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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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13.10.2024

Barack Obama's racist lecture to black workers in Pittsburgh

With just over three weeks remaining until election day in the United States, concerns within the Democratic Party over the electoral prospects of the Harris campaign are breaking out into the open. The wave of enthusiasm, which the media talking heads universally predicted would follow the substitution of Harris for Biden, has not materialized. An October 7 *New York Times* headline nervously asks the question: “How Could the Election Be This Close?”



Former President Barack Obama speaks during a campaign rally supporting Democratic presidential nominee Vice President Kamala Harris, Thursday, Oct. 10, 2024, at the University of Pittsburgh's Fitzgerald Field House in Pittsburgh. (AP Photo/Matt Freed)

Despite his pledge to finish the coup attempt he started on January 6, a second Trump presidency is a very real possibility. Polls show a statistical dead heat, certainly close enough for Trump to falsely claim any pro-Harris margin is the product of votes cast by “illegal immigrants,” setting into motion his plan to steal the election if he loses the electoral college. Harris is polling far behind where Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden stood three weeks before the

2016 and 2020 elections in the critical battleground states of Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin, states which Clinton lost and Biden only narrowly won. Democratic candidates say internal polling confirms these concerns, with Senate candidate Elissa Slotkin saying Harris is “underwater” in Michigan.

In this context the Democratic Party deployed former President Barack Obama to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he made his first public stump speech for the Harris campaign. Before the speech, Obama also spoke separately to Harris volunteers at a campaign office in East Liberty.

Obama began his stump speech:

This election is going to be tight because many Americans are still struggling, striving to make life better for themselves, their families, and their kids. We’ve been through a lot these last few years. A historic pandemic wreaked havoc on communities and businesses, causing prices to spike and straining family budgets. It’s felt like the aspirations of working people have taken a backseat to the priorities of the rich and powerful.

The former president is, of course, not among those struggling to get by. After Obama handed the keys of the White House to Trump, wishing him “good luck” and calling the 2016 election an “intramural scrimmage,” Obama hopped off to the Caribbean to jet ski with billionaire Richard Branson. In 2017 he was paid \$2 million to give three speeches, and in 2018 he signed a \$50 million deal to make movies for Netflix.

Nevertheless, Obama’s remarks express real concern in the ruling class about the growth of social discontent over the economic situation and anger over social inequality. Recent years have witnessed the growth of powerful strikes and social struggles among industrial workers at the heart of the productive process, including in rail, auto, aerospace, UPS and on the docks.

Fearing that the potential power of the emerging movement will disrupt profits or undermine its ability to wage imperialist war abroad, the Democratic Party is incapable of making any genuine appeal to the “aspirations of working people,” which Obama mentioned.

Instead, he launched into a patronizing denunciation of working class black men, implying that they are misogynistic for not voting for Harris in sufficient numbers:

My understanding, based on reports I’m getting from campaigns and communities, is that we have not yet seen the same kinds of energy and turnout in all quarters of our neighborhoods and communities as we saw when I was running. This seems to be more pronounced with the brothers.

Addressing black men, Obama said: “You come up with all kinds of reasons and excuses”—an oblique reference to complaints over economic conditions—“Part of it makes me think that, well, you just aren’t feeling the idea of having a woman as president.” Lumping himself in with working class black youth confronting police violence, the former commander-in-chief said, “When we get in trouble and the system isn’t working for us, they’re [black women] the ones out there marching and protesting.” He concluded his harangue by referring to Harris as “somebody who grew up like you, knows you, went to college with you, understands the struggles and pain and joy that comes from those experiences.”

There is something profoundly anti-democratic and unsavory in this multi-millionaire black representative of American imperialism telling black workers that they owe their vote to Harris because they belong to the same racial “community.” Obama is himself playing on racist tropes by insulting black men as “misogynists” if they do not turn out in November.

What Obama disparages as “excuses” are actually legitimate grievances over burning social needs felt within the entire working class. The top 10 percent of households owns 67 percent of the wealth, while the bottom 50 percent owns just 2.5 percent. Over 20 million people have died of COVID-19 globally, and life expectancy is falling in the United States for the first time in its history.

As for black men, only 27 percent have college degrees. One-fifth of African American men live below the federal poverty line, and one in 15 are currently incarcerated. The former prosecutor Harris has not even commented on Missouri’s execution of Marcellus Williams, an innocent African American man.

These conditions are the product of the Democratic Party’s decades-long abandonment of the social programs of the New Deal and Great Society, programs which first accounted for the shift among African Americans from the Republicans to the Democrats at midcentury. Instead, the Democrats have adopted the type of racial and gender politics that produced the right-wing imperialist career of Barack Obama.

Trump and the Republican Party are capitalizing on the disillusionment of African Americans with the Democratic Party, a protracted process which was apparent in the 2016 election results.

Trump and vice presidential candidate JD Vance have demagogically attacked the mass layoffs recently enforced throughout the auto industry, including at Stellantis, where 2,400 workers were laid off last week at the Warren Truck Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit. Speaking days later at Detroit’s Eastern Market, Vance said, “I think Michigan autoworkers would join me in saying we need to build our own cars, and Americans can drive whatever

the hell they want to because this is the United States of America, and we believe in freedom.” Trump and Vance combine such nationalist demagogy with fascist attacks on immigrants, whom Trump has accused of “stealing” jobs from African Americans.

The Socialist Equality Party rejects the fascist demagogy of Trump and the racialist warmongering of Obama, Harris and the Democrats. The potential for a revolutionary program to win an audience is growing and that finds expression in the growing influence and authority of the ICFI internationally and of the SEP in the US in particular.

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