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USA

# Three years after "Yes we can"

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**No he didn't. That's the epitaph on the tombstone of liberal and left-wing hopes that greeted the historic election of Barack Obama in November 2008. Did anyone imagine then that the election itself, more than anything he'd do in office, would be the high point of the Obama presidency? Or that three years later, the power of "Yes we can" would be the eruption of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) spreading to one city after another – essentially nothing to do with president Obama?**

The much weakened "change you can believe in" President faces a year of daunting challenges: a difficult reelection campaign with high longterm unemployment, a demoralized Democratic base and a far-right-controlled Congress. And the 2012 election is being stolen right now, thanks to reactionary Republican power in critical state legislatures, enacting voter-suppression laws that will strip as many as five million Black, Latino and poor citizens of their voting rights, while Obama's own Justice Department does little or nothing about it.

The Obama presidency also confronts a chain of crises stretching from Israel's intransigence over Palestine, and bloody stalemates in Yemen and Syria, to the near fracturing of the U.S.-Pakistan alliance. Hanging over it all is the real possibility of a new global financial meltdown and recession, or worse. To say that the ruinous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan-Pakistan and the shambles of the U.S. budget were largely inherited from Obama's predecessor is true, but of decreasing political relevance. What's happened – and more important, what next?

To be sure, it was always self-delusion for anyone on the left to imagine that president Obama would attempt to govern on the basis of anything resembling a truly progressive agenda – massive economic stimulus and aggressive public works to confront unemployment; at least temporary nationalization of the banks to restore the flow of credit; a writedown of principal on "underwater" housing mortgages; a rapid end to the disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the immediate-if-not-sooner closure of the Guantánamo prison; a serious fight for the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) and universal single-payer health care reform or, at minimum, the once-promised and quickly-abandoned "strong public option."

As for any truly radical measures – like freeing victims of racist and political repression entombed for decades in federal prison, and commutation for thousands of nonviolent drug offenders; full investigation and disclosure of the criminal abuses committed by the Bush-Cheney gang; banning deportations by executive order until the passage of comprehensive immigration reform – those were never even on the radar screen.

One strength of the movement around OWS is that illusions about Obama have significantly dissipated. There's a serious question to raise about Obama's course, but it's not about whether the left could "influence" him. The left never had "a seat at the table" of the Obama administration, nor frankly even the space to be a fly on the wall, and it was absurd to entertain fantasies of "the left-wing component of the broad progressive bloc" that our Obama-enthusing friends in the movement envisioned as a counterweight to the influence of the bankers and hedge funds.

In reality, president Obama can't properly be faulted for not governing on the basis of "progressive," i.e. liberal to moderate left values – because he doesn't share those values, and for those paying careful attention he never really claimed to. He ran for election with the posture as a charismatic but post-partisan, post-racial and post-ideological "pragmatist," in short as a thoroughly centrist corporate Democrat. If the Obama method of governing is that of his signature move on the basketball court – quick head fake left, then hard drive to the right – well, the Democrats always do that, and experienced activists shouldn't be faked out of the gym simply because Obama

performs it with more style.

There have been a couple of social movements in these three years that have won gains, even if limited ones, which stand as exceptions to the overall pattern. First, the lesbian and gay civil rights struggle, although perhaps not the more encompassing and radical Queer movement, has defeated "Don't Ask/Don't Tell" in the U.S. military and made progress in the fight for same-sex marriage rights. Revolutionary change, no â€" but significant reforms in a period where the social justice front has mostly been in retreat.

Second, the heroic open defiance of teenage and young adult "illegal" immigrants who have been in this country since very early age hasn't won passage of the federal DREAM Act, but has successfully pressured the administration to announce it would suspend deportations of those who would become eligible for citizenship under its terms. This is a limited victory indeed, at a time when the most vicious anti-immigrant laws since the 1920s are sweeping one state after another; but it has given these exceptional activists space to speak up not only for themselves but for their whole communities.

These reform victories, however welcome they should be, don't touch the heart of economic policy. That brings us to the question that analysts of the Obama era need to confront: it's not why he didn't respond to nonexistent pressure from his left, but why he responded so weakly and so late to the objective reality of a massive U.S. and world crisis. A whole lot of very smart commentators are beating their heads against the wall trying to understand this, and just because we're Marxists doesn't mean we have a definitive answer, but we'll take a shot.

## In the Age of Austerity

There are well-explored factors that do provide partial explanations. President Obama, who is firmly committed to the health of U.S. capitalism, really believed that the Republican leadership he soundly defeated in 2008 would constructively work with him instead of acting exactly as Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell said they would do, "to make sure that this is a one-term president." He chose to surround himself with the likes of Tim Geithner and Lawrence Summers, architects of the disastrous era of financial deregulation, on the theory that they knew best how to fix the mess they helped create. He saved Wall Street's butt by stuffing the banks with cash and bailing out General Motors and Chrysler, expecting that corporate America would be grateful and reinvest its profits instead of fattening already obscene CEO pay packages.

According to this listing, in short, Barack Obama is intellectually brilliant but woefully short of experience in the knife-fighting that U.S. politics has become. This is probably true, but doesn't fully account for some other phenomena â€" notably, why this president would simultaneously kick his own base in the teeth. Not only did EFCA go down without a whimper, but teachers, Obama's most loyal labor supporters, have been cynically scapegoated and disrespected, chastised and chartered in the name of "Race to the Top" in a truly shocking manner. (The American knife in the back of the Palestinians is another whole discussion elsewhere in this issue.)

We think, however, that there's an underlying factor, which we've attempted to explore in a previous editorial: "The capitalist class in the United States has opted for austerity â€" not for themselves, of course, but for breaking the remaining power of the working-class and social movements – mainly in the name of â€"fiscal discipline and responsibility." ("Austerity and U.S. Decline," ATC 153, July-August 2011)

This puts the president in the position of trying to persuade his rightwing enemies â€" people who literally hate and want to destroy him â€" to constructively collaborate with him, while also attempting to energize the labor, African American and social movement supporters who love Obama but desperately want him to fight for something. It isn't

surprising that the Obama rhetoric that genuinely inspired tens of millions of people, back in 2008, has given way to a rather tinny and hollow-sounding "Pass this Jobs Bill" mantra in the fall of 2011.

It might be different if this "jobs bill" really did aim for achieving full employment as fighting liberals of long ago used to believe in, or if Obama weren't simultaneously putting Medicare and Social Security on the negotiating table (read: chopping block) to pay for more corporate tax cuts and modest infrastructure spending. But what used to be conventional liberalism is now branded as Bolshevism. Much as official discourse denies it, there is class war in America, and it's taking an increasingly vicious form.

Teachers in particular are under attack not because they're overpaid or ineffective or "lack accountability," but because they're organized at a time when capital is determined to gut the unions. (The move to turn public education into a for-private-profit venture is driven by Democratic as much as by Republican operatives.) Not only are teacher benefits and wages to be cut, but even more, their job security is to be wiped out as it already has been for so much of the working class. Auto workers are supposed to be grateful to president Obama for saving their jobs, and there's no doubt that the UAW leadership worships him, but the growing ranks of lower-tier (roughly half-pay) workers may feel less warm and fuzzy about the new dispensation.

Little wonder that Obama's base feels less and less that he really speaks for them. Among the measures that could have been taken to energize people's hopes, consider this: In the face of the state of Georgia's drive to murder Troy Davis, the Justice Department should have launched a federal Civil Rights investigation into several witnesses' highly credible claims that their testimony at trial, identifying Troy Davis as the killer of a police officer, was falsely extracted by police coercion and intimidation. Yet not only was there no such investigation, but the Obama administration maintained absolute silence in the face of this legal lynching despite an outpouring of international outrage.

## Cloudy Electoral Prospects

We haven't tried to explore here the other side of the political spectrum, in particular, the monster-raving-loonie spectacle that the Republicans present to a disbelieving and frankly horrified world — climate change, a hoax contrived by a globalist conspiracy; evolution, an unproven theory; Social Security, a ponzi scheme. Is it possible that a presidential election could actually be won by a party carrying those messages?

The answer, we think, is yes it can, especially with voter-suppression laws being put in place in broad daylight, but the odds are still against it. Given the present cast of characters, we assume that most sectors of capital in the United States would generally prefer to see a "moderate Republican" sort of president — fiscally conservative, but pragmatic if a threat of economic slump requires it; socially tolerant, e.g. not fanatically hostile to lesbian/gay rights but not overly committed either; solidly militarist and imperialist without being an international embarrassment. Barack Obama, stripped of a Democratic majority and facing no serious liberal (let alone left) pressure, can fill that moderate-Republican role better than any other available option.

In contrast, among the current crop of GOP candidates, Mitt Romney is the only major one who's not committed to the extreme right (mainly because he's not committed to much of anything except his own ambition). A Republican president along with a Tea-Party driven Congressional majority could be dangerous for capital itself, in the event of severe economic emergency. If such an administration were to believe and act upon its own rhetoric that massive budget-cutting creates jobs, Herbert Hoover style, it really could turn a downturn into a new Great Depression — especially at a moment when the major European countries are following the same consumption-crushing course.

We'll be looking in coming issues of ATC at the 2012 election and potential openings for independent politics, but

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right now we envision a probable reelection of president Obama to a second term, but devoid of the hopes and the popular energy that marked the beginning of the first. There will be those who, as always, will insist on loyally supporting the Democrats yet again to beat back the far right. That argument undoubtedly will gain traction as the election heats up, but it sounds more tired with every repetition and it's a long and sad road from the change that so many millions so recently believed in.

Until the emergence of a powerful social movement and at least the beginning of a new socialist left, there's a very low ceiling for meaningful reform, for confronting the scandal of child poverty, the destruction of public education or reversing the collapse of working-class standards of living. That's why Occupy Wall Street represents the rebirth of hope for what democracy is supposed to look like.

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