

Obama in Berlin

20 June 2013

In his speech in Berlin on Wednesday, President Barack Obama made much of the fact that he was the first American president to speak from the eastern side of the Brandenburg Gate, in what was once Stalinist-controlled East Berlin. This was meant to symbolize the triumph of what Obama called “open societies that respect the sanctity of the individual” over oppressive political systems.

He felt obliged, however, to include an explicit defense of the newly exposed surveillance network over which he presides, whose massive and illegal operations dwarf the spying apparatus of the old Stasi secret police.

Obama once again resorted to outright lies, declaring that National Security Agency (NSA) programs that seize the phone records of all Americans and tap into the electronic communications of people all over the world are “bound by the rule of law” and do not target “the communications of ordinary persons.”

This was among the most glaring contradictions in a speech riddled with banalities and lies. Obama invoked the ideals of “peace” and “tolerance,” having just approved the direct arming of Islamist militias that are carrying out sectarian atrocities in Syria. He spoke of “justice” in one breath and his drone assassination program in the next.

Standing beside German Chancellor Merkel, who is spearheading the infliction of mass unemployment and poverty on the people of Greece and many other European countries, while his administration lays siege to workers’ living standards in the US, Obama denounced “the insult of widening inequality” and “the pain of youth who are unemployed.”

This hypocrisy was not lost on millions of people in Germany and around the world who not so long ago were taken in by presidential candidate Obama and his campaign slogans of “hope” and “change.” Since then, more than four years of war, bank bailouts, social cuts and relentless attacks on democratic rights—a

continuation and intensification of the right-wing policies of the Bush administration—have done much to deflate the popular illusions in Obama that existed at the time of his election.

On Wednesday, Obama spoke before a handpicked crowd of 4,000, standing behind bulletproof glass and protected by a virtual lockdown of much of Berlin. Five years ago, when candidate Obama spoke in Berlin, 200,000 people, most of them young, converged on the Tiergarten in a display of naïve and deluded enthusiasm that was dubbed “Obamamania.”

Candidate Obama’s reception in Europe was part of a broader phenomenon. Many people, especially young people, in the US and around the world were swept up in the mass marketing campaign to sell the virtually unknown US senator.

It is not enough, five years later, to merely shed illusions in Obama. There are serious political lessons that must be drawn so that workers and youth will be politically prepared for future developments.

The Obama phenomenon was the result of a confluence of media manipulation, political inexperience and self-delusion, and the false conception that Obama’s African-American ethnicity made him more sympathetic to the plight of working people and more inclined to pursue progressive policies.

Somehow, it was assumed, because Obama had an African birth father his election would change the nature of American imperialism.

Such bankrupt notions, the stock-in-trade of identity politics, were promoted above all by the various pseudo-left organizations, which speak not for the working class, but for privileged layers of the middle class. In the midst of the greatest crisis of American and world capitalism since the 1930s, Obama fit the bill for all those who serve as the “left” flank of the Democratic Party. The International Socialist Organization called Obama’s election a

“transformative event” and predicted a “new New Deal.”

The promotion of such illusions played into the hands of the ruling class, helping it to buy time while it prepared an unprecedented assault on the social conditions of the working class and an escalation of militarist violence in the Middle East and further afield. The installation of Obama further consolidated the military/intelligence establishment’s control over the United States.

Obama’s July 2008 speech in Berlin was widely praised by the media, including the organs of the pseudo-left. In fact, the speech signaled that, whatever the campaign rhetoric, the reactionary foreign and domestic policies of the Bush years would continue under an Obama presidency.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: “Barack Obama’s speech before an audience of some 200,000 in Berlin was a reactionary affirmation of Cold War anti-communism and an attempt to promote the new framework for US imperialist militarism and aggression, the so-called ‘global war on terror.’

“Against the backdrop of a potted history of post-war US-European relations, the Democratic presidential candidate appealed for closer collaboration between the two continents in the struggle against the ‘new danger’ of international terrorism and demanded that European governments increase their troop levels in Afghanistan.” (See: “Obama demands Europe send more troops to Afghanistan”).

Workers and youth who today confront unprecedented attacks on their living standards and democratic rights, and who are moving into immense struggles, should ask themselves what in the approach of the WSWS enabled it to combat the politics of blind impressionism promoted by the establishment media and the pseudo-left organizations, and correctly assess the political character and trajectory of Obama.

The answer is a politics based on a Marxist understanding of the historical experiences of the international working class, gained through the struggle of the Trotskyist movement against the betrayals of Stalinism, Social Democracy and the trade union bureaucracies, and a theoretical grasp of the laws of history.

Such an approach reveals that social class—not race, gender or sexual orientation—is the driving force of

politics. Obama, like any other politician, is not a free agent whose policies are determined by his personal attributes or individual psychology, but the representative of a ruling class that will stop at nothing to defend its wealth and power against the working class—a ruling class, moreover, that presides over a system in mortal crisis.

The fundamental lesson of the Obama experience is the need for a scientific evaluation of economic, social and political events and the development of a revolutionary perspective and program of struggle for the working class based on such an analysis. This task is carried out every day solely by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party.

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