

Change is Here, Change is Coming

By Sam Webb, National Chair, CPUSA

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I make no attempt to be comprehensive in these remarks. My aim is much more modest, as you will see.

Let me begin with a simple observation: If the last 30 years were an era of reaction, then the coming decade could turn into an era of reform, even radical reform. Six months into the Obama presidency, I would say without hesitation that the landscape, atmosphere, conversation, and agenda have strikingly changed compared to the previous eight years.

In this legislative session, we can envision winning a Medicare-like public option and then going further in the years ahead.

We can visualize passing tough regulatory reforms on the financial industry, which brought the economy to ruin.

We can imagine the troops coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan while U.S. representatives participate in a regional process that brings peace and stability to the entire region.

In the current political climate, the expansion of union rights becomes a real possibility.

Much the same can be said about winning a second stimulus bill, and we sure need one, given the still-rising rate, and likely long term persistence, of unemployment.

Isn't it possible in the Obama era to create millions of green jobs in manufacturing and other sectors of the economy in tandem with an attack on global warming?

Can't we envision taking new strides in the long journey for racial and gender equality in this new era, marked at its beginning by the election of the first African American to the presidency?

And isn't the overhaul of the criminal justice and prison system – a system steeped in racism – no longer pie-in-the sky, but something that can be done in the foreseeable future?

All these things are within reach now!

I make this observation because in the ebb and flow of the first six months of the Obama presidency, it is easy to lose sight of the overall dynamics and promise of this new era.

Obama's role

The new conditions of struggle are possible only – and I want to emphasize only – because we elected President Obama and a Congress with pronounced progressive and center currents.

So far Obama's presidency has both broken from the right-wing extremist policies of the Bush administration and taken steps domestically and internationally that go in a progressive direction.

At the same time, the administration hasn't gone as far as we would have liked on a number of issues. On economic matters as well as matters of war and occupation we, along with others, advocated bolder actions.

All and all, however, the new President in deeds and words – and words do matter – has created new democratic space for peace, equality, and economic justice struggles. Whether this continues and takes on a consistently progressive, pro-people, radical reform direction depends in large measure on whether the movement that elected him fills and expands this space.

The struggle going forward, much like the New Deal, will be the outcome of a contested and fluid process involving broad class and social constituencies, taking multiple forms, and working out over time.

It will pivot on the expansion of social and economic rights, the reconfiguring of the functions of government to the advantage of working people, and the embedding of a new economic architecture and developmental path into the nation's political economy.

No less importantly, it will also entail the recasting of the role of the U.S. in the global community along egalitarian and non-imperial lines.

“What's all this talk about reform?” you may be asking. “Aren't we radicals? Isn't socialism our objective?”

Yes, socialism is our objective and, according to recent public opinion polls, it is increasingly attractive to the American people. But clearly it is not on the immediate political agenda. Neither the current balance of forces nor the thinking of millions of Americans – the starting point in any serious discussion of strategy and tactics – has reached that point.

That socialism isn't on the people's action agenda, however, doesn't mean that we should zip our lips. Quite the contrary! We should talk it up and bring our modern, deeply democratic Twenty-First-Century vision of U.S. socialism into coalitions and mass movements. And with the use of the Internet we can reach an exponentially bigger audience than we could in the past.

As for our radicalism, we should be as radical as reality itself. And reality strongly suggests that our main task is to bring the weight of the working class and other democratic forces to bear on the reform process with the aim of deepening its anti-corporate content and direction.

Current phase of struggle

How do we understand the current phase of struggle? On the one hand, our strategic policy of defeating right wing extremism doesn't quite fit the new correlation of class forces. On the other hand, neither have we arrived at the anti-monopoly stage of struggle – a stage in which corporate class power is confronted on every level of struggle.

In short, we are in transitional phase that contains elements of both.

In the course of this struggle, political conditions – consciousness, organization, unity, and alliances, including temporary and conditional alliances – will hopefully mature to the point where corporate power emerges as the main hindrance to radical democracy and socialism in the minds of tens of millions.

We can conjure up pure forms of struggle and direct and unencumbered paths to socialism in our impatient minds, but they don't exist in real life. The struggle for a socialist future is complex, contradictory, roundabout, and goes through different phases/stages of struggle.

Propaganda and agitation by themselves won't bring people to the threshold of socialism. They need their own experience in struggle for their essential (what is essential is variable and expands over time) needs.

The question

People aren't sitting on their hands. Anger is out there, hardship is widespread, and the fight back is taking shape.

And yet, it is fair to ask: does the level of mobilization of the diverse coalition that elected President Obama match what is necessary to win his administration's immediate legislative and political agenda – let alone far-reaching reforms, such as military conversion to peacetime and green production, a shorter work week, a "war" on poverty and inequality, democratic ownership of critical economic sectors, and a retreat from empire?

I think the answer is no – not yet. A favorable alignment of forces exists and mass sentiments favor change. But political majorities and popular sentiments are consequential only to the degree that they are an active and organized element in the political process.

And herein lays the role of the Left. Its main task, as it has been throughout our country's history, is to persistently and patiently assist in reassembling, activating, uniting, educating, and giving a voice to common demands that unite this broad majority.

The Left's political analysis, its solutions to today's pressing crises, and its vision of radical democracy and socialism, rooted in national realities, 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 or insist on Left demands as the only ground for broad unity cut down the Left's capacity to be a growing part of a much larger coalition that could remake America.

Some on the Left dismiss the new President as simply another centrist or a right social democrat, or an unabashed spokesperson of Wall Street. Still others call him the new face of imperialism.

I find it unwise for many reasons to put President Obama into a tightly sealed political category. We should see the President and his administration as a work in progress in an exceptionally fluid situation.

Let's remember that he is the leader of a diverse multi-class coalition and a party with different currents. Let's not forget about the balance of forces in Congress that has to enter his – and hopefully our – political calculus.

Let's not turn any one issue into a litmus test determining our attitude toward the administration and Congress. Let's be aware that he has to keep a coalition together for his long-term as well as immediate legislative agenda. Let's give President Obama some space to change and to respond to pressures from below.

Finally, we should resist pressures from some sections of the Left, and a few in our Party, to define the current struggle as one that arrays the people against President Obama. That's not Marxism; it's plain stupid.

The American people and their main mass organizations have good reason to be angry and frustrated, but few embrace an approach that turns the Obama administration into the main roadblock to social progress.

That we have spurned such an approach too is to our credit. (Read the outstanding speech of AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka to the national convention of CBTU, in which he speaks of labor's positive view of the new administration and the new openings for class and democratic struggles that now exist.)

We can help re-bend the arc of history in the direction of justice, equality, and peace. But only if we, and millions like us, pursue a sound strategy that unifies broad sections of the

American people and looks for alliances no matter how temporary and conditional. Majorities make history, not militant minorities.

President Obama and progressive Congresspeople can't be the only change agents and will be change agents only up to a point.

Our responsibility is to support them, prod them, and constructively take issue with them when we have differing views.

But more importantly – and this is the heart of the matter – we have to reach, activate, unite, educate, and turn millions of Americans into “change agents” who can make the political difference in upcoming struggles.

Our parents and grandparents were such bottom-up change agents in the Depression years. Unhappy with the pace and substance of change, they sat down in plants and in the fields, marched for veteran benefits, petitioned local relief agencies, lobbied for a social safety net, established unemployed groups, organized industrial workers into the CIO, opposed discrimination and racism, turned multi-racial unity into an organizing principle, and, we should note, re-elected Roosevelt and a New Deal Congress in a landslide in the 1936 elections.

The American people today would do well to follow their example.

Likewise, communists of our generation should draw from the example of our Depression-era comrades. Because they were guided by a sound strategy that accented struggles for economic and social reforms and because they employed flexible tactics, and because they didn't conflate their mood with the mass mood, they were a vital part of this process too.

Struggle for health care reform

The mobilization that the labor movement and others carried out tirelessly last year in the elections is exactly what is needed now. How else can health care for all, the Employee Free Choice Act, economic relief, comprehensive immigration reform, a transfer of funds from military spending to massive green job creation, and a tax policy that weighs heavily the wealthiest families and corporations be won?

The Right Wing, the American Medical Association, the pharmaceutical and insurance companies have drawn a line in the sand on health care. They hope to defeat any legislation in the near term and in doing so to fatally weaken the administration's legislative program in the longer term, much like they did in the Clinton years.

The core of this struggle, whether we like it or not, turns on the inclusion of a public option in a health care bill. President Obama reaffirmed his support for such an option and the Congressional Progressive Caucus recently expressed its full support for a public option that is government run, covers everyone, and goes into effect right away.

Meanwhile, Republicans, with help from some Democrats, are ganging up against any public option, while at the same time introducing measures to weaken health care reform and confuse the American people.

True to form, the right-wing media is the megaphone of this effort.

Mass mobilization is needed

Over the summer this fight will be waged like an election campaign by the labor movement and progressive forces. Across the country activists will be asked to knock on doors and make phone calls to build a massive groundswell for health care reform.

This campaign provides a great opening to strengthen our clubs and build the broader movement. Some of our clubs are in the thick of the fight; some are looking for ways to become engaged.

Each district and club should discuss how to carry this fight forward in a way that results in new friends, new readers of the People's World, and new members of the Party and Young Communist League. A few ideas:

- speak to neighbors and friends about their health care stories and suggest what they can do.
- share coverage of the Peoples World in either its print or electronic form and ask if they would like the paper every week in one or another form.
- prepare a special agenda for your club meeting with invited guests
- help build participation in rallies and events of unions and other organizations
- organize speak-outs and town hall meetings with others
- collect signatures on petitions, make phone calls, employ the internet, and organize visits to your elected officials.

While we support HR 676 as the most advanced demand in the current debate, it should not be counterpoised to a Medicare-like public option. In the single payer movement and the campaign for a public option, our role isn't to sharpen differences, but rather to build maximum unity against the health care industrial complex and its supporters (Democratic as well as Republican) in Congress and for meaningful health care reform.

Economic crisis over

Another observation that I want to make is to beware of talk of better economic times around the corner. We may be over the worst of it; we may have avoided a 1930s-type depression; but it's quite another thing to suggest that we are on the road to recovery.

Yes, there have been some indicators that show improvement in the economy; but we shouldn't read too much into them (as the business press does).

After all, there are more signs that suggest that we haven't reached bottom yet, that the recovery is still not in sight; and that more government intervention is necessary.

Unemployment hasn't peaked, even though the official rate is nearly ten per cent. Poverty is growing, and among the long-term poor, the crisis is dire. Manufacturing is hemorrhaging jobs – none more so than the auto industry. Banks, as quiet as it is kept, hold mountains of toxic assets. Debt is nearly off the charts. Credit markets are far from fluid. Business investment is off. And housing prices fall and foreclosures rise.

On a global level, signs of renewed economic activity are few. Maybe the best we can say is that the decline of the economy is slowing down, thanks to massive government intervention, but hasn't bottomed out.

If this is so then three questions follow: first, when will the economy hit bottom? Second, when will the economy begin a vigorous and sustained renewal? Third, is the economic crisis reconfiguring the geography of economic power on a global level?

On these questions there is no consensus.

Some say that the economy will bottom out soon to be followed by a recovery early next year. Other economists are more pessimistic. Citing the enormous piling up of debt over the past 20 years, overcrowded world commodity markets, technological displacement, capital flight, downward pressures on profitability, and so forth, they predict little economic bounce for some time to come.

Months ago it was said that the downturn could be "L-shaped" rather than "V-shaped." In other words, the crisis begins with a steep decline in economic activity followed by long period of economic stagnation.

I suspect that this is what will happen, thus making sustained government and people's intervention an imperative. In my view this should take at least three forms:

First, more economic stimulus: the economy is underperforming and nearly 30 million workers are unemployed or underemployed and that number hasn't peaked yet.

Second, restructuring is imperative. The old economic model that rested on bubble economics, cheap labor, financial manipulation and speculation, deregulation, capital outsourcing, environmental degradation, and so forth, has to be replaced by a new model that expands and restructures the productive base and is "people and nature" friendly.

Finally, the economy has to be democratized. The wizards of Wall Street and inside the Beltway failed miserably, in fact, so miserably those economic decisions that affect the welfare of millions shouldn't rest in their hands.

The resistance to such measures will be massive. It will take a labor-led coalition far bigger than what exists now to drive the process.

Furthermore, even in the event that such a coalition materializes and pushes through such measures, the organically embedded economic contradictions and crisis tendencies of capitalism will erupt in one form or another. There is no such thing as a crisis-free capitalist developmental model. Sooner or later, it exhausts its potential and gives way to sharp and ultimately irresolvable contradictions located at every level of the capitalist economy.

In the meantime, the struggle for immediate public sector jobs and relief should command our attention. We, along with the labor movement, the nationally and racially oppressed, women, youth and others, have to help the unemployed find their voice and forms to express their demands and organize their struggle.

In addition to articulating class wide demands, we have to argue for special measures that address the catastrophic situation in the African American, Latino, Asian American, American Indian, immigrant, and other minority communities. The lack of jobs is at the heart of this dire situation, but it also includes malnutrition and hunger, poor health care, shabby housing, high dropout rates, homelessness, racial profiling, police brutality, criminalization, and so on.

The job crisis requires special discussion and initiatives with our allies. They should be concrete and realistic.

As for the impact of the current crisis of capitalism on the geographical distribution of economic power on a global level, it is enormous and consequential. While the U.S. and European market economies report negative growth rates, the economies of the emerging giants – China, India, and Brazil – are expanding this year and this trend will continue at a faster rate next year. If this trend continues – and there is no reason to think that it won't – the implications and consequences will be profound and long lasting.

An end to violence

Still another observation that I would like to make is this: against the background of the bloodiest century in human history and this decade of war, genocide, boycotts, and threats and counter threats, thanks in large measure to the Bush administration and our own imperialism, humanity is seeking a new world order in which peace and justice are its organizing principles.

The vast majority of people desire the easing of tensions, an end to violence, and the normalization of relations between states. They want dialogue and negotiation, not war and threats. And they hope that the U.S. government will choose a constructive role in world affairs.

President Obama has captured this sentiment well in several speeches before vast audiences. His emphasis on human solidarity, diplomacy, cooperation, and peaceful settlement of outstanding issues is striking an emotional chord worldwide. In nearly every

region of the world, the President has expressed a readiness to engage with countries that during the Bush years were considered mortal enemies – Iran, Cuba, Venezuela, North Korea, and others. In Latin America, he indicated that the administration would like to put relations between our government and others in the region on a different footing. In a historic speech in Prague, he voiced his desire to reduce and ultimately abolish nuclear weapons. Earlier this month, in an unprecedented address in Cairo he indicated his eagerness to reset relations with the Muslim world, sit down with the Iranian government, and press for a two state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

And only this week, he has been circumspect with regard to the massive social explosion in Iran over the rigged election and right-wing theocratic rule. He has quietly made his allegiances clear, but not in a way that would play in to the hands of the ruling reactionary regime.

While the administration has yet to fully match its words with practical deeds, what it has said and done so far constitutes a qualitative turn compared to the previous administration.

Nevertheless, more needs doing before we are on a distinctly new course.

In Afghanistan and North Korea, a negotiated solution to both conflicts that includes increased economic and humanitarian aid is urgently needed. Military occupation and troop buildup in Afghanistan and the imposition of sanctions against North Korea are extremely dangerous and will postpone any resolution of those crises.

To go further, if one or the other (or both) metastasizes into a bigger conflict, it could be the undoing of this administration. Don't get me wrong: terrorist activities and nuclear proliferation are both enormous dangers, but the solutions to these have to be sought along other lines and involve regional and international players.

In Iraq, the U.S. withdrawal plan is proceeding, with the first stage being withdrawal from Iraqi cities by July. President Obama has reiterated his intention to stick with the pullout deadlines. Even with the caveats about what U.S. forces might remain, this is a major victory for the peace movement. The struggle over what forces remain will depend in large part on the Iraqi people's democratic and progressive forces, as well as our own peace movement.

In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Netanyahu, in an about-face, said he could live with a two-state solution. And even with all the caveats and demagoguery surrounding the "concession," I believe that it signifies recognition, albeit forced, on Likud's part that public opinion is shifting against them in Israel, Europe, and the U.S.

In this country the peace movement has to note particularly the changing dynamics in U.S. opinion, including in the White House and Congress, including Jewish members of Congress. Netanyahu got a different reaction than he expected when he met with Congressional leaders when he was in Washington recently. While he wanted to focus on

Iran, they pressed him on the settlements. And, that pressure will only grow if the new Israeli government continues in its actions to pursue its present policy.

As far as Cuba is concerned, we are at a crucial moment in U.S.-Cuba relations. The Obama administration has indicated its readiness to reset relations with Cuba and has taken some very modest steps in words and deeds in that direction. But obviously much more needs to be done to end all travel restrictions, lift the blockade, resume trade, and free the Cuban 5, who languish in maximum security prisons. That said, the good news is that diverse groups have an interest in normalizing the relations between our two countries, including in the Congress.

Finally, we are in a moment when our ability to change our foreign policy will bear directly on our capacity to address economic and social problems at home. Currently, 53 percent of the discretionary spending of the federal budget goes to the military.

Thus, ending wars, closing military bases, and cutting military spending coupled with diplomacy, cooperation, and respect for international law and national sovereignty is good economic as well as good foreign policy.

But there is a hitch. Both Republicans and Democrats are upset at the minimal steps the administration is proposing to cut specific “unnecessary” or useless weapons systems.

So we have a struggle on our hands. And it will be fought out in “the court of public opinion,” at the ballot box, and in the economic trenches.

So far the peace movement has an array of plans to challenge the military appropriations process, including town hall Congressional meetings on foreign policy during the August recess. We should participate and support them.

Bottom line: the country and the Obama administration need a more vocal peace movement in order to reconfigure our role in world affairs and address the economic crisis.

Mentality of marginalization

Another observation that I want to make is that because of McCarthyism, the Cold War, and the long economic expansion following WW II, the Left has been on the edges of politics for more than a half century. During this time, our ability to impact on broader political processes in the country has been narrowly circumscribed – nothing like the 1930s, nothing like the Left in many other countries.

While we stubbornly fought the good fight and made undeniable contributions over the past half-century, we were not a major player; we didn’t set the agenda or frame the debate; we didn’t determine the political direction of the country; we were not a decider.

But this could change. Because of the new political, economic and ideological landscape, the Left has an opportunity to step from the political periphery into the mainstream of U.S.

politics. It has a chance to become a player of consequence; a player whose voice is seriously considered in the debates bearing on the future of the country; a player that is able to mobilize and influence the thinking and actions of millions.

Whether we do depends on many factors, one of which is our ability to shake off a “mentality of marginalization” that has become embedded in the Left’s political culture over the last half of the Twentieth Century.

How does this mentality express itself? In a number of ways – in spending too much time agitating the choir; in dismissing new political openings that if taken advantage of could create the conditions for mass struggle; in thinking that partial reforms are at loggerheads with radical reforms; in seeing the glass as always half empty; in conflating our outlook with the outlook of millions; in turning the danger of cooptation into a rationale to keep a distance from reform struggles; in enclosing ourselves in narrow Left forms; and in damning victories with faint praise.

In this peculiar mindset, politics has few complexities. Change is driven only from the ground up. Winning broad majorities is not essential. There are no stages of struggle, no social forces that possess strategic social power, and no divisions worth noting. Finally, alliances with unstable allies and distinctions between the Democratic and Republican parties are either of little consequence or disdainfully dismissed.

Unless the Left – and I include communists – sheds this mentality, it will miss a unique opportunity to grow and leave a distinct imprint on our country’s direction.

A final observation before closing is that I wholeheartedly welcome the proposals to reconfigure our work that you received and that we are going to discuss later today.

I don’t have any of the reservations about this that some have. The upside of this new means of communication, education, organization, and fund raising is that it is nearly limitless.

I think it is going to make a huge difference in our ability to reach, influence, and interact with a mass audience – something that we haven’t ever been able to do in a systematic way so far.

Every aspect of our work will experience new potentials, including grassroots organizing and club building.

I hope we enthusiastically adopt these proposals. Assuming for the moment that we do, it is fair to say that we will have our work cut out for us. But as is often said, we have a world to win! Thank you.