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**OBAMA, ELECTIONS AND THE MOVEMENT:  
PROBLEMATICS AND CHALLENGES OF CHANGE**

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This election, like those before it, generates its own special illusions, born of both unbridled hope and unrestrained hype, constantly nurtured as another needed “hook” to insure success and cultivated in the context of a country acutely addicted to self-congratulatory portraits of itself and intensely insistent on premature praise for the unfulfilled promise and unfinished work of freedom, justice and equal treatment for all. And in such a context, there is no illusion more persistent, multi-layered and misleading than that which imagines the Barack Obama election campaign to be already a movement that will in itself bring radical or at least, real, “change you can trust”.

Within this position is also the problematic assumption that there is little or no need to build an independent movement which would not only aid Obama’s campaign in achieving victory, but also check and challenge him during the campaign and after the election if he wins, insuring he did not betray the trust for real change placed in him. And it would also construct a vision, program and strategy beyond Obama and the electoral illusions and limitations surrounding him. Indeed, in our quest for real and deep-rooted social change, we must, for the sake of our people and ourselves, put aside illusions and prepare for a long, difficult and demanding struggle. In a word, as Amilcar Cabral taught, we must “mask no difficulties, tell no lies and claim no easy victories”. And this holds true whether it concerns struggle around elections, legislation, executive policy, judicial decision, corporate confrontation or the daily demands of creating and maintaining free space to enjoy

beauty, embrace hope, think deep and do good in our lives.

The country, we are told, is anxious for change, but there is no clear or comprehensive vision of what the change will or should look like, no readable or reliable indications of whether it will bring us together in and thru justice or just bring us together for coffee-table talk and more of the sleep-inducing latte of liberal race relations reconstituted so that white milk is the real base and coffee is added simply for multicultural color. Indeed, there are no signs that the promised change will provide even a beginning basis for all of us as persons, peoples and a country to live a morally and materially decent life without war, occupation and other predatory practices imposed on the peoples of the world under such nice sounding names as globalization, democracy, security, national interests, and such. So, if we are serious about change, we must, as Fanon says, think new thoughts and engage in new practices which ground, secure and seek to sustain the clear way and strong will to a shared freedom, justice, power, peace and flourishing in the world.

Moreover, if history is as revealing and rewarding as Malcolm taught us, and struggle is as indispensable to progress as Frederick Douglass informed us, then there is no hope for radical, real or respectable change without a movement that produces a vision, values, program and self-conscious practice that brings social change into being in its most fruitful forms. Otherwise, this election, like the last and those before it, will leave Whites still towering at the top, monopolizing wealth and power, relying on the imagined magic of military might and technological terror, arrogantly insensitive

to the rest of the world, and continually shocked by supposed subordinates who fail to submit, genuflect or flee in fear, and who instead dare to resist and remake society and the world in more just and human ways. And whether Obama is victorious or not, there will be, as always, symbolic placements of Blacks and other peoples of color in visible positions in order to claim freedom from racism, give the country and its corporate based-and-bound rulers a human face, and make oppressed peoples appear complicit in the crimes against them.

Thus, we must be clear about the meaning of a real movement for social change and distinguish it from the Obama or any other election campaign. By definition, a campaign is primarily to win an office, in spite of the grand promises and pretensions of the candidates. Furthermore, it is organized around the candidate and tends to degenerate into a politics of popularity and public adoration rather than be issues-driven. Also, a campaign is essentially an episodic engagement which ends with the election and thus does not commit people to the sustained engagement and struggle required by a movement for real social change. Finally, election campaigns, especially presidential ones, call for and cultivate a centrism and series of compromises that can deform and do serious damage to an original expansive vision and to the integrity of the candidate and lead to the vulgarly pragmatic justification of doing whatever is necessary to win.

A movement for social change, however, is an ongoing collective struggle with a shared ethical vision and values for a new society and world, interlocking and

mutually supportive structures, coordinated agendas and common goals, a web of communications and interactions, and an interrelated common pool of resources from which to draw. Moreover, when we talk of the need for a movement, we are really talking of the need for the formation of a series of movements which organize broad-based constituencies and communities and link up with other progressives in a larger national and international thrust for good in and for the world.

Such a movement would see the election as only one field of struggle and recognize with Paul Robeson that “the battlefield is everywhere. There is no sheltered rear”, no space or institution exempt, and no deference to any form of oppression anywhere. There is clearly a deep and widespread desire among Black people to see a Black person in charge at the White House. It is part of an early and ongoing aspiration for rightful recognition in this society; and the pursuit and possession of the presidency, the highest office in the land, is a symbolic marker of this. But it is not the substance of freedom nor the realization of justice, nor yet again evidence of equality for Black people or other peoples of color. Our task, then, and that of all progressives, is not simply to win elections, but rather to define a fundamentally different and new course for the country and to realize the unfulfilled promise and unfinished work of building a just and good society which self-consciously embraces and pursues the cooperative human project of peace with justice, and freedom with well-being, wholeness and flourishing in and for the world.