

# **The Obama Reality Disconnect “There is a sharp reality disconnect in the US Black community”**

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THERE IS A sharp reality disconnect in the Black community. On the one hand, the Black population continues to support the first African-American president, Barack Obama, by more than 90%.

Yet the plight of the Black communities is at its worst condition in three decades. Official unemployment is over 16% —twice that of whites — and in the high 30% for young African Americans. Black household income is in decline and the lowest of the five major ethnic groups. Poverty is at the highest levels in 30 years.

President Obama’s policies have not benefited the Black community, other minority communities or the working class as a whole. The so-called middle class with decent jobs and incomes are those still able to hold union-level paid jobs. Thousands of government jobs are being eliminated as the far right attacks city, state and federal employment.

The ongoing economic stagnation has devastated these communities. The rich have gotten wealthier and the top one percent barely feels any pain.

The propaganda war is being won by the right. They are convincing more and more workers that it is not a priority to force the “job creators” (the 400 billionaires) to pay a “fair share” of taxes. Many workers now believe that Social Security and Medicare must be modified to “protect” them.

A majority of white workers don’t support Obama. Blacks are not in that group, but have little power when the traditional leaders do little or nothing to lead a campaign for their interests.

When Obama travels, he rarely if ever sets foot in communities of color. When he talks about the “middle class” he rarely mentions the plight of people of color — too afraid of the extremist white backlash.

The Black leadership as a group — elected officials, heads of civil rights organizations and academic and intellectual elites — know full well that the Obama administration has taken few steps to help the most oppressed and discriminated segments of society.

Even the ongoing campaign by conservatives to limit voter participation — the greatest attacks on the 1965 Voting Rights Act since its inception — has brought little response from the Black Attorney General, Eric Holder, or the White House. When they do mention the assault on voting rights, they refer to seniors and youth, not Blacks.

Yet Black elites have remained basically silent on this failure of progressive leadership. The main leaders are too concerned that a criticism of Obama will help the white racist elements in the Republican Tea Party and society as a whole. The far right sees this weakness as the opening to do what they would have never tried under a white president — Republican or Democrat.

## Smiley and West

Two voices of criticism have come from prominent Princeton professor and author Cornel West and veteran journalist and radio host Tavis Smiley [1]. Their criticism has focused on Obama's failure to fight for the working class and the poor, and deal with the real poverty of the Black community. Professor West has called president Obama "another Black mascot" for "Wall Street oligarchs."

Both West and Smiley have been attacked for doing so. Many Black "leaders" and academics see them as ungrateful, or motivated by personal jealousy — or worse. The Rev. Al Sharpton, a longtime activist in New York, has become one of Obama's staunchest defenders no matter what the administration does. He now has his own television show on MSNBC.

Another academic defender is Melissa Harris-Perry, a columnist for *The Nation* magazine and MSNBC analyst; she sees West's criticisms of Obama as primarily "personal" because, supposedly Obama never "thanked" West for his support. Others say it is because of his own sour history with Obama economic adviser Larry Summers, former president of Harvard.

But the real question we should ask ourselves isn't West's personal motivations, but this: Are his criticisms valid?

One point West makes is that Obama is not a "progressive politician" and "lacks backbone" to stand up to the right.

In a magazine interview West did last year, he stated: "Black folk can't be blindsided by Obama's pigmentation and historical symbolism. What I'm saying is I wish he could be more Martin King-like... But by necessity, Obama has had to downplay his Blackness to appease the white moderates and independents and speak to their anxieties." [2]

Whether or not one believes that analysis, it is obvious that Obama rarely speaks to the needs of the Black community or takes any special effective actions to help the poorest communities.

West has joined protests against corporate greed on Wall Street. He's criticized Obama on war policies, on job creation and his capitulations to the right on environmental issues. The uncritical Obama supporters in the Black community generally steer clear of this type of activism and criticism.

## Obama Lectures CBC

The Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) — probably the most influential Black elite organization — recently held its annual conference. Speaking to this strongly supportive gathering on September 24, Obama spent a lot of time defending his programs and victories. But what made headlines were his concluding comments telling the Black leaders to stop "complaining" and get to work behind his policies.

"I don't have time to complain; I'm going to press on. I expect all of you to march with me and press on," Obama declared. "Take off your bedroom slippers, put on your marching shoes. Shake it off. Stop complaining, stop grumbling, and stop crying. We are going to press on. We've got work to do CBC."

CBC Chairman Emmanuel Cleaver of Missouri noted, "If Bill Clinton had been in the White House and had failed to address this problem [of high unemployment], we probably would be marching on the White House. There is less volatile reaction in the CBC because nobody wants to do anything that would empower the people who hate the president."

Whether the CBC would go after another Democratic president is debatable. But for sure, the Black leadership did press Republican presidents on such issues. The fact that now that the president is Black, Cleaver correctly reveals, is why civil rights and liberal groups won't stand up to Obama. As Congresswoman Maxine Waters of California also noted afterwards, Obama would have never said "stop complaining" to Latino, Asian, women's rights, gay rights or Jewish Democratic Party groups — and if he had, he would have been roundly attacked.

### **Best Republican President Since Reagan**

The fundamental contradiction in U.S. politics today is that Obama is probably the best "Republican president" in the modern era. Obama's policies on war, the economy and most issues have been to the right of every Democratic president and many Republicans (e.g. Nixon and Ford). His Affordable Health Care plan that includes individual mandates comes out of the Heritage Foundation playbook.

The uses of military drones to kill uncharged Americans (e.g. U.S.-born citizens Anwar al-Awlaki and Samin Khan, the editor of a pro-Al Qaeda publication) who are called "terrorists" are examples of Obama's use of illegal, unconstitutional actions. Obama has systematically escalated the use of CIA power more than any president in U.S. history — including Bush! Yet the left mostly sits on the sidelines.

In the economy, the Bush-Obama bailout of the Wall Street banks and Obama's reduction of tax rates for the rich to the lowest levels in nearly 60 years, while working class real incomes fall, is another case in point. Attacks on civil liberties and civil rights have escalated over his two years with little serious fightback.

Cornel West says he wishes Obama were more King-like. It would be a step forward to be, on social issues at least, more like LBJ — or even Nixon! — both of whom signed laws that actually improved racial equality.

Obama's accomplishments pale when measured against his actual (not rhetorical) pro-Wall Street and U.S.-first "anti-terror" foreign policies. The ruling class has the best man in the White House to advance its agenda. He has effectively demobilized the oppressed communities and liberal left, to an extent that no Republican president could ever do.

### **The Challenge**

Historically the Black community has been the most willing to fight and stand up to the powers that be, even when appealed to by the liberal establishment to hold back. The Obama effect is new but will eventually wear off. The substance of what Cornel West and other critics say about what Obama represents will begin to take hold. It will be a catalyst to new protests against the ruling power structure.

What's needed is a movement, like what Martin Luther King led, which starts with the issues of jobs, war and redistribution of wealth. It must be directed at Wall Street, big business and government.

The Obama factor in the demobilization of Blacks and others is not likely to wither away before the 2012 presidential elections. Blacks will vote overwhelmingly for Obama, which is why rightwing state legislatures are pushing through all kinds of measures to restrict and suppress Black and minority voting.

But the deepening world economic crisis will eventually lead to bigger responses than we've seen to date. If history is our guide, African Americans who suffer the most will once again take the lead in protest and resistance to the rich and far right.

**Malik Miah**

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**P.S.**

\* From Against the Current (ATC) n° 155, November/December 2011:  
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/current/node/3425>

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**Footnotes**

[1] See [www.smileyandwest.com](http://www.smileyandwest.com)

[2] Playboy, August 2010