

Black Faces In High Places

Why Obama's Election Does Not Mean Black People Are Free

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The November 2008 election of Barack Hussein Obama as the 44th president of the United States has excited the black community and broad sectors of youth and progressives unlike any prior event in the history of the United States.¹ Obama's election is a dramatic breakthrough in conventional U.S. politics, but does it mean that black people are "free" or have been liberated from the racist social and political structure that has oppressed African people in America for nearly 400 years? To answer that question, we must look at the current situation in our country. Foremost, there is the crisis of the mass imprisonment of black people in America. Of the over two million people incarcerated in U.S. jails and prisons, about half are black. One of every nine black men between the ages of 20 and 34, and one of every 15 black men ages 18 and older is behind bars. For black women ages 35–39, one in every 100 is incarcerated in the United States.²

According to Glen Ford, executive editor of blackagenda.com: "...Mass black incarceration...is the Mother of All White Backlashes... The purpose of U.S. prisons is to socially erase masses of Blacks, to subject them to social death. The demonic project has mutilated two generations of African American youth, and damaged Black America to its very core..."³

Mass imprisonment has devastated thousands of black families and hundreds of black communities throughout the country. Nevertheless, president-elect Obama, his opponents during the 2008 Democratic Party presidential primary race and most major civil rights leaders have ignored the issue of mass black imprisonment. Why?

According to journalist and historian Paul Street, there is an "epic disconnect" between the reality of black mass incarceration and two myths: 1. The United States is the "...headquarters of

¹ The excitement generated by Obama's election has been reflected in numerous news reports. For some examples, see Susan Page, "Hopes are high for race relations," USA Today, Nov. 7–9, 2008, page 1A; Lisa W. Foderaro, "For Striving 6th Graders, History Is Now and Their Future Just Changed," The New York Times, Nov. 6, 2008, p. P7; Jannell Ross, "Racial ideal revived for Nashville blacks," The Tennessean, Nov. 6, 2008, pp. 1A and 13A; and Marilyn Elias, "How Obama's win may impact Americans' mental health," Nov. 6, 2008, www.usatoday.com.

² Sources with information about black imprisonment in the United States include a 2008 report by Human Rights Watch, Targeting Blacks: Drug Law Enforcement and Race in the United States, www.hrw.org; a 2008 report by the Pew Center on the States' Public Safety Performance Project, More than One in 100 Adults are Behind Bars, www.pewcenteronthestates.org; a 2007 report by the Children's Defense Fund, America's Cradle to Prison Pipeline, www.childrensdefense.org; and "Commentary: Mass Black Incarceration is White Societal Aggression," March 18, 2004, www.blackcommentator.com.

³ Glen Ford, "Black Prison Gulag and the Police State," March 5, 2008, www.blackagenda.com.

freedom...” 2. The idea pushed by the political mainstream that America has become a post-racist society. Indeed, within minutes after the television networks proclaimed Obama the winner on Nov. 4, several political commentators said he had run as a race-neutral candidate. Some will now argue that racism is dead! Many adults, at least, know that racism in the United States is far from dead. However, there are those who will promote the ideological argument that American society can no longer use race as a barrier to the advancement of a black elite, and that anyone who does not “make it” now is just undeserving and lazy.⁴

During his campaign, Obama focused exclusively on the economic difficulties facing working class and middle class people, almost never acknowledging the plight of the millions of Americans who live in poverty. Yet, Obama will assume the Oval Office at a time when the United States ranks No. 3 in the world in the gap between the rich and the poor—a gap that has grown rapidly since 2000.⁵ The massive levels of unemployment, homelessness, and poverty concentrated primarily in the black community cannot be ignored. Consider these facts: (1). Almost 25 percent of African-Americans lived in poverty in 2007. (2). Black people comprised 47 percent of the U.S. homeless population in 2007, but they made up only 12 percent of America’s entire adult population (3). Three days after Obama was elected president, the black unemployment rate was 11.1 percent while the national unemployment rate was 6.5 percent. As one commentator noted, an economic recession for White America means an economic depression for Black America.⁶

Black people in America have suffered from decades of racial profiling, police brutality, and state-sanctioned murder by means of the death penalty, which has been disproportionately foisted on our community. Racism has caused black people to suffer from substandard medical care, resulting in higher infant mortality, strokes, heart attacks, HIV/AIDS, and thus the premature deaths of both children and adults.

President-elect Obama could begin to transform these problems, but as he himself has said, he cannot do it alone. He needs support from the millions of people who elected him. Obama has been quoted as saying that if Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were alive, that even with a black president, King would hold all political officials accountable to the demands of the people. That is what we want to talk about here: accountability, and the role of progressives and radical activists in bringing pressure to bear to win the demands of the grassroots. African-Americans are rightfully proud of Barack Obama. Nevertheless, at a time when so many of our people are suffering, we must not give the president-elect a free pass. He is not a representative or a champion of the poor, and he must feel pressure from the streets to ensure that he “stays real.” Thus, black radicals and progressives must build an independent, black-led grassroots movement, based on the poor

⁴ Paul Street, “Starve the Racist Prison Beast!”, Nov. 8, 2003, www.zmag.org.

⁵ The figure for the poverty gap in the United States may be found in *Are We Growing Unequal?*, an October 2008 report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, www.oecd.org. According to the OECD, only Mexico and Turkey have larger gaps of inequality and poverty than the United States.

⁶ The statistic for the black poverty rate comes from an Aug. 26, 2008, press release by the U.S. Census Bureau News, “Household Income Rises, Poverty Rate Unchanged, Number of Uninsured Down,” found at www.census.gov. According to the press release, black households in America had the lowest median income in 2007, \$33,916, compared to \$54,920 in non-Hispanic white households. The statistic for the black homeless rate comes from “Minorities and Homelessness,” Fact Sheet No. 2, published by the National Coalition for the Homeless, found at www.nationalhomeless.org.

The statistic for the black unemployment rate appeared in a Nov. 7, 2008, press release, “The Unemployment Situation: October 2008,” published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. For one analysis of the impact of the current economic crisis on African-Americans, see Algemon Austin, “What recession means for black Americans,” a Jan. 8, 2008, commentary published by the Economic Policy Institute, found at www.epi.org.

and lower levels of the working class. This movement has to raise the demands of the urban poor and force these demands on to the national political agenda. At the same time, this movement has to make sure that it has its own leadership and its own agenda.

The demands of the urban poor must not become minor public interest political issues, but the basis of an actual new urban politic. We must demand the dismantling of the prison-industrial complex; the rebuilding of the deteriorating cities [due to years of neglect]; the creation of millions of new public works jobs to transform the urban infrastructure; an end to racial profiling and the war on drugs; the diversion of billions of dollars from the wasteful war machine to rebuild America; reinstatement and enforcement of the civil rights laws by federal agencies; new laws to place serious constraints on corporations and financial institutions; and the reversal of many of the reactionary right-wing political gains of the last 25 years.

Our understanding is that political change begins in the streets, not the suites of the White House. A mass movement that organizes the 'hood and demands accountability from the president and all politicians could win the programs listed here and many others. The movement must be large-scale, autonomous, and much more radical than any wing of the Democratic Party. In fact, it cannot allow its internal programs, policies, or protests to be limited by or dictated by any group of professional politicians or liberal party interest coalition. Ultimately, it must strive for transitional forms of direct democracy in opposition to mainstream representative government. For instance, there should be community-based control of neighborhoods and government agencies, handling funds for social programs, putting power into the hands of worker and neighborhood assemblies for decision-making, instead of bureaucratic local governments; and other autonomous activities to build "dual power." It will be a difficult fight, but it will give us some direction and understanding of the role of a radical grassroots tendency. What we need is a radical democracy, not a corporate democracy.⁷

The 2008 presidential campaign was the most expensive race in history for the White House.⁸ Throughout the campaign, Obama preached about the need for change and the danger of corporate lobbyists. The fact is that he was a corporate candidate—just from a different wing. He raised more money than his Republican opponent, Sen. John McCain. Most of Obama's money came from corporations and Wall Street financial institutions, some of whom he criticized for the current collapse of U.S. capitalism.⁹ Obama was elected as president largely because of the country's deep financial crisis, which ruined millions of middle class homeowners, resulted in the loss of thousands of jobs, and the continued muddle of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet, Obama is not an anti-war activist, just a shrewd politician capitalizing on mass anti-war discontent. There is no evidence that he will even have a progressive foreign policy, as he is already threatening to expand the war in Afghanistan and to attack Pakistan, Iran and other countries, using the same flawed imperialist logic of his predecessors.

This leads to the real crux of the issue: Obama's election is not political liberation for the oppressed African masses in America. We cannot get our freedom under the U.S. political and economic system. Furthermore, Obama's election is not the "bloodless revolution" that Malcolm

⁷ In his Nov. 4, 2008, victory speech at Grant Park in Chicago, Obama said, "...I will ask you [to] join in the work of remaking this nation the only way it's been done in America for two-hundred and twenty-one years—block by block, brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand." See "Text of Obama's victory speech," at www.marketwatch.com.

⁸ See Jeanne Cummings, "2008 campaign costliest in U.S. history," Nov. 5, 2008, at www.politico.com.

⁹ See Foon Rhee, "Obama smashes money record," Oct. 19, 2008, at www.boston.com.

X raised as a possibility.¹⁰ That could only happen after a genuine struggle to overturn property relations and build a new society. Obama's victory did not constitute a social revolution; it was an electoral contest between the elite political parties in America, the Democrats and the Republicans.

At the most, the Obama White House offers the possibility of progressive social reform while America continues to exist as a racist, exploitative state. There may be more civil rights gains during Obama's presidency, although even this is not assured. One thing, however, is certain. The black underclass in America will not gain anything from the White House of Barack Obama unless an independent, radical black movement is willing to educate the masses, organize them in their neighborhoods and mobilize them in the streets. This movement must hold the president-elect accountable to a promise he made in his victory speech on Nov. 4, 2008 : "...There are many who won't agree with every decision or policy I make as President...But...I will listen to you, especially when we disagree..." Obama is not the answer to the intractable problems of black people in America, and we cannot expect him to free us. We have to do that for ourselves."¹¹

¹⁰ See Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," at www.americanrhetoric.com.

¹¹ "Text of Obama's victory speech," at www.marketwatch.com.

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