

# The Democrats' Domestic Agenda

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THE DEMOCRATS ARE taking over Congress with what we might generously call a “minimalist reform” program. That’s not fundamentally why they were elected; the dominant political question in America, as discussed in the “Letter from the Editors” in this issue, will be Iraq and related imperial criminal mischief. But the realities of our dysfunctional society at home will be on the agenda too — at least to some degree.

Barring a Bush veto, the minimum wage — which ought to be doubled immediately, then indexed to the inflation rate — will be raised in two steps with great fanfare, from \$5.15 to a whopping \$7.25 an hour. This won’t touch the crisis of the working poor in this country, but it will certainly create important opportunities for posturing and speechifying with the approach of The Most Important Presidential Election of Our Lifetime in 2008.

(This raises the question — have you ever heard any pundit or major political figure declare an election to be “the second or third least important in our lifetime”? But let’s not digress.)

Some kind of legislation will probably come forward to enable Medicare to bargain for drug prices. This reform may even reduce pharmaceutical profits from obscene to merely grotesque. The rational solution of universal single-payer health care isn’t on the radar screen. Forty to fifty million people in the United States will remain without any health coverage.

Some communities are standing up to resist the Wal-Mart plague, resentful that local hospitals must provide tax-funded emergency-room care for workers who don’t earn enough to buy into the company’s health plan. Don’t expect serious support from Congressional Democrats on that score, however, as Wal-Mart has shrewdly diversified its political investment portfolio to include both capitalist parties.

Democrats and Republican “moderates” have promised some kind of ostensible immigration reform. They’ll aim to cut out the more lunatic right-wing schemes of rounding up millions for summary deportation, which helped produce a large Latino voting swing away from the Republicans.

The brutal raids on immigrant Swift meatpacking workers shows how much the Bush regime cares about that — and the Democrats’ silence on this racist atrocity shows how much they intend to do about it. The government has broken its previous records for cynical manipulation by charging people not only with immigration violations, but “identity theft.”

The Congressional “moderates,” after many compromises and concessions, may produce an onerous “guest worker” program — combined with employment and social service restrictions that force undocumented immigrant workers deeper into the informal economy. The result? Those who can’t get “guest worker” status will become permanent “criminals,” adding still another layer to the multi-tier stratified U.S. labor force.

In the name of assisting the embattled American worker, Democrats will engage in some degree of protectionism. China is always a handy target, since its monumental abuses of labor and human rights don’t have to be invented. But as Au Loong-Yu shows in his article in this issue, protectionism by powerful states has nothing to do with international workers’ solidarity.

Further, of course, China-bashing affords a convenient cover for doing nothing about the wave of union-busting bankruptcies, anti-strike injunctions, or National Labor Relations Board rulings that strip workers, who may sometimes perform duties as “supervisors,” of union rights.

## **Expect Little or Nothing**

We’re likely to see some showy Congressional investigations of some of the Bush regime’s most flamboyant abuses of power — perhaps, for example, Donald Rumsfeld’s personal approval of torture, since that’s now out in the open and Rumsfeld is safely gone — but no serious consideration of closing Guantanamo, where basic rules of due process have been officially abolished.

There will likely be some interesting new light thrown on war profiteering by Halliburton, Bechtel and other Bush-Cheney cronies. But don’t hold your breath for penetrating Congressional scrutiny of ongoing secret detention, interrogation and “extraordinary rendition” (international kidnapping). Don’t expect Congressional Democrats to get all worked up over the physical torture and mental destruction of U.S. citizen Jose Padilla, let alone hundreds of foreign detainees held without charges.

Most of all, there’s absolutely no Democratic toleration of the I-word (impeachment), as the Pelosi-Reid leadership has made abundantly clear. Michigan Representative John Conyers, ready and eager to submit Articles of Impeachment when Democrats were out of power, has been silenced since the election. It’s hardly accidental that as of mid-December, Pelosi had not announced what should be Conyers’ automatic appointment to chair the House Judiciary Committee.

What’s even worse, the most appalling crises in our society will remain untouched by the incoming Congress.

\* Eighteen months past Hurricane Katrina, the alleged reconstruction of New Orleans is a bureaucratic and corrupt failure as massive as — well, as Iraq. Tens of thousands of African-American citizens of the city remain without housing or the assistance promised to them. Public education (as Christian Roselund shows in this issue) is effectively destroyed. Government policy is to finish the work that the hurricane began — to make the city uninhabitable for its Black poor majority.

\* Environmental destruction and violent climate instability aren’t just looming. They are well underway and, without drastic changes in global energy policy and economic priorities within two decades or less, will become catastrophic well within this century. With the incoming Democratic majority, it’s true that the key House and Senate Committees will no longer give platforms to global-warming deniers. This is a very long way from translating into action or even effective pressure on the Bush regime.

\* It’s not only the income gap between rich and poor that’s widening in the United States. Racial injustice remains the fundamental social reality of the United States — closely related and central to the crises of the cities, of education and public health.

Voters in Michigan — particularly male white workers hit by job losses and plant closings, and deeply fearful of their own families’ future — voted almost 3-2 to ban affirmative action by state universities and agencies. This vicious initiative (packaged by its backers as the “Michigan Civil Rights Initiative”!) is a warning that racism remains alive and virulent beneath the official fiction of legal “equality.”

African Americans in Michigan were rightly angered when state Democrats, while opposing the initiative, put no serious resources into the struggle to defeat it.

The Democratic Party, as voting results prove beyond any doubt, owes not only its Congressional majority but its survival as a national political party to the loyalty of its African-American base. What it gives in return is a sad indictment of capitalist politics, and an illustration of the desperate urgency of an independent political direction. To discuss those prospects would take us far beyond the squalid prospects of the new Congress.

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**P.S.**

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