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What's Left one year after Obama?

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The failure of Obama to live up to expectations can be disempowering to many on the Left, even those who understand the limitations of the current political system and how it truly serves only a wealthy elite. We must fight against this tendency with all of our might. Now more than ever, those who are committed to a just society must put forth a viable alternative to the present system, both through words and deeds.

Obama's charisma and oratory was all too achingly reminiscent of fallen civil rights leaders, playing on people's longing for a time free of today's suffocating cynicism, when change seemed not only possible, but tangible.

So-called "ordinary" people were more free of illusions than the left-wing Obama activists when they voted, looking for a candidate who would provide more jobs, health care, and an end to the war in Iraq, rather than believing that he would magically usher in a one-man revolution.

Even by these modest standards, Obama has failed. He has been uncompromising in bailing out the rich, while timid in doing any-

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thing of substance for the working class, or tackling racial justice or rights for the LGBT community.

He doesn't aim to end the "war on terror" whereby troops, mostly working class youth, especially those of color, are made into killers of other poor people so that corporate profits are safe. Rather, he wishes to "do it right", by shifting focus from Iraq to Afghanistan. Obama's health care similarly protects the interests of insurance companies, while providing the illusion of progress.

The Democratic party is fundamentally tied to the capitalist system that shapes our society, and serves the interests of an elite, just as the Republicans do. They differ in tactics and strategy, in the specific mechanics of oppression rather than anything of essence.

While these differences can mean tangible results for the working class and people of color that should not be dismissed out of hand, the parties have grown closer to each other over time. The social programs following World War II, implemented in response to pressure from below and the fear of revolution, were built with the record profits of American corporate exploitation throughout the globe. In the America of today, this is no longer possible.

The (relatively) high-paying union jobs in the manufacturing sector have largely been outsourced, as have much of the highly-touted information and high-tech jobs, leaving a large portion of the economy to low-wage service sector jobs. The reality of waiting tables, serving drinks, working the drive-through, and being a health attendant is not that these are "student" or "teenage" jobs, but the true jobs of the present and future. For many others, unemployment has remained the rule.

Many on the Left see the need to defend Obama, as he has been subjected to unprecedented attack by virulent right-wing forces. Corporate-backed ideologues such as Rush Limbaugh, Sarah Palin, and Glenn Beck masquerade as populists, stirring disaffected, largely white citizens into a frenzy. There can be no denying that these attacks play on thinly-veiled racism.

But the real threat are groups such as the Minutemen and Tea Party, whose verbal attacks on marginalized groups such as immigrants and people of color could easily turn to violence.

We must also resist the urge to cast large sections of America as hopelessly reactionary and racist. There are many angry people out there who see that big business and government are corrupt, and who feel that their lives is threatened and that the future of their children is becoming bleaker.

Unfortunately, right-wing forces have been far more successful in tapping into this sentiment in rural areas and amongst working class white people, while the Left has never made a genuine attempt to do the same in the last few decades.

It is all too easy to turn class resentment, mixed with anxiety from the perceived loss of white privilege into hatred for people of color, immigrants, women, and the LGBT community. Instead, the Left could use this opportunity to seize the moment to confront the real issues of the day.

People are not monolithic, and hardcore reactionaries are a minority; rather there are many disparate influences. This is why in a recent Gallup poll, 17% of Republicans had a favorable view of socialism (a mind-boggling statistic), with about 30% of conservatives having an unfavorable view of capitalism!

Defending Obama may be the natural tendency, and I am not suggesting that our priority is to recruit at Tea Party rallies, but to support Obama would be to miss a genuine chance to show a truly Leftist politics, a completely different animal than what the Democrats represent.

The endless debate between Democrats and Republicans and the view of a hopelessly polarized America is misleading. Rather, it is more accurate to say that a majority of people in this country are unhappy with the way things are. Unhappy does not mean ready for revolution. It means people would be open to an alternative, but see none likely to happen or possible.

This does not stop people from fighting back, and it is a source of hope. The workers of Republic Doors and Windows in Chicago staged an effective and electrifying sit-down strike in December of 2008, one month after Obama's election. These workers intuitively grasped a timeless fact: direct action gets the goods; that instead of waiting for a president or Congress to look out for workers, workers should look out for themselves and make what they want a reality with the force of their collective will.

More recently, students throughout California and the nation hit the streets in record numbers, occupying their campuses and shutting down a major freeway. Those involved were not just the expected student radicals, but "ordinary" students tired of being attacked year after year.

As some who were part of this movement declared that "we are the crisis", they sent a powerful message. Workers, students, people of color, women live the crisis while the rich hear about it on the news and they sign the memos that destroy lives and families.

Many are coming to understand that it is only by becoming a crisis for the rich that results will come.

Actions in response to attacks from the elite are as old as the history of this country and beyond. By themselves, they are gratifying and inspirational, but not enough. As I stood the education rally at my school, I heard many students wondering aloud whether there was anything substantial that could be done or what would come next. They knew too well that marches and rallies alone do not change what needs to be changed.

In the May Day rallies of several years ago, millions of immigrants and their supporters marched through the streets of major cities, demonstrating an amazing build-up of energy and power, but when the crowds petered out, the lighting that was caught in a bottle escaped. Simply reacting to the attacks heaped upon us is not sufficient.

Instead, we must create an alternative by building power. We must show, by building truly democratic, mass organizations, that

the world of domination masquerading as democracy is not the best we can hope for. Every time they tell us that we cannot make the key political and economic decisions that determine where we work, how we will work, who we will love, what kind of living spaces we will occupy, what kind of food we will eat, how long we will live, whether we can be healthy, they are saying that we are too stupid, too lazy, too violent.

The sad part is that most of us have come to believe it. Like the child who is abused and comes to believe she really is worthless, we look at the people around us and our communities and see only despair and ugliness. If we remain isolated, the spell will never be broken.

But by working with others to grapple with the problems we face, by discovering how sweet and exhilarating is the power we can exert as a collective, we can expose the lies about ourselves that we have been told all our lives.

It will not be easy. It will be painful, filled with conflict and setbacks, but ultimately we can come through the other side stronger. We need an economy that is run not by the rich for their own profits, but by the workers who do the actual work. Not by a "socialist" government either, but by democratic communities of workers, students, and human beings.