

Bending the Arc of History after the 2008 Election By Michael Zweig¹

I appreciate everyone coming out for this event on a snowy night. I don't think that it is possible to begin any public forum or private discussion this week without really reflecting for a moment on the significance and the great historical moment that we have had as a country in the election of Barack Obama to be President of the United States. I think that it is really a momentous occasion - I believe a qualitative transformation of American political and social life. Not to say that this is a post racial society or that we are done with racism; but as Obama likes to quote Dr. King, the arc of history is long, but it bends towards justice.

There are a couple of salient points in that. It is long. If you think for a moment that it's been forty three years since the voting right act in 1965. And that was a hundred years after the end of slavery. The arc of history is long. If you think about the women's movement and you think that between Seneca Falls in 1848 and the passage of the 19th amendment to the Constitution that allowed women to vote in 1920 it was 72 years, it's a long time. You think on the workers' agenda about the eight-hour day going back from Haymarket in 1886 until the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938 that's fifty-four years, that's a long time.

The arc of history is long, but it does bend towards justice. I think we need to understand that we are just coming out of a period of American history that is truly shameful. No one looks back at the McCarthy period - I know I am in Wisconsin and I know that Senator McCarthy was elected by the good people of this state - but I do believe that very few people look back and say "You know what we need, we need Joe McCarthy back." "You know what we need, we need

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Cotton Mather, where is Cotton Mather when we need him?” or “Let’s have Hitler back.”

People don’t look back at those periods and say, “Oh no, there was an idea that really didn’t get tested enough.” People look back at those periods of retrogression, people look back at those periods where the base human instincts are drawn on by demagogic politicians, as moments of shame. This means the arc of history bends towards justice, but it is long and there is nothing uniform about that bending. There is a process that has its ups and downs, its backs and forths, but I do think that with this election of Senator Obama, we have come to a qualitative moment where we can say that the arc of justice has finally bent again towards justice.

Now we have a black President. We have had black people in serious positions of authority in the United States for a while. This isn’t the first time, though of course the Presidency is the pinnacle of political power in the United States, but we have a black man on the United Supreme court, Clarence Thomas. Now, Clarence Thomas is not my favorite political or social beacon, but if you are seven years old it does not matter. If you are seven years old and you see a picture of who is on the United States Supreme Court and there is a black guy there, that says black people can be on the United States Supreme Court. And that is a very powerful thing. But when you get to be seventeen, it starts to dawn on you, “Well, who is this guy and what does he really stand for.”

Now we just had Hillary Clinton presenting a very credible run for President of the United States and we are told that Sarah Palin was the apotheosis of the women’s movement come to rescue the Republican Party and sweep the women’s vote into the White House. Well we can chuckle, as people are doing in the audience here, and it’s just ludicrous and preposterous, but what does it tell us? It tells us women need to be in positions of authority and we have come to a place in this country where women can be in those positions, although we still

haven't quite tested whether a woman can really be elected as president. We haven't really tested the depths and the limits of male chauvinism in this country but we have come to a place where we can say. "Which woman?" We won't be satisfied just to have a woman, just as we won't be satisfied just to have a black guy. The fact that we as a country have come to a place where we can begin to really ask that question in a serious way suggests that we have accepted, as a people, as a society, that we can put black people into the White House, we can put women into the White House. It brings us straight face to face with the question: "Which one?"

That is a class question. *Which* black guy, *which* woman? That depends upon what they stand for, what agenda they promote; and that choice, I would propose, that now confronts our country is essentially a class question. Will the black person, or woman, or white or Hispanic person, advance the interests and values of the working class, or of the corporate elite, the capitalist class? We see it presented in very stark ways in the economic crisis that we are in the midst of, where working people are suffering all across the country, and in two wars working people are fighting. It's young working class men and women who are in Afghanistan. It's young working class men and women who are in Pakistan and in Iraq.

The crisis of war, the crisis of economic arrangements, the crisis of finance are fundamentally crises of working class America. The ability of our country to address such crises to the systematic advantage of working people is going to take a long time to mature, but the arc of history is long and it does tend towards justice. Not spontaneously, not all by itself. People have to get out there and pull that arc of history. You know how you get an email message sometimes where at the bottom there is a little saying that the person has, whatever it might be? I am thinking that I want to put on the bottom of mine: "Bend that arc." You know, just get out there and bend that arc towards justice, towards freedom. I believe this is an agenda of working

class power as much as an agenda of civil rights and women's rights, representing freedom, justice, and the best aspirations of America as a country for everyone.

The fact that this country has come to a place where we can do what we did last week says to me that it's one amazing country. The American people can be a fine and important contribution to the political arena in the world, I do believe that. Now, Bill Ayers was a friend of mine, I still know him, still communicate with him. I was involved in organizing SDS in those days. I was never a Weatherman, never agreed with it. We had many discussions at that time. And to me the core difference I felt with that tendency in 1968, in 1969, was the fundamental disrespect for the American people I heard in it, a fundamental belief that for the most part the American people were pigs. I never could accept that. As difficult as the American people can be, as difficult as the tasks are in front of us, I think that we have to understand the American people are capable of making a glorious history. We have done it before; we will continue to do it. And there is no way to organize people if you disrespect them, which people sense right away.

Now the question is class. Not to say that race and gender are finished or that we have solved those problems but the problems of race and gender can no longer be presented to us simply as "Let's get a black guy in the White House. Let's get a black guy on the United States Supreme Court, let's get a woman to be commander and chief." With African-Americans and women in the highest positions of power, we cannot address continuing racism and male chauvinism without factoring in the class differences among African-Americans and women. We are now at a place where those questions of race and gender need to be rolled into a class analysis and a class dynamic of American society.

So let me say a word about what I mean by class. I think class is best understood as a question of power rather than income or lifestyle or wealth. Now, obviously income and wealth and lifestyles are markers of class, imperfect and incomplete and often misleading. I think that it is better for us to recognize that class is fundamentally a question of power, just as race and gender are questions of power. And I think that if we talk about class in America as I did in my book *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*, I looked into class as occupation, as a proxy for power. Those people who are in jobs that don't have a lot of authority or control over their work those are working class people. Now that's not just blue collar workers, that's also white collar workers, bank clerks and call center workers and home health care workers and cashiers and all kinds of people who are in the service trades and the service industries, as well as of course construction workers and industrial workers who haven't totally disappeared in this country. When I added up all of the occupations and the numbers of people in those occupations it's 62% of the labor force of the United States. This is not a middle class country, this is a working class society; this is a society in which the working class is the overwhelming majority.

Now, you might not think that people would understand this so easily because after all "everybody is middle class," as we know from the politicians, who all support "middle class tax cuts" and the like. If you ask people: "What class are you?" and you say "upper class, middle class, or lower class," most people will say middle class. They don't want to be lower class and they know they're not upper class. But if you put "working class" into the mix, half the population would say: "That's me."

So we can talk about the working class as a class in this country. I have just heard here at this school that in some sociology classes, students are asked at the beginning of the semester: "What class are you in?" There is no list, there's just an open-ended question. Half the class

says that they are in the working class or they come out of working class families. So I think that we can safely talk about the working class without fear that we are going to be put off into a corner some where as strangers from another century.

Class is a question of power, but power is a relationship. You can't have power unless someone else has not-power. You can't have little power unless someone else has more power, over your job, over the technology that is going to be implemented, over the marketing strategy or whatever it turns out to be. So the polarity I think we have to deal with in the class structure of American society is the working class on the one hand and the capitalist class on the other hand. I know that there are difficulties in talking about the "capitalist class," but I have to say that if Malcolm Forbes can have "capitalist tool" on *Forbes* magazine I don't see why we can't talk about the capitalist class. There is a capitalist class in this country; they're the captains of industries, the Boards of Directors, the CEOs, the people who are giving strategic guidance to the economic institutions, the major economic institutions of the country. That's about 2% of the labor force. So we have a working class of 62%, a capitalist class of 2%, and a middle class of 36%, who is in the middle of those two major polar classes.

There is middle class of professionals, of managers and supervisors, and of small business owners. That middle class is in the middle of the power grid of labor and capital. That middle class has certain characteristics and certain aspirations that are like capitalists, in the belief in private property, in the belief in individual initiative, in the belief in the importance of individual autonomy, and often in a certain hostility towards unions. On the other hand that same middle class has characteristics, attitudes, and orientations that are connected to the working class. They often have a hard time getting health insurance, they are also working under or more or less close supervision of somebody above them, they don't have full authority, they

have difficulty getting credit if they are small business compared with the larger corporate world. They often feel themselves squeezed in the middle of the power of capital on the one hand, constraining what they do, and the power of labor on the other hand, making demands on them.

Now if you look over the last thirty-five or forty years at the development of American society, everybody knows that there is a great increase in inequality. You might say that's just the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Well, yes, the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer, but I want to suggest to you that that's not the best way to think about it. A more appropriate way to think about it is not that the richer are getting richer but that the capitalists are getting more power. In that thirty-five years the working class has gotten less autonomy, less authority, less power, and so it's the working class that is taking it in the neck while the capitalist class is going to the bank. That's a different thing from saying that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.

Perhaps later in the question period we can elaborate on some of these ideas, but right now I just want to lay out the main points and the main themes.

So we have a working class that is in fairly great distress, I just finished a study through The Center for Study Working Class Life at Stony Brook which we call *Economic Stimulus and Economically Distressed Workers*. This was a program that was designed to come up with a stimulus package that was directed a low-wage labor and low-wage workers. A Congressman on Long Island requested it and we did the study over the summer and delivered it in September. One point I wanted to make here for our purposes is that we started out calling this a study of "low-wage labor." In addition to going through the data from the Census Bureau we also went out to low-wage workers and we talked to them, brought together by the Long Island Federation

of Labor (the AFL-CIO on Long Island), Jobs with Justice, and the local immigrant worker rights organization, the Workplace Project.

It did not take long into those discussions before we figured out that maybe “low-wage workers” isn’t the best way to characterize this population, because who wants to be “low-wage,” who wants to be the “working poor”? Once you formulate and describe a population in a way that repels them, you can’t engage in intellectual work that can draw them into a social movement, because the very terms that you use are repellent. So we changed the way we talked about it. We gave up the formulation of the “working poor” or the “low-wage” population. In the course of these discussions we understood that the key element to capture was the distress, the economic distress that these families and these workers were experiencing - distress over paying their rent, distress over losing their homes, distress over not having health insurance, distress over not having unemployment compensation, distress that they can’t educate their kids - distress, distress, distress. So we came to talk about “economically distressed workers.” And we found that this distress is far beyond the official poverty rate. The level of economic discomfort and distress and hardship in this country is double and in some places triple the official poverty rate. So when we talk about a crisis now in this country of working people it’s a very profound and far flung experience.

That experience is not only in the immediate economic crisis of home foreclosures, unemployment, and lost jobs. It is also experienced in the war and in the international arena. This financial crisis that is gripping Wall Street is gripping the entire capitalist world, which is to say the entire world. This financial crisis is global. I come from Detroit and I know about the rust belt and I know what happens when cities and major industrial cities collapse. It’s not only

an ugly thing; it's a profoundly sad thing. When I go back to Detroit it's just sad to see the ruin of a city that was one of the great cities of America when I was growing up.

The industrial crisis in this country is enmeshed in the global economic system. Now sometimes we talk about the United States as a super power, the world's only super power. And it is. But I think that is a mistaken formulation because it (a) focuses overwhelmingly on the military aspect of power; and (b) it does not tell us who the power is for. It just says that America is a powerful country. I think it's much more appropriate to think of the United States as the world's first truly global capitalist empire, or seeking to be the world's first truly global capitalist empire, meeting resistance from around the world - the developed world and developing world. It's a complicated story but it's a story of international capitalist development that we in this country are enmeshed in.

Now here let me just throw in one piece of orientation. Sometimes we think of globalization as "over there." We have a domestic economy, and then there is the global economy. If we could only protect ourselves here in America, if we could somehow or other insulate ourselves from the global economy. I think that is not a helpful formulation. It's one economy. Wisconsin is part of the global economy, Alabama is part of the global economy, and so is Suffolk County New York, where Stony Brook University is. It is one capitalist enterprise worldwide. It faces a worldwide crisis and that crisis is represented now most boldly in this financial meltdown that's sweeping the planet.

So this brings me back to the immediate question in front of us in this country being a class question - the question of economic crisis and the question of war. Both of those things are crises of capitalist empire. I think that understanding the capitalist empire in its class dimension - with the working class and the capitalist class as the main polarity and a middle class caught in

between - is a helpful way I would propose to understand the dynamic that we are now involved in.

One observation about this middle class: if you look over the last thirty or thirty-five years, those elements of the middle class, whether we're talking about managers and professionals, managers and supervisors, whether we're talking about professionals like lawyers, doctors, accountants, or if we're talking about small businesses - those elements of the middle class who are most closely associated in their work and in their livelihood with the capitalist class have done very well. Those elements of the middle class who are most closely associated in their livelihood and in their work with the working class have suffered greatly. That means doctors in Park Avenue New York who don't have to take insurance because their clients can just come in and their patients write a check - they are doing very well (until about three weeks ago). The doctor who is working in a clinic, depending on Medicaid payments, is a professional person, a middle class person, but a person who is suffering right now. A lawyer who hangs out a shingle in a small community who's just doing general law and divorce law and property law right in a small town community - that lawyer is having a hard time. A lawyer who is working at a Wall Street law firm is connected with a different class in the polarity and is part of the middle class that is doing rather well.

So when we try to understand this polarity I think we need to understand that we - I'm speaking now for myself as an academic, as a middle class person - we need to understand the forces that are gripping public education and public higher education and destroying both. In public education, K-12, and public higher education throughout the country, the forces that are doing that are the forces of capital seeking to privatize and destroy the public sector. That sector serves labor and working people. Those of us who work in the public sector, our job is to serve

that public. And because capital has no respect or interest in that public, we are caught in the crossfire.

That means we need to think about this middle class politically. In this arc that's bending towards justice, who's going to bend it, which way? That's a political question, that's a question that we, all of us, have to begin to confront. While we understand race and gender are not finished, this class question needs to be more salient.

Now, the challenge to neo-liberalism and the challenge to the war on terror - the very conception of an idea of the war on terror - I think we really have to challenge. There is an organization within the labor movement that does that; it's the US Labor Against the War. For those who don't know about it I would recommend you check it out at <uslaboragainstwar.org>. I have materials here that anybody can take a look at. It's an attempt on the part of the American working class, the American labor movement, to enter into the international arena, international solidarity with the Iraqi workers, to have a peaceful resolution of this problem and remove American troops from that country and allow for a vibrant and protected working class movement, labor movement, in Iraq to grow to have authority and to have power. Most people sitting in this room don't know that there is a labor movement in Iraq, but there is one. Most people in this room understand very well that the US blew up every institution in Iraq, all of Saddam Hussein's regime. But there was one law that the U.S. authorities kept in the force - that was law 150 from 1987, in which Saddam Hussein declared that public sector unions in Iraq were illegal. That law we kept on the books. Of course, maybe we shouldn't be surprised since public sector unions were also illegal in North Carolina, public sector unions are also illegal in Missouri, and in a lot of other places in this country.

So once again we see that there is a parallel between the experience of working people in the United States and the experience of people internationally. So if I say now the problem in front of us is a class problem we have to ask, where is the labor movement in that process? And here I would end with a couple of observations. The labor movement in the United States is severely weakened. The number of people who are in the labor movement now, covered by collective bargaining, is about 12% in the country, and the private sector is less than 7% - compared with 35% to 40% in the 1950s. So the labor movement in the United States is greatly weakened. There is a need to reconstruct a broad social movement of working people, not just going shop by shop and organizing in this industry or that plant, but a social movement of the working class that can vie for power in this country the way that there was a social movement of women, a social movement of African Americans, a social movement of Chicanos. Where is the social movement of working people we need to create that?

Now here I want to observe and reflect on the fact that this is a global economic system and it just may be that the upsurge of working class resistance and working class challenge to the power of empire, to the power of capital, will not originate in the United States. It may originate in Brazil, it may originate in Indonesia, it may originate in Mozambique. In this country, in our labor movement, in our popular movements, in our academic and intellectual work, we need to be open to those movements of working people all around the globe - in India, in China, in Bolivia, - where people are challenging not the rich, they are challenging capital. They are beginning now, with us in this country, to come to the point where the real issue in front of us is the issue of class, the issue of the working class challenging for power on a strategic plane in the organization of society, representing the whole of society, representing that arc of justice that is long but bends towards justice for everyone. That arc of history which we are now setting out

into a new phase - not to turn our back on the question of race, not to turn our back on the questions of gender but to integrate those questions of race and gender into the class divisions, into the class conflict which is the motor of the next period, which I think perhaps will take yet another fifty, seventy, eighty years, - it is long – but as the Chinese like to say: a march of ten thousand miles begins with a single step. So let's get out there and bend that arc, and I will leave you with that.

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