

# Savor The Victory, Get Right To Work

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All summer and fall, Black trade unionists in New Jersey signed up new voters on street corners, in churches and in union meetings, at registration tables hung with posters reading "After All We Have Been Through...How DARE You NOT VOTE."

That about says it all. Without the courageous efforts of students and sharecroppers in the 1960s to register black voters in the Jim Crow south, there would be no Obama victory today. Even 10 years ago no one could have imagined a person of African descent elected president of this imperialist superpower built on white supremacy. The victory marks a new milestone in the battle for democracy in the US. It does not, of course, mark the end. Neither does it mark the end of white supremacy, or the centuries-long struggle for self-determination of African and other oppressed peoples living inside the US.

The enormous pride and joy and hope that people of all nationalities in the U.S. feel at this victory will shape the political life of the US and the struggles of the people in the coming months.

## What The Landslide Means

Barack Obama won a lopsided victory in the popular vote and in the Electoral College. The Democrats picked up a half dozen seats or so in the Senate and upped their substantial House majority by around 20. By now, many are familiar with the statistics of the victory: the highest voter turnout in 80 years; massive voter registration drives (2 million more Black voters than in 2004); the large Latina/o vote that for example, turned New Mexico blue; the vastly increased youth vote; more whites voting for Obama than Kerry.

Understanding the causes and implications of this landslide should be our starting point.

1. **Hope and Agency:** The core dynamic of the victory combined the promise of hope and the sense of agency—that the collective efforts of millions of individuals could make change happen. This combination was best captured in will.i.am's celebrity-studded "Yes We Can" video which drew tens of millions of views on YouTube alone.

2. **Organization and Resources are Key:** An innovative organizing team was able to deploy, to an unprecedented extent, those who responded to this dynamic. They made especially deft use of the internet, the web and text messaging, giving campaign activists a powerful sense of being personally plugged in. So while Palin and McCain were denigrating Obama's roots as a community organizer, he was busy putting his experience in community organizing into his campaign, with young staffers marshaling and directing efforts of volunteers of all ages, and field operations in every corner of the US (not just focusing on the already blue areas of the map as was the conventional Democratic Party

wisdom).

3. **A New Americanism:** The clobbering of the reactionary right was enormously gratifying. They could not overcome the Bush Administration's lengthy track record of failure and criminality. The McCain/Palin team offered more of the same. Their Americanism was overtly reactionary and so were the forces they rallied—white, sexist, Christian fundamentalist, nativist, militaristic, small government oriented, and individualistic. Rather than put primary emphasis on "family values" this time, they chose to focus on "country first" and "real Americans."

The Obama campaign's Americanism was inclusive in stance and composition: democratic, green-tinged, globalist, state-interventionist, multi-racial, community-minded. This vision swayed another layer of voters who were disgusted with the horrendous reputation the US had in the world, thanks to the Bush administration.

(Because Obama's Americanism is obviously preferable to live under and provides the more favorable terrain for the struggles of the working class and the oppressed, it's good to remind ourselves that it shares with McCain's an underlying great power chauvinism. This is clearest in Obama's military platform—with the same breath he used to promise to start withdrawing troops from Iraq, Obama vowed escalation in Afghanistan (the graveyard of empires) and asserted that he would launch unilateral attacks inside Pakistan. Further, he plans to add 90,000 new troops to the already enormous armed forces.)

4. **The Economic Meltdown:** In this election racist and security fears were trumped by an even greater fear of allowing the Republicans to manage the economic crisis.

5. **The War Chest:** The highly organized mobilization of the hope-filled and the fearful was one factor that helped Obama to raise the greatest campaign war chest, in absolute and relative terms, in US history (leaving public financing laws in the gutter in the process). Obama raised \$650 million, nearly half of it in small donations solicited on the internet. The other half was fat/bundled donations from the rich and their corporations, especially the finance sector. Add in Democratic National Committee money and "independent" 527 advocacy groups, and the total is more than a billion dollars.

6. **The Mandate:** Obama achieved what the Bush/Cheney administration could only dream of— a real mandate built on majorities in popular voting and the electoral college. This may make it possible for Obama to shrug off pressure from particular individual donors or bundlers, even as the logic of capitalist politics and governance fills his new administration with politicians and corporate executives. This independence could cut both ways: for greater democracy and a program for "Main Street;" or for less democracy, as in the case of Obama's support for the extension of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which allows secret warrantless searches and spying on Americans.

## **Of Hope and History**

The deepening global economic meltdown has made for innumerable comparisons between Obama and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Are the present day realities such that Obama can construct a new New Deal? There is another historical precedent which may hold some indications of what the next few years could bring.

Forty eight years ago, a dynamic young Democratic politician with a photogenic family made history by becoming the first Catholic to be elected President, in a campaign noteworthy for the enthusiastic young people who staffed and drove it. Bourgeois historians sometimes date the start of the fabled 1960s to John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961.

In fact, what we call the Sixties started almost exactly one year earlier, on Monday, February 1, 1960, when four Black college freshmen sat down at a Whites Only lunch counter at a Woolworth's in Greensboro, NC. The next day nine more students joined them. By Wednesday, 85 people crowded into the store.

Hundreds of sit-ins then took place across the South, followed by Freedom Rides on interstate buses. Soon a grassroots effort was underway, centered in Mississippi, to challenge black disenfranchisement, the centerpiece of Jim Crow. This struggle was violent and deadly. An entire array of challenges to Jim Crow was underway: high-profile marches, citizenship schools (to prepare folks for the purposefully arcane questions needed to pass the voter registration test), the small courageous acts of taking four people at a time to register to vote, knowing it meant job loss or worse. Through 1963, direct action to challenge Jim Crow was the dominant form of struggle in the South.

President Kennedy, his brother Attorney General Robert Kennedy and their top advisors desperately sought to avoid dealing with this new movement. To do so risked alienating the segregationist "Dixiecrats" whose dominance of the Solid South was an essential part of the Democratic Party. Nonetheless the power of the movement and the support garnered from around the country, forced the Kennedys to act. The Kennedys were also mindful of the need to develop good relations with newly independent nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The push and shove between the government and the movement (and between racist die-hards and integrationists within the government) continued until JFK's assassination. Trying to deflect growing pressure for a Civil Rights bill, the Kennedys used carrots (bankrolling voter registration efforts, pressuring reactionary Southern governors, sending in troops, shaking unions down for contributions to moderate organizations) and sticks (FBI harassment, media leaks, divide and rule tactics aimed at pushing SNCC and CORE to the sidelines). Waves of struggle and deep-rooted organization throughout the south forced concessions.

Young white students from the North who had worked for Kennedy in 1960 became the most dedicated and reliable allies of the Black struggle. As the Kennedy years passed into history, some of them, Black and white, moved forward to become sparkplugs in the

movement against the Vietnam War, the modern women's movement and the whole revolutionary upsurge of the '60s.

### **New and Old Enemies**

For the last eight years the enemy, the Bush administration, has been easy to target and understand. Things will be different now.

1. **The Far right—not dead yet:** Let's start with the right-wing base. Their world view is rooted in privilege—white, economically in the middle strata, male and heterosexual dominant. Politically they see themselves as a virtuous but besieged minority outnumbered by undeserving people of color and snotty bicoastal liberals, their children brainwashed by sex education and evolutionism in the classroom. They are the folks rushing to buy guns. Sarah Palin was their standard bearer, making her campaign rallies far larger and more energetic than McCain's.

This has triggered a pre-emptive strike against Palin within the Republican Party and conservative media. The day after the election, Fox News and various influential rightwing columnists escalated their Palin-bashing and promotion of leaks about her ignorance, clothes-buying binges and ego. The Republican Party is one of the two political mainstays of capitalist rule in the US, and an easily marginalized Palin-controlled Republican Party is not in their interest.

As in the past, the right-wing will not be nursing its wounds silently. Bouyed by their three anti-gay marriage victories in California, Florida and Arizona, they will constantly attack Obama. Isolating them will be a high priority.

2. **Capital's crisis:** In the next few years, the global financial system will be extensively remade, new environmental approaches put in place, trade and other international policies reshaped drastically, and some strategic response to the economic crisis agreed upon. There will be winners and losers with every major change, and the big winners will be those who can bend the government their way. For the next four years that means a Democratic administration and Congress.

At this moment, various blocs of capital are fighting for survival. Many are trying to take advantage of the crisis. For example, the bailout bill, passed with the hopes of easing credit for investment, will most likely end up financing bank consolidation and further centralization and concentration of capital. It will be a bi-partisan effort. It is unclear if the left and our allies can "make the rich pay."

### **A Game Plan For The Left**

It is for this reason we need to concentrate on building our own forces, and taking advantage of both the opening and the feeling of possibility that millions of people feel today, as well as resistance struggles that emerge.

1. Keep the Obama base mobilized: The fact that Obama's victory was seen by supporters and opponents alike as a victory for change makes the prospect of a deep

change in American political culture a real one. Every effort must be made to keep this base from thinking that their job is over and from allowing the political analysis on the Left to harden into a cynicism that only distances us from this base and the enormous potential for motion within it.

Another source of disempowerment is not new: the liberal and union organizations who will counsel that we shouldn't make waves, be unruly, or bring discredit to Obama. They will tell us, "let us lobby and get the ear of the president." Right now they are actively pursuing their top agenda items. Change to Win has announced a campaign to get the Employee Free Choice Act "card check" law passed in the first 100 days of the new administration. The AFL-CIO is calling for a million EFCA petition signatures to be delivered on Inauguration Day. Similar calls have been launched by health care reform groups and environmental organizations moving an agenda to pressure the new administration to take necessary and bold steps on climate change and greenhouse emissions. Peace Action, one of the largest anti-war groups has decided to make opposition to escalation in Afghanistan its central focus in the coming period.

Such efforts are commendable if they move beyond lobbying on Capital Hill and reach down the grassroots, rank and file energy, commitment, talent and leadership. It will be interesting to see how effective these campaigns are in forcing the issues into the media and getting the attention of the new administration.

### **Change We Can Believe In**

But we shouldn't hang our hats on these. Building a successful grassroots movement requires a proactive program that taps into the same sentiments and dynamics as the Obama campaign so masterfully used for victory. We believe the program enunciated by our friend and ally, Bill Fletcher (in the Fall 2008 issue of New Labor Forum) is a good place to start:

#### **1. Immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops, bases, and mercenaries from Iraq and Afghanistan.**

**2. Economic triage.** Economic aid that has been diverted to cover the Iraq/Afghan war costs must be redelpyed to reversing the more than thirty years of attacks on working people and their declining living standards. In the short-term, however, several steps need to be taken, including but not limited to:

- A moratorium on foreclosures and evictions. The Republicans' efforts to restrict individuals' ability to declare personal bankruptcy must be reversed.
- An extension and updating of both unemployment and food stamp benefits to reflect today's cost of living.
- Immediate public service job creation: A good starting place is Obama's plan of dedicating \$210 billion to create construction and environmental jobs
- Federal intervention to halt the collapse of student loan programs.
- Elimination of Bush tax cuts.
- Federal aid to the states that provides the states with more of a safety net as they struggle to balance their budgets.

### **3. A Marshall Plan for U.S. cities and depressed regions.**

The Hurricane Katrina disaster and the 2007 Minneapolis bridge collapse exposed significant problems with our political leadership, economic choices, and the basic U.S. infrastructure (not to mention race, gender, and class politics when it came to Katrina).

- This program would involve a renewal of the U.S. physical and social infrastructures. Much ground work has been already been laid by the such groups as the National Jobs for All Coalition.
- The immediate establishment of a regional public agency to oversee the reconstruction of the post-Katrina Gulf Coast and the repatriation of its native population.
- The establishment of a 21st century version of the Works Progress Administration to oversee the infrastructure-related work. Priority in employment would go to the chronically and structurally unemployed. Wages would be paid according to the Davis-Bacon Act. At least 25 percent of such jobs should be staffed by people of color, with at least another 25 percent staffed by women. Regional planning authorities should be established in depressed regions bringing together the business community and worker organizations, including unions, academia, and governmental representatives.
- Emergency measures to provide more low-income housing.

### **4. Immediate signing of the Kyoto Protocol.**

- Make a commitment to launch international negotiations toward a new and stronger pact.
- Push through the Renewable Energy and Job Creation Act to promote renewable energy, green-collar jobs, and tax benefits to middle-class families.
- Establish a "Green Commission" that brings together labor, business, environmental groups, community-based organizations, and government representatives to recommend technological, economic, and developmental changes geared toward building a sustainable economy.

### **5. Pass and sign the Employee Free Choice Act.**

### **6. A universal health care initiative.**

Universal, single-payer health care cannot take flight within the first 100 days. The groundwork, however, must be laid immediately.

- Expand the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP).
- Draft legislation for universal, single-payer coverage. Aim for passage before the midterm elections.

### **7. Immigration reform.**

Immediate steps must be taken to lay out an immigration reform program that is coupled with changes in U.S. foreign policy (therefore, points # 7 and # 8 are integrally linked). This program must include:

- Amnesty (in the form of permanent residency status) for undocumented workers who have no criminal record.
- Priority given to family reunification interests.
- A revised application process that gives priority to refugees from areas of political

conflict where the U.S. has been historically involved.

- Elimination of guest worker programs.
- Unionization rights for all workers within U.S. borders, irrespective of their immigration status.

### **8. Forge global partnerships.**

Changing U.S. foreign policy is an uphill, long-term process. Nevertheless, certain immediate measures are imperative. In addition to withdrawing from Iraq and Afghanistan, the new administration must:

- Develop foreign aid and trade programs designed to promote more self-reliance among nation-states, while responding to the civilian needs in those areas.
- Develop programs of repair in areas where U.S. involvement has distorted regional development (e.g., Southeast Asia, Angola, and Central America).
- Develop trade relations that are based on fairness rather than on corporate interests.

Explore a renegotiation of NAFTA.

- Implement the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty with steps toward de-nuclearization.
- Employ special envoys for peace and development who will work with regional representatives to address matters such as political conflict, economic underdevelopment, and environmental devastation.

Sure, none of this is easy, but then again, who ever imagined a Black president? Let's get to work.

### **Still We Believe In An Even Larger Vision, We Must Work Toward A Greater Change**

While we will work in hopes of a real change during this period, we do not have any illusions that Obama is a Socialist (in case anyone believed Palin). The current situation pleads for the development of a party for socialism. In order for the Left to be more than the sum of its parts and, in fact, to influence developments, there is a pressing need for organization. While organization cannot be created out of thin air, the combination of the economic crisis (which is not a crisis created by a few greedy individuals but instead is a crisis engendered by the dynamics of capitalism) and the new political situation with the Obama victory, necessitate a level of organization that presently does not exist within the Left. Promoting social movements and articulating an alternative vision are tasks for a party of socialism. Thus, the work of building such an organization should remain central to all those who see themselves on the radical Left.

For more information visit:

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