

Obama's State of the Union Address: An Empty and Reactionary Charade

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US President Barack Obama's State of the Union address Tuesday was, perhaps even more than his previous addresses, a cynical and reactionary charade. Empty rhetoric was combined with a complete disconnect from the reality confronting millions of people and an assertion of executive power.

The thrust of the speech was a mixture of pro-business nostrums, militarist jingoism and a jumble of penny-ante proposals. The media's attempt to promote the speech as a major address on inequality was a deliberate falsification aimed at drumming up interest among a generally indifferent and hostile population.

Instead it was a threadbare attempt to cover over the reality of the past year, a year in which the mask fell off a society riven by historically unprecedented levels of social inequality and mass poverty, overseen by a vast police-state spying apparatus, on the verge of another global war of incalculable consequences and presided over by the most right-wing administration in US history.

Obama himself spoke before the members of the US House of Representatives and the Senate, the majority of them millionaires, as a representative of the financial aristocracy and the military-intelligence apparatus.

He began by painting the US as a country undergoing a booming economic recovery, with "the lowest unemployment rate in over five years," a "rebounding housing market" and a growing manufacturing sector. He did not mention that the unemployment rate has fallen largely due to millions of people having given up the search for work, or that the very small increase in manufacturing jobs is due to the collapse of wages encouraged by the administration.

On economic policy, Obama began with a call to make things "easier for more companies" through tax breaks. The two parties, he said, were agreed that, "our tax code is riddled with wasteful, complicated loopholes that punish businesses investing here, and reward companies that keep profits abroad." He called for a lowering of corporate tax rates, with media reports indicating that this might be as much as 7 percentage points.

In the midst of his praise for the supposed resurgence of manufacturing in America, Obama failed to mention that the historical center of American manufacturing, Detroit, is currently in bankruptcy. With the support of the administration, the courts are being utilized to force through deep cuts in pensions and cut off access to culture and other social rights.

Obama did, however, praise the new CEO of GM, Mary Barra, who was invited to the speech

as a special guest. Barra, touted as the first female CEO of a major auto company, is planning to accelerate cost cutting in Europe and America in order to increase already surging profits in the auto industry. He also praised Detroit Manufacturing Systems, an auto parts supplier that has worked closely with the unions to hire workers at a fraction of their former wages.

The president, who has done more than any of his predecessors to funnel money into Wall Street, acknowledged that “corporate profits and stock prices have rarely been higher, and those at the top have never done better,” as if the policies of his own administration had nothing to do with it. He quickly claimed, however, that the American people “don’t resent those who, by virtue of their efforts, achieve incredible success.”

Presumably Obama was referring to the likes of JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon, Obama’s favored banker, who, despite the repeated and documented criminal activities of his company, has not only gone unpunished, but last week received a 74 percent pay raise.

Obama made as brief a reference as possible to the fact that at the end of last year, due to the actions of Democrats and Republicans, 1.6 million people were cut off of extended unemployment benefits. At the same time, he called for “reforming unemployment insurance so that it’s more effective in today’s economy,” which could only mean introducing greater restrictions on eligibility.

The president was also silent on the Democrats and Republicans having just agreed to slash \$8.7 billion from food stamps, only the second cut in the program since it was founded (the first coming just a few months ago). He touted a right-wing immigration reform and his health care overhaul, an opening shot against all the social programs introduced in the 1930s and 1960s.

The headline proposal from Obama, intended as a sop to the trade unions and the administration’s liberal and pseudo-left supporters, was an executive order to require federal contractors to pay a minimum wage of \$10.10. This requirement will only apply to new or renewed contracts, not existing ones.

In the run-up to the speech, there was a concerted effort in the media to paint a picture of partisan gridlock, which Obama was proposing to overcome through executive actions. Given that Obama’s actual proposals amount to nothing, and that the parties are agreed on fundamentals, Obama’s repeated insistence that “I’m going to do” what is required has the distinct and ominous odor of a presidential dictatorship.

It is notable that even though it is an election year, Obama made no call for voters to elect individuals pledged to implement his proposals. Rather the speech was an assertion, from an individual who more than any other has presided over the shredding of large sections of the Constitution, that the president has the power to act regardless of opposition. The target of these actions is the working class.

There was almost no mention of the vast police-state spying apparatus that has been revealed over the past year. The president sits on top of a military-intelligence complex that monitors the communications of virtually the entire planet. The day before Obama’s remarks, the latest information from Edward Snowden revealed that the US and its UK partners collect data from cell phone applications in order to determine the “political alignments” of millions of users worldwide.

Obama's only reference to the collapse of democratic rights was to defend the "vital work of our intelligence community" while promising token reforms in order to boost "public confidence, here and abroad, that the privacy of ordinary people is not being violated." In fact, these reforms are intended to ensure that the government can go on violating this privacy.

As Obama spoke, Snowden remained in exile in Russia, facing death threats from US military and intelligence officials.

Obama heaped praise on the military, citing a plan for the long-term presence of tens of thousands of US troops in Afghanistan, insisting that the danger from Al Qaeda remains and threatening countries around the world. He welcomed recent moves from the Iranian regime to accommodate the demands of American imperialism and threatened that if Tehran fails to toe the line, war remains an option.

Obama lent support to the protests stoked by the US and European powers in Ukraine, led by extreme nationalist and fascistic forces. He pledged to "continue to focus on the Asia-Pacific," a reference to the "pivot to Asia" that is aimed at countering China's rise and threatens to unleash a global conflict.

As has become traditional in such events, Obama singled out individuals in the audience, generally victims of the policies of the ruling class, who are exploited to make various political points. Nowhere was this more sickening than at the end of the speech, when the president heaped praise on a veteran severely maimed by an explosion in Afghanistan.

The assembled congressmen—responsible for wars of aggression that inflicted a similar fate on thousands of Americans, while killing hundreds of thousands of Afghans and Iraqis—gave a lengthy standing ovation to one of the victims of their criminal policies. This spectacle was a fitting conclusion to a nauseating political ritual.

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