

Prospects for African Americans

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MUCH OF THE debate in Washington and Wall Street is about the ongoing world economic crisis and what to do about it. The ruling elites' solution: cut taxes for the rich, who will "trickle down" their investments to hire more people who will then jumpstart the economy. The fact that this hasn't worked for the past 10 years is irrelevant.

This reality bodes ill for African Americans in 2011-12. With or without a double-dip recession, the crisis for the Black communities will deepen, leading to even more homelessness and unemployment rising to the mid-20% range or higher. Official Black unemployment in November 2010 was at 16%, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

While there is anger and frustration for the lack of jobs and opportunities, there is little agitation by African Americans. Worse, there is paralysis and demobilization because of a lack of leaders willing to take on the government led by "one of our own."

You would think the ruling class would be pleased with President Obama. They are getting richer. But it's not enough. They want more — a permanent wealth shift that hasn't been seen in the country since the days of the Robber Barons in the 19th century.

The "hope of 2008" among African Americans was that the first African American president would tilt toward their concerns. The hope today is that Obama will eventually turn his attention to "his community" and the poor and begin a program of revitalization of urban areas where most Blacks still live.

The challenge for African Americans and the working class as a whole is to recognize that a "hope" approach has never helped in the past. It didn't stop President Clinton's revamping of the welfare system that threw hundreds of thousands off that social program. It will not change with Obama, no matter the pride Blacks have in having "one of our own" in the White House.

In the 1970s and '80s, a similar nationalist pride did not lead to major change even with the election of thousands of Black officials to city halls, state legislatures and Congress. The fundamental structural problems of class and race in U.S. society require much more than Black faces in high places. Corruption and power is colorblind.

The Austerity Drive

While President Obama gives lip service that he's concerned about the "middle class" and working families, he's accepted the right's argument that "government must tighten its belts." Whose belts? Obama's first decision after the November midterm elections was to target federal workers, including those earning modest wages. He declared a two-year wage freeze.

Next he negotiated a secret two-year tax plan that primarily benefits the wealthy and big business. Few African Americans are in those categories, but a disproportionate number of African Americans are employed by the federal government.

Republicans are pushing for more cuts in social spending and pensions, and seek more giveaways to the rich. Obama's capitulation and agreement to do so is not a good sign for the future.

Obama the "post-partisan" has turned out, to the disbelief of many liberals, to be a run of the mill centrist Democrat. The poor — particularly African Americans — have been left further behind and out in the cold.

So far, the protests against these anti-working class, pro-wealthy policies have mainly been verbal, or hypocritically staged by the Tea Party. The unions and other organizations have not yet taken to the streets to challenge Congress or the White House, including its wars in Iraq and in South Asia, where more drone attacks have occurred under Obama than Bush.

Wall Street and the right, unlike the elites in Europe, don't see the need for a rise in taxes to deal with the deficit. The United States can still simply print more dollars that other countries and American companies want to buy.

This is why the comparison of the U.S. debt to other countries' "sovereign debt" crises is misguided. Who wants to buy junk-bond-rated debt from Greece or Ireland?

The alarmist talk of desperately urgent deficit reduction in the United States is to justify beating up the poor and the working class. The U.S. ruling class seeks to place the entire deficit reduction burden on the poor and the working class, with no price to be paid by big business. So far it's working!

As long as protests are nearly nonexistent and don't strike fears of bigger rebellions, the wealthy will continue to reap the benefits of the crisis. African Americans, who are at the bottom of the economic heap, will suffer the most.

In a November 26, 2010, column "Winning the class war," The New York Times columnist Bob Herbert writes: "Recessions are for the little people, not for the corporate chiefs and the titans of Wall Street who are at the heart of the American aristocracy. They have waged economic warfare against everybody else and are winning big time.

"The ranks of the poor may be swelling and families forced out of their foreclosed homes may be enduring a nightmarish holiday season, but American companies have just experienced their most profitable quarter ever. As The Times reported this week, U.S. firms earned profits at an annual rate of \$1.659 trillion in the third quarter — the highest total since the government began keeping track more than six decades ago. "

Considering there are no working people in Congress (where most are millionaires), it is not surprising that Congress is out of touch with "Main Street." The December 2010 polls put the

approval rating for Congress at 13%.

Neither party talks about the impact of the economic crisis on the poorest of the poor — the African-American communities. President Obama rarely mentions the issues, concerns or the plight of Blacks, knowing full well that the majority will vote for him no matter what he does.

The race-baiting and pure racism of the right would have led to marches and demands in past decades. Yet African Americans today are demobilized at a time where action is more urgent than ever. Change has never occurred for African Americans waiting for support from elected officials.

What a “win” for the ruling class!

Obama continues to have a 95-98% approval from Blacks. Civil rights leaders are left to back Obama’s actions even if it doesn’t serve the community’s interest. The criticisms do exist (and some are spoken out loud by figures such as the respected Black intellectual and author Cornel West), but always with the caveat that the greater problem is the Republican Party and the far right.

Naming the Crime

When President Johnson urged Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders in the 1960s to go easy on their civil disobedience campaign while he crafted new legislation to get around the segregationists in his own party, they either refused outright, or demanded serious results. Obama doesn’t even have to ask to get today’s “leaders” to cooperate, nor do they demand anything from him.

The WikiLeaks exposures show how far the Obama White House has gone in its war drive and efforts to undermine transparency and democratic rights. The young soldier Bradley Manning who allegedly released the records to WikiLeaks has been in solitary confinement since his arrest, under conditions that amount to torture. The actions of the Justice Department are in line with past attacks on civil rights and antiwar leaders —blaming the messenger, not the policies.

Manning is being treated like an “enemy combatant.” There has been too little solidarity from the civil liberties establishment for this modern-day Daniel Ellsberg. The liberal left is basically demobilized, frozen in their fear of the far right extremists. Meanwhile Obama has dropped more bombs on Afghanistan and killed more civilians than George W. Bush, who was labelled a war criminal, did in his final two years in office.

The New Race Warfare

The dire reality for African Americans as we enter 2011 is that class warfare is compounded by race warfare. No, it’s not the race war of the Jim Crow segregation era, or the days of white rage after the end of Reconstruction. The race war today is being led by right-wing groups openly promoted on radio and Fox News, and emboldened by Obama’s inaction.

Pushback by liberals against this “new racism” is weak, and the Black community follows the lead of the White House — doing nothing. The type of racism that a Rush Limbaugh displays daily would not be possible if Obama weren’t always in fear of a white backlash.

As Obama moves further rightward to prepare for the 2012 presidential election, we have the sad reality of increased racism going unchallenged; the poorest areas of major cities left without

support; social programs slashed; and the likelihood of cuts in Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security.

Reporters have documented “death panels” in health care — and not the imaginary ones raised by rightwing critics of the reform bill. In Arizona, poor people needing organ transplants have been told state funding is no longer available. Meanwhile more funding is going to private prisons.

Labor’s Decline in Perspective

The Black community’s natural ally, the labor unions, are extremely weak today. They have no effective strategy to advance the interests of their own members and those of nonunion workers.

The fact that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and National Mediation Board (under the Railway Labor Act) for airlines and railroads are more liberal since Obama’s election has not benefitted the unions. In the largest organizing drive in 50 years, no union could win representation for the 56,000 nonunion members at Delta Airlines — the only major carrier that is majority nonunion.

The unions lost every election to organize flight attendants, baggage handlers and customer service workers. Yet for the first time, new rules meant that workers who did not vote would not be counted as “no union” votes. Even with this change the unions were decisively defeated.

The right’s “me-myself-and-I” philosophy permeates society. In this climate there is demobilization, a lack of effective leadership, and Blacks like everyone else are looking out for themselves.

It is worth recalling, however, that for several years after the Great Depression began with the 1928 crash, the working class and its poorest sections were atomized under the blows of the crisis. The great labor strikes didn’t start winning until 1934.

The Bear stock market lasted the entire decade (with modest business-cycle upturns) until World War II. Yet the U.S. economy was stronger than its European counterparts. The United States was a creditor nation, not the debtor nation of today.

During this entire period African Americans were treated as second-class citizens with segregation entrenched in law and in practice, so the battle for civil rights and equality was number one on the list of most African Americans. Civil rights organizations planned a March on Washington in 1941 to protest discrimination in every facet of society, and only called off when President Roosevelt agreed to set up a commission to enforce fair employment practices in the war industry.

Today, with the progress of legal equality, Black faces in high places make it more difficult to stand up for the poor of all colors. A majority of whites unfortunately still buy the right’s propaganda that Blacks and other minority groups, immigrants and trade unions are not their allies. You see it most clearly in the South, but it can be seen across the country in predominantly white working-class communities.

Prospects for the Years Ahead

There will be no independent mobilization of the Black population so long as the “we have your back” attitude prevails towards President Obama. At some point the electoral issue must be separated from the need to stand up and fight the government as it cuts programs, fails to have a

jobs program and supports the rich.

The Black community will have to say, “We are with you, Brother President, against the racists, but we demand that you and the government change your policies to help us.” The broad liberal and progressive left must do the same.

Unless this begins to happen, the rich will continue to wage effective class warfare that’s been advancing for 30 years but accelerated after 2001. It will also continue to embolden racist elements in society.

There is no electoral solution to class warfare and racism. The situation requires a willingness to take on the government and Wall Street by direct action — legal and extralegal. It requires a new leadership, new types of organization and parties and a willingness to take whatever steps are necessary to bring fundamental change.

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P.S.

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