

Capitalist Elections Against the Working Class

The election media blitz is running full blast. We hear the same media messages over and over: we are supposedly witnessing the most important election in American history; we face a stark choice between sharply different candidates; this election will determine the future direction of society for generations to come.

Of course that is what they always say about presidential elections. It makes for great theater, even if it has nothing to do with reality. It's hard to remember the last time the media told us that the current presidential election is meaningless, that it offers a choice between indistinguishable opponents, or that no matter who wins nothing much will change.

And of course this year is even more historic than usual -- the first African American candidate nominated for president by a major party on one ticket and a woman running for vice president on the Republican line for the first time in history. No matter who wins, the media tells us, we will have an historic first.

For the working class, reality is quite different from the media mythology. No matter who wins, no matter who occupies the White House, the situation for the working class will be the same --

- our sons and daughters will be called upon to shed their blood for American imperialism, which will be forced to resort to more and more military interventions throughout the world
- the economic crisis will continue unabated attacking our wages, our standard of living, our health care, our pensions, our housing conditions, social services
- the social divisions that exist in the U.S. will continue to worsen; the rich will get richer and the poor poorer.
- unemployment will continue to grow.
- the future will continue to look bleak.

Of course the big "news" in this election is Obama as an African American presidential candidate and his rhetoric about change, which is attracting millions of young people to his candidacy. However black or white or biracial he may be, Obama is just another capitalist politician like any other. Despite his early opposition to the war in Iraq, he is in fact no anti-war candidate. He made it crystal clear in his convention acceptance speech that he is as committed to using military power to defend American imperialist interests as any other capitalist politician. He doesn't want to bring the troops home from Iraq; he wants to transfer troops to the war in Afghanistan and launch military strikes into Pakistan, and to be prepared to unleash war elsewhere. His main criticism of Bush policy is that the US military is spread so thin

that it leaves it unable to respond to other threats to its hegemony, like in Georgia. Obama is just as much a war monger as McCain. On the economy, none of his policies can deal with the fact that the problem with the economy is not policy mistakes by Bush, but the global crisis of capitalism, which is an historically anachronistic system, about which Obama is powerless to do anything.

For capitalism, the election campaign is a crucial element in the democratic mystification, the ideological swindle that spins the myth that in a capitalist democracy everyone is equal and has the opportunity to speak his/her mind, that everyone can participate in making the decisions on how society is to be run. The ruling class pumps hundreds of millions of dollars into the campaign, and mobilizes its mass media, its unions, its educational institutions, and its left and right political organizations to reinforce this myth and pull workers into the electoral circus. For the ruling class, the elections are a valuable tool in misleading working people, in tying them to the state, derailing them from the class struggle, and bamboozling them into thinking they are "free" -- free to choose their oppressors for the next four years.

Capitalist elections weren't always such an empty sham. In the 19th century when capitalism was still a growing, historically progressive system, capable of further developing the forces of production, elections constituted the venue where the capitalist class decided upon its "executive committee" to control the government and rule society. Various factions of the ruling class, defending different programmatic orientations, different economic interests, such as finance capital, or the railroads or the oil industry, competed with each other for control of the state. In this period, because capitalism was still expanding and it was therefore still possible to wrest significant reforms from the system, it made sense for the workers movement to participate in elections and take advantage of the factional disputes within the ruling class to win gains for the working class, such as the eight hour day and the end to child labor.

But this situation changed dramatically in the early 20th century with the completion of the world market, when capitalism reached the zenith of its historic development and became a fetter on the further development of the productive forces. With the system in decay, the possibility of wresting durable social reforms from the capitalist system no longer existed, and the orientation of the workers movement toward capitalist elections was fundamentally altered. The determination of political policy switched definitively into the hands of the executive branch, the permanent bureaucracy in particular, which rules in the interests of the national capital-

ism and prepares constantly for the deadly competition with rival nations.

With the disappearance of the historical circumstances that made elections relevant to the workers movement, electoralism inevitably became an instrument of political mystification, an ideological swindle perpetuating the democratic myth and obscuring the true nature of the capitalist class dictatorship and fostering the illusion that working people can participate in the determination of governmental policies.

In this context, the electoral circus represents the grand ideological maneuver of the bourgeoisie. For the greater part of the past century the American bourgeoisie has been particularly adept in controlling presidential campaigns to put in place political teams that would be capable of implementing its strategic orientations and promote the credibility of the electoral circus. The party in power in the White House was generally determined by carefully orchestrated media manipulation of the electoral process to generate the desired outcomes. Under the political discipline within the ruling class, the major parties and their candidates could be relied upon to accept the division of labor determined by the dominant fractions. The factors at play in determining the desired left-right political division of labor at the level of the national state may vary depending upon prevailing domestic or international circumstances. This ability to control the outcomes of elections and to maintain discipline within its own ranks began to deteriorate after the collapse of the bloc system on the international level, leading to the embarrassing results of the Bush administration in the stolen election of 2000, which did not serve well the interests of the ruling class.

Today there are two fundamental political objectives for the dominant fractions of the American capitalist class in the coming presidential election:

- a rectification of the Bush administration's disastrous imperialist policy blunders in order to significantly restore American authority on the international level and enable it to intervene militarily in other parts of the world,
- a total refurbishment of the democratic mystification, which has taken a terrible beating since the year 2000.

The dominant class has already made great strides in setting the stage for repairing the mess that the Bush administration has made of imperialist policy. Obama's proposed withdrawal from Iraq over two years has already been agreed to by the Iraqi regime and the Bush Administration. The groundwork is in place for a more sophisticated, "multilateral" imperialist policy, that will lessen American imperialism's growing isolation and reestablish its authority in the international arena.

In terms of resuscitating the electoral mystification, Obama clearly best serves the interests of the dominant class. His charismatic, but largely vacuous, appeals for change have triggered a rarely seen enthusiasm among young generations

of voters, who have been largely apathetic to the capitalist political process, drawing them into electoral politics in large numbers for the first time in many years. Capitalist political pundits have promoted the Obama phenomenon as "a social movement," that has tapped the wellsprings of "hope" and a desire for change.

To the contrary, what we are witnessing is not a social movement, but an extremely successful ideological campaign, reviving the electoral mystification. However, the Obama candidacy ultimately risks aggravating the very problems that it's designed to redress. If he loses the general election, disillusionment will set in with millions of young people. If he wins the election, it will be impossible for him to deliver any significant change, which will also give rise to widespread disappointment and disillusionment.

For the working class the election is a complete diversion. The only way to defend our interests is the class struggle, in the streets and in the workplaces – against the pay cuts, and layoffs, against the attacks on our living conditions, against imperialist war. This daily struggle to defend working class interests against capitalism holds within it the seeds of the development of class consciousness, of a working class movement that will be capable of confronting capitalism head on and destroying this social system based on the exploitation of man by man and powered by the drive for profits with a social order controlled by working people themselves, where the fulfillment of social need is the driving force.

--Internationalism, September 2008
www.internationalism.org

Internationalism is the U.S. section of the International Communist Current, 320 Seventh Avenue, No. 211, Brooklyn, NY 11215

