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It's complicated: President Obama and mass movement building

By Sam Webb

A few on the left say that the absence of a mass movement on the scale of the 1930s and 1960s stems from the fact that millions of Americans still believe the president is an agent of progressive change.

What follows from this theory is the role of left and progressive people is to ruthlessly unmask the politics and progressive pretensions of the president, which in turn will melt away people's illusions in him and trigger a mass upsurge throughout the country.

But is this the case?

I don't think so. And I will tell you why.

The building of a mass movement on the scale of the 1930s or 1960s is a complicated process. A wide-angle lens is needed to capture its many sides.

Before we lay responsibility for the inadequate scale of today's movement on the shoulders of the president, we have to factor in the impact of three decades of right-wing ideological onslaught.

We have to consider the structural changes in the U.S. economy that have economically devastated, socially atomized and politically weakened traditional centers of working class and people's power.

We have to take into account the unprecedented attack against African Americans and



other communities of color, dating back to the election of Reagan.

We have to acknowledge the reality of a smaller labor movement, in large measure the result of economic downsizing, production relocation and a fierce right-wing anti-labor offensive.

We have to factor in the impact of the ideological intensification of racism, male supremacy, immigrant-bashing and homophobia in recent years on popular consciousness.

We have to include in our political calculus the negative effects of capitalist-structured glo-

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balization on working-class consciousness, unity and capacity.

We have to bear in mind the consequences of

People in the face of crises can opt for individualist as well as collective solutions.

the militarization of our society on our society.

We have to note the capitalist class's control and domination of the means of communication and education.

We have to recognize that people in the face of crises can opt for individualist as well as collective solutions.

We have to weigh in the force of habit and inertia.

We have to appreciate that the president operates in a complex of competing class and social forces, some of which (namely the extreme right) are determined to sabotage his presidency.

And we have to bring into bold relief the fact that the left and progressive movements are still too small to exert a decisive and sustained influence on the nation's political direction. Face it. We still preach to the choir.

The multifaceted nature of the process of change is not a reason to throw up our hands in frustration or to revert to simplified explanations, in this case presidential mis-leadership, for the difficulties of building a progressive mass movement.

Indeed, I would argue that today's movement

has the potential to eclipse the popular movements of 1930s and 1960s in size, social composition, political consciousness and social power.

Who thought in 1920 or in 1950 that people's movements of enormous scope and strength would spring up and proceed to realign national politics a few years later?

But that is what happened as many foreseen and unforeseen factors came together in such a way that massive social explosions rocked the country and new chapters of progressive change entered the history books.

These movements had their own complicated factors to deal with, including the global rise of fascism in the 1930s.

Should we think that the process of progressive change and the building of a mass movement with transformative capacities would be any less complicated in our time or any less doable?

You know my answer.



Sam Webb is chair of the Communist Party USA.

15 years after welfare "deform"

By PW Editorial Board

The 15th anniversary of welfare reform, also known as welfare "deform," was recently marked.

1996 legislation gave life to a new "welfare-to-work" program called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families that is administered through block grants to states. The TANF program is set to expire in September.

In the economic boom of the 1990s, the TANF program was hailed by many as a great success with perhaps over half of the former recipients finding minimum wage work.

In today's economy, the modest employment gains in service industry jobs have been all but wiped out, with these workers joining their counterparts in the vast army of the unemployed.

With poverty rising, TANF funds only reach 4.5 million families, or 28 percent of those needing assistance, according to Jake Blumgart of the American Prospect.

"By contrast, in 1995, the old welfare system covered 13.5 million families, or 75 percent of those living in poverty," he writes.

"The increase in deep poverty has been espe-

cially large," writes LaDonna Pavetti of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. "The number of families in deep poverty rose by 13 percent between 1996 and 2009, from 2.7 million to 3 million."

In September, Congress is expected to pass a continuing resolution and re-approve the faltering TANF program. It should consider anti-recessionary employment measures not contained in the original bill.

The value of TANF funding has dropped by over 30 percent in the last 15 years; funding desperately needs be enlarged.

In addition, jobs measures such as the TANF Emergency Fund approved in the 2009 stimulus bill should be, at minimum, re-approved. Funding for jobs expired in September 2010.

To really address the crisis, much stronger legislation, including an extension of unemployment benefits and passage of the Emergency Jobs to Restore the American Dream Act introduced by Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., is needed.

Congress and the president need to know nothing less will do.

The value of TANF funding has dropped by over 30 percent in the last 15 years.

The Republicans must be defeated

By Jarvis Tyner

After watching the recent Republican presidential debate in Iowa, I am sure millions have been convinced more than ever that the Republicans must be defeated in 2012.

This motley crew of right-wing fanatics are not in favor of giving any concessions to the working class, the poor or the victims of systemic racism.

The Iowa debate convened the real “death panel,” because if the GOP policies prevail a whole lot of people won’t survive.

In their debate, the war hawks pushed for more war, more squandering of blood and treasure while claiming to support the troops.

With the addition of Rick Perry, the political debate among the Republican contenders has moved even further to the right. The process of picking the next Republican “fuehrer” shows a party whose time has long past.

By opposing raising taxes on the super rich and subsidies to big oil, they oppose jobs for the unemployed, rebuilding the collapsing infrastructure, ending the foreclosure crisis.

If the dominant policies of the current Republican contenders prevail, our nation will be driven into a far deeper crisis economically, socially and politically.

The truth is that the crisis will not be overcome without increasing the wellbeing and buying power of working people. And that is what they are fighting tooth and nail.

The racial dynamic of their policies are something that should alarm all democratic minded people.

One has to be impressed by the new militant spirit of fight back that is gaining momentum cross the country. Grassroots folks from people’s and labor organizations are confronting tea party elected officials at their town hall meetings.



Labor is gearing up for the big fight for jobs and decent contracts. The immigrant rights movement is on the move.

The Congressional Progressive Caucus and Black Caucus are holding hearings on the issue of jobs creation through public works to repair our neglected infrastructure.

Taxing the rich has become a majority demand. Tens of thousands are lining up at job fairs organized to get corporations to step up and hire the unemployed, veterans and youth.

Peace forces are pushing to bring the troops home and transfer the money to create jobs and stop the massive number of foreclosures.

This is a crusade to put the people first.

Despite their correct criticisms of the president, they understand that the main danger comes from the right.

If the GOP regains all three branches of the government, the crisis of human suffering can and will become far more severe.

The majority of the American people understand that the reelection of Obama is not an option. It is part of what is necessary to win this epic battle.

This is a crusade to put the people first.

History comes alive in OK City

By Jim Lane

Oklahoma City's Central Labor Council followed up last year's highly successful labor festival with a second "Oklahoma Laborfest" Aug. 25-27. It featured special poster art by one of the state's most sought after artists, Carlos Tello, as well as union music, readings, poetry, workshops, cultural booths, history lessons and outstanding films such as *Matewan* and *Salt of the Earth*.

One of the most remarkable features was a special reading at noon, Aug. 27, of *Nor Iron Bars*, by Eli Jaffe.

Because of his work as a labor and civil rights organizer and his relationship to the CPUSA, Jaffe was one of the four defendants put on trial for "criminal syndicalism," or plotting for the overthrow of the United States government through violent means. The only evidence entered into court against Jaffe was the fact that he had no middle name (which was offered as proof he was a Russian spy), a photograph of him sharing a meal with African Americans and excerpts from books gathered in the bookstore raid.

Jaffe wrote *Nor Iron Bars*, a one-act stage play of several scenes, in September 1941. The play is based on his experience in the Oklahoma County jail, where he spent four months over the course of the trials. The play incorporates elements of his own Oklahoma City story as well as the social realism, regionalism and agitation propaganda that was predominant in literature and the arts at the time. The play has never before been produced or publicly read.

Wilma Lewis Jaffe, native Oklahoman and Jaffe's widow, granted exclusive rights to produce the play to Laborfest Planning Committee member Rachel Jackson. This year's public reading was facilitated by the Lawton Improv Group under the direction of Daren Two Hatchett. Those interested in participating in the reading or in being in the audience were welcomed.

¿Sí importa cuál partido gana?

Por Sam Webb

Es evidente que entre partidarios del Partido Demócrata ya existe un creciente sentimiento de frustración y hasta ira con lo que se ha logrado durante los últimos dos años.

Hablando por el movimiento sindical de los trabajadores, el presidente de la AFL-CIO, Richard Trumka, expresó esta inquietud de una manera muy fuerte en varios de sus discursos recientes.

Además hay las presiones estructurales de gobernar en una economía y un estado capitalista.

Y luego hay presiones conservadoras provenientes de congresistas demócratas y hasta de ciertos integrantes de la administración misma.

Pero desde un punto de vista estratégico la cuestión principal es esta: ¿Hace diferencia alguna, desde el punto de vista de las luchas de clase y democrática, cuál partido gane la ascendencia política?

Dicen algunos, pero no el movimiento sindical ni las otras organizaciones de masas del pueblo norteamericano, que no, que no importa.

Nuestro punto de vista es que las diferencias entre los dos partidos del capitalismo sí son de consecuencia para las luchas democráticas y de clase.

Ninguno de los dos partidos es anticapitalista, pero tampoco son idénticos los dos. Existen diferencias a niveles de política y de composición social.

Sí, por la otra mano, hubieran sido victoriosos los Republicanos en 2008 se hubiera desarrollado el carácter de las luchas democráticas y

de clase de una manera muy distinta. Nuestro movimiento hubiera estado a la defensiva desde el primer día.

Hablando de la sabiduría de un tercer partido siempre hemos abogado por la formación de un partido popular independiente. Pero su realización depende de más que nuestros deseos. Los millones que tendrían que estar al centro de este partido todavía operan bajo el paraguas del Partido Demócrata, aunque sea de una manera siempre más independiente.

Además, separarnos en este momento de estas fuerzas sería contrario a nuestra política estratégica de construir una máxima unidad contra el extremismo de ultraderecha ahora y en las elecciones del año que viene.

Comprendemos que su formación se dicta por las realidades políticas concretas y las necesidades estratégicas.

Cuando diga alguien que no criticamos a la administración lo que suelen querer decir es que nuestras críticas no son tan amplias y categóricas que deseen ellos.

Sí hacemos críticas, pero las hacemos dentro de un contexto determinado y con una meta objetiva determinada en la mente.

No tenemos ilusiones sobre el Partido Demócrata, pero tampoco tenemos ilusión ninguna sobre el Partido Republicano.

Además, somos muy conscientes del hecho innegable no hay otro partido que no sea el Partido Demócrata, que tenga posibilidades para derrotar a los Republicanos para el año que viene.

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