

Progress or Regress?

Considering the Future of Leftist Politics under Obama

1. Many people across the political spectrum—including those who claim to be on the Left—assume that the election of Obama represents a symbolic vindication of the struggles of the Civil Rights movement. But is the implied conception of the Civil Rights movement really adequate to this history? Pivotal Civil Rights intellectuals and leaders, including Bayard Rustin and even Martin Luther King Jr., advocated the use of political force against the economically structured social *inequality* of American race relations. As Rustin put it: “Negro poverty...will not be eliminated without a total war on poverty.” This vision clearly lost out—indeed, Rustin saw even purportedly radical declarations of “Black power” as both a conservative naturalization of the racial difference the movement had tried to eliminate and a rationalization of powerlessness. Today, changing the racial composition of the powers-that-be, celebrating diversity, and pursuing sanctioned reform and institutionally-given power are seen as the limits of what the Civil Rights Movement imagined or pushed to achieve.

What are the roots of this historical forgetfulness? What critique can we offer to the reduction of the Civil Rights movement to symbolism and status-quo powers? And how might such a critique help foster popular political energy against the structural inequalities that remain intact in American Society?

2. Organized labor was a major constituency of the Obama campaign, and put much effort into working for an Obama victory. For instance, the “Change to Win Coalition” mobilized the political power of six million workers represented by seven unions, it organized teams to knock on doors, make phone calls, distribute information, to rally for an Obama victory. However, even during the campaign Obama made statements, specifically about teachers’ unions, which revealed that he didn’t consider himself as squarely in the camp of organized labor. More recently he has said that he intends to bring *all* parties to the table, including labor *and* the interests of Capital, to seek solutions to the financial crisis. With this in mind, to what extent should organized labor see in Obama a “partner” in the struggles of the working class to secure improvements in their bargaining position?

Furthermore, how can the working class take advantage of the limited opportunities presented by the Obama presidency without losing the degree of independence needed to push beyond what seems possible under the administration. What can be done beginning under Obama’s presidency to reverse the assault on organized labor which has characterized the past several decades and to put the working class into an active and not passive or defensive position? What is the agenda of labor regardless of the president?

3. The vacuous phrase “Wall street vs. Main Street” was effectively used by the Obama campaign to portray the class divisions made perceivably more acute by the current

economic crisis. How should this opportunistic rhetoric be addressed? And how should criticism of capitalist class-society and its crises be promoted without simply condemning the “greed” of Capitalists and heralding the altruism of the “working people”? What can be done to deepen a public understanding of class dynamics and to counter the ideological confusion produced by the crisis and its management.

4. The politics of Anti-Iraq-War dissent, coupled with Anti-Bush-Administration disapproval, has driven Leftist organizing for most of the past decade. These politics have cemented a bond between political bedfellows who seem to share little more than the deep-set reliance on the quantification of “opposition” through mass-demonstrations and disapproval polling, and the cynical belief that practically anybody is better than Bush and the Republicans. Indeed, it often seems like the only thing that has held together groups with deeply conflicting principles and social visions has been a general “anti” stance towards the current regime. However, Obama’s administration threatens to dissolve this arrangement by meeting, at least in part, many of the rallying demands of the “movement”—for instance, by closing Guantanamo Bay, settling on a scheduled withdrawal from Iraq, curtailing some of the gross war-profiteering, and becoming less hostile to the U.N. and more careful with “global opinion.” If Obama’s presidency does diminish the efficacy of Bush-era “anti” politics, can you foresee a new arrangement of principles and criticisms which could create a more successful oppositional force? What could this Left stand *for*? How might it be capable of fighting against the *causes* of war across presidential terms, specific military campaigns, and nationally bound politics?
5. Rather than hysterically celebrating Obama’s election as the “beginning of a new age” or cynically dismissing it as a meaningless display of “celebrity politics”, how do we determine what is really new versus what is left wholly unchanged in the present political moment? What are the actual and significant new developments the Obama presidency represents—or *may* represent—for the Left? This seems to be deeply affected by how we understand the election in light of the continuing weakness and obsolescence of the Left as a social force. How is Obama’s election part of a more general historical trajectory, characterized by the loss of political possibilities and the decline of a Leftist politics? And what might be done today to buck against that trend?
6. To what extent is Obama or anyone in his administration free to transform socio-economic conditions in the United States? To what extent are they—granting them even the best of intentions—bound to preserve and reproduce these conditions? How should a Left begin to clarify and aim to overcome this present limitation? And how might it address this problem of constraint so that the task to overcome the limitations of social agency is made clear and may point toward effective political action? In other words, what would the Left need to become to end capitalism in 10 years?