

Obama and Romney: A “debate” without real differences

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The first debate of the US presidential election campaign laid bare the unbridgeable gulf between the corporate-controlled political system and the concerns of the overwhelming majority of the American people.

The United States is in the grip of the worst social crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, with record levels of long-term unemployment, record levels of hunger and homelessness, mass layoffs of workers in the public schools and other essential services, deteriorating public infrastructure and deepening poverty and social misery.

Aside from two sentences from Romney—in the course of proposing measures that would make the crisis even worse for working people—there was no reference to this social reality in 90 minutes of debate. The words “poverty” and “unemployment” never crossed Obama’s lips. Neither candidate offered any proposals to alleviate mass suffering, put the unemployed to work or rebuild public services devastated by budget cuts.

On the contrary, more than four years into an economic crisis brought on by the greatest financial collapse of the profit system since the 1930s, both candidates pledged their loyalty to Wall Street and hailed capitalism as the greatest boon to mankind.

Obama declared in his two-minute summation, clearly prepared in advance, “The genius of America is the free enterprise system.” Romney, himself the possessor of a huge personal fortune based on stripping the assets of companies and speculating in the financial markets, repeatedly argued that the “private sector” had to be given free rein in every sphere of life, from job-creation to education to health care.

Obama made only one timid reference to the role of Wall Street in wrecking the US and world economy. Even there, he equated the swindlers and the swindled, saying that the workers hoodwinked into taking out sub-prime mortgages and the bankers who pocketed huge bonuses by fleecing them were both guilty of “reckless behavior.”

Obama also refrained from identifying Romney personally with Wall Street. In the course of the nationally televised event, he made no mention of Romney’s role as a corporate raider at Bain Capital, Romney’s refusal to release his tax returns, or his use of offshore investment accounts.

Most significantly, he made no reference to Romney’s disparaging comments about the “47 percent” of Americans dependent on government programs and too poor to pay federal income taxes, and his assertion that no one in America should consider himself “entitled” to

food, health care or a roof over his head.

Based on conventional electoral considerations, this silence would appear inexplicable. Obama campaign television commercials have hammered Romney on his “47 percent” remarks for two weeks, and Romney’s poll numbers declined as a consequence.

It is clear, however, that in preparing for the first debate, with an estimated television audience of 60 million, the largest of the campaign, Obama and his political handlers viewed any hint of economic populism as too dangerous. It might offend the Wall Street power brokers and encourage a militant response from below.

The month of September has already seen two major strikes erupt in urban centers, with workers rebelling against cuts demanded by Democratic mayors with close ties to the Obama administration. In Chicago, 26,000 teachers walked out for a week, and in Detroit, water and sewage workers went on strike and initially defied a court injunction and their own union officials.

There were considerable efforts in the media before the debate to frame the contest between Romney and Obama as a titanic duel of deeply opposed philosophical standpoints. This carried over into the questions posed by the moderator, Jim Lehrer of the Public Broadcasting System, who began each segment of the debate by asking the candidates to outline their differences on a particular domestic issue: in other words, to focus on the 1 percent on which they disagreed, rather than the 99 percent they had in common.

It proved impossible to conceal the alignment of the two candidates, however. Viewers quickly lost count of how many times Obama or Romney voiced agreement with one another—on stimulating the private sector, on cutting taxes for corporations, on education “reforms” directed at privatizing schools and bashing teachers, on cost-cutting in health care, on promoting US energy companies.

Romney disavowed his best-publicized economic proposal—a \$5 trillion tax cut largely targeted to the wealthy and corporations—in favor of a renewed emphasis on deficit reduction as the principal goal of a new Republican administration. Obama responded by reiterating his own plan to cut the deficit by \$4 trillion, the bulk of that through domestic spending cuts.

As throughout the campaign, neither candidate would speak openly about the impact of their respective deficit reduction plans on the social programs on which tens of millions of working people depend. Both claimed to uphold Social Security, while accusing their opponent of seeking to devastate Medicare. The claims are lies, while the accusations—against both candidates—are true.

Perhaps the closest the debate came to a moment of truth was when Romney observed, “High-income people are doing just fine in this economy. They’ll do fine whether you’re president or I am.” Obama smiled in response.

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