

# Thirty years since the assassination of Martin Luther King

**Helen Halyard**  
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Thirty years ago, on April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. died after being shot by an assassin in Memphis, Tennessee.

King was unquestionably one of the most powerful orators of twentieth century America and a man of great personal courage. He was able to give voice to the passionate strivings of millions of people to throw off the shackles of racial discrimination. Unlike those within today's official civil rights leadership who seek to cash in on his memory, King was an honest man who was not driven by financial gain.

Three decades after his assassination there are no shortage of tributes in the news media and on television, but during King's lifetime he was reviled, spied upon and ultimately targeted for murder. Today, the same forces that sought to undermine his struggle and, directly or indirectly, bear responsibility for his assassination, seek to transform him into a harmless icon.

Workers, students and young people should not allow themselves to be taken in by the hypocritical tributes that the government organizes in King's name. Today they present the martyred civil rights leader as a "great African-American," with the aim of covering up the continued racial discrimination that exists in capitalist society. They celebrate precisely the weakest side of King's legacy, his religious pacifism, in an attempt to promote the passive acceptance of social inequality, not only for black workers, but for the working class as a whole.

For the working class and oppressed masses internationally, this anniversary must serve as the occasion to soberly analyze the lessons of the movement which King led in order to prepare for the struggles to come.

## Heroic sacrifices

Masses of people participated in the movement for civil rights, the great majority of them black workers and youth, but they included thousands of all races, especially young people, who were inspired by the goals of integration, racial equality and democratic rights for all. They stood up to enormous odds and made heroic sacrifices. Many were killed, and many more were beaten, jailed and victimized.

The leadership of this movement, however, was petty bourgeois in its class makeup and thoroughly reformist in its political outlook

and program. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference based itself on the perspective that racial equality and social and economic justice for black people could be achieved without challenging the existence of capitalist property relations and the present government institutions. From the Montgomery bus boycott through to the marches into Cicero, Illinois, the strategy of King and the SCLC was to mobilize nonviolent demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience for the purpose of pressuring the government into enacting reforms.

Why was it that the struggle against racial inequality developed under the leadership of reformists and Baptist preachers, rather than more radical and revolutionary forces? Much of the answer lies in the bankruptcy of the official labor movement.

The CIO of the 1930s was able to build mass industrial unions only through a bitter battle against the attempts by the employers to pit white workers against black. This struggle produced real gains, in terms of economic conditions, racial equality and working class solidarity.

But this movement was aborted by its bureaucratic and Stalinist leadership and brought under the domination of the capitalist state and the Democratic Party. The trade union leaders with assistance from the Stalinists of the Communist Party sought at all costs to prevent the working class from breaking with the capitalist parties and establishing an independent mass party of labor.

In 1955, the year Martin Luther King led the Montgomery bus boycott, the CIO merged with the AFL to form the pro-capitalist bureaucratic apparatus known as the AFL-CIO. Just as the craft union bureaucrats of the old AFL saw the industrial worker of the 1930s as "the garbage at labor's doorstep," so the Meany leadership of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy treated the black worker with open disdain. Racial discrimination was widely practiced in the unions themselves, and the entire bureaucracy supported the Democratic Party, the pillar of segregation in the South.

Under these conditions the struggle for civil rights developed outside of and apart from the trade union organizations, which at that time embraced nearly 35 percent of the work force. The program of the civil rights movement remained on the level of bourgeois democratic demands.

Following the social struggles of the 1960s, legislation was drafted to formally dismantle the hated system of Jim Crow segregation and legally sanctioned discrimination. The concept of "separate but equal" education was struck down. Voting rights were established for all. Formal equality was guaranteed by law.

However, in drawing up a balance sheet 30 years after King's assassination, the limitations of the victories achieved by the movement he led are more apparent than ever. An objective assessment points to the necessity of critically examining the political program that guided his movement.

## **Essential problems unresolved**

Separating the struggle for legal equality from a fight against the capitalist system responsible for racial discrimination and oppression could at best produce reforms that left the essential problems unresolved. It was impossible to attain social equality under conditions of capitalist private ownership and gross economic inequality.

Official legal barriers to equality were dismantled, making it possible for a thin layer of black politicians, professionals and administrators to rise into positions of influence and privilege. This top 5 percent of America's black population has been deliberately cultivated by the ruling class—thriving under the banner of “affirmative action.” But this was the slogan of Richard Nixon, not Martin Luther King.

This privileged layer has been promoted as another line of defense for capitalism against the increasingly impoverished masses. Such is the essential role played by the black elected officials, police chiefs and administrators who have taken office in one after another of the country's biggest cities.

While the proportion of black families earning \$75,000 and above grew significantly from 1970 to 1997, during this same time the number living in extreme poverty also increased. Half of black women in America are heads of households, and 50 percent of these live with their children in conditions of abject poverty. There are more black youth in America's jail cells than there are attending college.

Martin Luther King, Jr. stood head and shoulders above Jesse Jackson and other charlatans who, in the name of “civil rights,” seek privileged positions as advisers and spokesmen for corporate America. Nonetheless, there was a logic to his class program and outlook which led inexorably from the idealism of the 1950s to the political skullduggery of the Al Sharptons of today. In different forms, similar processes of decay have affected not only the civil rights movement, but the trade unions, the feminist and women's groups, and all those organizations which sought to make the profit system more democratic while accepting its basic structure.

Given this experience, what is the road forward today in the fight against racial discrimination, as well as the economic and social deprivation facing growing numbers of workers, black and white? The road of King's movement—of appeals for legal remedies and political reforms under capitalism—is clearly a blind alley.

## **American capitalism's decline**

It was possible for the civil rights movement to win significant gains in the 1950s and 1960s, despite its reformist program, because American capitalism was enjoying the heyday of the post-World War II economic boom. This made it possible to extend concessions to even the most impoverished sections of the working class.

But such reforms and concessions are today beyond the reach of the ruling class. The economic position of the United States has deteriorated over the past 30 years. Globalized production has intensified the struggle between the United States and its capitalist rivals for control of markets and cheap sources of labor.

In country after country social welfare programs, public education and basic democratic rights are being systematically destroyed. Within this context, the capitalist class foments racial poison to divide workers and justify the conditions of mass poverty and oppression which its system creates.

The bankruptcy of reformism and the inability of capitalism to solve any of the fundamental problems facing masses of people have led to the growth of right-wing and nationalist politics all over the world. In the United States sections of the black middle class promote cultural nationalism, “black capitalism” and the demand for “black control of the black community.”

Founded on the acceptance of racial divisions, this ideology defends the interests of a privileged stratum of the black petty bourgeoisie. Under conditions of growing social inequality affecting broad masses of workers, black nationalist politics serve to split the working class. Ultimately, the realization of the nationalists' program would yield the same bloody results in America that the politics of ethno-communalism have produced in the former Yugoslavia.

The overriding lesson which must be drawn from the fate of the civil rights movement is the necessity to revive the workers movement on the basis of socialist internationalism and establish its political independence from the capitalist class. It is in this way that genuine social and economic equality for all workers, as well as legal equality, can be achieved. Different sections of the working class—white, black, Hispanic and immigrant—must not fight each other over jobs, schools and housing. Rather they must unite to reorganize society on socialist foundations so that decent and ever-improving living standards can be provided for all.



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