

Why I Won't Vote for Obama

...Or for Hillary, And Certainly Not for McCain, And Not Even For Ralph

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In the United States, there has developed an enthusiastic movement of support for the Democratic presidential candidate, Senator Barack Obama. Besides the large forces he appeals to, especially among young adults, he is overwhelmingly supported by the left: liberals, social democrats, and Stalinists. I appreciate the movement-like aspect of his popular support, yet I personally will not vote for him. I do not try to persuade individual friends, family members, and co-workers not to vote for him, but I would like to change their attitudes. It is typical of liberals, etc. that they start elections by declaring the Democratic candidate to be the "lesser evil" (which admits that he or she is an evil). But as the election gets closer, they become convinced of the great goodness of the candidate. (In psychology, this is called the operation of cognitive dissonance. After all, who wants to believe of oneself that we are supporting someone evil? So we persuade ourselves that the evil politician is actually good.)

Let me give some anecdotes about the real Obama. In the left-liberal journal, *The Nation* (2/18/08), Christopher Hayes wrote a pro-Obama article, "The Choice." He recalled, "For the Chicago left, his primary campaign and his subsequent election to the Senate was a collective rallying cry...Young Chicago progressives felt...He is one of us and now he is in the Senate (p. 20)."

And yet.... "That's not, alas, how things turned out," writes this supporter of Obama. "Almost immediately, Obama...shaded himself toward the center....His record places him squarely in the middle of Democratic senators (same)." This is a typical story of a young idealist becoming corrupted by playing the game of bourgeois electoral politics.

Hayes suspects that this was due to Obama having "an eye on national office." But there were other corrupting forces. For example, Obama has boasted to campaign crowds in Iowa that he had passed a law to increase regulation of nuclear power plants. Specifically this was a response to the Exelon Corp. which had failed to inform the public about radioactive leaks at one of its plants. Senator Obama scolded both Exelon and federal regulators. He presented a bill to force nuclear power companies to disclose even small leaks. On the stump, Obama stated that this was "the only nuclear legislation that I've passed. I did it just last year (*New York Times*, 2/3/08, p. A1)."

However, this was a lie. Obama had introduced such a bill, but it was repeatedly weakened until it no longer imposed any demands on the nuclear power industry...and then it was dropped. Obama never got any law regulating the nuclear power industry passed. Why did he cave in? The

New York Times reports that Exelon was “one of Mr. Obama’s largest sources of campaign money (same, p. A17).” Since 2003, Obama has gotten more than \$227,000 from officials and employees of Exelon. Two of the top executives are among his biggest donors. Obama’s chief political strategist has been an advisor to Exelon.

In short, good intentions (I assume Obama had good intentions and that it was not a fraud from the start) were overwhelmed by the influence of big business. Of course Obama is a supporter of the capitalist economy. He hopes to be the top administrator of the capitalist economy. In no way is he anti-business, no matter how many unions endorse him. No doubt he would deny that there are necessary conflicts between labor and business. The bringing together of clashing forces is one of his central ideas. For example, rather than fight for a single payer health insurance plan—which would alienate the insurance industry—he proposes a health program which would include the insurance companies, providing them with lots of cash. But like his nuclear regulation bill, the insurance companies will do all they can to water down his original plan and then to kill it if they can.

Perhaps to most people, Barack Obama’s biggest appeal is his opposition to the Iraq war. Unlike Senator Hillary Clinton (let alone John McCain), he opposed the war in the beginning. But this does not make him an anti-war candidate. He proposes that most U.S. troops withdraw, but that a significant number (precise amount unspecified) will remain to guard U.S. personnel, to train forces of the puppet Iraqi government, and to “strike at Al Qaeda.” What he would actually do in the face of a collapse of the Iraqi government is anyone’s guess.

But whether or not Obama will continue this particular war, he remains a supporter of the U.S. empire. This empire has military bases in approximately 150 countries and military alliances around the world. Despite its decline, it still dominates the international economy and drains wealth from every continent. Obama is for this empire, which he discusses in terms of the “national interest,” meaning the interest of the U.S. ruling class (including the executives of Exelon). Because he supports this empire, he is most likely to remain in this war and to get into other wars. In interviews, he has already said that he might bomb Pakistan and that he would consider military action against Iran.

Another major appeal is his race. Just by being himself, an African-American, he makes the point that it is possible for People of Color to rise in our society, even to be president. However, this distracts us from the real problems of U.S. racism. Most African-Americans will remain at the bottom of society, impoverished, last hired and first fired, and subject to police violence. This will not change by having a cool Black man as president. True racial change will require a social upheaval, not just the election of one person.

When pressed, many liberals and social democrats will admit that Obama, like Hillary Clinton, is a candidate of capitalism, militarism, and imperialism. But, they argue, he is far less of an evil than Senator John McCain. In McCain the Republicans have put their best foot forward. Unlike the inept Bush, he is intelligent and witty, a war hero, and he sometimes shows some humanity (as in opposing torture, before he caved). He is still hated by the far right, which does him credit. Yet for all that, he is pledged to carry on the Iraq war, if necessary for a “hundred years.” In general he will continue the programs of the vile Bush regime. It is important to oppose him. Since the U.S. population is far from ready to support a socialist (or anarchist) alternative, it is argued, we must support Barack Obama as the lesser evil.

In response, I accept that the Democrats, however evil, are indeed the lesser evil. I only doubt that the greater evil can really be defeated by supporting the lesser evil. After all, liberals, union-

ists, the African-American community, the women's movement, the environmental movement, the GLBT community, etc., etc., have been supporting the Democrats for decades, generations. And yet the Republicans have moved more to the right, and the Democrats have also moved to the right (but remain just a little bit to the left of the Republicans). Lesser-evilism has not worked very well.

Instead of comparing the Democrats to the Republicans, I propose a different standard: What is necessary to save the country and the world from disaster. Does the candidate have a program which will prevent the economic crisis we are sliding into? Will he solve the danger of ecological/environmental/energy catastrophe? Will he reverse the spread of nuclear weapons before there is a nuclear war? To claim that Obama (or even Ralph Nader, the independent) reaches this standard is absurd.

No one person can be an effective chief administrator of a unit as large as the United States. On the other side of the coin, any one person's vote does not make a difference, considering the size of the country. This is just too big a social unit. We need vibrant local democracies, political, economic, and social, more than we need an imperial president.

People argue with me: But what if everyone (or if a lot of people) had your (my) negative attitude toward elections or for supporting pro-capitalist candidates? My response is: Great! Then there would be a mass movement.

The gains of the thirties labor movement were won mainly through sit-ins in the factories as part of mass strikes. The gains of African-Americans in the fifties and sixties were won through mass civil disobedience and urban uprisings ("riots"). The struggle against the Vietnam war was fought through massive demonstrations, student strikes, and a virtual mutiny in the army.

The gains of most social movements have been won through non-electoral means, not by electing lesser-evil politicians. Independent electoral actions, such as that of Ralph Nader or the Green Party, have never been very useful. If successful (as in some European countries), they will also be corrupted by the pressures of electoralism, money, and the need to administer a giant capitalist government.

My goal is not to persuade individuals to not vote. It is to raise the idea of independent mass struggle. A single general strike in a U.S. city would do more to advance the struggle for freedom than any number of Obamas.

It is exciting to see the popular response to Obama, especially by young people. This lays the basis for a new New Left, a new wave of radicalization. But that will be based on recognizing the truth and telling the truth, as best as we radicals can see it — not by capitulating to the illusions which others still have. A new radicalization will develop when people are disillusioned by Obama and the Democrats. And this will happen. Or we are all in big trouble.

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