

# USA: The change we didn't get

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## The change we didn't get

***Lee Sustar analyzes Barack Obama's record after nearly two years in office—and explains why he failed to meet the expectations of his supporters.***

October 4, 2010

President Obama during a meeting with Cabinet members (Pete Souza)

TWO YEARS ago, tens of thousands of people gathered in a Denver stadium to hear candidate Barack Obama promise dramatic change as the country was slipping into a financial panic:

*"We meet at one of those defining moments, a moment when our nation is at war, our economy is in turmoil, and the American promise has been threatened once more. Tonight, more Americans are out of work and more are working harder for less. More of you have lost your homes, and even more are watching your home values plummet. More of you have cars you can't afford to drive, credit cards, bills you can't afford to pay, and tuition that's beyond your reach."*

That was true then. It's even more true now.

These days, of course, the political momentum has shifted to the right, with the Republicans expected to score big gains, if not take control of both houses of Congress.

To use the vaguely obscene but appropriate cliché: WTF?

The pundits have a ready answer, and they're already rehearsing their Election Night pronouncements: Obama strayed too far to the left, alienating voters in what is instinctively a "center-right nation." Just as voters delivered a rebuff to George W. Bush in 2006 by delivering Congress to the Democrats, the electorate will reign in Obama for pursuing his progressive, even quasi-socialist, agenda.

There are plenty of signs that Obama and his advisers agree with that assessment. For example, word is that Obama's top economics adviser Larry Summers, the outgoing chair of the National Economic Council, will be replaced by someone more business-friendly, like former Xerox CEO Anne Mulcahy. As if Summers, an architect of financial deregulation who made millions working part-time

for a hedge fund, is a dangerous left-wing radical.

No, the real reason that Obama's bubble has burst is his failure to use his widespread popularity to extract concessions from capital, and use them to consolidate his political base. The Democrats are about to take a pasting not because they were too bold, but because they tailored their policies to Wall Street and Corporate America, at the expense of working people on almost every issue.

At one level, that's no surprise. The Democrats are, as the ex-Republican adviser Kevin Phillips once noted, history's second-most enthusiastic capitalist party.

But you might have assumed that the Democrats' ardor for the rich must at least coexist with a desire to hold on to the power that fell into their hands. By taking office amid the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression, Obama and congressional Democrats had an opportunity to bury the Republicans by pushing through legislation that would have solidified the support of working-class and poor voters for a generation.

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IT COULD have happened. But it didn't.

Obama and the Democrats did pass a \$787 billion stimulus package. Yet while it was the biggest in U.S. history, it was also underpowered—both in the total amount spent and its significant reliance on tax cuts rather than direct spending.

And while the Bush administration created the \$700 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) to bail out the banks, the Obama administration used the money not just to keep propping up financial institutions, but also to nationalize General Motors. Rather than save auto jobs, the Obama administration oversaw a bankruptcy that led to tens of thousands of layoffs.

Next came the blizzard of money from the Federal Reserve in the form of near-zero interest rates and a range of loan programs—but it all fell into the pockets of the big banks. Homeowners facing foreclosure had to worry and wait for federal programs that have only helped a tiny minority of those in need.

It's that double standard that rankles—or infuriates—those who looked to Obama with, well, hope. Meanwhile, Corporate America isn't investing, even though business is sitting on a cash hoard of \$1.8 trillion—thanks in large part to the financial bailouts and those low interest rates.

But none of that fazes Washington's self-appointed wise men and women. In their view, Obama veered too far with the left with health care reform, and that's what's animating the right-wing backlash around Tea Party.

Wrong again. A new AP poll found that 40 percent of people felt that the health care legislation signed into law by Obama, which consolidated the role of the private insurance industry, didn't go far enough—compared to just 20 percent who thought it went too far.

Incredibly, the health care law—which could have been a hallmark Democratic achievement like Social Security and Medicare—has instead become a millstone around the Democrats' necks.

At the same, the billions in federal funds flowed into the banks, and the states got aid that was far too small to avert the budget cuts and layoffs that are sweeping the country. That has only compounded the social misery generated by years of mass unemployment, which the current weak recovery hasn't alleviated, and won't for years to come.

Then there are Obama's wars. The president delivered on his promise to remove all U.S. combat troops from Iraq—if you believe that those heavily armed 50,000 soldiers were left behind for the foreseeable future to act as school crossing guards.

In Afghanistan, Obama dispatched a total of 50,000 more troops, bringing the total number of U.S. soldiers there to more than 100,000—fighting a losing war to prop up a government of crooks, drug runners and warlords, while innocent Afghans suffer the terror of the U.S. military machine. A Rasmussen poll published in early September found that “just 18 percent of voters say the situation in Afghanistan will improve over the next six months, the lowest level of confidence since last October.”

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BAIL OUT the bankers, give a blank check to the generals, shaft the workers and abandon the poor—whose numbers, by the way, are at record levels. It all adds up to a recipe for electoral defeat for the Democrats.

None of that was inevitable. Franklin Roosevelt, to whom Obama was compared by many when he took office in 2009, managed to turn a far worse economic crisis into a political opportunity, locking in Democratic dominance of Congress for most of the next six decades.

But Roosevelt faced something Obama didn't: an insurgent working class that mobilized mass protests, general strikes in key cities and union organizing drives at the heart of U.S. industry. Elected on a fairly conservative program, Roosevelt was nevertheless forced by both pressure from below and the intractable economic crisis to take bold and risky actions—and put people to work.

The Corporate America of the 1930s screamed “socialism” at Roosevelt, too. He even said he “welcomed” the bosses' hatred.

But Roosevelt was shoring up U.S. capitalism, not threatening it. “I am the best friend the profit system ever had,” he said. He recognized that the creation of government programs to give people jobs, such as the Works Progress Administration, might be expensive, but would provide political benefits, too.

Today's Democrats, however, enthralled by decades of neoliberal, pro-market economic dogma, don't seem able or willing to use their political power to discipline corporate bosses, even when the long-term interests of U.S. capitalism are on the line—the incredibly expensive yet spectacularly ineffective health care reform legislation is the best example.

Long gone are the days when a Democratic senator who lost an election would take a quiet do-nothing job as a university president. Take, for example, Tom Daschle, the former majority leader of the U.S. Senate, who today has a far more lucrative job as a rainmaker for one of the most high-powered law firms in Washington. Other members of Congress would like similar career options. So perhaps it's not surprising that nominally pro-worker liberals lined up to support the slap-on-the-wrist law that was billed as financial regulatory reform.

Without the kind of mass movements that forced Roosevelt's hand, Obama felt pressure only from above. So the bankers, despite being effectively nationalized, still got to block any serious threat to their wealth. And the rich, worried that the Bush tax cut bonanza might soon be repealed, were able to bankroll the Tea Party protests that tapped into popular anger over the economy and diverted it into a racist and anti-immigrant backlash.

Liberal organizations and organized labor bear some responsibility for this state of affairs. Having

failed to mobilize against the giveaway to the banks or to demand jobs, they left an opening for the billionaires to manufacture a “movement” to denounce the status quo.

The One Nation march set for October 2 is a last-ditch response. But while it will voice important demands, such as increased social spending and jobs creation program, it's certain to be dominated by Democrats who promise to stand up for working people, even as their policies go precisely in the opposite direction.

The failures of the Obama administration are, in the end, a reminder of what U.S. history has always shown: that without large, fighting mass movements, the Democrats, like the Republicans, will always defend the status quo.

**Lee Sustar**

November 4, 2010

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## **How Obama got from hope to hopeless**

***The Democrats were handed a golden opportunity to transform U.S. politics for years to come—and they blew it. Alan Maass looks at how it happened—and why.***

BARACK OBAMA thinks you really ought to be more patient.

“It took time to free the slaves,” he said in a speech at the end of September. “It took time for women to get the vote. It took time for workers to get the right to organize.”

Well...he's certainly right about that. The struggles of the past that changed the world didn't happen overnight.

But Obama wasn't just making an observation about history. This was his excuse for how little the Democrats have done to meet the expectations of their supporters—they need more time.

The real question is: More time for what? The Democrats haven't moved at even a snail's pace on so many of the issues that motivated millions of people to support them in 2008—keeping people under threat of foreclosure in their homes, creating good-paying jobs, reducing the staggering inequality between rich and poor, reversing the shrill intolerance of the Christian Right, ending America's wars and occupations around the globe.

On the other hand, Obama and his administration acted plenty fast when they wanted to.

It took almost no time at all for the Obama White House to embrace the bailout of Wall Street engineered by the Bush administration and put U.S. taxpayers on the hook for trillions of dollars—and only slightly longer to make it clear the Democrats wouldn't require the least concessions from the banksters in return.

It took barely a month or two before the administration was defending the worst outrages of Bush's shredding of civil liberties in the name of the “war on terror.” About four months, and Obama's Justice Department was in federal court to defend the anti-gay Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and

“don’t ask, don’t tell” policy in the military. On health care reform, it took a full year, but Obama and the Democrats abandoned almost every proposal that might have threatened the profits of the insurance industry.

Barack Obama wants you to believe that the “change we need” takes time. But when it comes to the “change they need”—the policies that America’s economic and political elite want, from rescuing Wall Street, to expanding the U.S. war in Afghanistan, to privatizing public education—Obama delivers like clockwork.

That’s why the Democrats lost ground in the November 2 election—not because a majority of the population suddenly embraced the Republicans and their pro-corporate, bigoted, anti-worker policies, but because Obama and the Democrats disappointed millions of people who believed them when they talked about hope and change.

And it isn’t stopping, either. The day after the election, Obama devoted an interminable news conference to promising he would compromise with the Republicans on any issue they wanted. As if he hadn’t spent the last two years doing exactly that.

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THIS IS a far cry from how Obama looked two years ago. He won the 2008 election by a solid margin and started his term in office with sky-high popularity. A Time magazine cover morphed together pictures of Obama and Franklin Delano Roosevelt to capture the expectation that the incoming president would preside over another New Deal. Newsweek countered a few weeks later with a cover headline that read “We’re all socialists now.”

Newsweek’s claim was based on a distorted definition of socialism as nothing more than government intervention in the economy. But it turned out that Obama and the Democrats were so wedded to the conservative economic dogmas of the past era that they wouldn’t follow even this limited program, much less fulfill the Republicans’ frantic nightmare of Bolshevism in power.

Within a month of taking office, the new administration won passage of a \$787 billion economic stimulus law—roughly the same size as FDR’s New Deal programs in inflation-adjusted dollars, though more weighted toward corporate tax breaks and too small by the estimates of even moderate administration officials. But that was the last of economic stimulus.

Meanwhile, Obama had put together an economics team that would set the agenda for the rest of the next two years—and it was filled with people who were part of the Wall Street mania that set off the 2008 financial crisis. Documentary filmmaker Charles Ferguson ran down the list in a Salon.com article:

Larry Summers, the man behind nearly every disastrous policy that created the crisis, fresh from making \$20 million from hedge funds and investment banks while at Harvard, to become the director of the National Economic Council; Tim Geithner, plucked from the New York Federal Reserve Bank and put in charge at Treasury; as Geithner’s chief of staff, Mark Patterson, a former Goldman Sachs lobbyist; to succeed Geithner at the New York Fed, William C. Dudley, who was chief economist of Goldman Sachs during the housing bubble years; Michael Froman, straight from Citigroup Alternative Investments, which lost billions while its executives became rich, to coordinate economic policy for the National Security Council; Jacob Lew, who was the CFO of Citigroup Alternative Investments, as deputy secretary of state (and now, Obama’s nominee to run the Office of Management and Budget); Gary Gensler, a former Goldman executive who helped ban the regulation of over-the-counter derivatives, to lead the Commodity Futures Trading Commission,

which regulates derivatives; Mary Shapiro, former head of the Financial Industry Regulatory Agency, the investment banking industry's self-policing body, to run the Securities and Exchange Commission; reappointing Ben Bernanke. And on and on.

Not a single socialist among them.

There shouldn't be any surprise about the policies that would come from such people. The administration adopted nearly wholesale the Wall Street bailout scheme cooked up in the final months of the Bush presidency—and why not, since Tim Geithner had been one of its main authors. On the other hand, programs to help homeowners at risk of foreclosure, funded at a fraction of the level of the bailout for the banks, proved to be completely ineffective, helping only a fraction of those in need.

Obama and his advisers opposed any real effort to control pay and bonuses for executives at Wall Street banks, even the ones that were still in business only because of handouts from the government—the president limited himself to occasional complaints about “fat cat bankers” that were quickly withdrawn. Legislative proposals to impose regulations on Wall Street languished in Congress—long enough for the banksters to organize a multimillion-dollar lobbying campaign to gut them.

“It is, in short, overwhelmingly clear that President Obama and his administration decided to side with the oligarchs—or at least not to challenge them,” Ferguson concluded.

With the Democrats committed to the policies Wall Street needed to survive, the Republicans—reduced in both houses of Congress to the smallest numbers for either party in a generation—took advantage of the opportunity to pose as anti-bailout crusaders.

Of course, the Republicans' real agenda is to make the rich and powerful even richer and more powerful still—as they showed with their nearly unanimous opposition to any re-regulation of the financial system or repeal of the Bush-era tax cuts for the super-wealthy. But the Democrats opened the way for the GOP to cloak its pro-corporate program with complaints about the Democrats' giveaway to the bankers.

The Republicans' semi-populist rhetoric is one important factor behind the success of their campaigns in the congressional elections this month. Thus, according to the New York Times, the GOP was able to overcome the Democrats' traditional advantage in polls when people are asked which party is better able to create jobs. Incredibly, the edge went to the anti-worker Republicans.

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THIS HAS been the political dynamic of the past year at least: By serving the interests of the elite and abandoning any commitment to even meager reforms, the Democrats disappoint and demoralize their core supporters, and they give the Republicans the opportunity to energize theirs.

And it has played out on every single issue—there are no exceptions. To name just a few:

— Labor's top priority for the new Obama administration was the Employee Free Choice Act, a proposal for labor law reform that, among other things, would make it easier for workers to join unions. Obama spoke out in favor of EFCA during the campaign, but after Corporate America launched a furious lobbying offensive against the legislation, he and the Democrats caved—EFCA was gutted of its most important provisions, and even what was left died before coming to a vote in Congress.

— Obama made health care reform the centerpiece of his first years in office. But he began the “debate” by excluding proposals for a single-payer system that would cut out the parasitic private insurance industry, while lobbyists for the health care industry were welcomed to participate in drafting the legislation. The result was a law that further entrenches the power of the health care industry.

The outcome was so disorienting for even supporters of reform that Republicans—whose uncompromising opposition to all reform measures seemed wildly out of touch at the beginning of 2009—touted their position during the 2010 campaign, while Democrats tried to run away from the issue.

— Supporters of LGBT equality turned out in large numbers for Obama—even though he said during the campaign that he opposed same-sex marriage—because he promised to work for the repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act and “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

But there was no action from the Obama White House, even as opinion polls showed majorities opposed to discriminatory policies growing to overwhelming levels. Instead, the Obama Justice Department went to court to defend DOMA and “don’t ask, don’t tell,” even after they were declared unconstitutional.

— Obama promised to enact immigration reform and fix a broken system that victimized the most vulnerable. As president, however, his administration has escalated the federal government’s enforcement measures, leading to a record number of deportations under his watch.

When Democrats in Congress allowed one piece of pro-immigrant legislation to come to a vote—the DREAM Act to give a minority of undocumented youth a restricted path to citizenship—they attached it to a Pentagon appropriations bill in a cynical maneuver against Republicans.

— With only a few weeks to go before the election, it seemed that the Democrats would at least fulfill their promise to repeal the tax cuts passed under George Bush that funneled hundreds of billions of dollars into the pockets of the richest few over a period of 10 years. But once again, Corporate America pitched a fit, the Republicans portrayed the proposal to not renew the tax cuts as a tax increase—and the gutless Democrats backed down without even forcing a Senate vote on the question.

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THAT LIST could go on and on, and no one reading SocialistWorker.org is likely to be anything but pissed off about it—not only about Obama’s broken promises and pandering to the U.S. ruling class on every issue, but the very real impact all this has had in making the lives of working-class people more difficult, more stressful, more prone to poverty and violence.

But even from the narrow perspective of mainstream politics and this month’s elections, Obama and the Democrats have been their own worst enemies.

Their victories in 2006 and 2008 depended on millions of people feeling greater confidence that there could be an alternative to the dark years of Bush, Cheney and the Republicans. Now, huge numbers of people feel the opposite—so instead of turning out on Election Day in unprecedented numbers, they stayed home. ABC News’ polling expert calculated that 29 million Obama voters from 2008 didn’t cast a ballot in 2010.

As Patricia Elizondo, president of a Milwaukee International Association of Machinists local, told the New York Times before the election, “People have been unemployed for two years, and they’re

unhappy that the health care bill was not as good as they expected. Two years ago, I had many members going door-to-door to campaign. Now they're saying, 'Why should I? We supported that candidate, but he didn't follow through.'"

And the response of Obama and the Democrats? Blame their own supporters.

Yukking it up at a \$30,000-a-plate fundraiser in Connecticut in September, Obama laughed at supporters who "just congenitally, tend to...see the glass as half empty. If we get an historic health care bill passed—oh, well, the public option wasn't there. If you get the financial reform bill passed—then, well, I don't know about this particular derivatives rule, I'm not sure that I'm satisfied with that. And gosh, we haven't yet brought about world peace."

In the wake of the Republican victory, there'll be even more abuse heaped on anyone who dares to remember Obama's promises as a presidential candidate—and nothing but offers to "reach across the aisle" toward the bigots and reactionaries who run the Republican Party today.

Obama's day-after-the-election press conference—where he ditched the Democrats' already-compromised energy legislation, signaled his willingness to accept an extension of the Bush-era tax cut giveaway to the rich, and generally offered to negotiate on every issue—made it clear what direction the White House is headed.

But Obama and his top advisers have had the right-turn signal on for weeks. In a long New York Times Magazine article on "The education of President Obama," an unnamed "senior White House official" declared, "You'll hear more about exports and less about public spending. You'll hear more about initiative and private sector and less about the Department of Energy. You'll hear more about government as a financier and less about government as a hirer."

My question is this: When does Barack Obama ever talk about "government as a hirer"?

The Democrats started 2009 with the White House in their possession, control of both houses of Congress by the biggest majorities in decades, and widespread public sentiment in favor of transforming Washington politics.

And they blew it.

Obama has no one to blame but himself, but this should be a lesson for those who care about justice and equality: Don't expect political leaders to bring the "change we need" without being pressured to do so.

As Obama helpfully pointed out, it did take time to free the slaves and win the vote for women and gain the right to organize unions. It took time because the ruling elite of this country, including its mainstream political parties, was dead set against allowing those things to happen. It took time for slaves and abolitionists, for women and men, for millions of working people to organize a struggle that could win those profound changes.

That's where we have to turn today to build a movement of real hope and real change.

**Alan Maass**

November 5, 2010



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## **EDITORIALS: Is the Obama presidency unraveling?**

***Both Republicans and Democrats are proving that they're completely out of touch.***

**June 30, 2010**

THE SIGNS stapled to telephone poles and houses along Louisiana's Gulf coast said it all: "President Obama, BP took my money. Where's my change?"

The BP eco-catastrophe—and the utter failure of the federal government's response—are certainly driving discontent with Barack Obama and his administration. But they aren't the only issues where disappointment with a president who represented the hopes and expectations of millions of people is keenly felt—not by a long shot.

Obama's popularity rating has fallen to the lowest point in his 18 months in office. According to a new Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll, 62 percent of people feel the country is on the wrong track, the highest level since before the election. Just one-third of those surveyed thought the economy will get better over the next year.

Will the right wing be the beneficiaries of this growing bitterness with the Obama presidency?

If you were to judge from Washington politics alone, the answer would probably be yes. After all, the right has been allowed to dominate much of the mainstream political discussion. Even the most commonsense appeal for an extension of unemployment benefits were met with an avalanche of resistance from Republican—but also some Democratic—lawmakers, who held up the measure until the last minute.

To add insult to injury, the main objection for many lawmakers was that the bill extending benefits would also begin to close a tax loophole for the rich—that was enough to justify their all-out opposition.

The fact that extending benefits to people suffering the effects of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression is even up for debate could lead you to ask who's really in control in Washington—the Obama administration that took office with the promise of change for working people or the Republicans who represent the opposite?

Or it could lead to another conclusion: The whole bunch is completely out of touch with the needs of working-class people.

This underlines the difference between politics from on high, as practiced in the halls of Congress, the White House and the corporate media—and politics from below that express the experiences of working-class people and the ideas they are moving toward. The gap between them today is wide and getting wider.

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THIS ISN'T to say that what happens in mainstream politics is irrelevant. On the contrary, when the right wing is allowed to dominate the debate in Washington, they can get hearing for their ideas on a

larger scale and make people on the left feel marginalized and isolated.

For instance, the fact that a small but well-funded group of Tea Party activists—preaching their message against government spending on social services—get so much face time on TV leads left-leaning people to feel less confident about the direction that public opinion is going in.

And even though the “populist” tea party movement is, in fact, disproportionately upper- and middle-class—76 percent have annual household incomes above \$50,000, and one-fifth make more than \$100,000, according to a New York Times poll—and largely an invention of the Republican Party establishment, still, their ideas can gain ground throughout the population. Thus, an April Rasmussen poll found that nearly half (48 percent) of Americans find some points with which to agree with the Tea Party.

But if right-wing ideas do get a hearing, the blame should also fall on Barack Obama and the Democrats for conceding and retreating again and again on the issues that are most important to their liberal base.

This goes to the heart of what the Democratic Party represents in the U.S. two-party system. It’s seen as the party that stands for ordinary people and is committed to civil rights and liberal policies. That can lead to radical-sounding rhetoric, especially come election-time.

But when the Democrats take office, their job—as a party committed to the interests of Corporate America and the mainstream political establishment—is to uphold the status quo.

This means, for example, that the Democrats’ campaign-trail promises that they would push for serious reform of the health care system evaporated once in power, when the priority became coming up with legislation that was acceptable to the insurance and pharmaceutical industries. Barack Obama’s tough talk about Wall Street’s excesses is nowhere to be found in a financial reform bill that will change very little about how the banker robbers operate.

In a situation like that, the right can gain ground—for one thing, because no one on the liberal end of the incredibly narrow spectrum of mainstream politics is challenging conservative ideas, and for another, because the Democrats’ liberal base becomes disillusioned and demoralized.

But it’s important to see that this doesn’t necessarily mean the population as a whole is shifting to the right.

In fact, the Obama administration’s inability to provide a solution to the crisis for workers can also translate into a leftward shift in public sentiment.

For instance, recent polls show that—contrary to the Tea Party agenda—ordinary people want the government to intervene more on behalf of poor and working class people. According to a recent poll, over half of respondents agreed with the idea that the government should take a larger and stronger role in making the economy work for average Americans—including creating jobs and training programs, helping cut health care costs and combating corporate greed, according the poll conducted by Lake Research Partners for the Center for Community Change and the Ms. Foundation for Women.

Remember that this result comes despite the tidal wave of rhetoric from conservative politicians and commentators that the Obama administration is presiding over budget-busting, big-government policies run amok—and the failure of any mainstream Democrat, including the White House, to call them out the right-wingers for their lies.

Instead, this poll result reflects workers' firsthand experiences of the economic crisis—slightly less than half of Americans worry that they, or someone in their household, will be out of a job in the next year, and more than half worry that they or a family member won't work enough hours so they can make ends meet.

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THIS HIGHLIGHTS the inherent contradictions in the solutions of the right wing. The Republicans decry "big government" for hurting the "little guy"—which means they're for shredding the social programs that actually benefit the "little guy."

At the same time, however, the Democrats aren't proposing anything that represents a real alternative for workers—though they have plenty to offer Corporate America in the form of bailouts and watered-down financial reform.

No one within Washington politics will expose these fake solutions to the crisis for what they are—giveaways to the rich and austerity for the rest of us—much less provide genuine solutions. For that to happen, it will take a stronger left, organized from the grassroots.

In building that alternative, it's critical to be a part of the struggles that emerge over a number of issues that matter to working-class people.

From the vantage point of mainstream politics alone, the passage of the Arizona's anti-immigrant racial profiling bill SB 1070 exposed how racism and scapegoating has become acceptable in the mainstream political debate—and also how such ideas have gained a wider hearing, at least to some extent, as evidenced by the majority support for SB 1070 in opinion polls.

But at the same time, the outpouring of anger and resistance to the bigoted Arizona law among a core of people determined to stand up against bigotry shows the potential for shifting the mainstream political debate to our side. Immigrant rights supporters showed what the impact of the law would mean for all people—undocumented immigrants as well as documented—and began organizing a fight that depends on solidarity, not division.

This isn't the only area where people are recognizing the need for solidarity to find a way forward. Like LGBT activists who are organizing support for union hotel workers' boycott in San Francisco, alerting visitors for LGBT Pride Week not to stay in boycotted hotels. Or union dockworkers and Palestinian solidarity activists who stood together and stopped an Israeli ship from unloading for 24 hours at the Port of Oakland.

These small actions give a glimpse of future bigger struggles to come. But to reach those bigger struggles, the organizing has to begin now.

**Socialist Worker**

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## **EDITORIALS: The year of frustrated hopes**

***Why has Barack Obama disappointed his supporters on so many issues?***

**January 27, 2010**

ONE YEAR ago, millions of people were in Washington for the inauguration of Barack Obama as president.

They wanted to witness history being made—the first African American president taking the oath of office in a land built on slavery. But they were also celebrating the end of the long years of Republican dominance in Washington and the expectation that a new era was beginning in U.S. politics.

Obama's oft-repeated statement from the campaign spoke to the hopes of millions of people: "We are the change we have been waiting for."

One year later, we're still waiting—and the idea that Barack Obama is part of anything to do with change seems like a joke. The disillusionment in Obama has left many people wondering if they were wrong to hope at all.

True, expectations in the new administration a year ago were so high that Obama was bound to disappoint. As USA Today summarized the results of a poll at the time:

Eight in 10 said he will improve conditions for minorities and the poor, and 76 percent said he'll increase respect for the United States abroad. About seven in 10 said he'll be able to improve education and the environment. More than 60 percent said he will reduce unemployment, bring U.S. troops home from Iraq, improve the health care system, create a strong economic recovery and keep the U.S. safe from terrorism. More than half said he will be able to bring troops home from Afghanistan, reduce U.S. oil dependence, heal political divisions and control federal spending.

That's how strong the faith in the new administration was—a majority of people thought Obama would bring home troops from Afghanistan, even though he explicitly promised to escalate that war.

But the bitterness about Barack Obama goes far beyond Afghanistan—it's the failure of the administration to accomplish anything that was expected of it that's feeding a sense of demoralization.

Obama had the opportunity to change the direction of U.S. politics and society—and the popularity to accomplish it. Even those on the left, like us at Socialist Worker, who were skeptical of Obama's promises concluded that the multiple crises facing the White House would compel the president to move away from the free-market, neoliberal policies that characterized not only Bush, but the Clinton administration before him.

As we wrote in an editorial right after the election:

The difference is that Obama has become president after the discrediting of the right-wing agenda that dominated U.S. politics for the last three decades, including the Clinton years. On the economy especially, Obama faces a severe crisis that won't respond to the tame government measures popular with policymakers in the neoliberal era...

In short, the scale of the problems and questions the U.S. faces—not just economically, but in the areas of foreign policy and more—is driving Obama toward a different agenda.

On the contrary, instead of using economic policies to counteract the worst mass unemployment since the 1930s, Obama rushed to aid the banks. Government loans, investments or guarantees to banks and other financial institutions amounted to some \$13 trillion—nearly the size of the entire

annual economic output of the U.S.

For the rest of us, there were only crumbs: A mortgage relief program that benefited just a fraction of hard-pressed homeowners, a modest tax break and an underpowered economic stimulus plan that diverted money into tax cuts rather than job creation.

Next in line was the Pentagon brass, which got an increase in defense spending beyond what Bush had proposed—and a \$30 billion, 30,000-troop “surge” in Afghanistan. On health care, the White House outsourced the details of reform legislation to members of Congress like Sen. Max Baucus, a wholly owned subsidiary of the health insurance industry."

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WHY HAS Obama been such a disappointment—seemingly in thrall to all the dogmas and policies that were discredited by the self-destruction of the Bush administration?

In fact, Obama was never a maverick or a reformer. As Socialist Worker pointed out in 2008:

For all his ability to galvanize working people and youth to get out the vote, his campaign relied on huge amounts of money from corporate donors, allowing him to spend an estimated \$650 million, by far the most in U.S. history. To tap those funds, Obama, the former community organizer, abandoned the public financing system that was established to counteract the role of big money in politics.

The other factor in judgments about Obama a year ago was whether he would face pressure from below to deliver on his rhetorical promises of change. As we wrote:

[T]he exact shape of [Obama’s] agenda will be determined by how much pressure he feels from below. Will his economic team at first fall back on familiar neoliberal prescriptions, or will they turn to a more dramatic intervention? Obama has said he will have a program for infrastructure improvements, but will his proposal put a priority on creating good-paying union jobs?

How those questions are answered will depend in important measure on how our side organizes to make its hopes felt in Washington.

In fact, the biggest forces in the Democratic Party’s base have completely failed to hold Obama’s feet to the fire.

Consider the case of the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), proposed legislation that would make it easier for people to join unions. Obama promised labor repeatedly that he’d sign the bill if it got to his desk. Instead, the president looked the other way as business orchestrated a backlash. And the unions, rather than mobilizing to fight for jobs and labor law reform, have been divided among themselves.

It didn’t have to turn out this way. The Republic Windows & Doors factory occupation in December 2008 highlighted the potential for labor to take the initiative against big business discredited by the economic crash. Some of the local activism around EFCA showed that labor at the grassroots was ready to mobilize. Instead of relying on this, however, union leaders contented themselves with the illusion of influence, thanks to their renewed access to the White House.

This is the context of the victory of Republican blowhard Scott Brown in the special senate election in Massachusetts. Brown’s ability to posture as a populist and make inroads among working-class voters was the direct result of an administration whose chief achievements were a colossal giveaway to the banks and expansion of the war in Afghanistan, while social cutbacks deepen and

unemployment rises.

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IT SHOULD be emphasized, however, that Brown's victory doesn't mean the clock has been turned back to the Bush years, when the Republicans rode a wave of post-September 11 war hysteria to push through their agenda. The deeply felt sentiment for change that propelled Obama throughout 2008 remains.

The cynics who shrugged off the enthusiasm that Obama generated during the 2008 election were wrong then, and they remain so today. Obama won big not because he had the bankers' seal of approval, but because working people want the change that he seemed to promise.

The growing anger with the Obama administration among precisely those who supported it most enthusiastically can become the basis for rebuilding movements that recognize the importance of relying on grassroots strength. As Deepak Bhargava, executive director of the Center for Community Change, wrote:

Beginning now, and for the long haul, progressives need to recommit to movement building and organizing at scale as the only path to transformative change. The great changes in American history—the abolition of slavery, suffrage for women, the New Deal, civil rights and Great Society—were not the product of electoral shifts alone or insider influence peddling. They were the result of millions of people acting and taking history into their own hands.

Such movements have to be built from the bottom up, and that will mean much patient persuading and organizing. But each step we take sets the stage for future struggles. An important example of what's possible now is the fight to defend public education in California, which building on campuses and in communities across the state toward a day of protests and strikes on March 4.

For the left, the task remains the same as it was a year ago: Build the movements, unions and organizations that represent our agenda, whether or not a Democrat is in office. There are no shortcuts—and the time to act is now.

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