

USA: After the Democrats' Debacle

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HOW FAR HAVE politics “moved to the right” in the United States — and for how long? Although we’re going to press before the November 2 midterm elections, you’re probably reading it after the anticipated Democratic debacle and the attendant speculation about the viability of the Obama presidency. Whether the Democrats have retained slim majority control of one or both houses of Congress obviously matters for some legislative purposes and power relations, but our view of the broad trends is pretty much the same either way.

In fact, we do not believe that the political views of the mass of the population have shifted sharply rightward. Nor, as we’ve stated previously, did we consider president Obama’s historic 2008 election the indicator of mass sentiment moving dramatically “left.” What has happened is that politics “at the top” have clearly shifted, and the Republicans’ base has been energized while the Democrats’ is demoralized.

Bourgeois electoral politics “at the top” are generally a contest over which factions set the agenda of the debate. In 2008, the agenda for both the population and the corporate elites was set by the Bush regime’s domestic and international disasters, from Iraq to the global financial meltdown. In 2010, the right wing regained control of the agenda through three factors above all: a well-coordinated racist smear campaign against president Obama, which was entirely predictable; the Republicans’ calculated strategy of legislative obstruction, which was also predictable since they announced it from the very beginning; and the Democrats’ remarkable failure to defend their own legislative agenda, inadequate as it was, from procedural obstruction.

The Democrats had the votes not only to defeat filibusters, but the power to attack the grotesque Senate rules that require 60 votes in order to debate and vote — and that allow any one Senator to block all kinds of proceedings, including routine appointments. They pathetically failed to do so. Instead, conceding that the “strong public option” the president promised in his health care speech could not withstand a filibuster, the Democratic leadership pulled the measure from the health reform bill before the debate even began. That fatal sign of weakness demobilized the Democrats’ base and empowered their enemies.

Even before that, the Democrats had already thrown the supporters of “single-payer” national health insurance — the very core of their popular base — under the bus. For these activists, naturally, losing the chance to fight for what they believe in was infinitely worse than making the fight, even if losing this time around, would have been. Why will they mobilize again for a party that disregarded them?

Political Capital Squandered

Why did so many millions of people vote for Barack Obama and give the Democrats huge Congressional majorities? To recall the reasons is to understand how the Democrats and the administration have squandered so much political capital. Working people, social and human rights activists, Latino and of course African Americans voted for the Democrats' promises to put jobs and people first. They voted to end the Bush regime's rotten and hopeless wars, to end the national disgrace of Guantanamo and the scandal of torture, to get serious about climate change and a new sustainable economy, to stop the piracy of Wall Street and the banks, to save their homes and their communities.

People thought they were electing Democrats to fight for them. It turned out, when rhetoric had to be turned into legislative reality, that the Democrats barely believe in fighting for what little they believe in, and that what they believe in isn't much worth fighting for. The banks are healthy again, but not lending. Corporations are profitable again, but not hiring. Auto workers are making half their previous wages, as Dianne Feeley's article on the "new UAW" in this issue reports. Home foreclosures devastate the land like a plague of locusts. Pensions disappear.

Democrats say they'll "re-focus the message." Who do they think is listening? Why will they accomplish, if they manage to retain tiny majorities, what they didn't with commanding ones?

It's true that the Republican party faces its own contradictions. The success of probably unelectable Tea Party candidates in some primaries may just have allowed the Democrats to keep the Senate. The Republican nomination of an obscene racist, sexist pornographer Carl Paladino for New York governor will presumably keep the Democrats in control of that seat. The Republicans have not yet remade themselves as a reliable ruling-class party for savage budget-cutting, with the wilder social reactionary element kept in a junior-partner role. But they don't yet need to be.

Between now and 2012, the Republicans will more aggressively and confidently work to block Obama's economic stimulus initiatives, undercut his authority, use the military to prevent him from beginning the promised withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2011, watch his global prestige shrink as Israel blows apart his Middle East "peace initiative," push more tax-cutting schemes to balloon the budget deficit, and force the president more and more on the defensive as his reelection campaign looms. Meanwhile, Obama's own attacks on teachers in the guise of education reform, and the slashing of wages and conditions for what remains of the unionized industrial working class, will further gut the Democrats' labor base.

Behind the Qur'an Burning

How quickly it came and went, yet how much it showed about the prevailing climate: For ten days or so in September, the world's media made the third-rate petty fascist leader of a 50-person Florida racist cult calling itself a "church" the lead story in global news for threatening to burn copies of the Qur'an on the 9/11 anniversary.

After succeeding in attracting denunciations from president Obama, General Petraeus and various conservative Christian leaders — and, we suspect, backchannel expressions of interest from the Internal Revenue Service — the Gainesville "pastor" Terry Jones dropped the plan and crawled back under his rock, hopefully never to come out again.

This bizarre episode of the mass media as simultaneously manipulator and manipulated will be

almost entirely forgotten by the time this issue of *Against the Current* reaches our readers. Why then recall the Qur'an-burning stunt in this context? There are a couple of reasons why it remains a relevant indicator of deeper trends.

Although the disgusting "pastor" Jones was reviled across the political spectrum, the attention devoted to his antics, along with the manipulated hysteria over the planned Islamic Community Center near the World Trade Center site, underlined the depth of anti-Muslim bigotry seething under the civilized veneer of U.S. political culture these days. This is a very powerful factor in the rise of a rightwing pseudo-populism in America that — along with billionaire financing — propels the Tea Party.

Even more revealing than the "pastor" Jones incident is the article by the nation's most repulsive public intellectual (forgive the expression), Dinesh d'Souza, "How Obama Thinks." This was published not in some Ku Klux Klan sheet but in *Forbes* magazine, and was warmly embraced by Newt Gingrich.

"Incredibly," writes d'Souza, "the U.S. is being ruled according to the dreams of a Luo tribesman from the 1950s. This philandering, inebriated African socialist [Barack Obama's father]...is now setting the national agenda through the reincarnation of his dreams in his son."

Behind d'Souza's bigotry, the substance of his attack on Obama's policies is not that the president is a "socialist" but that he believes the wealthy should pay somewhat higher taxes, and that the United States and other wealthy countries should be consuming somewhat fewer of the world's resources. How profoundly un-American can you get?

The real program of the right wing, however, is that the working people and the poor of the United States should consume a whole lot less of the country's resources while the deserving rich, the corporate elites and the military machine should get a whole lot more. That is certainly the aim of the publisher and editors of *Forbes*, who themselves couldn't care less about Barack Obama's ancestry or extraneous issues like a "Ground Zero mosque."

What then is the function of those no-boundaries, over-the-top personal assaults on president Obama and all the "Muslim threat to America" bullshit stories come in? Partly, they're an attempt to give ideological coherence for an all-out assault on the living standards and "entitlements" (decent wages, social security and the right to health care) of the working class majority in this country. And like the Tea Party phenomenon, they serve the purpose of convincing some victims of this assault to cheer "U.S.A.!" as their own rights and futures are stolen from them.

October 2 and the Future

On October 2, 175,000 or so people gathered on the Mall in Washington, DC under the rather tepid banner of "One Nation Working Together." Unfortunately this was not a March on Washington, but an extended rally with folks coming and going over the course of a very long afternoon. Organized by the AFL-CIO and NAACP, the event by all accounts was substantially trade union in composition, strongly multiracial — and almost entirely passive.

One contingent that actually marched in the streets on October 2 was the "Peace Table," giving voice to an antiwar message that clearly resonated with the sentiments of the crowd but was distinctly not promoted by the rally organizers for fear of appearing critical of president Obama. The peace march was joined by a few hundred participants of the Socialist Contingent, initiated by the Dan La Botz for Senate campaign in Ohio on the Socialist Party ticket.

Clearly, the October 2 rally was intended in part as counterpoint to the Glenn Beck “Restore Honor” event of August 30, but even more as a last-ditch effort to rebuild the morale of a dispirited Democratic voting base. For many of the social and trade union activists who turned out, it undoubtedly meant something more than just an election rally — the desire for the beginning of a serious fightback to stop the assault on their lives.

Is that fightback really possible? For the answer, take a look at the events that have unfolded in September and October in France — a mass wave of strikes, beginning with public sector workers but quickly spreading to trucker highway blockades, factories and students — protesting the government program to raise the retirement age.

Contrary to media reports about those lazy French workers, full pension benefits don’t kick in until age 65 — which Sarkozy’s “reform” would raise to 67 — and then only after 40+ years of paying into the system, which Sarkozy would raise even further. French students joined the struggle precisely because they see what this means for their own futures. The anti-capitalist party NPA called for all-out strikes demanding full pensions at age 60, along with its “main demand [for] the redistribution of wealth and the sharing of work,” while the Socialist Party was calling for “days of action” leading toward elections in 2011 and 2012. [1]

The question in France, and in much of Europe, isn’t really whether “there is no alternative” to slashing budgets and cutting living standards, but whether capital and rightwing governments can break working-class power and will to resist. In the United States, where the unions’ power has been gutted, the assaults are going even deeper, to the point of threatening the future of Social Security altogether. But here too, the question is not some objective need to “stop runaway social spending” but how far down people can be pushed.

Elements of the resistance are visible — in the student mobilizations to save public higher education, in auto workers’ struggles in Indianapolis, Indiana and at Lake Orion, Michigan against 50% wage rollbacks, in young immigrants putting their lives on the line for the DREAM Act, yet another of the broken promises of this Democratic Congress and administration.

The immediate results of the November 2 election will likely be further demoralizing for the social movements and for working people. But ultimately — we do not pretend to predict when or where — capital and the forces of racism and repression will cross a bridge too far in their lust for profit and power. When the fightback breaks out for real, that explosion could change politics “at the base” and make the Tea Party look like a tea party.

The Editors; Against the Current

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] See <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org> for coverage and on ESSF see the section: France, [>rub222]