

OBAMA AND AMERICAN LEFT

Sam Webb

After the first, perhaps over analyzed, hundred days of the Obama administration, it is fair to say that President Obama is a reformer and the world is entering an era of reforms, possibly radical reforms.

Some on the left (ignoring the right wing talk shows and their fantastic claims about Obama's socialist pedigree) mockingly dismiss the new president and his reform inclinations, saying that his main mission is merely to save capitalism. Even if that is true, and there is no reason to doubt it, what does it reveal—that he is neither a politician of the left nor an advocate of socialism? Well, everybody already knew that.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, too, had no aspirations to change the foundations of capitalist society. But he realized that in order to preserve capitalism it had to be modified (and, yes, it can be modified), and he had to respond to the anger and yearnings of millions of Americans caught in the web of a seemingly intractable economic depression.

Given the contemporary economic crisis, Obama appears to be of a similar mind, though he comes to the White House with deeper democratic and reform sensibilities than FDR.

So far, Obama's presidency has not only broken decisively from the right-wing extremist policies of the Bush administration, but has also taken measures domestically and internationally that go in a progressive direction.

Whether this continues and takes on a consistently progressive, pro-people, radical reform character isn't a sure bet, however. Much like with the New Deal of the 1930s, it will be the outcome of contested and fluid process stretching over time, taking multiple forms, and pivoting around the expansion of citizenship rights (socialized health care, for example) and the reconfiguration of the role of government to the advantage of working people.

Socialism may be an objective necessity for America, an appealing idea to many ordinary Americans (a recent Rasmussen poll found that 20 percent favored socialism over capitalism and another 27 percent were unsure which was better), and a vision that people on the left want to vigorously popularize, but it isn't yet on the immediate political agenda—clearly, neither the current balance of forces nor the thinking of millions of Americans is at that point.

For one thing people in America are still in a democratic, increasingly anti-corporate, phase of struggle. In the course of this, political conditions could mature over time to the point where more advanced solutions—such as military conversion to peacetime and green production, a shorter work week, a “war” on poverty and inequality, public democratic ownership of critical economic sectors, and, depending on the dialectics of struggle, socialism—come to the fore of the people's agenda.

Currently, the level of mobilization of the diverse coalition that elected Obama doesn't match what is necessary to win his administration's immediate legislative and political agenda, let alone more far-reaching reforms.

A favorable alignment of forces exists, to be sure. But political majorities are consequential only to the degree that they are an active and organized element in the political process.

Moreover, the opposition is formidable. Right-wing Republicans experienced a crushing defeat, but no one should write them off; they have

consolidated their grip on the Republican Party, are well funded, and are clever at exploiting popular grievances and resentments.

Finance capital will attempt to minimize losses to its balance sheet, rob the public till where it can, and restructure the regulatory environment along lines that favor speculation and a casino economy.

Other powerful sections of big capital – energy, military, health care, pharmaceutical and other giants of corporate America – will also fiercely resist measures that collide with their political and economic interests.

Finally, there are political groupings of considerable influence in the administration and the Democratic Party who, while supporting Obama, will use their influence to cut down on the sweep and anti-corporate character of his initiatives.

Thus, the struggle of the nation's progressive majority—the working class, the racially oppressed, women, young people and others—is two-sided.

On the one hand, it has to battle stop-at-nothing right-wing extremists and their backers who are intent on defeating Obama and the people's coalition that supports him.

On the other hand, it has to struggle (but in a constructive, unifying way) within the multi-class coalition that Obama leads, to put their essential pro-working-class and democratic stamp on the reform process and the political direction of the country.

And herein lies the role of the left. Its main task, as it has been throughout the country's history, is to assist in reassembling, activating, uniting and giving a voice to common demands that unite this broad majority as well as draw in other people who didn't vote for Obama.

The left's political analysis, solutions to today's pressing crisis and a vision of socialism, rooted in a democratic ethos and practices, and not tied to a universal "model" imported from the 20th century, will receive a fair and favorable hearing from millions of Americans to the degree that left activists are active participants in the main labor and people's organizations struggling for vital reforms today – jobs, health care, retirement security, quality public education, equality and fairness, immigration reform, a foreign policy of peace and cooperation, and a livable environment and sustainable economy.

Those who narrow down the role of the left to simply being a critic of every move of the Obama administration and/or insist on left demands as the only basis of broad unity limit the left's capacity to be a part of a much larger coalition that could make America "a more perfect union." □