

Six months of the Obama administration

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Six months ago yesterday, Barack Obama was inaugurated as the 44th president of the United States.

The election of Obama represented a popular repudiation of the Bush administration and its domestic and foreign policies. The principal slogan of Obama—"change you can believe in"—struck a chord with a population fed up with eight years of war and single-minded focus on the interests of the corporate elite.

Obama's persona and individual history symbolized, for broad sections of the working class and youth, this desire for change. The fact that Obama would be the first African-American president was seen by many as reason to believe he would instinctively sympathize with the poor and oppressed. In any case, it was thought, he would be very different from what had come before.

What evaluation can be made in light of six months' experience? The facts speak for themselves. On every critical issue, Obama—presiding over substantial Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress—has continued the basic policy of his predecessor.

Military policy

The direction of the administration on military policy was signaled early on. On January 23, three days after his inauguration, Obama ordered missile strikes by unmanned Predator drones on a location inside Pakistan, killing 18 people. With this initial blood on his hands, Obama proceeded apace.

The war in Afghanistan is now definitively "Obama's war." Under his watch, the US has set in motion a doubling of its forces, from 32,000 to 68,000, and is presently carrying out a major operation to wipe out popular opposition in the south. At least 30 US soldiers and 25 NATO troops have died so far this month, making July the deadliest month to date for occupation forces.

With Obama, however, the operation has become the "AfPak" war. US missile strikes within Pakistan, often killing dozens of Pakistani civilians, have become a regular occurrence. The administration has pressured Pakistan to carry out its own offensive in its northwestern territories, resulting in hundreds of thousands of refugees and massive casualties.

The occupation of Iraq continues. The drawback of US forces from the cities does not herald an end to US military involvement in the country. Some 130,000 troops remain in what amounts to permanent military bases outside the cities, and the administration has begun the process of relabeling troops as "advisors." In the event that the fragile political situation breaks down, the US military will intervene with full force.

Economic and social policy

On domestic policy, Obama's overriding concern has been to defend the wealth of the most powerful sections of the corporate and financial elite. Through cash injections, subsidies and loan programs, trillions have been handed out to the banks and financial institutions, with no strings attached. The administration has opposed any real constraints on executive pay or bonuses.

Utilizing the government handouts, the largest banks reported massive profits in the second quarter of 2009, including \$3.44 billion for Goldman Sachs and \$2.7 billion for JPMorgan Chase. The banks plan on handing out record bonuses this year to their executives and traders.

The very institutions that precipitated the economic crisis through their speculation and looting operations are doing better than ever. This is not an accident. It is the intended outcome of the policy carried out by the Obama administration.

Many auto workers looked to Obama for positive change. Instead, the administration has forced through massive cuts in wages and benefits, along with the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs. Obama has shepherded General Motors and Chrysler through bankruptcy court, where the two companies left billions in unwanted liabilities behind, including health care obligations to tens of thousands of retirees.

The administration is carrying out a similar policy in relation to state and local governments, refusing to give them the type of loans made available to the banks. The largest state in the country, California, is on the verge of economic meltdown, and the state government is seizing on the crisis as an opportunity to gut education, welfare and other social programs. Similar draconian measures are being implemented throughout the country.

As for the Obama's principal domestic initiative—health care “reform”—the administration's proposals are driven by the desire of corporations to slash their employee health care costs and are tailored to the demands of the major players in the health care industry—particularly the insurance and pharmaceutical companies.

Health care “reform” has been shifted from providing decent care for all to cutting costs. Obama insists that reducing health care expenditures is imperative for lowering the budget deficit and restoring the economy, even as he declares he will do “whatever it takes” to bail out the banks.

If a bill on health care eventually passes, it will require workers to pay more for inadequate health insurance and rationed care. This “expanded coverage” will be used as a pretext for slashing federal health care programs, particularly Medicare.

Like everything else, health care is being restructured as a more openly class-based system. Workers will have to choose between their health and their other needs, while the rich are afforded the best treatment money can buy.

The outcome of the administration's policies to deal with the economic crisis is a massive redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top.

Democratic rights

On all essentials, the Obama administration has continued the antidemocratic policies of its predecessor. It has invoked “state secrets” to block court cases challenging torture and domestic spying. The administration reversed a promise to release photos showing US torture of detainees. It has continued the military tribunals and indicated it plans to adopt a policy of indefinite detention for prisoners at Guantanamo Bay.

Obama has repeatedly insisted that there will be no prosecution of any of the crimes carried out by the Bush administration. This means no one will be held accountable and that the crimes will continue.

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The outcome of the 2008 elections is an object lesson on the failure of American democracy. These elections produced an outcome that is diametrically opposed to the aspirations of the voters who cast ballots for the victor.

It is not possible, through the existing political system, to effect a change in government policy. The basic reason is that the political institutions and parties are the unvarnished instruments of class rule. The financial elite exercises absolute control over every aspect of political life.

What is perhaps most remarkable is the fact that the Obama administration barely makes an effort to conceal its class character. It seems to assume that Obama’s persona by itself is sufficient to quell opposition. To the extent that the administration’s attention is focused on the Democratic Party and its periphery—the assorted coterie of “left” publications and organizations—this evaluation is correct.

However, there has already been a significant fall in Obama’s poll ratings, including substantial declines on the economy and health care. According to the most recent Washington Post-ABC News poll, Obama’s overall approval ratings have dropped below 60 percent for the first time. We suspect that public unease is, in fact, far broader and deeper than these figures yet indicate.

Here, Lincoln’s famous aphorism is appropriate: “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.”

Public disenchantment and anger are being driven by the objective impact of the economic crisis, the consequences of Obama’s wars, and the ever more glaring contradiction between the popular sentiments to which he appealed to get elected and the social interests that he serves. To the extent that the American people feel they have been taken for a ride and played for suckers, the mass opposition will be that much more intense.

The administration has yet to reckon with the independent intervention of the American working class. When this class movement does develop, it will seek new channels independent of and in opposition to the entire political and social system.

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