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By BILL FLETCHER JR.

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The fight over the increase in the debt ceiling should have taught us a few lessons. These include that there is a wing of the Republican Party -- the Tea Party faction -- that is quite prepared to fly their planes into the towers of government in order to make their point. They have no interest in compromise and are doing all that they can to defend the wealthy elite that dominate this country, despite their rhetoric about looking out for the common person.

There is something else that we have to face. President Obama accepted the basic Republican framework for looking at the economic crisis in which we find ourselves. Thus, instead of focusing on jobs, Obama began, some months ago, to talk more and more about national debt and budget deficits. At a point when the government should be putting more resources into the production of jobs as a way of priming the economic pump, President Obama called for shared sacrifice in the need to cut the debt. This was compounded by his willingness to concede most of the demands of the Republicans as the price for gaining the rise in the debt ceiling. The irony, of course, is that the Republican shenanigans, and the instability that this displayed, contributed to the S&P downgrade and the subsequent, renewed financial crisis. So, instead of the President standing firm in defense of our hard-won social benefits and insisting that without a clear debt ceiling increase from Congress that he would use the Constitution's 14th Amendment to increase it unilaterally, he blinked, and sadly, the Republicans knew well in advance that he would.

Leaving aside your personal feelings about President Obama one thing becomes perfectly clear. There is no way that we can rely on him to defend the social safety net that was won in the 20th century, nor is there any way that we can assume that he 'gets' the centrality of the need for jobs in order to get us out of the economic crisis. Whether this is due to his ties with Wall Street, his belief system, or his poor negotiating skills is actually irrelevant. What we have to recognize is that if we want any action out of the President, the everyday person will need to be the one that brings this about.

How? We will have to make more noise than the Tea Party element. We will need to have protests, not just in Washington, D.C., but throughout the USA. The unemployed need to assemble in state capitals and insist that they will not be allowed to starve. Workers facing layoffs and demands for concessions must receive support from the rest of us so that they are not standing alone. And, yes, in 2012, we must run and support candidates that have a demonstrated record of being on the side of working people and the poor. We do not need those who will talk out of both sides of their mouths and offer us heart-warming speeches. We need politicians who are with us in the trenches, fighting the good fight. The decisions about our economy will be made both in Washington and in corporate board rooms. If working people do not make their voices heard and flex their muscles -- in the streets and in the election booths -- just guess who will come out on top?

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