

# **Obama – change you can't believe in**

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The election of Barack Obama to the White House in 2008 was one of the most celebrated electoral victories of recent times. Not since Nelson Mandela's win in South Africa, following the collapse of the Apartheid regime, was the supposed power of the ballot box so publicly celebrated and displayed.

Obama's victory was hailed as a triumph for the 'democratic process' and was widely touted as a fine example of how people power and electioneering can trump entrenched bigotry and money.

Even outside the United States, in part due to the adverse reaction to George Bush's rule, the Obama win was widely viewed in a very positive light. It was speculated that the victory would open up a new chapter in U.S. foreign policy and might even amount to a clear break with Bush's militarist and war-mongering approach; a view that, no doubt, was in part responsible for Obama's dramatic Nobel Peace Prize win. Der Spiegel, a leading current affairs magazine in Germany, even went so far as to describe Obama as 'the World President'.<sup>1</sup>

## Colour

Obama's victory was indeed significant – and for a number of reasons. Most importantly, perhaps, he was the first African-American to become President of the United States. In a country long dogged by endemic racism and discrimination, this was quite an achievement. After all it is not so long ago that the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. fought and overcame institutionalised racial segregation in its Southern states.

Today, legally speaking, African-Americans are fully equal but in reality like other groups in U.S. society they suffer massive disadvantage in terms of wages, their life expectancy and in terms of having the means to access health care. Not only do African Americans, for example, make up a disproportionately large section of the prison population in the States, there are also more African American men in jail than there are in college.<sup>2</sup>

The symbolism of Obama's win in this context was not lost on anyone. Because of the colour of this skin and because of racism's strong and overarching connection to generalised oppression in society, Obama's victory had a strong resonance among other oppressed sections of U.S. society. American workers came out in droves to vote for him, as did a wide range of discriminated communities across the States – from Latinos to American Indians.

Nor was Obama himself slow in making the same point and underlining this connection. Drawing the obvious comparison with a similar journey made by Abraham Lincoln (the U.S. President credited with ending slavery) Obama said on his way to the inauguration day celebrations (a journey he also made by train) that:

*"To the children who hear the whistle of the train and dream of a better life—that's who we're fighting for."*

Obama's victory was certainly historic but this should not take from the reality that the road to the White House was nonetheless a long fought battle that drew on massive resources and commitment. Obama, to his great personal credit, went out and mobilised to win. He was determined and spoke at rallies that drew a huge layer of electoral activists into his orbit; these

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Goodman interview with Mathias Muller Von Blumencron, editor-in-chief of the German magazine Der Spiegel, [www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org)

<sup>2</sup> [www.kff.org/minorityhealth/upload/7541.pdf](http://www.kff.org/minorityhealth/upload/7541.pdf)

activists believed whole-heartedly in his mission. Ultimately it was the combined and effective efforts of this army of supporters that made his victory possible.

## Yes, We Can

In a similar vein it must be emphasised that Obama's victory didn't derive just from some sort of 'underdog' effect or simply from having an effective electioneering machine. On the contrary his victory, and the message of social justice and change (remember the 'Yes, We Can' slogan?) that he embodied could not have come at a more relevant juncture in U.S. history.

For many Americans, the prospect of 'the American Dream' (in other words enjoying material well-being in your life), has become a distant and unattainable goal. In the States, millions survive in poverty, in low wage jobs and are effectively excluded from access to basic healthcare. This at a time when the United States is, by any measure, one of the wealthiest societies in the world.

The reality that Obama was able to connect to was the increasing gap in the States between the rich and the poor – and the anger that this has fuelled in layers of U.S. society. Commenting on the Obama campaign victory, the Wall Street Journal put it eloquently when it said about the United States that: *"populist anger is like a long-caged animal now on the loose"*.<sup>3</sup>

In itself inequality, of course, is no stranger to the United States. But this said, there is no escaping the conclusion that in recent times, this situation has worsened dramatically. These recent figures point this up:

- In 2007, 1% of the population of the U.S.A. received a staggering 25% of all income in that country. Note that wealth ownership (as opposed to income) figures are significantly worse!
- The top 10% of the U.S. population received a staggering 50% of all income in that same year. The present income gap is now equivalent to what it was in 1928 in the U.S.A. Moreover the division is getting bigger. (See Figure 1)
- The average household income of the top 0.1% of the U.S. population is \$27 million dollars per year.
- Corporate bosses (CEOs) in the States now earn 185 times the average industrial wage. In the early '80s the factor was about 30 times.<sup>4</sup>
- The amount of tax paid by millionaires in the U.S.A. has been in steady decline since the late 1940s.<sup>5</sup>

If any particular aspect underlines this worsening situation for many Americans today it is the problem with the U.S. health care system. Access to an adequate and affordable level of care is just not possible for many, many Americans – a problem accentuated by the reality that if you can pay (or if you have access to top level insurance) then you're guaranteed the very best and most advanced treatments that money can buy. But, for so many, it is not a question about

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<sup>3</sup> Gerald Seib in Wall Street Journal April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2009

<sup>4</sup> Dean Baker (Economic Policy Unit) The U.S. Wage Gap and the Decline of Manufacturing in [legacy.usw.org](http://legacy.usw.org)

<sup>5</sup> [motherjones.com](http://motherjones.com)

getting access to the best or most advanced care – rather it is about getting access to any care at all!

## No, We Won't!

As we all know now Obama's period in office, so far, has been marked by a series of broken promises and u-turns. The scale of these has been huge and around key issues like Guantanamo Bay (see A promise broken: Obama and Guantanamo Bay) and health care they have been fairly stark. But the key question is why have they happened. To get a better understanding of the answer to this question, consider this little discussed incident: Obama's NAFTA promise.

During the election campaign Obama made a very prominent pledge to pull the United States out of the NAFTA agreement – NAFTA being the free trade arrangement with Canada and Mexico. NAFTA was an election issue because it was (and is) one of the mechanisms used to force down pay rates in the U.S.A. particularly in manufacturing. NAFTA allows U.S. manufacturers to move plants and production facilities to low wage Mexico and not suffer tariffs on re-exports to the States.

Needless to say for many U.S. workers and trade unionists, opposing NAFTA makes a lot of sense. For this reason Obama said, in order to appeal to these working-class voters, that it was also one of his policy aims to pull the U.S.A. out of NAFTA.

However when this became known (that this was an Obama policy), Canada, a signatory to the NAFTA protocols, became alarmed. They were aware that Obama was likely to win and so the Canadian government inquired as to whether this was true or not.

They were unable to speak to Obama himself but an Obama campaign director said 'There's nothing to worry about'. The official added that Obama's statement on leaving NAFTA was just 'campaign rhetoric'. The Canadian Government were pacified by this and made the situation known in a press release. As a result of the Canadian publicity however, Obama himself was now challenged anew – to clarify his true position. Once more and publicly he declared that it was a priority for him to take the U.S.A. out of NAFTA. However this time the Canadians took no further action and maintained that they had 'been told otherwise' and they believed what they had been told.

So what happened? As they often say, the proof is in the eating. Well, all this time later, the U.S.A. has not withdrawn from NAFTA. And in actual fact it has never even appeared as a remote possibility at any point in time – the U.S. will not be leaving NAFTA because it suits the big U.S. manufacturers too well.

So consider the explanations – and you decide! Is Obama a liar? Was he just 'playing the game', telling a bit of 'white lie' maybe? Was there confusion in the campaign? Either way – the point is – it doesn't matter now. People who voted for him were swindled. At some level in the electoral process voters have to make a call on trusting the people they intend to vote for. But, what many voters don't fully realise is that it is part of the game to lie to the electorate. And there's nothing we can do about it.

Let's look at other campaign pledges by Obama.

**Health Care Reform:** One of Obama's campaign promises was to move to a system that guaranteed basic care to ordinary Americans<sup>6</sup>. And indeed there can be no doubt that if Obama had

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<sup>6</sup> [blogs.suntimes.com](http://blogs.suntimes.com)

followed through on this priority alone, he would've been forgiven many other broken promises. But he reneged. His Health Care Bill, signed into law in March 2010 was, Obama admitted himself, only 'a first step'. But a first step to what? Robert Reich, a mainstream economist, described the Bill as 'a very conservative piece of legislation, building on a Republican (i.e. a private market approach) rather than a New Deal foundation.'

And according to Rose DeMoro of Nurses United, the Obama bill 'strengthened the hand of the U.S.'s powerful Insurance Corporations and would require ordinary Americans once more to fork out thousands of dollars out of pocket to big private companies. In fact it amounted to little change.' Commentators noted that 'Too many people will remain uninsured, individual and family healthcare costs will continue to rise largely unabated and private insurers will still be able to deny claims with little recourse for patients.'<sup>7</sup>

**Guantanamo Bay:** See separate article.

**War and Military Expenditure:** In a famous speech about his opposition to the U.S. war in Iraq, Obama said in the lead up to his election victory: *"If the troops are not home by the time I am elected, it is the first thing that I will do – you can take that to the bank."*<sup>8</sup> In fact Obama only very gradually reduced troop numbers in Iraq. The current plan will see combat troops removed by the end of 2011 but the U.S. military will continue to base approx 30,000 in Iraq for the foreseeable future.

In tandem with the war in Iraq, the U.S.A. has hugely increased its involvement and commitment in Afghanistan under the NATO alliance. The U.S. military has been involved in a number of atrocities and in the murder of civilians in the border area with Pakistan. The use of the 'people killing' drone bombing tactic has also skyrocketed under Obama who has pursued war and sacrificed civilian casualties in favour of minimising U.S. troop casualties. U.S. military expenditure has also risen during Obama's term in office.

**Wall Street Inequality:** Near economic collapse followed quickly on the heels of Obama's election – for reasons that had nothing to do with Obama. The collapse was the result of Bush's tenure and the massive deregulation that had taken place in financial and housing markets. The consequences of the collapse were that millions more Americans were impoverished and thrown out of their homes. How did Obama respond?

In 2009 he signed into law a two year extension to Bush's infamous, 'super-rich' tax breaks. These tax breaks have been a foundation stone of increasing the share of income accruing to the very rich. What is perhaps more criminal is the fact that Obama appointed many of the figures that were at the helm in the financial crash to be his advisors once he got into office. As has happened in Ireland, the very wealthy white collar criminals have not been targeted.

**Deep Well Drilling:** The scandalous oil drilling accident in the Gulf of Mexico was one of the most serious crises to hit Obama's term in office. The accident polluted a huge area, ruined livelihoods and cost a fortune to clean up. Cost cutting, abandonment of safety guidelines and 'risky' behaviour by the multinational companies involved in the drilling (BP Oil and Halliburton) have all been implicated in the disaster. Although Obama 'got angry' about what happened in the Gulf of Mexico, the moratorium on risky drilling was lifted in March of this year in the States.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rose DeMoro of National Nurses United in [www.counterpunch.org](http://www.counterpunch.org)

<sup>8</sup> Obama in [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

<sup>9</sup> [www.wsws.org](http://www.wsws.org)

## Change That Won't Happen

Obama rode to power on a wave of optimism and hope. He ran a vibrant, innovative campaign which maximised his support and raised expectations (See Obama + Internet + Money = HOPE). Yet, more than two years on from his dramatic victory, it is a changed reality that is facing those who supported him. To suggest that hope in this mission has been dashed and that optimism has collapsed is probably an understatement.

In truth, many of Obama's supporters have been shocked by the about turns and broken promises. Activist numbers and supporters have drifted from his camp and there is no doubt that his May 2011 visit to this country, Ireland, is a sign that Obama himself is now scraping the barrel. In order to get elected for a second term, he will no longer be relying on promises. Rather he will be warning the voter that: 'However bad I am, the Republicans are worse'. It is indeed a far cry from the heady days of slogans like 'Obama – Yes, We Can', 'Obama – Hope' and 'Obama – Progress'.

For anarchists, of course, Obama's election and his subsequent litany of broken promises, come as no surprise. Rather they prove once again, albeit more dramatically than usual, that the anarchist arguments against involvement in the electoral process are solidly rooted in a reality we all see time and time again. However the anarchist argument is more than just a critique. Rather it is vital to understand if we are to move away from this cul de sac of the ballot box. The bitter truth is that there can be no wealth redistribution or meaningful reform through this method. Another way is needed; another way is possible.

But what exactly is the anarchist argument? Well, it is simple. Modern parliamentary democracy is not about giving you a say, it is rather about maintaining social control. We are offered the illusion of change and having a say, but what we vote for is easily deflected and quickly forgotten about. In reality, we are made promises and offered policy platforms – and these do influence how we vote in an election – but afterwards we have no say, one way or the other, as to what happens with any of these promises or policy pledges. Some people say, 'Ah but at the next election, you can get your revenge!' But, by the time the next election comes around, it is too late – a case of bolting the stable door after the horse has run a hundred miles away. And also, let's face it, revenge is fruitless. What we want and need is to have a say in the decisions that matter in our lives. That's the very thing we are not getting in fact.

A key point to realise too is that the present system of democracy – so called representative democracy – protects politicians and defends their right to break promises. We elect politicians but we have no power to recall them. The system moreover was set up this way in order to allow politicians to ignore popular mandates. This is the basic but most important ground rule of parliamentary democracy: politicians in government only have to be guided by our wishes; they are not bound by them. As a result of this rule, don't be surprised that this is exactly what they do.

Sometimes it is argued that this anarchist view point is over-simplifying the problems. Why don't people just wake up, look more closely and really vote for an option that they believe in? We are not children after all, this argument goes. But the problem with this argument is manifold. Firstly, isn't that what they did with Obama? The electorate that voted for him – that vote for change and hope – really did think he 'meant it' and look what happened.

Moreover you also have to accept that at election time is very difficult to separate out who stands for what when everyone promises 'good things'. So what are people to do? Say for

example in France, the electorate might appear more thinking and vote in the Socialist Party there, but what if the Socialist Party then turns around – as it did – and implements the status quo and business friendly policies. What is the electorate to do?

Lastly it is worth pointing out that parliamentary and presidential elections constantly need to re-invent themselves to appear relevant in our lives. Hence the appeal and profile of Obama. The system of control always has to appear ‘new’ and ‘fresh’ and to ‘appear’ like it still relevant. New blood that fosters the idea that ‘this time we will be different’ is an essential part of how social control operates. This is because, at heart, there is a hunger for change out there in society. This hunger is fed with a few crumbs every four or five years and people grasp at it. But it goes nowhere.

Here in Ireland we can already see that ‘new radicals’ and ‘real alternatives’ are ready to step forward to dance in front of the tired electorate. The ULA/Socialist Party/ People before Profit option now have some new faces in the Dáil, like Clare Daly and Richard Boyd-Barrett. They ULA is suggesting that it could become ‘a real left’ or ‘a principled left’ or even ‘a radical left’. All we need to do, the ULA spokespeople say, is to devote our time and energy into the project of creating this ‘new movement’. The ULA want activists to commit themselves to a long term campaign that will aim to ‘capture’ the Dáil one day. The promise, of course, is that – THEN – finally real change can and will happen. But it’s the same tired illusion spun out once again. An Obama apparition of a different sort.

For anarchists the key is to build outside the parliamentary system. We want to channel our energies and the energies of those who want change into building something that is meaningful in fighting for change now – in our lives today, tomorrow and next week. The sorts of areas we want to build influence in are in areas where we live and where we work. We believe it is fundamental and vital to put our efforts now into any and all work in the union sphere, where our fellow and sister workers are opposing their bosses and this new regime of cuts and austerity.

Long term this where a real and strong extra-parliamentary opposition can be created.



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