

Who is promoting Ebonics and why?

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Until very recently, the term Ebonics (literally, black sounds) was unknown to all but a handful of academics and black cultural nationalists. Within the last month, however, the public has been bombarded with news reports, talk shows and opinion columns all dealing with the issue.

The source of this controversy is a resolution passed by the Oakland California School board in mid-December. Prepared by an Afro-American Task Force, this document asserted that Ebonics is "genetically-based" and the "primary language" of black students in the district.

It further affirmed that black Americans have retained an African linguistic structure and thus "are not native speakers of a black dialect or any other dialect of English." Attributing low test scores among black students to the failure to recognize these supposed facts, the resolution concluded by demanding funds for bilingual education.

The big business media go out of their way to publicize those who promote racial separatism and divisions. The Oakland affair is no different. Nonetheless, the political implications of these propositions for the working class must be carefully considered.

From the standpoint of science, the claim that any language is "genetically-determined" and racially-based is charlatanry. Against racial theorists of every stripe, biology long ago established that genetic differences between supposed racial groups are far smaller than those existing within each group. Language, moreover, originates not from the genes, but from social interaction. Languages develop and change. Over the course of human history ancient languages have become extinct and new languages have taken their place.

The speech patterns of every section of modern-day American society are the product of a complex web of historical and environmental factors. Wave upon wave

of immigration together with the vast internal migrations, for example, of poor Southern blacks as well as whites to the industrial North, have played their part. So too have geography, technology and, crucially, class divisions.

What of the claim that neglect of Ebonics is the root cause of the crisis of public education in Oakland and other impoverished and predominantly black school districts? This supposed explanation has been invented to cover up real causes which are obvious to anyone who cares to look.

According to the 1990 census, 18.8 percent of Oakland's population (70,000 people) lives below the official poverty level. State and city budgets for education and social programs have been under siege. Oakland's teachers are notoriously underpaid and overworked.

Such conditions are not unique to Oakland. Together with poverty and the deterioration of public education, illiteracy among both blacks and whites is on the rise. Approximately 27 million people in the US are functionally illiterate and another 40-50 million are marginally illiterate, their ability frozen at a third or fourth grade level.

The inevitable result is a decline in language skills among the more oppressed layers of the population. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the segregation of impoverished sections of the black population in inner city ghettos, which are starved of funds and employment and where housing, education and health care are left to disintegrate.

These conditions are an indictment of the capitalist system. They can be changed only by unifying the working class across every racial and national division in a common struggle for a more just and equal distribution of the wealth which workers create. Society must be transformed to meet the needs of the majority, rather than the profit interests of the ruling class.

Those who promote Ebonics are hostile to this

struggle. They employ pseudoscientific phrases in an attempt to portray the evils created by capitalism as a good to be preserved and celebrated. Thus, street slang becomes a distinct language, and racial segregation the supposed basis for a separate culture.

These theories direct workers and youth away from any struggle against the source of social and cultural deprivation, the profit system itself. The myth of Ebonics fuels racism and racial division, while pitting one section of the working class against another for increasingly scarce resources.

This particular myth is the offshoot of a broader ideology of cultural nationalism and Afrocentrism, which serves the interests of a definite social layer. Made up of black elected and appointed officials and businessmen, this layer defends the status quo. It has carved out a privileged position for itself by helping to administer the conditions of social misery created by capitalism.

The fight for quality public education, the right to a decent job and the full intellectual and cultural development of all the people can be carried forward only in a battle against every form of politics based on racial and national divisions. It requires the development of a unified, politically conscious movement of the entire working class against capitalism.



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