribune, "I'm a Christian. And so, although I try not to have my religious beliefs dominate or determine my political views on this issue, I do believe that tradition, and my religious beliefs say that marriage is something sanctified between a man and a woman." The problem for Obama and for the GLBTQ community is that gay marriage has become the touchstone issue on all GLBTQ issues. While we as socialists are supporters of full civil, political, social and economic rights for the GLBTQ community and opponents of hetero-normal standards, we are not necessarily advocates of marriage; still, we do support the civil right to gay marriage as a matter of simple equality and support the gay and lesbian movement in its fight on this issue.

Communities of Color

The economic crisis has fallen hardest on communities of color, particularly on African Americans and Latinos, who have higher rates of unemployment and poverty. Whether one talks about the closing of auto plants or cutbacks in construction, Black and Latino workers have borne more than their share of the suffering. In April 2009, the national unemployment rate reached 11.3% for Latinos and 15.0% for African Americans. In 2007, 18 percent of all children were growing up in poverty, and 7.8% in extreme poverty, but with today's much higher unemployment rates that figure must also have grown substantially. A disproportionate percentage of poor children will be found in Latino and African American homes because of their parents' unemployment, under-employment or

lower wages.

Like other areas of American life, our society's structural racism adversely affects people of color in terms of homeownership. In 2007, 68.1% of all families owned homes, and for whites, the figure was 72%, while for Latinos it was 49.7% and for African Americans only 47.2%. Home foreclosures have also hit Latinos and African Americans harder than whites, according to a study by ACORN published last year. African Americans and Latinos have lost more homes during the current crisis both because of their higher unemployment and because of high cost of their home loans. Subsequent news reports in various cities have confirmed ACORN's research, with Black and Latino neighborhoods in many cities being affected.

Throughout the United States, as homeowners can't pay mortgages and renters can't pay their rent, cities and suburbs are experiencing a rise in homelessness. While most homeless people are white, Blacks and Latinos represent a disproportionate percentage of the homeless as they face rising unemployment and poverty. A study by the National Center on Family Homelessness, analyzed data from 2005-06 and found that more than 1.5 million children were without a home. That is, one in fifty U.S. children will be homeless. African American and Native American children were disproportionately represented. Naturally, homeless children are less likely to graduate from school and more likely to have health problems.

The crisis may have the most detrimental affect on undocumented immigrants. Undocumented immigrants, an estimated 12 million people in the U.S., suffer more than others during this economic crisis because they are not legally entitled to many of the social welfare programs, whether unemployment compensation, state welfare, or many public health programs. Rightwing groups also make undocumented immigrants the scapegoats for the problems of "American society," blaming them, rather than the corporations or government, for lost jobs, low wages, crime and other problems.

Scapegoating provides the climate in which hate crimes flourish—with such crimes rising almost 50 percent since 2000. In December 2008, seven teenagers attacked and killed Marcelo Lucero, an Ecuadorian immigrants in Patchogue, N.Y. The gang of youths who attacked and killed Lucero were also accused of attacking another eight Latino men. Less than a month later three men shouting anti-Latino and anti-gay epithets, beat and killed Jose Sucuzhañay, another Ecuadorian immigrant, in Brooklyn. An FBI report on hate crimes indicated that there had been a 40 percent surge in anti-Latino violence since 2003. The Southern Poverty Law Center reports that it tracks 888 organizations, among them the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which it classifies as hate groups.

African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and other people of color in American society continue to deal with the abuses of the criminal justice system, among them such issues as racial profiling and police abuse. The Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) police officer killing of Oscar Grant represents just one of the most recent such acts so typical of police forces around the country. Or, then there is the case of Bernard Monroe, the retired electrical utility worker, age 73, who was hosting a cookout at home when police, with no motive, shot and killed him and then planted a gun on his body.

4. Obama's Foreign Policy

Obama did not campaign against the U.S.'s dominant imperial role in world affairs, but rather promised after the disastrous Bush years to restore U.S. leadership. Such leadership means the creation of a bi-partisan war cabinet committed to the maintenance and expansion of U.S. power

abroad. Obama's cabinet choices and other appointments place his government in the tradition of bipartisan imperialism. Jeremy Scahill writes, "The assembly of Hillary Clinton, Robert Gates, Susan Rice and Joe Biden is a kettle of hawks with a proven track record of support for the Iraq war, militaristic interventionism, neoliberal economic policies and a worldview consistent with the foreign policy arch that stretches from George H.W. Bush's time in office to the present."

Policies on Imprisonment, Rendition, and Torture

Upon taking office, President Obama ordered the closing of the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and changed Bush policies on the interrogation of suspected terrorists, banning the CIA interrogation techniques best described as torture. He also initially ordered a halt to the trials of those held at Guantanamo, but then later reinstated the military tribunals. While the Guantanamo detention center is slated to be closed, Obama did not close the Bagram Air Base detention facility in Afghanistan and other such facilities, while habeas corpus will be denied to detainees in the U.S.'s extraterritorial prisons. Obama's administration also attempted to maintain secrecy on the Bush regime's torture memos, until that became politically and legally untenable. Most recently, he also blocked the release of photos documenting the abuse of prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan, arguing that it would jeopardize U.S. service men and women.

Obama's record so far, with the exception of the symbolic order to close Guantanamo, has been one of preserving and protecting the old system of unconstitutional, secret, military detention centers that also exist in violation of international laws and human rights standards. Congressional Democrats have not taken a stand against Obama's policies, though liberal institutions such as the ACLU and Human Rights Watch have been critical. While movement activists are aware of this record, there has not been significant action to oppose it, which would most naturally make up part of a revived anti-war movement's demands.

Wars and Occupations

While Obama's domestic policy with its calls for regulation of the banks, economic stimulus, and EFCA does not much resemble that of President Bush, his foreign policy has far more in common with that of his predecessor. For those who voted for Obama as an "anti-war candidate" his policies actions since taking office should be deeply disturbing:

In January, Obama authorized further drone aircraft attacks on Pakistan.

In mid February, Obama announced that he would send an additional 17,000 troops to Afghanistan and by year's end that number would increase to 30,000.

In late February, Obama announced that even after U.S. troops pulled out, he would leave 50,000 there to protect American interests.

These developments make clear that Obama has not ended the Middle Eastern wars and occupations, but that he is continuing and expanding them.

U.S. air strikes in Farah Province, Afghanistan in May, which killed 140 civilians, including 95 children, acted to catalyze concern about the war in that country. As reported by the New York Times in mid-May, some Democrats in Congress were beginning to feel uncomfortable with Obama's plans for America's foreign wars, even if they were not ready to move into opposition to it. Jim McGovern, Democrat of Massachusetts, has won 76 members of Congress to support his call for an exit strategy for Afghanistan. This group is not yet in a position to resist the Democratic Party majority. Still, one sees the beginning of an opposition movement in Congress, which may ease the organization of an independent opposition movement in the streets.

The American public has not yet come to see the Afghanistan War as Obama's war. So, in effect, it is as if the United States had just begun a new war, and so far the significance of the situation has not registered. Much of the public had until now accepted the Afghanistan war as legitimate, the country and its Taliban having been the hosts of Al Qaeda, while Iraq was seen as the illegitimate or at least the dubious war. No doubt it will take some time before the American people realize that Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan form part of a whole, an imperial war for domination of the Middle East and Central Asia, its oil and its strategically important geopolitical space.

Middle East

The Obama administration has not fundamentally changed American policy in the Middle East, that is in Israel/Palestine. As he made clear during his campaign, Obama has adopted the historic U.S. policy of virtually unconditional support for Israel, while at the same time ignoring the demands of the Palestinians. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton has said that the U.S. will not recognize or deal with Hamas until they accept the existence of Israel; this policy will keep Gaza and the West Bank divided and stop progress toward a two-state solution. However, if the situation became more acute, the U.S. would not necessarily support Israel in continuing the occupation.

With regard to Iran, Obama said the nuclear option is off the table, but that the U.S. had to be militarily prepared to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. In fact, Obama's overtures to other Middle East powers represent an attempt to isolate Iran and lay the basis for future military action. Also flowing from this policy is Obama's pursuit of an alliance with Vladimir Putin of Russia in order to pressure Iran from that side. The test for the Obama administration would be to say that the military option in Iran is off the table. That would represent a shift in policy that has not yet taken place, if it ever will.

Latin America: Mixed Record

In Latin America, President Obama has changed the style and tone of U.S. relations with countries in that region—even in some cases the substance. Still, the overall goals and objectives of U.S. foreign policy remain the same—i.e., U.S. domination of the region. Though with U.S. power declining and the influence of Europe and China growing in the region, and with the rise of Brazil and the increasing independence of many Latin American countries, other methods will have to be used. The situation has to be seen in the context of Latin American developments.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Latin Americans resisted neoliberalism in various countries through national general strikes, popular uprising, and attempted coups. By the late 1990s the struggle found expression in political campaigns. The continental shift to the left can be seen clearly in the series of elections over the last decade which brought to power in seven Latin American nations a series of presidents—Hugo Chavez, Ignacio "Lula" da Silva, Tabaré Vázquez, Evo Morales, Michelle Bachelet, Nestor Kirchner, Kristina Fernández de Kirchner, Rafael Correa, and Fernando Lugo—with politics described as ranging from populist, to social democratic, and, in some cases some claim, socialist. All of these Latin American presidents, with politics ranging from social democratic to radical—represent a rejection of the Washington Consensus that had such a devastating impact the region.

One of the most interesting and important developments during the recent period has been the transformation of the South American Community of Nations into the far more ambitious Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). Founded in May of 2008, UNASUR brings together a dozen Latin American nations and two common markets—Mercosur and the Andean Community—to create a broader economic and political union. When Bolivia seemed to be on the verge of a civil war last September, UNASUR met and voted to back elected president Evo Morales and called for a peaceful

resolution of the conflict. UNASUR also rejected a proposal to take the issue to the Organization of American States (OAS), which has historically been dominated by the United States. The UNASUR resolution of the Bolivia issue, without the OAS or the U.S. represented an historic turning point in Latin America's recent history.

Obama then cannot operate in Latin America as previous administrations have, still various developments provide openings for the United States. Four countries give a sense of the different policies being pursued by the Obama administration: Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia and Mexico.

Obama is taking the first steps to improve relations with Cuba by making travel possible for Cuban citizens. Obama is able to do this because of the aging and dying off of the revolutionary era Cuban "exiles" in Miami and New Jersey who have been replaced by more moderate and pragmatic successors. The president is also responding to pressure from Cubans of all ages who want to be able to visit and financially support family there. The more important motivation is a response to the fear of U.S. banks, corporations, and farmers of exclusion from potential business in Cuba, while Spain, France, and Canada invest in tourism, oil and mining. The long-term goal of the Obama administration is to make possible U.S. investment in Cuba and along with that, to make the Cuban government amenable to American lobbyists.

While the world was captivated by the photos and films of U.S. President Barack Obama shaking hands with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, it should be remembered that less than a month before Obama had accused Chávez of "exporting terrorism." Nevertheless, the global fall in oil prices could weaken the Venezuelan economy and thus the Chávez government, giving the U.S. an opening to both put pressure on Chávez to make changes in his foreign and domestic policy—such as his alliance with Iran and his nationalization of foreign companies—while at the same time offering support to the conservative opposition in the country.

In terms of U.S. relations with Colombia, Obama spoke out strongly against negotiating a Free Trade Agreement with that nation as long as violence against trade unionists continued. At the end of April, Obama asked U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk to work with Colombia and Congress to resolve those issues and bring forward a trade agreement. So, at this juncture, it appears that Obama will support a FTA with stipulations about labor rights, though it seems unlikely that President Uribe of Colombia would actually ensure workers' rights.

During his first visit to Mexico, President-elect Obama gave no indication of any major shift in U.S.-Mexico policy, rather praising President Felipe Calderón for his war on the drug cartels and pledging that he would work to strengthen the existing "the commercial ties, the security ties and the cultural ties that exist between the United States and Mexico." Speaking with the press, Obama lauded Calderón for his efforts on all fronts, from energy policy to the drug war. President Calderón's war against the drug dealers has involved the mobilization of 40,000 soldiers and has so far resulted in 5,000 deaths, reportedly mostly of drug dealers and their gunmen, though some civilians have also been killed in the crossfire. Human rights organizations have complained of soldiers committing human rights violations from killings, to rapes and robber.

Obama support for the Mérida Initiative, also known as Plan Mexico, which will eventually provide Mexico with \$1.6 billion to fight the drug wars, has been criticized in Mexico as representing a threat to Mexican sovereignty, and in both countries because of concerns about human rights. Secretary of State Clinton appeared before Congress in late April to ask for more funds for Mexico for security, including three Black Hawk helicopters. The 2010 budget, now before Congress, includes \$550 million for more security on the U.S.-Mexico border and \$450 million for the Merida initiative. President Obama, though he says he is opposed to militarizing the border, also continues to consider putting over 1,000 troops on the U.S.-Mexico international frontier.

The only sign of any change to be found were Obama's pre-election commitment to revisit labor and environmental standards in NAFTA, but only time will tell exactly what that means. -

5. Response to the Crisis

The response of the US working class to the continuation of the wars and to the crisis has been weak, uneven and sporadic. We do not see a strong social movement in any sector of society - not in labor, not in the anti-war movement, not among people of color or immigrants. While there has been activity around the gay marriage issue, largely in response to denial of the right to marry, the GLBTQ movement has otherwise not been particularly active. The lack of response is a result partly of the Obama honeymoon factor and secondly of the cautious reaction to the economic crisis.

The Anti-War Movement's Response

The anti-war movement, already disheartened by its inability to move the Bush presidency despite massive demonstrations in the early years of the Iraq War, has now been largely demobilized by the Obama presidency. Many believed that Obama would carry out his campaign promises to end the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, MoveOn.org, which claims after ten years to now have 4.2 million members, has said it will give Obama "the benefit of the doubt," an attitude calculated to encourage passivity. While the two other largest anti-war organizing centers, United For Peace and Justice (UFPJ) and the ANSWER Coalition, have not adopted that position and continue to call for an end to the wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, they have not been able to overcome the current malaise of the movement.

In 2008, there was a small uptick of antiwar activity (most notably IVAW's Winter Soldier hearings) around the country. Despite this, there was no national (or coordinated regional) mobilization to mark the fifth anniversary of the Iraq War. Since then, many people have come to believe both that "the surge" has worked and that Obama will be ending the war in Iraq. People have also become consumed with the fallout over the economic crisis. As a result, antiwar activity has plummeted and the antiwar movement threatens to virtually disappear. Unlike 2008, however, the anniversary of the war in Iraq in 2009 was marked by two mass demonstrations.

UFPJ felt pressured to have an event around the 6th anniversary, initially calling for a week of actions in DC, abandoned after ANSWER responded by calling for a march in DC on the 21st.

The ANSWER demonstration involved about 8,000 people in a march past the Pentagon and office buildings and converged on Halliburton and General Dynamics. There was a small but spirited Campus Anti-War Network (CAN) contingent. The demonstration, made up of a young, diverse and energetic crowd, had a clear "Out Now" message, strong support for Palestine, and an anti-imperialist sentiment. Unfortunately, its numbers did not exceed 10,000 and it had been organized largely by ANSWER with its typical lack of transparency. Many of those participating were members of left groups.

UFPJ ended up calling a national march in Lower Manhattan on April 4th. The march was made up of about 5,000 people with visible minorities of youth and people of color, well as a U.S. Labor Against the War contingent of some 100s (USLAW continues to organize, including doing real solidarity work with the Iraqi labor movement, but on a smaller scale than before) - but it was mostly white and older "Vietnam Anti-War Movement" generation folks.

The event was called "Beyond War: A New Economy is Possible" and it tried to make linkages between the economic crisis and the money being spent on the war. While attempts were made to link the economic crisis to the wars, it did not have a clear "Out Now" message, Palestine was not

mentioned (despite the largest-ever Palestine solidarity demonstrations erupting earlier in 2009 in response to the murderous siege on Gaza), there was no criticism of Obama, and the march was disappointingly small.

These demonstrations suggest that the antiwar movement is at a very low level and needs to be rebuilt from the bottom up.

Labor's Response

The response to the crisis by organized labor has been extremely slow and the levels of activity have been low. The AFL-CIO and Change to Win bureaucracies put enormous amounts of the unions' staff, money, time and energy into the Obama campaign, but little has gone into organizing to resist the effects of the recession. The UAW has worked closely with the Democratic Party in dealing with potential bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler, attempting to mitigate the damage of layoffs and concessions, though not mobilizing the members to fight against them. Most other union bureaucracies have simply functioned as ushers to maintain order as their members walked the plank of unemployment and fell into the sea of poverty and despair.

A few unions have made token responses. SEIU organized demonstrations of 10,000 members at the banks in more than 30 states to protest the bonus scandals at AIG. The United Electrical Workers led a small, but heroic strike and factory occupation by 260 workers at the Republic Window plant in Chicago which saved their jobs. The United Steel Workers (USW) has organized an important campaign in defense of industrial jobs based in the US. Most unions, however, have failed to mobilize their members in defense of jobs and contracts, and at the same time there is no evidence that workers themselves have been prepared to act. Throughout the month of March 2009 there were no strikes of more than 1,000 workers, continuing a long term trend of union passivity.

Jobs with Justice and Labor Notes have been among the organizations which have attempted to offer leadership where the labor bureaucracy has failed. Jobs with Justice (JwJ) has held town hall meetings on the crisis in various cities, most notably in Portland, Oregon where 800 people attended such a conference, but also smaller events such as in Dayton, Ohio where 50 gathered to discuss the situation. JwJ seems to have focused its activities on pushing for the Employee Free Choice Act and health care reform with an emphasis on single payer. Labor Notes, the newspaper and organizing center, has held a series of Troublemakers Schools to prepare workers to meet the crisis that have been attended by a few hundred union activists.

The U.S. working class will be tremendously weakened by the closing of unionized auto plants. The UAW, even with its bureaucratic leadership, has been a bulwark of labor and liberal causes, providing support over the decades for movements such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the United Farm Workers (UFW), and the civil rights movement. The UAW represented the heart of the liberal-labor left in the Democratic Party nationally, and UAW members formed the core of Democratic Party politics in many cities and towns in states such as Michigan, northern Ohio, northern Indiana, and Illinois, and at one time too in New Jersey and Los Angeles. While the UAW did not often mobilize its own members, the officials used the bureaucracy and the union's resources to support its limited version of social democratic politics within the Democratic Party. As the UAW crumbles away, it will weaken the forces that elected Obama and the Democratic Party. More important, as the cadres of engineers, skilled workers, and experienced production workers who formed the core of the union dissipates, local federations and groups such as Jobs with Justice will be weakened.

One bright spot is the continuing organizing for single-payer. Despite the capitulation of most of the labor movement tops in supporting whatever the Obama administration is proposing for health care

reform (currently the notion that some form of a public option - inevitably compromised and constrained by "centrist" Democratic legislators, and by an Obama administration that doesn't want to alienate the insurance and pharmaceutical industries - will solve the health care crisis) hundreds of union organizations, including 39 State Federations and numerous CLC's, have endorsed HR 676, and many have and continue to vigorously advocate for its enactment. To some degree this widespread sentiment is crystallized in the Labor Campaign for Single-Payer Healthcare, a small but important core of activists - nurses chief among them.

Despite a great deal of pressure to limit their organizing to what's "politically possible," i.e. acceptable to the Democratic Party, there is ongoing organizing with significant rallies held in places including Vermont, California, Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington. On May 30th a National Day of Action for Single Payer Health Care saw protests in more than 50 cities with some 3,500 people marching in Seattle. While there is a danger that Obama's health reform may result in passing something that discredits universal health care reform and undermines organizing for a national solution, the fight will now move to winning single-payer on a state level.

Foreclosures and Housing Struggles

Looking at movements around housing, ACORN has mobilized its members around the country, many of them low income urban African Americans with large number of women activists, to participate in its Campaign to Stop Foreclosures. ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, claims 400,000 member families organized into more than 1,200 neighborhood chapters in 110 cities and 40 states across the country. ACORN members have participated in protests at foreclosures and evictions, and have been training their members to take more aggressive action through civil disobedience. While ACORN has attempted to take leadership on this issue and has used its resources to build its campaign, the results so far have been rather limited, with perhaps a few thousand involved in the protests around the country. ACORN announced a national "broad civil disobedience campaign," but there has not yet been any serious, consistent action to back up this claim.

ACORN has been the most visible organization among many. There are also decentralized activities around the U.S.- "a budding resistance movement," as the New York Times called it in February 2009. Local movements challenging foreclosures and evictions have sprouted in Miami, Baltimore, Philadelphia, the Twin Cities, and a host of other cities. One of the largest and most successful local campaigns has been conducted by City Life/Vida Urbana in Boston. Their confrontational, direct action tactics have succeeded in delaying several foreclosures.

There is little national coherence to this "movement." It is fragmentary and decentralized, shaped primarily by local circumstances and actors. Local movements are usually composed of some combination of non-profits, local activists, community members, city government allies, leftists, and tenants and homeowners facing eviction. The main rhetoric and demands of the movements revolve around two ideas. The first is "bail out the people, not the banks;" the second is some variant of a call for a foreclosure moratorium.

The movement has two constituencies: homeowners facing eviction and tenants facing eviction because their landlord was foreclosed. Local campaigns tactics include: protests at statehouses, direct actions attempting to blockade threatened homes, legislation-oriented advocacy, squatting in vacant homes, and pickets in front of homes facing foreclosure or in front of bailed-out banks that are kicking people out of their homes. Most local movements have aimed for legislation that will stop or slow down foreclosures and evictions. One popular legislative demand has been for "Just Cause" law which allows tenants in good standing to remain in their foreclosed homes until they are sold. The movement has made some gains. In cities around the nation, activists have successfully pressured local government and the mortgage industry to make concessions—some real, some rhetorical—on foreclosure policy and deal with homeowners/tenants for sensitively. Local

movements have provided tenants and homeowners with lawyers and educated them about their legal rights. Protests have kept the plight of the victims in the local media. Moreover, small layers of tenants and homeowners have been empowered by the actions.

Immigrant Rights Movement

Latino immigrants, representing the largest segment of all immigrants, have been at the forefront of the immigrant rights movement. In 2006, led by the Latinos, immigrants carried out demonstrations that put hundreds of thousands on the streets in the nation's largest cities with perhaps a million out in both Chicago and Los Angeles. Many smaller cities and towns also had demonstrations of thousands or hundreds in what were the largest social movement protests in U.S. history. In the largest cities, May Day became in effect a virtual one-day general strike, as many factories closed and shops shut down. Since then, the immigrant community has seen immigration reform stall, workplaces and neighborhoods raided by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and experienced the recession, all of which have had a devastating impact. This year it appears that despite the Obama and united labor calls for immigration reform, the movement is deeply divided and the demonstrations will be smaller. May Day 2009 found the immigrant rights movement still demoralized and divided and demonstrations were much smaller than at the high tide of 2006.

So it appears that working people will continue to absorb the shock of the recession for some time longer. If, as some analysts now predict, the recession is over at the end of 2009 or in 2010, we may never see a response to it, though it is possible that when employment renews, workers will be more willing to struggle.

Student Activism

Student and campus activism mirrored the general momentum of other movements during the election cycle and into the first 100 days of the new administration. Many student activists were won to the dynamism of the Obama campaign: both those who had experience with broader social or off-campus solidarity campaigns (environment, antiwar, labor support, anti-racism or GLBTQ rights), with specifically student issues such as tuition and access to higher education, as well as thousands of previously inactive students. Some participated directly in the campaign through Students for Obama or Young Democrats, others joined "fronts" like Power Vote or worked on voter registration and canvassing.

Since the election, student activism has slumped, with the Obama campaign apparatus having collapsed (by design) post-election. Obama's proposed solution to the student debt crisis, an anemic expansion of the federal Pell Grant program, may not pass the Congress but the proposed \$200 expansion would not make a dent in rising tuition costs anyway. Students in many states have mobilized against spiraling student fees and university cuts. Thus far, this patchwork phenomenon does not see itself as a nationally coordinated movement, in part due to the varied circumstances of higher education state-by-state. Other programs designed to increase access to higher education, such as the DREAM Act for undocumented students, have been re-introduced in congress with no decisive action in Obama's first 100 days. In the spring, Powershift drew around ten thousand students to DC for a weekend conference on environmental topics spanning from direct action campaigns against coal power and environmental justice alliances to "green capitalism" and lobbying. Other mainstays of broader political campaigns such as action against the wars and in support of worker organizing on campus and internationally have been harmed by the downturn in those movements.

United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), one of the longest-lived and healthiest independent student activist networks, has faced difficulties in obtaining the union funding that has enabled a

national staff and tempo of regular conferences. Another recent development, the “new” SDS, has faced its own difficulties in the past year – a combination of its being drawn into the Obama campaign, combined with a move to adventurist actions by some remaining students, as well as ongoing sectarian fights between anarchists and Marxists.

6. The Balance of Forces Today

Obama’s leftist (as opposed to liberal) supporters argued during the primaries and the campaign that voting for Obama would not only represent a better alternative to supporting conservative John McCain or wasting one’s vote on Ralph Nader or Cynthia McKinney, but would also help to create the conditions for a resurgence of the social movements and activism. A vote for Obama, they argued, would be a vote cast not only against conservative economic policies (neoliberalism) and against the war, but also against racism and homophobia, and more important would encourage movements for economic and social justice to begin to act. This was the politics put forth by Progressives for Obama.

Clearly, it is difficult to separate the response to the Obama administration from the reaction to the crisis. Historically, a new administration generally enjoys a honeymoon period and a crisis often leads, at least initially, to a period of quietism as labor, the social movements, and the population at large takes stock of the situation, and acts to protect their own personal positions first—meaning their jobs, housing, and family welfare—before acting as a class. While a crisis creates high unemployment, usually the first reaction of U.S. workers is caution, not militancy.

At this point, it would seem to be that Obama’s presidency has not led to significantly greater activism by any movement in any sphere of the society. While there does seem to be a more open and optimistic attitude toward race issues, there has not been an upsurge in activism or radicalism. One might even argue that, quite the contrary, the fact that Obama now occupies the Oval Office has led many activists to believe that they now have a friend in the White House who will deal with the economic crisis, end the wars in the Middle East, handle the problems of the environment, and tackle the oppression of racial minorities, women, gays and lesbians. For those who begin to see that their trust has been betrayed, a kind of social-psychological depression may set in before people return to action.

While the liberal establishment organizations—the AFL-CIO, NAACP, NOW, MoveOn.org, the ACLU and Human Rights Watch, the Sierra Club, and others—do continue to monitor and to pressure the Obama administration, they generally now operate through friendly channels of communication as allies of the President and the Congress, rather than as critics or opponents. Consequently the initial result of Obama’s presidency is a honeymoon period for him and a mood of hopeful expectation of change among the Liberal establishment and the voters who supported him. The result of this then has been a demobilization of former activists and with that a decline in the liberal public’s attention to Obama’s behavior.

Similarly with second level national organizations and with regional and local groups, activism has generally declined. While there are notable exceptions—the Steelworkers campaign in labor, ACORN in housing, and a few others—what is clear is that there has been no upsurge. We remain in a downturn in activism that has existed since about 2005.

The current situation is exacerbated by the deep divisions within the labor movement, particularly the internecine warfare among the SEIU, NHWU, CNA, the former UNITE-HERE. The SEIU’s top-down organizing model and its labor-management partnership approach to contract negotiation, combined with its hubris, particularly its imperial ambitions to dominate the labor movement, not

only in the U.S. but also in Puerto Rico and even abroad, have led to the current deep crisis which particularly affects health care workers.

Most important is the struggle taking place in California. There SEIU members in United Healthcare Workers West (UHW), a 150,000-member California local led by Sal Roselli, complained that the SEIU had “silenced workers’ voice in bargaining with the California Home Alliance by directing International Union representatives to meet with employers behind our backs.” After SEIU trustee (that is, took over) the local union, members resisted by seceding and creating their own organization, the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW). SEIU has been fighting NUHW for control of contracts both in the courts and through union representation elections.

The fight by NUHW members, first to control their own local union and negotiate their own contracts and subsequently to create an independent union, has inspired many SEIU members throughout California and around the country. Many see this as one of the most important fights taking place in the contemporary labor movement, a fight between the SEIU top-down approach and an approach where members have a greater voice in the union.

The balance of forces at the moment is extremely adverse to the social movements, labor and the left, and it is extremely favorable to capital and government. While we may expect that a continuing and deepening crisis will produce some movement, and while the Obama administration’s charm will wear off, we remain in a period of low levels of social and labor activism. We will need to continue to build grassroots community and rank-and-file labor organizations, to work to unite the small and weak U.S. left, and to try to strengthen our own organization while doing so.

The Republican Party and the Right

Meanwhile, the right-wing has not been idle. Supported by FOX News, Republicans and other conservatives organized “Tea Parties” around the country in March and April, bringing thousands out in many cities to protest Obama’s stimulus package and other policies. In many places these demonstrations—comprised of almost exclusively white middle class suburbanites—had a very right-wing character, and among the ordinary Republicans who participated, extreme right-wingers provided more radical t-shirts, signs, and slogans. The demonstrations indicate that while the Republican Party has been defeated and is in disarray, there are conservative and ultra-conservative activists prepared to offer an alternative to Obama’s social liberalism. These demonstrations represent not only a conservative political alternative but also the breeding ground for more rightwing movements.

The Republican Party, having suffered a disastrous defeat in the 2008 elections, has been severely weakened. Today it is also deeply divided between, on the one hand, the Rush Limbaugh and Dick Cheney rightwing faction, and on the other the more moderate Colin Powell faction. Yet no one should believe that the Republicans will not make a come back. The capitalist class has historically understood the necessity of both a Democratic Party capable of Keynesian spending and promoting social welfare, and of a Republican Party advocating free enterprise and cutting taxes and budgets. When the current crisis has passed, and the economy has revived, the corporations and banks may well turn their attention, and their money, once again to the Republicans.

7. Conclusion - The Left and its Tasks

The Left - a Motley Crew

The U.S. left is a motley crew, politically speaking. Some on the left support Obama, others wish to build a movement that will make Obama be the president they believe he might be. Further to the

left, Solidarity and other socialist organizations call for an independent politics and independent movements to challenge Obama and his policies.

The liberal left, represented by *The Nation*, only a few months ago absolutely enamored of Obama, has quickly become more critical, though it still tends to be critically supportive. In a recent article Robert L. Borosage and Katrina vanden Heuvel write that, "Without a grassroots uprising that challenges business as usual in Washington, we aren't likely to get the change we were promised, much less the change we need." Borosage and vanden Heuvel, however, still put their emphasis on build a movement that can support and pressure the president, rather than building a movement that challenges him and his party.

The Communist Party and its publication *The People's Weekly World*, which also supported Obama in the election, take a similar position. Sam Webb wrote in the May 1 issue, "Currently, the level of mobilization of the diverse coalition that elected Obama doesn't match what is necessary to win his administration's immediate legislative and political agenda, let alone more far-reaching reforms." Webb goes on, "And herein lies the role of the left. Its main task, as it has been throughout our country's history, is to assist in reassembling, activating, uniting and giving a voice to common demands that unite this broad majority as well as draw in other people who didn't vote for Obama." The article makes clear that those on the left are to be drawn in behind Obama to push him forward so that the forces of finance capital do not triumph and pull his administration to the right.

The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which claims to be the country's largest socialist organization, published in its journal, *The Democratic Left* (Fall 2008), an election year statement by its honorary chair Frances Fox Piven, in which she argued for support for Obama. She wrote: "If turnout remains high, an Obama victory could mean a realignment of American electoral politics around a majority coalition similar to the one forged in the New Deal era, with African Americans and Latinos replacing the white South as the reliable core of the coalition. The composition of this new coalition would encourage presidential rhetoric that in turn could spur movement activism. It would simultaneously generate the hope that is always the fuel of movements from the bottom of society, and it would put in place a regime that is vulnerable to those movements. If there is political salvation in the American future, it can only be forged through the dynamic interplay between progressive social movements and elected politicians."

In the Spring 2009 issue of *The Democratic Left* (Spring 2009) carries an article by Bill Fletcher, titled "What Now for the Left?" writes, "The left tends to either abstain from electoral politics; marginalize itself with small-party candidacies in partisan elections; or tail after the Democrats. It is time for the left to invest in a different approach, one that I and others have called a neo-Rainbow approach, which emphasizes an independent politics and organization that operates inside and outside the Democratic Party. Working the electoral arena that way opens up opportunities to develop a mass base and hearing for a left/progressive agenda."

Solidarity argues that these approaches lead in the end to the subordination of the labor and social movements to the Democratic Party. All of these positions suggest that the movements should push Obama forward and upward, rather than building a politically independent movement with the ultimate goal of pushing him and his party aside. When leftists argue for supporting Obama and the Democrats, they disorient the movements and make it difficult to build the opposition needed to change foreign and domestic policy. As long as people think that Obama can be pressured to bring about health care reform, they will not build the independent movement that will be necessary to really make that happen. The inside/outside approach, advocated by Fletcher, tends in practice to become an inside pressure group approach - unless there is a serious strategy to carry voters out of the Democratic Party.

The International Socialist Organization (ISO), in the March-April, 2009 issue of *International Socialist Review* carries an article about "Obama's Mixed Message," suggesting that his talk of change has not been fulfilled in his political agenda. The ISR article continues, "Real change will be possible if and when the Obama Generation develops the political maturity and self-confidence to realize they don't have to wait on leaders or symbols to bring about a better world: They can and must organize to make history on their own." We in Solidarity share this view, which is another way of arguing, as we do here, that we must have an independent social movement if we are to make significant change in America. Such a social movement we would argue must eventually find political expression in a working class party.

Solidarity acknowledges that many social movement activists identify and work within the Democratic Party. We also know there is currently no viable, independent Left party to provide a political and electoral expression of our movements. Thus, we work with these activists everyday to build militant movements to the furthest extent possible, regardless of the particular face of capitalist power in the U.S. But we maintain that many of the crucial reform goals of these movements are incompatible with the dominant politics and historical role of the Democratic Party. Looking for influence within - or relationship with this or that figure in - a Democratic Party administration or coalition will weaken and disorient the movements.

Organizing and Program

At the present moment, as we face a deep economic crisis, we find that there is a great disjuncture between, on the one hand, the sense that we need a political, economic and social program that speaks to the crisis, and on the other, the low level resistance and struggle in society. We in the left have a wealth of historic programs we can draw upon from the socialist movement, while the crisis itself presents us with a ready made list of demands:

Jobs at a living wage for all who need work.

- Housing for all who need homes.
- Health care for all without cost.
- Free public education K to Ph.D.
- Free and adequate public transportation.

To achieve these demands we can see that we would need a more elaborate political program:

- End the wars and use the military budget for social needs.
- Socialize and transform U.S. industry under the control of citizens, workers and consumers.
- End the carbon-based economy of coal and petroleum to stop global warming.
- Take up the fight for the rights of people of color, immigrants, GLBTQs, and other groups which suffer discrimination.
- Create a working class political party to fight for these measures.

We can also see that immediate demands and a political program, to really lead to change, would have to be organized and conceived in such a way as to lead to a transition to socialism. Virtually all of the groups on the left have developed programs such as these, more elaborate and sometimes more elegant than the items listed here. What is missing, however, is the connection between the labor and social movement's struggle and such a program.

We in Solidarity put our emphasis therefore not on the development of a program or the construction of a political party, but on the rebuilding of the labor and social movements at the grassroots. We believe that at this time socialists should put their emphasis on rebuilding a layer of committed activists in the working class with a class struggle perspective, as well as reconstructing

such a group within the social movements. When movements become large and powerful, then programs take on real importance. Unfortunately in most parts of the country the movement does not have the size or strength to put forward a program except in the most limited way.

Sometimes even small movements facing big problems can and must put forward programs which speak to the magnitude of the issues and the needs of working people. So, for example, rank-and-file Detroit autoworkers called for the take over of the failing auto companies by a public trust that would transform what had been auto into a new transportation and energy corporation organized along environmental lines with workers having significant involvement in the actual running of the new organization. Such a program in that case put forward a vision of a different way of thinking about the industry, one which was transformative, environmentalist, publicly owned and worker managed. Where such programs seem necessary and appropriate they should be advanced, but such cases may be few at this time.

When movements—labor unions, immigrants, people of color, GLBTQ people, environmentalists—begin to intersect, then the combined movements begin to put forward programs which resemble those of working class parties. We have not yet reached such a stage.

Left Unity

We in Solidarity believe that we can engage in this task together with other socialists who share our commitment to building the movement while discussing our commonalities and our differences. We have found that in our work in the unions and social movements that we often share many of the ideals and methods of other left organizations and collectives which may not come from our political traditions. Since 2007 we have been in discussions with a number of groups—the Bay Area Activist Study Circle, the Freedom Road Socialist Organization, the League of Revolutionaries for a New America, Left Turn, the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, and the New York Study Group—and this summer will work together on the Revolutionary Work in Our Times Conference [1] to be held in Chicago from July 31 - August 2. We see a conference such as this as a way to advance our common agenda of building the movements. We believe that a united revolutionary left will be essential in building the forces that can confront the crisis, challenge the Obama administration, and begin to create a revolutionary movement in this country.

P.S.

* From Dan La Botz - May 17, 2009, Solidarity:
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/obamaw...>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.revolutionarywork.org/>