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United States

Barack Obama: A Campaign with Issues

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There will be no real progress on health care, education, sustainability or any other meaningful goal without freeing up the resources that are being poured into the colonial occupation of Iraq and the overwhelming U.S. military budget. On one point Barack Obama is perfectly clear, and in harmony with John McCain: He'll expand the U.S. military operation in Afghanistan.

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Barack Obama: the next US president.

Image: Elizabeth Cromwell

THE ISSUES IN the 2008 election ought to be clear to everyone by now: Rev. Jeremiah Wright. John McCain's medical dossier. Obama leaving Trinity United Church of Christ. Will Bill and Hillary Clinton sabotage the Obama campaign? Will she force herself onto the Obama ticket? Will the religious right come around to McCain after all?

We hate to disappoint, but in this editorial we're going to bypass these fundamental issues and instead take up a few secondary questions that may be of some marginal interest – a continuing disastrous war, an economic shambles that's destroying the lives of millions of families, a growing global food crisis and the legacy of an outgoing administration that has smashed all previous records in U.S. history for presidential abuse of power.

We begin with what everyone knew well before the June 3 final primaries, that Barack Obama will be the Democratic presidential nominee. His election would be the political event of the past hundred years in American politics. Yet even after Hillary Clinton's concession speech, there are still two Democratic candidates: As the late great Mary Wells of Motown fame once sang "I have two lovers, And both of them are you," the Democrats have two presidential nominees and both are named Barack Obama.

There's the Barack Obama who has seized the attention of Black America, of young people by the millions, of political independents and of some Republicans. This Barack Obama would get us out of the Iraq mess in less than two years, restore sane priorities for combating global poverty and environmental destruction, and begin bridging the racial divisions and deep inequalities in our society. Most important for his army of supporters, he'd replace the old politics of the past two administrations – the systematic lying, cronyism and abuses of the Bush regime and the cynical triangulation and sleaze of the Clintons – with a new kind of open and honest governance.

Then there's Barack Obama the actual nominee, who ran straight to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and sang AIPAC's favorite hit-parade tunes ("Undivided Jerusalem Israel's Eternal Capital," "No Talking to Hamas," etc.), a performance that Israel's preeminent peace campaigner Uri Avnery called "a speech that broke all records for obsequiousness and fawning."

But the importance of that speech wasn't just in slamming the door on hopes for Palestinian peace and freedom, it also affirmed Obama's complete integration into the imperial and elite establishment. This is the Obama who surrounds himself with thoroughly conventional political, economic and foreign policy advisors; whose "vice-presidential search committee" chairman is so saturated with corporate sleaze he had to resign before even getting started; whose newly appointed chief economic advisor Jason Furman is an explicit supporter of Wal-Mart, globalization and privatizing Social Security; and who seems allergic to any hint of a social justice agenda.

Which Barack Obama is authentic? In a real sense, both of them. An army of Obama supporters, the African American community, and tens of millions of people all over this country will mobilize around Obama the symbol of

“The Audacity of Hope.” The Republican Party, in keeping with its nature as the preferential option for corporate power and white supremacy, can be expected to target this same symbolic Obama, in what we can expect to be the dirtiest, most bigoted, racist and scaremongering campaign in our country’s recent history. (He’s biracial! His father was once Muslim! He’ll talk to Ahmedinejad! His middle name is Hussein!)

Meanwhile, a significant sector of corporate and policy elites will gather around Obama the mainstream Democrat. There is genuine fear in these circles about the consequences of the Bush regime’s massive financial irresponsibility, its ideologically-driven military adventurism, its disastrous inattention to infrastructure and catastrophic climate change, its incapacity to respond to out-of-control domestic and global energy price inflation, in short, its squandering of the physical, monetary and political assets that make the United States the master of the world.

These forces are happy to enjoy the fruits of Republican policies that have made them rich at the expense of the rest of us, but are worried that pushing this direction further could seriously destabilize U.S. capitalism and the global system. Well aware of the distinction between lofty imagery and the realities of bourgeois politics, they see Obama as their safe-reform option and hope for a soft landing from the present crisis.

How About That Economy?

There are differences between the Obama-Democratic and McCain-Republican programs, and we’ll get to them, but they have practically nothing to do with the most important recent event in the U.S. class struggle. An 87-day strike at American Axle and Manufacturing (AAM) ended in abject surrender by the UAW International, with production workers’ wages essentially cut in half. Union members have returned to work in a police-state factory atmosphere, with the company aiming to push the existing work force out the door to be replaced with new hires at \$11.50 an hour.

This is not only a tragedy for AAM workers and their families, but portends the end of the U.S. auto industry as a high-wage employer. It’s easy to recognize the implication for the next bargaining round at the used-to-be-Big Three: The next generation auto work force will be at more or less the upper end of low-wage workers.

This development should be reverberating through the national political debate, but of course it isn’t. Labor’s wave of concessions throughout industry points toward a series of urgent issues:

* The AAM workers went back under the threat of replacement workers, knowing that labor law and government policy would allow this and that the UAW International couldn’t or wouldn’t defend them. Barack Obama has vaguely mentioned workers’ rights, but certainly not how the threat of permanent replacement cripples unions’ right to strike effectively, and when the UAW endorsed him it didn’t even demand that he address labor law reform.

* Fewer and fewer workers have decent health care insurance through their employers. McCain and the Republicans promise to make this broken system even worse, by forcing families to buy into costly private plans with the promise of “tax credits” to partially offset the ruinous expense. Obama and the Democrats will play around with using government programs to incorporate blocs of uninsured Americans into the private system, but they’ll be lucky if they can cover half the uninsured through such schemes.

Barack Obama could boldly pose the following question: “There are 50 million Americans without health insurance, and over 100 million inadequately covered. What is the greater risk to them — a potential terrorist attack, or a major illness in their family that wipes them out financially?” The symbolic audacity-of-hope Obama would ask that

question; the real life centrist Democrat Obama of course will not.

* While AAM is a profitable company â€” so much greater the crime of enabling its wage-slashing spree â€” much of the U.S. auto industry, given the population's falling purchasing power and gas rising over \$4 a gallon, is on the sharp end of an incipient deep economic crisis (discussed in the articles in this issue by Nomi Prins and Jack Rasmus). After decades of turning its back on energy efficiency to produce high-profit gas-guzzlers and that ultimate Brantomobile the SUV, the U.S. auto industry is "restructuring" â€” on the backs of its work force, moving production to the U.S. and Global South and pushing all its workers' conditions toward the bottom. A different kind of "restructuring" is possible, but it would require decisive political (legislative and executive) action, a militant revival of union activism against corporate power, and a true "Audacity of Hope" in our society.

George W. Bush's horrible ethanol-from-corn debacle is helping drive food prices up here and globally, pushing the U.S. toward "stagflation" and tens of millions of people in the Global South toward starvation. Urgent action is needed now to use the existing alternative, sustainable energy technologies and develop new ones; to create urban mass transit and design future housing patterns to be able to use it; to fully exploit the potential for electric, hybrid and alternative-fuel vehicles; and so much more.

The audacity-of-hope Obama would campaign on the necessity of a "sustainability revolution." The real-life centrist one won't go beyond the pathetic plea of UAW President Ron Gettelfinger to "assist the auto industry" while it cuts his members' wages and benefits.

And the War(s)?

There will be no real progress on health care, education, sustainability or any other meaningful goal without freeing up the resources that are being poured into the colonial occupation of Iraq and the overwhelming U.S. military budget. On one point Barack Obama is perfectly clear, and in harmony with John McCain: He'll expand the U.S. military operation in Afghanistan. What a disaster. Beginning about a hundred years ago, U.S. Marines went into Nicaragua and Haiti and remained for a quarter century. At the present rate, the war in Afghanistan could easily last that long, at a vastly higher price.

Obama's argument is that troops can be pulled away from "the wrong war" in Iraq to fight "the right war against terrorism" in Afghanistan â€” out of the quagmire, into the quicksand. McCain of course wants to sink in the quagmire and quicksand at the same time; stability is just around the corner in Iraq and then U.S. forces can triumphantly remain forever, just like in South Korea.

The tragic reality about the debate on Iraq is that the destruction of that country and its people has substantially faded from the corporate media, due in large measure to the decline of the antiwar movement which, for a couple of years, forced part of the truth to come out. If Barack Obama in the White House is going to do anything serious about withdrawal, the decision would have to be taken in the very first months of his administration. After that, he would already "own" the war and be unable to take the heat of "losing Iraq," as if this wretched war weren't lost years ago.

This points to the need for the antiwar movement to get itself rebuilt at the grassroots and "surge" into the streets, as soon as possible after the election even if, regrettably, it probably can't do so before. (And we're not even discussing here the possibility of a last-ditch strike at Iran by the Bush regime in its death agony.)

Some Brief Conclusions

Where does this leave us? That depends on where your politics are. If you're a Democratic voter, if that party and its program are yours, then Barack Obama "the real one, not the symbol" is your candidate. In particular, we'll say it out loud: For those Democratic voters who supported Hillary Clinton, the only reason for "staying home" or voting for McCain would be racism. The brutal fact is that such a discussion would never come up if Senator Clinton had been narrowly defeated by, say, John Edwards or Joe Biden.

On the other hand, if you consider yourself to be a progressive or independent voter with a commitment to peace and social justice, you'll have to confront the disconnect "which will only grow from now till November" between the symbolic, audacity-of-hope Barack Obama and the real-life candidate who's consciously opted for the politics of a centrist, pro-military corporate Democrat. If you decide you want a genuine, not just symbolic alternative, you'll need "the audacity of hope" to look elsewhere.