

# The Financial Calamity, Blacks and Obama

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AS WE GO to press prior to the November 4 presidential election, the deepening financial calamity exposes how the "fundamentals" of the economy impact working people, particularly African Americans. The so-called unfettered free market system has been a failure.

The "race factor," or racism to be more explicit, shows the contradictions of American society.

The issue of the economy has given the presidential campaign of Barack Obama, the first Black candidate for a major party, a big boost. After eight years of Bush-Cheney, Obama should be a shoo-in. Democrats are expected to garner big majorities in the Senate and House of Representatives.

Yet as television pundits and print commentators have noted, Obama is in a close race with the Republican John McCain for one reason: the color of his skin.

While there are some differences on foreign policy, they're not what's driving this election. Both would forcefully defend the interests of the ruling class. Obama has repeatedly gone out of his way to state his willingness to use preemptive military force in Pakistan or against Iran, as well as increasing U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan.

Because the impact of the economic crisis and the presidential elections are so tied together, it is difficult to separate the two for African Americans. The blows to the economy are not new; the chance to have a Black person elected president is. No African-American leader thought this was possible or realistic even a year ago.

Obama has gone out of his way to remain cool under attack and not appear as the angry Black man that many whites fear. The careful tone of Obama's Black supporters and his coolness under fire has a lot to do with the racist history of the country and how he and others have responded to charges of "elitism."

## **Race, the Economy and Politics**

Blacks are very familiar with code words being used to put down or be condescending to Black men and women. The constant charge of "inexperience" by Republicans, for example, is the latest of a long history of racial code words against capable Black men. (Obama is as experienced as another Senator from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln, when he was elected president and then led the U.S. Civil War.)

The economy of course is a huge issue for African Americans. Not surprisingly there is general anger about the \$700 billion Wall Street bailout. No such bailout occurred for the victims of Katrina in New Orleans or for the permanently unemployed and underemployed in Black America.

Most Black Congressional representatives initially voted against the bailout. They changed their minds only after Barack Obama said it was necessary to vote "yes" for political reasons. He "promised" a future bailout of the "middle class" after he wins the presidency.

In September official unemployment numbers for African Americans stood at 11.4 percent; for the general population 6.1 percent; and for whites 5.4 percent. (The real numbers are much higher across the board, as Jack Rasmus shows in his article elsewhere in this issue of ATC. [1])

In addition, there are some 6.1 million part-time workers who want to work fulltime. Blacks are a big part of that group. Rising health care costs hit African Americans hardest, many of whom work jobs that don't provide health insurance. The need for universal health care is obvious. As bad as the financial calamity is for average working Americans, it is qualitatively worse for Blacks.

African Americans nevertheless see the economic crisis and the presidential election as connected. The possibility of the first Black president is inspiring and hopeful. Voting for Barack Obama is viewed as more than just voting for "Black pride" but as a possible firewall to limit the worse blows of the financial crisis.

The Republicans understand this too, which is why the first African American presidential candidate for a major party is attacked on "cultural values" and his "character" - which, as McCain and Palin's handlers fully understand, means skin color - to mobilize the votes of bigots and those not fully conscious of their bias attitudes.

The racist campaign against Obama is barely hidden. The code words and phrases emphasizing his middle name "Hussein" and "palling around with terrorists" are aimed at getting the white voter to vote on "fear of the Black man" over economic self interest. Bush in 2004 linked Democrats to being soft on "terrorism." Obama has a double whammy — a friend of terrorists (maybe a sleeper) and being an "alien" to blue collar Americans.)

### **"Racism Without Racists"**

A revealing survey was conducted by Stanford University with the Associated Press and Yahoo in September. It showed that Obama would be at least six percentage points higher in every poll if he were white. What is known as the "Bradley effect" (referring to the African-American Democratic candidate, Tom Bradley, for Governor of California in 1982 who lost even though he was up by more than 10 points in many polls) is why few assume that the economic crisis and other indicators assure that Barack Obama will win the November 4 election.

The Steelworkers Union in Pennsylvania is going door to door in working class neighborhoods to win support for Obama. They've heard comments from white co-workers about not voting for "that boy" and outright about never voting for a Black man - and these statements are only from those who are open and honest about their feelings. These are workers who have lost their jobs or benefits and are angry about the Wall Street bailout.

Phillip Goff, however, a social psychologist at UCLA who focuses his research on "racism without racists," notes: "When we fixate on the racist individuals, we've focused on the least interesting way that race works. Most of the way race functions is without the need for racial animus."

In other words, he explains, the problem is those whites and others who believe in racial equality and have no objection to electing a Black person as president, yet who discriminate unconsciously. This is particularly true for older Americans. The younger generations who grew up after the victory of the civil rights movements in the 1960s tend to be less concerned about race and voting for a Black president.

I would argue further that today, the economy is causing a majority of whites and other ethnic groups to put their own self interests over their anti-Black biases. I believe if that weren't true, the race factor of six percent would be larger, and polls would not show more and more white men willing to say that they will vote for Obama for his economic positions, even if they don't see him as "Joe six-pack."

Can this new trend negate the Bradley/race factor? The fact that Obama won the nomination when a similar smear campaign was launched by the Clintons shows how the depth of racism among whites in 2008 is much weaker than it was in 1982.

This is not to minimize the virulence of the hardcore racist minority. The extreme ultra-evangelist leaders of the Republican Party will play the race card as Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, the vice presidential nominee and the attack dog on the issue, continues to do in public.

Palin whips up the "base" that leads to shouts of "kill him" and "he's a terrorist." The crowd at one Florida event even began shouting epithets at an African American member of a TV crew. It shows the logic of racism among a mob-like crowd.

In Macomb County, Michigan, a mostly white working class area, pro-McCain ads have used images of the former disgraced mayor of Detroit, Kwame Kilpatrick, and Obama's former minister, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, to turn against Obama.

Ads claiming Obama to be a "Muslim" are also being circulated. Right wing talk show hosts regularly refer to Obama as "a communist, socialist and terrorist" and that "he's not one of us" (meaning the infamous "blue collar white worker" that Hillary Clinton more discreetly talked about during the Democratic primaries.)

### **Does It Matter?**

Many independents, socialists and opponents of lesser evilism who back Ralph Nader or Cynthia McKinney may say it doesn't matter if Obama wins or loses; he is the head of a major ruling party.

What's missing in this analysis is the context. The vast majority of African Americans who know and experience racism do care about the outcome. They see the virulent racism directed at Obama as directed at them. In that sense the November 4 vote is a referendum on race relations. Consider one point: if Obama is leading every major poll by 6-10 points as he is on October 8, yet loses even while the Democratic Party makes big gains in Congress, the impact and angry reaction could be huge in the African American community.

While I believe that the changes since the victory of the civil rights revolution for Blacks are shown by the facts, a racist defeat of Obama could set back those gains - and open the door to encourage the bigots to further push back on other programs that benefit minorities and women. Progress on race relations could be setback, especially for the Black middle class.

## **Few Illusions about Future**

African Americans are quite aware of the racial contradictions of American society and history. That's why they see the current economic crisis and the presidential election tied together at least until the election is over. They recognize that voting for Obama is not a solution to the lack of jobs and opportunities.

But from a nationalist (or racial pride and community solidarity) point of view, Obama's victory would be seen as a confirmation of the civil rights progress since adoption of the civil rights laws in the 1960s. No one from the civil rights era of Martin Luther King, Jr. truly and genuinely believed that a Black man could be elected president of the United States in their lifetimes. That's why most initially backed Hillary Clinton, until Obama's broad appeal emerged in Iowa and the early primaries.

The deepening economic calamity is causing more Blacks to lose their homes, be evicted from their apartments and lose their jobs. And while the Black community leadership has no plan of action to help the population, the hope is that the first Black president in 232 years of the United States will put programs in place that are fairer. There are few illusions but a great deal of hope - and pride.

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**P.S.**

\* From Against the Current, November/December 2008, No. 137:

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/atc/current>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] See on ESSF: [The Crisis Beneath the Bailout](#)