

USA : Who Speaks for the 99%

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THE BITTER TRUTH about U.S. politics is that neither ruling-class party speaks for the working class or poor. President Obama likes to talk about the “middle class” and how he stands up for them, but he rarely mentions that poverty disproportionately hits African Americans and Latinos. While he personally supports social programs for the working poor, his actual proposed budgets would reduce funding for these programs.

The Republicans are worse. They propose massive cuts in Medicaid spending that services the poor (the Ryan budget slashes \$1 trillion) as they demand new tax cuts for corporations and the super rich .01%.

The Republican presidential candidates seem to only speak for the 1% and upper class. Mitt Romney, the leading candidate and former private equity fund manager of Bain Capital, openly states that he's “not concerned about the very poor because they have a safety net.”

He's tried to say that wasn't what he meant — but of course it's exactly what he meant, even if he didn't mean it to sound that way. Naturally, he's not worried about the rich either, since his proposed economic plan lowers their taxes even more.

Romney's net wealth is reportedly \$250 million. He lives off investment income. He hasn't had a job in more than a decade while joking about being unemployed. In 2010 and 2011 his tax returns show \$43 million of “passive income.” He paid 13.9% in federal income taxes, while maintaining several offshore banking accounts that conceal much of his fortune.

Romney's rivals in the presidential field (as of February) are just as out of touch with working people. The former Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, creates a make-believe caricature by labeling president Obama a “European socialist” who channels the views of his Kenyan-born father ; Obama is “un American, and not one of us,” Gingrich tells his supporters.

The former Senator from Pennsylvania, Rick Santorum, has made his central qualification to be president as being more Christian than the Pope. He opposes the rights of women — opposing not only abortion rights but contraceptives. He despises gays and looks down on public education. When asked at a campaign rally about the high costs of health care and drugs, he ridiculed the questioner and defended the right of drug companies to reap big profits.

The libertarian Texas Congressman Ron Paul says the Federal Reserve is evil and wants the country to return to the “gold standard.” He opposes the 1960s civil rights acts, claiming they violate

"individual liberty ;" he defends the "right" of property owners to refuse to serve, rent or engage with anyone they please. A son of the South, his meaning is clear : bigotry trumps equality. Racist newsletters were published under his name in the 1990s.

The Way It Isn't

A common theme of the Republican presidential candidates is how they want to go back to the America prior to the first African-American president. Those who dropped out of the presidential race — former Texas Governor Rick Perry (who had a "niggerhead" rock on his ranch), Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann (Tea Party favorite) and the former business executive from Georgia, Herman Cain (the self-proclaimed real "Black man") — were similar in substance but simply more obviously ridiculous.

In the Republican view, Barack Obama is a creation of the liberal media, and thus his election was a fluke. Their America is one where whites of all classes feel comfortable with the government that looks like them — a country where the ethnic minorities know their place.

The far-right conservative apparatus (Republican elites, talk radio blowhards and think tanks funded by billionaires) advocate income inequality and social Darwinism. Their publications like Forbes, National Review and financial newsletters/seminars preach the virtues of market superiority and why wealth inequality is the engine for American-style capitalism.

"Greed is good and regulations bad" is their motto. They define it as the basis of "American exceptionalism," claiming it's why the United States is the greatest and most innovative country and in Romney's words, "the hope of the world." They argue that anyone can become rich, showing that income and wealth inequality is a sign of a vibrant market system. (The reality is that there is less "social mobility" in the United States today than in most other industrial nations.)

Herman Cain explained that it is the fault of the unemployed for not having a job. Gingrich says Black children lack work ethics and should take the jobs of unionized school janitors. He called Obama the "food stamp" president, arguing that people who need food stamps to feed their families do so because they don't want to work. Romney explains how "corporations are people ; money is free speech" and how banks feel pain too.

The "survival of the fittest" ideology of the right views capitalists as superior to the working class and poor because they are smarter and create wealth. This social Darwinist creed is rarely so openly spoken, which is why many Republican leaders were upset when Romney spoke their true views about the poor.

The majority of Americans, including Republican voters, believe the rich should pay higher taxes. Americans support unemployment insurance and Social Security. They support public workers who fight fires and teach their children in public schools.

Facts are stubborn things if known. Misinformation and lies, however, can appear as facts if the billionaire-driven propaganda machine repeats them over and over again. That's why the far right focuses on the mythical Obama and employs a race-baiting strategy.

The far right and establishment Republicans all know that subtle and not so subtle race-baiting is the most effective weapon to attack the president, knowing that he won't respond directly. Obama does not want to face a counter-punch by the right claiming he is "playing the race card."

The tactics of the far right are working so far. Their hatred of president Obama is visceral. In thinly veiled racist rhetoric, they appeal to many millions of white people, especially in the Deep South, who look down on or don't trust Blacks.

Most whites, however, aren't racist and recoil from the far right's race-baiting. The best answer to racism is to go on the offensive and educate people about what's being done. The failure over the last three years to do so is a central reason why so many blows and setbacks have occurred for voting and civil rights. The African American leaders don't dare cause problems for the Black president by marching in the streets.

It is possible that the extreme transparency of the far-right racist appeal will backfire as independent voices speak up. It could lead to the reawakening of the social organizations against the right. The labor-led recall campaign in Wisconsin, the Ohio referendum on labor rights, and most recently the broad-based defense of Planned Parenthood show the potential for victories.

The Rulers' Best President

Whether or not president Obama is reelected, he's not the solution even if he is the bogey man target of the far right. Obama is not a "socialist" or even a New Deal liberal. Ironically, an objective look at Obama's policies shows he's at best a centrist Democrat.

Obama's economic program and his foreign policy (the president who killed Osama bin Laden) are mainstream capitalist and imperialist politics. His use of unmanned drones (more than Bush used in his eight years in office), his execution of U.S. citizens abroad without charges or trial (al-Awlaki in Yemen) and his decision to sign the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) after promising to veto it, show where he stands.

The NDAA is quite telling about Obama's disregard for democracy and support for an imperial presidency. The Act states quite clearly that it is legitimate to arbitrarily arrest U.S. citizens without subsequent benefit of legal counsel. It allows possible torture and imprisonment of non-citizens, legal residents and citizens whom the president declares to be engaged in activities "harmful to the United States."

As usual, Obama said he didn't agree with all of the new law as an olive branch to civil libertarians. Then he vigorously defended its powers. The fact that habeas corpus is thrown under the bus has gotten little play by the pro-Obama or mainstream media.

On domestic policies Obama's key decisions, from health care to help for small businesses and the big banks, come from previous Republican and conservative playbooks. While the far right presents a fantasy Obama to their supporters, it knows he is not a threat to "American capitalism." The real reasons are cynical and strategic : How better to win an election than by demonizing Obama ?

Yet even this is not the primary motivation for the most extreme wing of the Republican Party. Its objective — the real goal of the organized far right — is to turn back the clock to an era where the demographics of the country were predominantly white, and where power remains in their hands even as people of color become a majority by 2050. To them it is not about one election, but future elections and power relationships.

Obama's re-election in truth is in the best interests of the ruling class. He reflects the future demographics of the country and ruling class, not the past. A move to reverse gains of 50 years could in fact lead to a social backlash that the government and Wall Street might not be able to

contain.

Impact of Occupy Wall Street (OWS)

The weakness of a mass response to the right's attacks has fuelled the extremists' belief they can impose positions not supported by public opinion — a power grab that so far is advancing. The Occupy Wall Street movement is changing the equation.

The President is reflecting the themes of OWS in his campaign speeches. It's a way to deflect the race baiting tactics of the Republicans — without actually discussing race and racism — and to line up with popular anger against the super-rich.

According to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), between 1979 and 2007 the inflation-adjusted incomes of the top 1% grew by an average of 275%. During the same time period, the 60% of Americans in the middle of the income scale saw their income rise by 40%.

Since 1979, however, the average pre-tax income for the bottom 90% of households has decreased by \$900, while that of the top 15% increased by over \$700,000, even while federal taxation became less progressive. From 1992-2007 the top 400 income earners saw their inflation-adjusted income increase 392% and their average tax rate reduced by 37%. In 2009, the average income of the top 1% was \$960,000 with a minimum income of \$343,927.

In 1979, when CBO data collection began, the average after-tax incomes of the top one percent of households were 7.9 times higher than those of the middle fifth. By 2007, those incomes were 23.9 times higher than the middle fifth — more than tripling the income gap.

In terms of ownership of wealth (income, real estate, investments) the top 1% in 2007 owned 34.6% while the bottom 80% owned 15%. The numbers shifted even more after the Great Recession of 2008. The top 1% now own 37.1% of overall wealth, and rising.

The financial income gap is even wider. The problem for working people, the oppressed and poor is the rhetoric of Obama and liberals about "shared sacrifice" when in truth the only group sacrificing are the bottom 80%. Obama calls for a modest increase in taxes paid by the wealthy, but he also says the 99% must accept a restructuring of Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security and other social programs.

Romney paid, like most one percenters, less than 14% in federal income taxes. In 2011, corporations — which the U.S. Supreme Court says have the same rights as people — paid only 12.1% of profits in federal taxes, the lowest 40 years (see February 3 The Wall Street Journal). The average middle-income worker pays twice that rate.

Obama understands that defending capitalism at home and abroad is his job as president. Giving some support for the concerns of workers and poor is the best way to keep the popular anger within the Democratic Party.

The most significant development in 2011 was the rise of the OWS movement that Democrats and Obama seek to coopt. It changed the debate in most of the country from balancing the federal budget to income inequality — "99% versus 1%." It has inspired the unrepresented, the poor and labor to demand fundamental change.

Mass Action, Independent Movements

Those suffering the most are told to throw their energies behind reelecting Obama for president. This is no solution.

It was decisive action and mass defiance — ultimately forcing the use of federal troops — that ended Jim Crow legal segregation. Women won the right to vote by direct mass action. The labor movement's major advances in the 1930s were not gifts from FDR but were won through mass actions including sitdown strikes.

Counter-offensives ensued after each of these historic victories. The ruling-class goal was containment, then rollback. They knew time was on their side so long as their political power was not threatened. Social movements would eventually decline with complacency or exhaustion.

Equality would be partially rolled back (e.g. most affirmative action programs and school desegregation plans). Yet integration continued ; the rise of a Black middle class, free to move to suburbs and to work and live in areas historically denied even to affluent African Americans.

The latter trend has led to deeper class divisions within the Black population as the less educated, homeless and lower-income Blacks are left behind. During the era of legal segregation that was not possible for educated Blacks. Whites "accept" for the most part this professional layer, which is present even on Wall Street.

Martin Luther King Jr., whose monument now sits in Washington, used nonviolent mass civil disobedience to win basic civil rights in the 1960s. The movement did not focus on politicians, and King continued the movement for full equality speaking up for the very poor with his "Poor People's" campaign.

For women to go much beyond the right to vote took a second wave of feminism, winning gains in employment and reproductive rights. Immigrant rights and basic rights for other minorities arose on the backs of the civil rights movement. The movement for gay and lesbian rights took direct action too. It was no accident that the conservative President Nixon signed many of the most significant civil rights laws in that period.

The counter-offensive against these gains began in earnest in the 1980s. The shift from mass pressure and action demanding fundamental rights, and the resulting integration of many of the leaders of the social movements into the major parties, helps explain why the far right's 30-year-long counter offensive is succeeding.

The contradiction is that the very progress that led to the election of the first Black president is the same reason for today's racist backlash. The victory of the civil rights revolution, winning for Blacks the right to vote and some slice of political power, led the white segregationists to flee to the Republican Party that now uses racial code words to win elections. The goal of the counterrevolution is not a return to the 1950s laws of Jim Crow segregation, but to retain the old power relationships of a bygone era.

What Next ?

What happens next depends on the social movements and independent political action by the working class and poor. It means focusing demands on institutions of the state — both parties of "free enterprise," the president, Congress and the courts. This is the lesson of Occupy Wall Street,

which seems diffuse but in fact targets the powers of the 1%.

So long as the political framework is defined by the fight between Obama and the far right in 2012, the working class and poor will be weaker and unable to advance their own interests. At the same time, the Black community will stand behind Obama as the racist attacks against him escalate.

A majority of Latinos facing anti-immigrant policies and comments like Newt Gingrich's "Spanish is the language of the ghetto," as well as other minorities, will likely vote for Obama. (The exception is Cuban Americans, who enjoy their privileged position of immediate legal status as soon they step on U.S. territory.)

Established labor unions will also vote for Obama and Democrats. So who speaks for the working class and poor ?

No capitalist political party does. Rather, it's the diverse independent organizations and voices seen at Occupy Wall Street and the many social organizations that place demands on the government and state for working people, minorities and the poor.

These activities are not dependent on electoral politics or presidential elections. The challenge is to continue with these efforts, while knowing that most working people of color will likely vote for Obama as a firewall to the most extreme racist and right wing forces in the country.

Fundamental and radical change, as history shows, comes by mass direct actions and popular outrage. Martin Luther King, Jr. marched and demanded equal rights under Republican and Democratic presidents. The movement won. The legislation and structural changes came after the victory, not the other way around.

Malik Miah

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