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By Adolph Reed

WHY LABOR'S SOLDIERING FOR THE DEMOCRATS IS A LOSING BATTLE

THE QUESTION WHETHER AN OBAMA-ERA DEMOCRATIC PARTY MAY OFFER opportunities for labor and left-of-center political interests presumes that Obama's Democratic Party offers potential for significant departure from the rightward tacking we've seen since Bill Clinton's presidency. There is little in anything Obama's said or done to warrant such a presumption.

Throughout his career, Obama has been able to assume left support while never seriously committing to any actually left policies. In fact, in his books and speeches he has frequently invoked stereotypical images of left dogmatism, intemperateness, or folly, often as asides that seem intended mainly to reassure conservative sensibilities about his judiciousness.¹ This inclination to toss off casual references to the Left's "excesses" or socialism's "failure" has been a defining feature of Brand Obama and supports the claim that he is a new kind of pragmatic progressive, singularly able to bridge—or rise above—left and right, and appeal across ideological divisions.²

Rather than a departure, however, Obama's political style presumes and consolidates Clintonism's ideological and programmatic victory. Obama could not have sold his liberal-conservative "bipartisan" transcendence so successfully to leftists/progressives if Clinton had not already moved the boundaries of liberalism rightward enough to incorporate key elements of the Reaganite agenda and worldview. Clinton's presidency articulated a Democratic version of neoliberalism that abjures commitment to the public sector's role in mitigating inequalities produced through market processes. This is the substantive foundation of Obama's political vision. His posture of judiciousness and transcendence of left-right division, for example, depends partly on ritual

validation of bromides about “big government,” which he can evoke through nods to resonant phrases, without needing affirmative arguments that might disconcert his left constituents.

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In a similar vein, Obama’s reliance on nasty, victim-blaming stereotypes about black poor people to convey tough-minded honesty about race and poverty also presumes victorious Clintonism. Clinton’s rhetoric of “ending welfare as we know it,” his division of the poor into those who “play by the rules” and those who presumably do not, his Orwellian recasting of the destruction of low-income housing and forced displacement of poor people as “moving to opportunity” and “HOPE,” and (most of all) his debacle of “welfare reform” already had helped effect liberal Democrats’ accommodation to underclass ideology that construes behavior modification as the fundamental objective of anti-poverty policy. Obama’s nefarious “Popeyes chicken” speech and his Father’s Day excoriation merely rehearsed, albeit more effectively, Clinton’s well-known stratagem of disparaging poor black people in speeches to black audiences.³

Neither Obama’s deep and tight connections to investor class interests (no candidate received more in financial sector campaign contributions, as is reflected in his list of economic appointments) nor his commitment to a militarist foreign policy has differed substantially from Clinton’s, Gore’s, Kerry’s or others’ in the Democratic leadership. So why, then, have so many politically savvy people assumed—both during his presidential campaign and since his inauguration—that an

Obama-led Democratic Party would mark a progressive departure from its predecessors?

This assumption stems largely from his racial classification and the complex imagery and claims associated with the prospect of his becoming the first president publicly recognized as black. That imagery encouraged characterizing the implications of Obama’s election for American racial politics as lying in a different, and perhaps normatively precedent, dimension from his substantive vision and programmatic agenda. From that perspective, the symbolic significance of the opportunity to elect a black president could mystify, or even outweigh, the candidate’s actual politics.

In this view, Obama’s victory and presidency are progressive because he is black. Obama receives a pass from progressives because the election of a black president is *by definition* a progressive accomplishment. Whatever advances and supports this president’s election and administration must be progressive, even when he explicitly and preemptively rejects left options for conservative ones. Tellingly, Obama himself has sought to deflect criticism by adducing who he is—elements of his biography, his personal bona fides—rather than his substantive political commitments. The logic that roots Obama’s progressivism in *who* he is rather than what he *does* or stands for also mirrors Clinton’s insistence that his liberalism inhered in who he was—the poor boy from Hope, Arkansas who could feel your pain, baby-boomer, post-segregationist Southerner. As we have seen around one issue after another—the endless, even expanding wars; failure, yet again, to follow through on promised labor law reform; an approach to health care reform that built in satisfying the insurance and pharmaceutical industries as non-negotiable from the outset, the equivalent, as my father would say, of hiring Jesse James as a bank guard; an inadequate approach to

economic stimulus; abetting, if not actively advancing, the destruction of public education; and, in some ways most destructive of all, blithe inattentiveness to the intensifying fiscal crises of the states—the belief that this administration is open to progressive initiatives remains undisturbed, undercutting protest or mobilization from the labor movement and other institutional constituencies actually capable of marshalling opposition. The conviction that Obama literally embodies the aspirations of a Democratic Left has encouraged a suspension of criticism of his administration, as the travesty of the Gulf Coast oil spill dramatically illustrates.

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So the posture from the AFL-CIO and other unions—as well as environmental, civil rights, women's, and public interest groups—has been first to defend the administration against attacks from the Right and then to hope that demonstrated loyalty or “responsibility” will pay off in concessions. This hopefulness is often expressed in appeals to the president's better, more progressive instincts—which had largely been projected onto him in those supporters' will to believe—and efforts to dissociate him from his appointees' actions. (If

we could only get an audience with the king, we could show him the mistakes being made in his name!)

To be sure, our side has realized gains from this administration that would not have been possible under Republicans. One recent illustration is the apparent shift in the New York Labor Board's disposition regarding graduate student unionization.⁴ Department of Labor enforcement reportedly has improved dramatically as well, and Obama's executive order mandating project labor agreements for federal construction projects (Executive Order 13502) will have real impact. The EPA and OSHA have been reinvigorated as regulatory agencies, as have others, and civil rights enforcement in the Department of Justice has been renewed. At the same time, it is not clear that these and other gains indicate any particular openness to progressive politics from Obama's administration. They just as likely reflect the general ways that having a Democratic administration in power is preferable to the alternative.

These and other such gains are meaningful so far as they go and are not to be dismissed. It is necessary to lobby, advocate, cajole, compromise, and acquiesce to win as many such victories as possible. The reality of our political weakness is such that we cannot hope for more from a sitting administration and Congress. No less than comparable gains under Clinton, however, these must be weighed against what we have lost and will lose—as workers of whatever race, gender, and sexual orientation—as the result of the Obama Democrats' generally imperialist foreign policy and economic and social policies that shrink social protections while expanding the punitive apparatus and reinforcing financial sector and corporate hegemony.

That sort of accounting is unlikely to take place, partly because doing so would mean confronting a core contradiction of labor and left political strategy that is content to operate entirely within the national Democratic Party's programmatic steering imperatives. Over

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time, a political strategy crafted within those constraints will be able to do little more than negotiate the best possible terms of defeat in a revanchist regime of upward redistribution that is the practical logic of neoliberalism.⁵ As Doug Henwood recently observed, the essence of this contradiction is that “the Democratic Party is a party of capital that has to pretend for electoral reasons that it’s something else. So, Dems make progressive noises to satisfy the base, but once in power, do the bidding of their funders.”⁶

It is this tension between the class basis of the Democratic Party's policy commitments and the concerns of its electoral base that often gives Democrats the appearance of incoherence. Republicans don't have that problem because they've fashioned a popular electoral base on issues that lie in a different domain from their commitments to the financial sector, crony capitalism, and upward redistribution.

This brings us to what *is* distinctive about the Obama-era Democratic Party and his administration. Obama's signature accomplishment may be sidestepping that tension precisely

through the symbolic power condensed in the imagery of the First Black President. That imagery—which condenses longstanding tropes and narratives of American history, racial and otherwise—has swept up not only the politically naïve. Nor is this disposition only a matter of ideological thrall. It has a material foundation in the institutional arrangements that have emerged through the breakdown of the New Deal and postwar social bargaining system, and the political weakness and demobilization that accompanied it. Therefore, rather than providing new opportunities for the Left and labor, the Obama presidency is more likely to complete the Clintonist consolidation of the Democratic Party as the identitarian left-wing of neoliberalism.

In an otherwise insipid 2008 *New York Times Magazine* article on Obama as avatar of yet another “new black politics,” Matt Bai contended that the new black politicians are “just as likely to see themselves as ambassadors to the black community as they are to see themselves as spokesmen for it.”⁷ They are, that is, emissaries *from* Democratic elites who communicate the limits of the possible and thinkable, as established within the boundaries of the neoliberal policy framework, to their putative constituents at least as much as they articulate, and advocate for, the interests of the latter to the former. That characterization applies more broadly to those institutions and interest groups, including the labor movement, that are likely to be harmed by the party's commitment to a larger framework of neoliberal policy priorities. At best, those institutions effectively function to fit their constituencies' interests and political agendas into that larger framework. This development is substance and product of political demobilization.

As the Clintonist consensus has taken more complete hold in defining the Democratic policy horizon, those opinion-shaping elites have less and less to deliver to their constituencies,

to the extent that victory commonly, perhaps unconsciously, reduces to averting the worst possible defeat. In their efforts to mobilize electoral support for Democratic candidates, at least on some basis other than the standard mantra that “the other guy is worse,” these emissary elites’ claims to constituent bases have also had to strain credulity ever more. Labor Party National Organizer Mark Dudzic’s observation about John Kerry’s 2004 presidential campaign expresses this contradiction neatly:

*Legions of anti-war activists campaigned their hearts out for a pro-war candidate. Laid-off textile workers and steelworkers went to the wall for a man who had never voted against a single trade agreement. Lifelong advocates of health care as a right devoted their every waking hour to elect someone who promised to throw another half a trillion dollars down the sinkhole of private, for-profit health insurance.*⁸

Unless we believe that it is possible to persuade people indefinitely that their material experience is, in fact, not their material experience, this is an arrangement that cannot hold.

Clintonism was partly an attempt to displace this contradiction by weaning Democratic liberalism from its association with downward economic redistribution through crafting a new mythical target voter, much as the Republicans had under Reagan. The ideal New Democrats are socially liberal members of the professional-managerial stratum and investor class who accept the dominance of the financial sector, an imperialist foreign policy, and a retreat from the public sector in the name of rationality and innovation; they are committed to cultural diversity and identitarian liberalism—or at least to feeling smarter and morally superior to their Republican neighbors, families, and co-workers. This mythical voter also is drawn to a post-partisan, technocratic vision of politics and policymaking that renders class

rule invisible by presenting it as undebatable rational necessity, a baseline commonsense. Eruption of discontent from labor and the Left around NAFTA and welfare reform underscored the limits of Clinton’s strategy. However, by the end of his administration the apparent Clinton prosperity, and the need to circle the wagons to defend him from right-wing attack, seemed to harmonize the Democratic base.⁹

Obama’s technocratic approach to policy depoliticizes decision-making and appeals to a professional-managerial constituency.

Obama has taken the logic of Clintonism further in two respects. First, his posture of judiciousness and technocratic approach to policy matters depoliticizes decision-making and appeals to a professional-managerial constituency. In addition to conferring a tint of “grassroots” authenticity, his self-narration as a “community organizer” reinforces this effect via the trope of change without conflict. (This move fits perfectly with what we might call the NGO-ization of social movements.) Second, he promises to harmonize the Democratic coalition by embodying an evanescent progressivism that appeals to blacks and non-white immigrant groups, as well as liberals of whatever race, gender, or sexual orientation, on the basis of his own biography and identity and the massively seductive power of the First Black President trope. The latter is a notion of progressive politics without clear programmatic content apart from a commitment to diversity. Moreover, to the extent that Obamaism reduces to an essentialist—and essentially irrationalist—grounding

of politics in identity, and a post-partisan, post-ideological approach to policymaking, it also fits comfortably with neoliberalism's disparagement of the public and the social.

Walter Benn Michaels argues in the Spring 2010 issue of *New Labor Forum* that it is possible to meet an egalitarian ideal of diversity or parity of group representation within an ideological and policy regime that radically intensifies economic inequality, even in ways that increase hardship on significant proportions of the groups that benefit from pursuit of diversity.¹⁰ From this perspective, conflation of the two notions of social justice—equality and parity among groups—is not simply an analytical problem, but can have real-world consequences that include a zero-sum relation between diversity and economic equality.

The labor movement has become a cue-taker in the Democratic coalition, corraling and channeling its constituencies around and between elections to rationalize why the promised payoffs fail to materialize.

Proponents of an antiracist politics commonly express anxiety that Obama's election could issue in premature proclamation of the transcendence of racial inequality, injustice, or conflict. It is and will be possible to find as

many expressions of that view as one might wish, just as it will be possible to find a more or less explicitly racist "birther" tendency. The greater likelihood, and in my view the great danger, is that we will find ourselves left with no critical politics other than a desiccated identitarian leftism capable only of counting, parsing, hand-wringing, administering, and making up "Just So" stories about dispossession and exploitation recast in the arid language of disparity and diversity. This is a politics that emanates, by the way, from the professional-managerial class that remains generally insulated from the ravages of the ongoing economic crisis,¹¹ the endless wars, and the other costs of predatory neoliberalism.

So what does the analysis I have laid out here say for practical political action? As I have indicated, working to win whatever gains can be won for labor and other left interests, particularly at the level of social regulation, is an urgent necessity for the sake both of improving and securing people's lives and buttressing our position in ongoing struggle. But, without social movement pressure, we win hardly anything. The late Tony Mazzocchi often observed wryly that the labor movement, and working people in general, got more from the Nixon administration than from Clinton's. The difference is not that Nixon was more our friend than Clinton was. It was that our movements were still vital enough as a force in the society to compel action, to force our will onto history, if only in limited ways. We have so long since lost that capacity that it seems no longer to exist in historical memory.

If we are to have any hope of shifting the terms of political debate in a direction more favorable to working people's interests, we need to focus on rebuilding social movement capacity as well as winning what can be won under the terms decreed to us by Democratic neoliberalism. This is a project,

however, that cannot be conducted within the constraints of either the electoral cycle or Democratic politicians' and functionaries' sense of the limits of the possible. And there lies a Catch-22. Institutions, like the labor movement, that have the capacity to generate and sustain such a project have become, to an unhealthy extent, cue-takers in the Democratic coalition; they function as much as anything else to corral and channel their constituencies around and between elections to rationalize why the promised payoffs fail to materialize.

Notes

1. For example: "It made me smile, thinking back on Frank and his old Black Power, dashiki self. In some ways he was as incurable as my mother, as certain in his faith, living in the same sixties time warp that Hawaii had created." Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1994), 98. Such characterizations abound in Obama's second book, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006).

2. Matt Taibbi, "Obama Is the Best BS Artist since Bill Clinton," February 14, 2007, available at <http://www.alternet.org/story/48051>.

3. Barack Obama, "Speech on Fatherhood," June 15, 2008, available at http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/06/obamas_speech_on_fatherhood.html; see also "Obama Sharply Assails Absent Black Fathers," *New York Times*, June 16, 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/16/us/politics/15cnd-obama.html> and Lynn Sweet, "'Y'all have Popeyes out in Beaumont?' Obama on the Bully Pulpit," *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 29, 2008, available at http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2008/02/sweet_column_yall_have_popeyes.html.

In this institutional vacuum, many energetic young and not-so-young people have gravitated toward romantic political strategies that amount to little more than hyperbolic, often seemingly Alinskyite calls for propaganda of the deed and fantasies that are the political equivalent of spontaneous combustion. Creating alternative courses of action that can help navigate our way out of this political impasse seems to me to be a vastly more important discussion for us to have than wondering what we might be able to win from a Democratic Party and administration over which we, in any event, have no control.

4. "Showdown on Grad Unions," *Inside Higher Education*, April 28, 2010.

5. See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 19.

6. Doug Henwood, "How to Learn Nothing from Crisis," *Left Business Observer* #125, February 25, 2010.

7. Matt Bai, "Is Obama the End of Black Politics?," *New York Times Magazine*, August 6, 2008.

8. Mark Dudzic, "After the Elections: What Next?," available at <http://www.thelaborparty.org> (accessed January 5, 2005) and cited in Adolph Reed, Jr., "The 2004 Election in Perspective: The Myth of 'Cultural Divide' and the Triumph of Neoliberal Ideology," *American Quarterly* 57 (March 2005): 4.

9. Reed, "The 2004 Election," 11.

10. See Walter Benn Michaels, "Identity Politics: A Zero-Sum Game," *New Labor Forum* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2010).

11. See Andrew Sum et al., *Labor Utilization Problems of U. S. Workers Across Household Income Groups at the End of the Great Recession: A Truly Great Depression Among the Nation's Low Income Workers Amidst Full Employment Among the Most Affluent* (Flint, MI: C.S. Mott Foundation, February 2010), 13.