They hoped for FDR; all they got was the "F"

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[The following appeared as a contribution to a symposium on electoral politics in the September 2011 issue of Yankee Radical*, DSA's Boston-area socialist monthly. While the piece makes reference in places to the perspectives of a particular organization, its analysis is meant to apply to a broad swath of the US left as well.]*

Barack Obama is the worst Democratic president since Grover Cleveland. Sure, there've been some real sweethearts since. Woodrow Wilson segregated the armed services, mired the U.S. in World War 1, that poster child for imperialist adventures, and launched a Red Scare that makes the McCarthy years look like drizzle on a Sunday afternoon. Harry Truman nationalized the steel mills to break a strike, vetoed Taft-Hartley and then unleashed it once it was law. LBJ and his schizoid regime of napalm abroad and butter at home unraveled an already frayed New Deal coalition. Obama promised to be audacious. He was; for the wrong side.

I expect no one in DSA is defending the Obama administration on the merits—such as there are. Its failure of imagination and nerve combined with a toadying to Wall Street and enabling of corporate America would have embarrassed Richard Nixon, if indeed anything could embarrass Nixon. What attracts many to Obama isn't his accomplishments in office, but the threat of a mad-cow-like GOP that would make the ills of the Obama presidency seem like robust health by comparison. But the GOP is always worse, and unless progressives are willing to pull the trigger and withhold support sometime for wayward Democrats, the drift toward the Right will continue.

We can't read Obama's mind, so we can't know if the once-frisky Chicago community organizer is a knowing tool of capital, an inveterate capitulator, or both. Through inattention, ineptitude, gutlessness or design, his administration serves no progressive purpose. All we can do is judge it by its works, from recalling the vile Larry Summers from exile the morning after the election and carrying on Bush administration war aims to folding on the deficit fight, coming late to the unemployment dance with a lame jobs bill and being at best inconsistent on whether Medicare and Social Security need cutting. By those yardsticks, Obama's is a failed presidency.

If not for the threat posed by the GOP and its teabagger ankle biters, no one on the Left would wish this president four more years in office. Thanks to the GOP's virulent war against working people liberals are already lining up to re-elect the enabler of that war.

I don't minimize the damage that Republican control of all three branches of the federal government—especially the federal courts—would wreak. Nor do I accept, as too many on the radical Left do, that Obama has been an even more useful idiot for the business class than would any Republican—so useful that he's foreclosed opposition from the social movement leaders who would be in full-throated rebellion otherwise. That's a common enough trope, but impossible to prove, too rarely questioned and probably wrong.

I do think that socialists ought to say plainly: this far and no further! It's time DSA stopped playing the good classroom attendance monitor and became irritants and critics, not just of neoliberalism in general but of an administration that does the man's work, by omission if not commission. It's also time to stop blaming the weak state of the social movements for the failure to let Obama be FDR. That lack of street heat may be an explanation for why no path-breaking legislation has come out of Washington, but it's no excuse for the emasculated Obama health care bill that wasn't a reform, the kid gloves with which the administration handles the financial industry

or the educational programs the administration trumpets that would destroy the nation's common schools.

DSA's national political committee perspective on 2008, which I had a hand in formulating as an NPC member, argued that an Obama administration—bottom line—would give the social movements and especially labor options foreclosed under a GOP regime. Those options never materialized. And breaking with Obama is no face slap to the African American community, who, with other people of color, have been this administration's chief victims. So let's put distance between us and the Obama campaign.

True, we socialists don't function alone, nor should we. Organized labor, who were owed the world by the administration after the 2008 campaign and got only a third friendly vote on the National Labor Relations Board, may think it has no choice, but we do. Individuals with ongoing or wannabe careers as political operatives may not be able to break with the national and state Democratic committees, but that's not DSA's problem, either.

DSAers can profitably integrate themselves into this election cycle, but only on the state and local levels. In November, I'll be one more voice urging the convention to take no stand on Obama, not even one expressing a preference and issuing guidance on voting. DSAers know how to vote. Like the rest of the left, we're just not yet sure how to move forward together.

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