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## Obama's final State of the Union: Lies, evasions and threats

By Patrick Martin

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The final State of the Union speech delivered Tuesday night by President Barack Obama was a demonstration of the incapacity of the American political system to deal honestly or seriously with a single social question.

Obama evaded the real issues that affect tens of millions of working people in America every day of their lives. He painted a ludicrous picture of economic recovery and social progress that insulted the intelligence of his television audience—and went unchallenged by the millionaire politicians assembled in the chamber of the House of Representatives.

Summing up what he called “the progress of these past seven years,” Obama gave first place to “how we recovered from the worst economic crisis in generations.” The so-called “recovery” has been a bonanza for corporate profits, stock prices, and the wealth and income of the super-rich. For the working people who are the vast majority of the population, it has been a disaster.

By most social indices, the American people are worse off in January 2016 than when Obama took office seven years ago. The real wages of working people have fallen, social services have deteriorated, pension benefits have been gutted, and cities such as Detroit and San Bernardino have been forced into bankruptcy.

According to a report by the National Association of Counties issued on the eve of the State of the Union address, of the 3,069 counties in the United States, 93 percent are worse off than before the 2008 financial crash according to at least one of four economic indicators: total employment, the unemployment rate, the size of the economy and home values.

In 27 states, not a single county has recovered fully from the 2008 crash and the deep economic slump that followed. These include such major states as Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania.

Obama, however, painted a picture of nearly unblemished economic advance, declaring, “The United States of America, right now, has the strongest, most durable economy in the world.” He boasted, “We’re in the middle of the longest streak of private-sector job creation in history. More than 14 million new jobs; the strongest two years of job growth since the ‘90s; an unemployment rate cut in half.”

The president did not acknowledge that the post-2008 “recovery” is the weakest on record, that the vast majority of the new jobs created have been low-wage and many of them part-time, or that the drop in the unemployment rate is primarily due to the withdrawal of millions of people from the work force because they lost all hope of getting a decent-paying job.

He went on, tellingly, to cite the auto industry as a symbol of success, declaring that it “just had its best year ever.” This perfectly expresses the utter blindness, not just of Obama, but of the entire political establishment. The “best year ever” was for General Motors, Ford and Fiat-Chrysler, which enjoyed record profits, not for the auto workers who produced those profits.

Real wages for auto workers have dropped sharply since the Obama White House forced through a 50 percent cut in wages for all new hires as part of the bankruptcy reorganization of the industry in 2009. Mass discontent among auto workers was expressed at the end of 2015 in the rejection of contracts at Fiat-Chrysler and Nexteer, a major supplier, and in widespread demands for strike action, smothered by Obama’s stooges in the United Auto Workers union.

“Anyone claiming that America’s economy is in decline is peddling fiction,” Obama concluded. The social position of the American working class has, in fact, suffered a dramatic decline, through the combined efforts of the corporate bosses, the unions and the two capitalist parties, the Democrats and Republicans.

The president conceded that economic inequality has grown in the United States, but he described it as the outcome of long-term trends such as globalization and automation, as though the policies of his administration—bailouts for Wall Street, budget cuts and wage cuts for workers—had nothing to do with it.

In the seven years since the financial crash, brought on, as he admitted, by “recklessness on Wall Street,” not a single banker or speculator has been prosecuted or jailed. On the contrary, the billionaires have greatly increased their wealth, gobbling up 95 percent of all new income since Obama entered the White House.

Obama listed a few other policy “successes,” claiming that “we reformed our health care system, and reinvented our energy sector... we delivered more care and benefits to our troops and veterans.” He was referring, however, to a series of social disasters: the reactionary attack on health benefits for workers and their families known as Obamacare; the devastation of Appalachia and other energy-producing regions; and the abuse of ex-soldiers, wounded in body and mind, by the Veterans Administration.

Obama sought to defend the foreign policy record of his administration from criticism, mainly from the Republican right, where demands are being raised for military escalation in the Middle East and stepped-up attacks on democratic rights at home in the name of fighting “terrorism.”

While he claimed to reject an American role as the world’s policeman, he nonetheless boasted, “The United States of America is the most powerful nation on Earth. Period. It’s not even close. We spend more on our military than the next eight nations combined.”

He continued, “Our troops are the finest fighting force in the history of the world,” winning the bipartisan standing ovation that always accompanies any mention of American soldiers engaged in combat overseas.

Obama indulged in the glorification of killing that has become an essential part of the degraded spectacle that passes for political discourse in America. Describing the US war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, he claimed, “With nearly 10,000 air strikes, we are taking out their leadership, their oil, their training camps, and their weapons.”

He called on Congress to pass an Authorization for the Use of Military Force against ISIS, but vowed to wage war with or without legislative approval. The leaders of ISIS, he proclaimed, “will learn the same lessons as terrorists before them. If you doubt America’s commitment—or mine—to see that justice is done, ask Osama bin Laden. Ask the leader of al Qaeda in Yemen, who was taken out last year...”

Then he declared, in language that will be noted by nations all over the world, that when it comes to waging war against potential adversaries, “our reach has no limit.”

Obama concluded his speech with an appeal to his Republican opponents to work with his administration and pull back from the extreme anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric that has characterized the contest for the Republican presidential nomination.

In a clear reference to Donald Trump, he argued that “we need to reject any politics that targets people because of race or religion. This is not a matter of political correctness, but understanding what makes us strong.”

Obama was making an argument, not so much that racism and bigotry are intrinsically wrong, but that they make it more difficult for American imperialism to maintain its dominant world role. “When a politician insults Muslims,” he said, “it makes it harder to achieve our goals.”