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A Legislative Agenda for the First 100 Days

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Preface/The Setting

Two days after the November 2008 elections, Democrats and their allies are still celebrating the decisive defeat of Republican John McCain. With his defeat comes the chance to render unto history the remnants of the Bush/Cheney regime that so ruined the lives of the bottom 80 percent of the U.S. population, and turned most of the world against the U.S. Eight years of Bush/Cheney have brought incompetence, jingoism, and neoliberalism. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, and the deepening economic crisis have served to discredit much of the conservative agenda, even going so far as to generate despair among the right-wing evangelical base.

Let's imagine that, after several months of drafting, the final touches are being placed on what has come to be known as *The First 100 Days: A Working People's Agenda for the First 100 Days of the Incoming Democratic Administration*. This project, initiated by members of the AFL-CIO, Change To Win, as well as several independent unions and other progressive working-class organizations, has identified several key areas where the new Democratic administration must take bold steps within its first 100 days. Let's also imagine that the drafting committee collected hundreds of ideas and developed an extensive list of recommendations for an even more comprehensive agenda; but the committee's delicate task was to focus first and foremost on the emergency steps required to rescue the country from the potentially deep, and already devastating recession, and two disastrous wars.

Within a week, the document will be presented to the President-elect and his transition team. The atmosphere in this final meeting is one of both excitement and anxiety as everyone realizes that just as this document is being drafted, several other documents are being drafted by various forces representing constituencies whose interests are antithetical to those of working people. The responsiveness of the President-elect to *The First 100 Days* will depend not only on the logic and persuasiveness of the document itself, but also on the capacity of the constituencies uniting behind this document to back up each word with *people power*.

The Crisis

The U.S. has plunged into a significant economic crisis which, at a minimum, is heading toward a conceivably severe recession. Yet the crisis is not simply about the immediate economic situation. A series of factors have contributed to an economic unraveling that is fueled by political uncertainty:

- The living standard has declined for the average U.S. worker since the mid-1970s. While productivity has increased, workers' pay has decreased. Structural unemployment has worsened as sectors of the economy have begun to reorganize, move, or disappear

altogether. In addition, the adoption of neoliberalism as the given economic framework in the capitalist world generally and the U.S. in particular, has meant an assault on the public sector and public service, a factor that became tragically apparent when Hurricane Katrina hit. Meanwhile, the domino effects of a credit crisis (that began as part of the speculative boom in housing prices and values), continue to destroy the lives and savings of millions of working people.

- Neoliberal globalization, in both its military and non-military forms, has brought unprecedented levels of migration. In the U.S., as part of this global migration, we have seen a steady increase in immigration from the 1970s (particularly from Indochina), through the 1980s (largely as a result of the Central American wars), into the 1990s and today (stemming from the collapse of the Soviet bloc, along with the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the migration of Mexicans into the U.S.).
- Efforts at some form of national health care have been undermined since World War II, largely by the political Right. Renewed attention to the more than 44,000,000 people lacking *any* health insurance, along with the legions of people who have *inadequate* healthcare coverage, surfaced in the early 2000s.
- An environmental crisis has enveloped planet Earth sooner than many people, including many scientists, expected.
- Workers remain under attack, and not just as a result of a problematic economy. The ability of workers to join or form unions has worsened with each year.
- The global community is becoming more unequal. In terms of income and wealth, inequality has consistently grown under the neoliberal order. In the U.S., the top one percent controls more than 35 percent of the wealth. At the global level, the richest 225 individuals have more wealth than the bottom 47 percent of the world's population. This dramatic wealth disparity, not seen in the U.S. since the 1920s, is a major source of social instability and resentment, undermining the entire notion of democracy.
- Inequality in the U.S. also has a racial and gendered face to it, due to a regression from the victories of the civil rights and women's movements, along with the growing tendency to blame the setbacks of white men on those who have been subjected to historic discrimination.
- War (in Iraq and Afghanistan) and the national security/neoliberal authoritarian state have changed the terms of domestic and international politics. In addition to destroying the countries involved, these wars are a tremendous drain on the U.S. budget (with a cost of approximately \$845 billion by the end of 2008).[1] *Insecurity* in the U.S. has also increased in response to the rising global resentment toward U.S. policies abroad. The growth of the neoliberal authoritarian state has brought a decrease in actual democracy and civil liberties.
- While the situation facing the U.S. and the rest of the world could be described in greater detail, the preceding depicts the key elements of the current emergency. The Bush administration and its allies (as well as the McCain campaign) have lived in denial,

perpetuated lies (such as those in connection with the illegal U.S. invasion of Iraq, as well as the hostility toward Iran), and promoted the interests of the rich.

The time has now come to fight for the bottom 80 percent.

The Federal Emergency Response

The new administration's first initiatives must be both domestic and global in scope. There is little time to engage in the politics of symbolism, playing to a particular constituency, rallying troops to the 'flag,' without speaking to the deep-seated nature of the challenges that we face.

At the same time, it must be understood that the efforts within the first 100 days cannot represent the totality of the new administration's program. A mandate to bring about more sweeping change must be organized and mobilized over the coming months and years. This will require a combination of movement-building and building a broader social consensus in favor of significant structural change.

With that in mind, let us itemize the agenda:

1. Immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops, bases, and mercenaries from Iraq and Afghanistan.

This should involve the following:

- Asking the United Nations (UN) and Arab League for assistance in creating a multi-national, transitional team to bring the various forces on the ground together, along with regional powers, to negotiate a long-term resolution of the conflict and the stabilization of Iraq.
- The elimination of any obligation on the part of the Iraqi government to fulfill agreements imposed upon Iraq during the reign of Paul Bremer.
- Bilateral discussions with Iran regarding future policies and relations with the U.S.
- Multi-party discussions between the U.S., Pakistan, and the various political forces in Afghanistan regarding a permanent political settlement.
- Reparations from the U.S. (and any other country or group that interfered in the internal affairs of Iraq and Afghanistan) placed into a reconstruction fund established by the UN.
- A renouncement of any U.S. intentions to have permanent bases in Iraq or Afghanistan; a withdrawal of U.S. bases from Saudi Arabia; a renouncement of U.S. intentions to secure control over oil and/or natural gas reserves in the region.
- Immediate talks toward establishing a U.S./European Union/Russian/Arab League/Israeli/Palestinian joint committee on the resolution of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Deployment of a special envoy to lay the foundations for this project.

2. Economic Triage.

The ongoing economic meltdown, particularly the collapse of the housing bubble and the lending/credit/foreclosure calamity, calls for both immediate relief and long-term management. This will require the sort of economic aid that has been diverted to cover the Iraq/Afghan war costs, and attention must ultimately be paid to reversing the more than thirty

years of attacks on working people and their declining living standards. In the short-term, however, several steps need to be taken, including, but not limited to:

- A moratorium on foreclosures and evictions. Immediate steps must be taken to halt foreclosures and evictions, while providing immediate assistance to those affected by these actions to renegotiate the terms of their debt. This may mean federal assistance to pull individuals out of usurious loans, allowing them to more comfortably rebuild their financial standing; this would be a step just short of declaring personal bankruptcy. The Republicans' efforts to restrict individuals' ability to declare personal bankruptcy must be reversed. The new administration must also re-establish the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC). This would be a 21st century version of the New Deal measure that statutorily arranged a temporary corporation to stabilize uncertain mortgage markets.[2] Upon any reinstatement of it today, the HOLC would acquire defaulted loans from mortgage lenders and offer sustainable refinancing options for homeowners to prevent future foreclosures.[3]
- An extension of both unemployment and food stamp benefits. The Bush administration has adamantly held the line against such expansion. But greater numbers of the working poor have come to depend on food stamps in order to survive, and the current apportionment insufficiently reflects today's cost of living. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates that the current food stamp benefit averages about \$1 per meal per individual.[4] Benefit amounts are based on the USDA's "Thrifty Food Plan"—a theoretical diet created in the 1930s to provide a minimally adequate diet at a low cost—which hasn't been updated since 2003.[5] Additionally, according to the Bread for the World group, most food stamp households spend 80 percent of their benefits by the 14th of each month.[6] Thus, the food stamp system must be retooled to meet the full nutritional needs of its recipients.
- Immediate public service job creation. The federal government needs to infuse the economy with funds to prevent further collapse. As part of a longer-term initiative, the federal government must begin emergency public sector reconstruction work, focusing on bridges, tunnels, and levees. We need a program along the lines of that proposed by Barack Obama, who suggested the dedication of \$210 billion to create construction and environmental jobs: \$60 billion would be directed to a National Infrastructure Reinvestment Bank to rebuild public projects such as highways, bridges, airports; and \$150 billion would be earmarked for the creation of five million green-collar jobs to develop more environmentally friendly energy sources.[7] This would be funded through cuts in military spending.[8]
- Federal intervention to halt the collapse of student loan programs. A hidden crisis, that is part of the larger credit crunch, has been the declining number of banks that offer affordable student loans. This has resulted in a higher demand for available loans and the elimination of higher education opportunities for many students. A federal intervention, therefore, is needed to make sufficient funds available. This could take the form of legislation proposed by Senator Kennedy in April 2008 to increase federal student aid. This proposal would, among other things, reduce students' need to take out costly private loans by increasing their access to guaranteed low-interest federal loans.[9] The bill would increase federal loan limits by \$1000 a year for dependent undergraduates, and by \$2000 a

year for independent undergraduates and students whose parents' credit score disqualifies them for federal parent loans.[10] The new administration should also take steps aimed to restrain predatory lending.

- Elimination of Bush tax cuts. Bush's tax cuts, along with the Iraq and Afghan wars, have been bleeding the economy. Steps must be taken to reclaim the money that has been disproportionately funneled to corporations and the wealthy. Though longer-term tax reform will be necessary, the first step is to stop the hemorrhaging.
- Federal aid to the states. Despite growing constraints on state budgets (particularly within the context of the rising unemployment and foreclosure rates), the federal government has increasingly meted out severe budget cuts. Federal assistance should provide the states with more of a safety net as they struggle to balance their budgets.

3. A Marshall Plan for U.S. cities and depressed regions.

The Hurricane Katrina disaster and the 2007 Minneapolis bridge collapse exposed significant problems with our political leadership, economic choices, and the basic U.S. infrastructure (not to mention race, gender, and class politics when it came to Katrina). Another assortment of projects must be undertaken to make the infrastructure address our environmental crisis. With all of this in mind, the following initiatives should be announced:

- A national commitment to launch a domestic version of the Marshall Plan. This program would involve a renewal of the U.S. physical and social infrastructures. With regard to the physical infrastructure, in 2005, the American Society of Civil Engineers estimated that rehabilitation should cost \$1.6 trillion over five years. The National Urban League, which has been a strong proponent of a social Marshall Plan, has identified ten areas that are integral to revamping the socio-economic infrastructure.[11] We must combine the elements of these two proposals in order to lift the U.S. from the abyss. A successful modern-day Marshall Plan would also build upon the work of groups such as the National Jobs for All Coalition, which has proposed a 21st-Century Public Investment Act, featuring: a Public Works Authority that, while working with state and local authorities to create permanent jobs, would provide long-term funding for high priority public works and infrastructure projects, ensuring that these projects employ the unemployed and underemployed; a Public Investment Fund that would fund a Public Service Employment Program designed to close job gaps, while continuing to encourage job creation; and a National Employment Accounting Office that would evaluate progress and assess ongoing needs for job creation and public investment.[12]
- The immediate establishment of a regional public agency to oversee the reconstruction of the post-Katrina Gulf Coast and the repatriation of its native population.
- The establishment of a 21st century version of the Works Progress Administration to oversee the infrastructure-related work. Priority in employment would go to the chronically and structurally unemployed. Wages would be paid according to the Davis-Bacon Act.[13] Building trades contractors and unions would agree to 50 percent residential set-asides for entry into apprenticeship programs and journeyman work in connection with any of these

efforts. At least 25 percent of such jobs should be staffed by people of color, with at least another 25 percent staffed by women.

- Regional planning authorities should be established in depressed regions bringing together the business community, worker organizations including, but not limited to, unions, academia, and governmental representatives. Such authorities would explore economic development strategies such as industrial cooperatives, public/private partnerships, and governmental incentives to encourage the creation of new industries or the introduction of industries which had been discouraged from emerging.
- Emergency measures to provide more low-income housing. This would include an Executive commitment to push through: the National Affordable Housing Trust Fund Act,[14] which would establish a federal housing trust fund to ensure housing for the lowest income earners who have the most serious housing problems; and the Housing Assistance Tax Act which would, among other provisions, provide tax credits to first-time homebuyers, while improving access to low-income housing, allowing families to deduct property taxes.[15]

4. Immediate signing of the Kyoto Protocol.

The U.S. is way behind the rest of the world on the environment, and the Bush administration has flouted the gravity of the matter. Our over-dependence on fossil fuels has straightjacketed the global economy (making the greater international community highly dependent on oil), which has contributed to the rising global temperature. The environmental crisis, however, is not limited to global warming. The epidemic of bee colony die-offs and the endangerment of various species paints a disturbing picture of an unraveling ecology. Most urgently, the new administration must:

- Sign the Kyoto Protocol, while making a commitment to launch international negotiations toward a new and stronger pact.
- Push through the Renewable Energy and Job Creation Act[16] to promote renewable energy, green-collar jobs, and tax benefits to middle-class families.
- Establish a "Green Commission" that brings together labor, business, environmental groups, community-based organizations, and government representatives to recommend technological, economic, and developmental changes geared toward building a sustainable economy.

5. Pass and sign the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA).

As a step toward jettisoning the one-sided class war against workers, the new administration must:

- Reaffirm the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA)'s mandate that it is within U.S. public policy to promote collective bargaining.
- Sign the EFCA.

- Draft legislation that proscribes any employer involvement in their workers' choice of bargaining representatives.

6. A universal health care initiative.

Universal, single-payer health care cannot take flight within the first 100 days. The groundwork, however, must be laid immediately. The new administration must:

- Expand the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), as proposed by the Democratic Congressional leadership in 2007.[17]
- Establish a commission to draft legislation for universal, single-payer coverage. Plan for a one year drafting period, followed by national town meetings and hearings. Aim for passage before the midterm elections.

7. Immigration reform.

Immediate steps must be taken to lay out an immigration reform program that is coupled with changes in U.S. foreign policy (therefore, points # 7 and # 8 are integrally linked). This program must include:

- Amnesty (in the form of permanent residency status) for undocumented workers who have no criminal record.
- Priority given to family reunification interests.
- A revised application process that gives priority to refugees from areas of political conflict where the U.S. has been historically involved.
- Elimination of guest worker programs. Investigation of already existing guest worker programs' impact on both domestic and foreign born workers.
- Unionization rights for all workers within U.S. borders, irrespective of their immigration status.

8. Forge global partnerships.

Changing U.S. foreign policy is an uphill, long-term process. Nevertheless, certain immediate measures are imperative. In addition to withdrawing from Iraq and Afghanistan, the new administration must:

- Create a *21st Century Partnership Program* to develop foreign aid and trade programs designed to promote more self-reliance among nation-states, while responding to the civilian needs in those areas.
- Develop targeted programs of repair in areas where U.S. involvement has distorted regional development (e.g., Southeast Asia, Angola, and Central America).
- Promote trade relations that are based on fairness rather than on corporate interests. Explore a renegotiation of NAFTA.
- Implement the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty with steps toward de-nuclearization.

- Employ special envoys for peace and development who will work with regional representatives to address matters such as political conflict, economic underdevelopment, and environmental devastation.

Conclusion/A Qualifying Thought

This agenda will be moot without a strong backing from social forces that are prepared to press for its implementation. Any demobilization of those who successfully brought the Democratic candidate to victory will buoy the political Right's leverage to assert its own agenda. Right-wing forces will push for a continuation of the Bush administration's anti-progressive policies. Thus, if we are not prepared to consistently place enough pressure on our "friend" in the White House, we should expect a repeat of the Bill Clinton years—an era in which there was (technically) a high degree of access to the President and top cabinet officials, but the progressive social movements were afforded very little actual power.

The choice is ours, and we have precious little time to decide how we want to proceed.

[1] See "Iraq war will cost \$12 billion a month," *Associated Press*, March 9, 2008, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/23551693/> (citing Joseph E. Stiglitz and Linda J. Bilmes, *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq War*, W.W. Norton, 2008).

[2] See http://www.house.gov/apps/list/press/il10_kirk/HOLC_release.html, accessed July 7, 2008.

[3] See *id.*

[4] See www.results.org/website/article.asp?id=358, accessed July 7, 2008.

[5] See *id.*

[6] See *id.*

[7] See "Obama vows \$210 billion for 'green,' building jobs," *The Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 2008, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/feb/14/nation/na-obama14>, accessed July 7, 2008.

[8] See "Obama's Pocketbook Speech," Jason Horowitz, *The New York Observer*, May 3, 2008, <http://www.observer.com/2008/obamas-pocketbook-speech>, accessed July 7, 2008.

[9] See http://kennedy.senate.gov/newsroom/press_release.cfm?id=C7BF90E6-D809-4274-900D-109ADC11ED76, accessed July 7, 2008.

[10] See *id.*

[11] Their proposal, as of July 2007, included areas such as mandatory early childhood education beginning at age 3, universal healthcare, building economic self-sufficiency for working people, and an urban infrastructure bank. See www.nul.org/PressReleases/2007/2007PR417.html, accessed July 7, 2008.

[12] See the National Jobs for All Coalition's *Shared Prosperity and the Drive for Decent Work* report, www.njfac.org/sharedpros/pdf.

[13] Under the Davis-Bacon Act, federal government construction contracts are required to include provisions for paying workers nothing less than the [prevailing wages](#) paid for similar projects in the geographical area.

[14] This bill passed in the Senate in May 2008, after an overwhelming passage in the House. See <http://www.nlihc.org/template/page.cfm?id=40>, accessed July 7, 2008.

[15] In April 2008, Congressman Charles Rangel introduced this bill in the House. See http://www.novoco.com/low_income_housing/legislation/index.php#hata, accessed July 7, 2008.

[16] See http://moran.house.gov/apps/list/press/va08_moran/GreenEnergyBill.shtml, accessed July 7, 2008.

[17] See <http://www.schip-info.org/>.